

Striving for Educational Equality:
A Bright Side to Focused Discrimination

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Abstract

For three decades the U.S. Department of Education has been working towards the goal of equal access to higher education by providing financial aid to those in ‘need’ and monitoring the use of those funds. This goal of equality has turned the once privileged to the underprivileged.

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You may think that you have the same access to colleges and universities as your classmates but further investigation may prove reality to be quite different. Some thirty-three years ago through combining of a few federal offices the United States Department of Education was created. Today this department has 4,400 employees and a budget of \$68 billion all of which it says is dedicated to:

Establishing policies on federal financial aid for education, and distributing as well as monitoring those funds, collecting data on America's schools and disseminating research, focusing national attention on key educational issues, and prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to education. (U.S. Department of Education, 2013)

And their mission statement, "ED's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering education excellence and ensuring equal access." (U.S. Department of Education)

As financial aid is something that was mentioned in what the U.S. Department of Education is dedicated to you may be asking something along the lines of, 'how do I have equal access to education'? The department provides basic eligibility criteria as, "have either a high school diploma or GED, be enrolled or accepted in an eligible degree, registered with selective service if you are male, have an SSN, sign certifying statements on the FAFSA, maintain

satisfactory progress in school...”, and of course be in the United States legally. (U.S. Department of Education) Keep in mind though that these are just eligibility standards and meeting them in no way guarantees access to funding.

The Huffington Post in 2012 published an article which relayed the findings of an OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) report and stated:

In the U.S., 42 percent of all 25-64 year-olds have reached higher education -- making it one of the most well educated countries in the world, but behind Canada (51 percent), Israel (46 percent), Japan (45 percent) and the Russian Federation (54 percent)...

According to the report, higher education attainment levels in the U.S. are growing at a below-average rate. (Education At A Glance 2012: OECD Report Finds U.S. Lags

Behind Other Countries In Higher Education Attainment Rate)

From this article it is apparent that other countries have higher education growth rates than that of the United States which could place the US in a position to be passed by other aggressively educational countries.

One of the many struggles that the Department of Education faces is that of income inequality. Catherine B. Hill (2013), president and professor at Vassar College says, “Income inequality is the major factor contributing to the challenges facing higher education and is a significant public policy issue.” (Hill, 2013) Hill (2013) continues, “Increased access to higher education would help moderate the expansion in income inequality over time. Yet the increasing inequality itself presents obstacles to achieving this goal.” (Hill, 2013)

The problem of unequal distribution of funds for financial aid does not solely reside with the US department of education. Even looking through scholarship applications one is sure to find this statement attached to many:

Preference will be given to those whose scores allow placement into college level (1000 level and above) in English and Mathematics and who meet any of the following criteria:

- Ethnic Minority
- Economic Need (Verified from FASFA)
- First Generation College Student
- Single Parent with a dependent child
- English as a second language (Salt Lake Community College)

In addition to this statement on what would otherwise appear to be an opportunity for all students will find a plethora of other scholarship applications targeted at only specific groups of students furthering the discrimination of those not meeting any of the above mentioned criteria.

These preferences were originally created to help usher in an equal distribution of education and aid in the elimination of discrimination as it pertains to college admittance and enrolment. Thus we see that between the complexity of the financial aid system and the preference based awards, those deemed to be privileged are placed in an underprivileged situation. Being forced to do little schooling at a time or incur huge amounts of debt to obtain the same 'access' or opportunity that others are provided.

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