

---

Peer-Reviewed Article

## Opinion: Issues in Higher Education, part II: Who Will Study it?

J. Mark Aiken, MSW, CSW  
Independence University

---

**Abstract:** Responding to the three fundamental questions regarding higher education decisions posed by Cohen and Kisker (2010), which are what will be studied, who is going to study it, and who is going to pay for it. This article is part two, an opinion piece on who is going to study it, reviewing the transition through the twentieth century of college and university enrollments moving from allowing only the elite to obtain an education to allowing all who desire an education. It is from this change in society and the higher education market place that the author proposes that a well-educated society benefits all and if a school receives funds from public sources, it should be an open enrollment school allowing all who desire a college education to have the opportunity. With the number of schools in the United States and with the availability of online education, there is little reason education should not be available to all and in the end, an education should be a right and not a privilege, open to all that can demonstrate the ability to succeed in higher education.

**Keywords:** higher education, student enrollments, opinion, rights vs. privileges

Read part one the series:

Aiken, J. M. (2017). Opinion issues in higher education: What will be studied?. *Journal of Online Higher Education*, 1(4). Retrieved from <https://online-shc.com/arc/ojs/index.php/JOHE/article/view/29>

---

Colleges and Universities in the United States have always had entrance requirements. Early in the nation's history, the requirements were religious in nature and had to do with who your parents were or who you knew. In the twentieth century entrance requirements involved letters of reference, pre-college experiences, a certain level of grade achievement or an attainment score on a college entrance exam and even included written essays by the student making a case for why they should be allowed into the institution. Even at colleges and universities with the least restrictive enrollment practices there were still entrance criteria, such as having a high school diploma, and demonstrating an ability to pay for schooling.

As shared in part one of this series, there are three basic questions that are the underlying guide to nearly all decisions made in higher education, which are the fundamental questions of what will be studied, who is going to study it, and who is going to pay for it (Aiken, 2017; Cohen & Kisker, 2010). In looking at our modern higher education system, with the understanding that all schools have some variation of entrance requirements, the question arises, who should be studying for their future?

Since there is a wide disparity in the types of prerequisite requirements expected by institutions of higher education in today's education market, and because there is such a wide variation of entrance requirements, the question becomes less about what the requirements should be and more about whether there should be requirements or not, especially for publicly funded or publicly subsidized education programs. Private institutions may set their entrance requirements, but if they receive tax payer funded student loans for tuition and/or if they are a publicly subsidized institution, the entrance requirements should be very minimal, generally an open enrollment institution. The question for these types of higher education institutions then becomes; is education a right or a privilege?

### **History and Relevance**

Beginning in the 1890's college enrollments began to swell, especially due to more women enrolling in college (Geiger, 2005). Between World War I (WWI) and WW II university enrollments doubled. After WW II these enrollments continued to grow in large part due to soldiers returning home and using their G.I. Bill to fund and attend college (Geiger, 2005). This time leading up to the end of the twentieth century is a period of change towards educating the public and not just the elite. The last half of the twentieth century became a time in higher education, in theory, for all who wanted it.

The change in who attends college along with the rise of private for-profit institutions, vocational schools and online education during the late 1990's and the first part of the 2000's, in their various forms, lessened the entrance requirements at many schools without eliminating them. Competition for students has in many cases created a whole industry of what are considered open enrollment schools, requiring the most basic entrance expectations. However, at the other end of the spectrum for some programs and limited number of institutions, this competition has increased the entrance requirements; especially in popular programs such as nursing or in high status schools where the perception of a better education made them more difficult for acceptance. It is a good thing that these areas of increased entrance requirements are limited, and that open enrollment is becoming more prevalent.

During this same period of increased competition, a landmark case began to answer the question of right versus privilege. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plyler vs. Doe* granted unconditional access to P-12 education for all people in the United States. This access was regardless of citizenship or immigration status (Serna, Cohen, & Nguyen, 2017). However, this same guarantee was not granted to those who wished to attend institutions of higher education (Serna, Cohen, & Nguyen, 2017). For many in the United States, a college education is usually seen as a pathway to economic stability and employment success. According to Weeden (2015), the chance of being unemployed doubles for those without a college degree. Using those who are undocumented as an example, the undocumented in society contribute to their local economies, they participate in both labor and trade, and they contribute to the overall tax base (Serna, Cohen, & Nguyen, 2017). According to Adams and Boyne (2015) there are 11.5 million undocumented residents in the United States, with 1.8 million over the age of 18 and an estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduating from high school each year. By preventing them from attending college the U.S. misses a large number of potentially skilled and educated workers while continuing to perpetuate an underclass of people in the United States (Serna,

Cohen, & Nguyen, 2017). This is only one example of a population in the United States and there are several populations that have no or limited access to higher education. We see from Plyler vs. Doe a right to education for children and privilege to obtain a college degree for adults.

### **Impact on Higher Education**

As stated earlier, an individual is twice as likely to experience unemployment without a college degree but on average an individual with a degree earns more over a lifetime than those without a degree. Since skilled and educated workers contribute to society in greater ways than those who may need more from society based on poor socioeconomic status, poor health, and less opportunity, it is in the best interest for society to help everyone who is able, to get an education. As a society, we do help those to obtain an education. It is tax dollars that subsidize public institutions of higher education. Tax dollars contribute to the funds dispensed through federal grants and through federal student loan programs, commonly referred to as Title IV funds. According to Kena et al. (2016) there are 7,236 institutions of higher education that receive Title IV funds of which 4,724 are degree granting institutions. Broken out, there is an average of 94 degree granting institutions for each state in the nation, and yet we as a society still limit who can attend college. We limit undocumented residents because they do not have a social security number and limit those without a high school diploma, and we limit those who may not be able to navigate the complicated higher education system.

Having this many schools available, and with the availability of online education there should be no reason a person with a desire to learn and a desire to obtain a degree should ever be denied. Robinson (2016) articulates that in the United States the economy is moving away from low skilled jobs and increasingly requiring higher-order thinking, leaving opportunity gaps for those who are unable to attend college. However, as with the previously reviewed court case, The Supreme Court ruled in *San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez* that the United States Constitution does not recognize a right to education (Robinson, 2016). Currently, all colleges, some more than others, are held to the pressures demonstrating success with student outcomes and career placement. It is because of the need to produce positive numbers of successful career placement that institutions continue to enforce entrance requirements. Institutions are afraid of political backlash and continued public scrutiny. Fear is often used by politicians to create and enforce political policies and agendas (Schwarz, 2015). In order to change the fear, and therefore change the reliance on the numbers only system, institutions, politicians, and communities need to move from a focus on outcomes and more on education/degree obtainment for all who desire. If we focused less on the skills of how to do things, and more on how to ensure everyone has an opportunity for an education, then entrance requirements become less and less important (Schwartz, 2015). Robinson (2016) believes that we could overturn the *Rodriguez* case using the Fourteenth Amendment to require states to provide equal access to educational opportunities allowing them to employ their First Amendment rights of being competent (well educated) voters. By overturning *Rodriguez* and by changing the political conversations, education could truly move from being a privilege to being a right, benefiting all who desire an education and benefiting schools with truly open enrollment and lessening the concerns about entrance requirements.

### **Conclusion**

Over the last 120 years, colleges and universities in the United States witnessed tremendous growth in overall enrollments. This is due to population growth, changes in attitudes towards education, and changes in the job market requiring higher order thinking skills. However, with the increased enrollment, we have not seen an elimination of entrance requirements. Throughout, this paper the arguments have pushed for lessening entrance requirements that strive for more types of open enrollment schools. Entrance requirements will still be necessary, as communities desire to ensure student success. However, the requirements need change. The education industry needs to find ways of assessing ability beyond the current requirements of simply obtaining a high school diploma or passing an exam.

As an industry, educational institutions need to change the politics and public perception from thinking of education as privilege to recognizing education as a right. Although these words are very similar, it is important to recognize that a privilege is an opportunity or advantage that others do not have. A right is something the all individuals are entitled to. Education is not solely about student outcomes and placement numbers. In the United States there are rights that protect people and allow all to seek good jobs and meaningful employment. Since a college education is a pathway to better and more secure employment, and because college educated individuals contribute to society through better jobs and additional knowledge, it becomes important for communities to support all who want to receive a college education. As a society, our taxes subsidize educational institutions and our tax dollars contribute to Title IV funds and federal grant monies. Because our tax dollars, as public funds, are supporting schools in these ways; all schools who receive public funds should have open enrollment policies with least restrictive entrance requirements possible, allowing education to be sought by all who desire.

## References

- Adams, A., & Boyne, K. S. (2015). Access to higher education for undocumented and "DACAmented" students: The current state of affairs. *Indiana International & Comparative Law Review*, 25(1), 47-62. doi:10.18060/7909.0004
- Aiken, J. M. (2017). Opinion: Issues in higher education: What will be studied?. *Journal Of Online Higher Education*, 1(4). Retrieved from <http://online-shc.com/arc/ojs/index.php/JOHE/article/view/29>
- Cohen, A. M., & Kisker, C. B. (2010). *The shaping of American higher education: emergence and growth of the contemporary system* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey/Bass.
- Geiger, R. L. (2005). The ten generations of American higher education. In P. G. Altbach, R. O. Berdahl, & P. J. Gumport (Eds.) *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 38-70). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kena, G., Hussar, W., McFarland, J., de Brey, C., Musu-Gillette, L., Wang, X., & ... Dunlop Velez, E. (2016). The Condition of Education 2016. NCES 2016-144. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington DC.
- Robinson, K. J. (2016). Comments: Fisher's cautionary tale and the urgent need for equal access to an excellent education. *Harvard Law Review*, 130(1), 185-240.
- Schwarz, G. E. (2015). CAEP advanced standards and the future of graduate programs: The false sense of "techne". *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 42(2), 105-117.
- Serna, G. g., Cohen, J. j., & Nguyen, D. d. (2017). State and institutional policies on in-state resident tuition and financial aid for undocumented students: examining constraints and opportunities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 28(14-18), 1-22.
- Weeden, L. D. (2015). Good public policy occurs under plyler when in-state college tuition rates are awarded to undocumented bona fide resident immigrants. *George Mason University Civil Rights Law Journal*, 25(2), 191-216.