



WHO IS COLLEGE FOR?

A
*Community
Discussion
Guide*

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How To Use This Document.

This Discussion Guide

The information offered here is intended to frame your discussion and provide some relevant information. This guide focuses on three different approaches regarding who should go to college? Each approach includes:

- 1) A brief description of what supporters of the approach might believe about the issue.
- 2) What supporters would do to address the issue.
- 3) How opponents of the approach might respond.
- 4) The tradeoffs that need to be considered.

The Dialogue

This session is designed to engage people in conversations about important issues. Each participant should feel comfortable to talk, listen, and learn from the conversation. There is more than one way to address an issue and often there may be tension among the approaches. No one approach is "the right one," but by participating in this process, you should feel confident in making more informed decisions. Furthermore, this is a process of informing people's opinion and is not concerned with advocating a particular position.

About Deliberation

Deliberation is in stark contrast to our more conventional system of debate, where issues are polarized and people stake a position either in support or opposition to an idea. In debates, there are winners and losers and the only information brought to bear on the issue is what either side thinks is important. The process of deliberation allows for more equal participation in a dialogue regardless of the level of knowledge a person brings to a discussion or the investment they have in a particular outcome.

Ongoing Conversations

It is our hope that the conversation will not end when you leave a formal session. This dialogue guide should be used to stimulate conversations over dinner, with family and friends, with local organizations, or in many places in your community. Please share this discussion guide with others and discuss the issues with people around you.

Who Is College For?

Prior to 1945, less than 20% of high school graduates went on to college. A high school diploma was the standard for entry into the workforce and it provided all the required training for participation in American democracy. However, since World War II, higher education in the United States has changed dramatically. Toward the end of the war, President Harry S. Truman signed into law the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill. For millions of American servicemen, college became a possibility when it had previously not been an option. A few years later, the Truman Commission promoted the notion of the community college, further recognizing the important role college plays in the vitality of the nation.

Since that time, the role of the federal government in higher education has grown dramatically. The 1958 launch of Sputnik began the race in space exploration and generated unprecedented federal support for university research. President Johnson's Great Society of the 1960s broke new ground for higher education. The 1960s introduced federal student aid programs, civil rights legislation, and affirmative action programs recognizing that the solutions to America's problems are found in an educated populace. During this same period, there was a growing recognition that higher education could stimulate economic development by preparing a highly skilled workforce that would attract corporations to these "centers of talent." For many Americans, this is what college has come to represent.

Today there is a growing belief that everyone who wants access to college can have it. College enrollments have continued to grow for over half a century and now it can be argued that most American families dream of a college education for their children. Over 80% of eighth graders aspire to education beyond high school. In addition, nearly 75% of high school graduates attend some level of college within two years of graduation. Opinion polls report that Americans have great regard for colleges and universities. But in the last several years, there is some indication that our national commitment to higher education is fading. As states struggle with budget difficulties, state support for public colleges is declining and tuition is inevitably rising. Some states do not have sufficient capacity to serve the students who want to enroll. More and more students attend college part time, bear a greater share of the cost of education than ever before, and subsequently assume higher levels of debt.

A 2003 report by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) demonstrates there is a growing "participation gap" in American higher education.

Based upon current census data and enrollment trends, greater than 2.3 million more students will attend college by 2015 and ECS estimates this number could reach 8 million new students if a greater proportion of high school graduates attend college. This gap could well affect how many people U.S. higher education can accommodate and, as a result, who will be able to attend college. The reality we face is one of limited capacity to serve all students equally well. Our current system is not prepared to meet the growing demand. As it stands, colleges and universities will be forced to make difficult decisions about who should come to college. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court issued rulings in two cases involving the use of affirmative action in admissions policies at the University of Michigan, upholding the use of race in admissions as a compelling state interest while striking down point systems that disproportionately favor one racial group over another. Opinion polls also indicate a growing distaste for preferences given to children of alumni. When spaces are limited, what are the most equitable ways to admit students?

At the center of this issue are important considerations regarding opportunity, fairness, and participation in "the American dream." In an era when college is seen as an important path to economic success and civic leadership, yet access to college may be limited, we are forced to ask the question: Who is college for? This discussion guide considers three approaches that address this very difficult question.

Approach One:

Those Willing To Work For It.

America is the land of opportunity for those willing to work for it. Generations of immigrants have come to America believing this fundamental tenet. According to this approach, college is a means to a higher paying career and a piece of the American dream. As Senator John Edwards proclaimed in his campaign for the Democratic nomination for the 2004 presidential race, education should be available for all qualified students willing to work for it. Supporters of Approach 1 believe that any student can attend college, regardless of their lot in life. They may need to take a longer, more difficult path, but their hard work will pay off in the end.

Supporters of this approach also recognize that two trends are changing the nature of college access. First, as the cost of college rises, more and more high school graduates are forced to choose non-traditional pathways to a col-

Supporters of Approach 1 believe that any student can attend college, regardless of their lot in life. They may need to take a longer, more difficult path, but their hard work will pay off in the end.

lege degree. Thirty years ago, it took four years to earn a Bachelor's degree; the standard today is five or six years. These pathways may include taking time off, having children, working before entering college, or working while taking classes. Second, the fastest growing student population is the adult learner, bringing a different set of expectations and life experiences. Non-traditional students require that colleges and universities rethink what they provide to students and how it is delivered.

What should be done?

- **Adopt alternatives to race-based affirmative action.** This might include pursuing need-based alternatives or percentage plans that guarantee admission to the top high school graduates of the state. Underrepresented minorities are more likely to have limited economic means, but many white families also cannot afford to send their children to college. Level the playing field, but do so in a way that benefits the greatest number of people.
- **Emphasize need-based aid programs.** Grants and work-study programs should target students with the greatest need. Many students have to work in order to pay for college, and research shows they are more likely to succeed if they work on campus. The advantage of these programs is simple: they provide financial support to pay for college and give students who need to work a connection to the campus community.
- **Expand guaranteed student loan programs.** Students should share the cost of their education because a college degree is their ticket to a higher paying job. However, federal support to pay for college while a student is in school is a wise investment in the nation's future human potential. The less a student is required to pay out of pocket while in school, the more quickly they will be able to complete a degree and enter the workforce.
- **Increase support for community colleges and extension programs through four-year colleges.** Access is best achieved when education is available where people live. The best college education is the one that meets the interests of the students and will prepare them for the career they want. However, for many students, if college is not close to home or work, post-secondary education is not a viable option. Some students will find the necessary training for their field in a certificate or Associates degree program, while others can use the first two years to figure out what they want to do while they complete their general education requirements for a Bachelor's degree.
- **Place greater emphasis on career exploration and development in high school.** Students should be encouraged to think about career directions earlier in high school so that they can make informed decisions about whether to

attend college and if so, what to study. High school internships or career development courses may be helpful in this regard.

- **Create and expand degree programs that recognize and give credit for the experience adult learners bring to the classroom.** Adult learners often return to school to fill gaps in their preparation, but they are not interested in replicating what they have already learned on the job. A more flexible degree option will make college more feasible and thus more accessible.
- **Offer courses and college services beyond the traditional 8-5 workday.** Many adult learners who return to school must do so while they work. More colleges are offering evening classes but fewer have made services like financial aid or the registrar's office available in the evening or on weekends. Current systems penalize people who must work in order to attend college because they lack the flexibility to accommodate this growing population of non-traditional students.

What Should be Done?

- *Adopt alternatives to race-based affirmative action.*
- *Expand guaranteed student loan programs.*
- *Increase support for community colleges and extension programs through four year colleges.*
- *Place greater emphasis on career exploration and development in high school.*
- *Recognize and give credit for the experience adult learners bring to the classroom.*
- *Offer course and college services beyond the traditional 8-5 workday.*
- *Do not penalize adult students who must maintain a job while attending college.*

Opposing voices

Today, more than 80% of eighth graders say they want to go to college, yet fewer than 40% of high school graduates earn college degrees by age 25. Obviously, not everyone who wants a college education has access to it. For some students, even the cost of a four-year state college or community college exceeds what their families can afford. It is also important to recognize that the benefits of attending college are different depending upon where you go. A student who graduates from an elite private university is likely to make more money and find a better job than someone who attends a local community college. Today, minority students, particularly Hispanic and African

American students, are more often than not enrolled in community colleges. In this system, minority students will not fare as well economically or professionally as their white counterparts.

Opponents would also argue that the definition of "qualified" is subjective. Today, college admissions policies rely heavily on standardized tests that assess only a limited range of a student's potential. They also emphasize high school curriculum and give greater weight to Advanced Placement (AP), honors courses, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, which are not available in all schools. These are not obstacles that can be overcome simply by working harder. They require changing both the systems of K-12 and higher education, which includes leveling an unequal playing field.

Tradeoffs

In our current system, some people fall through the cracks. Parents and community expectations play a significant role in shaping college aspirations and in getting students ready for college. Some students could succeed in higher education, but they have never been exposed to encouraging influences and they do not have the help and support from family at home. Cost can be prohibitive for poor students, but if everything is paid for them and they lack the personal investment, they may also lack the incentive to finish. However, taking out loans to cover the cost of an education that exceeds a family's income can be a barrier even for the most academically qualified young people. Finally, adult students represent a relatively new and growing population on college campuses, but does higher education have the capacity to provide access for both a growing traditional age population as well as the non-traditional learners?

Approach One: Those Willing to Work For It

Supporters of Approach 1 believe that any student can attend college, regardless of their lot in life. They may need to take a longer, more difficult path, but their hard work will pay off in the end.

What Should Be Done?

- **Adopt alternatives to race-based affirmative action.** Need-based alternatives are fairer than race-based plans.
- **Expand guaranteed student loan programs.** Federal support to pay for college while a student is in school is a wise investment in the nation's future human potential.
- **Increase support for community colleges and extension programs through four year colleges.** For many students, if college is not close to home or work, it is not a viable option.
- **Place greater emphasis on career exploration and development in high school.**
- **Recognize and give credit for the experience adult learners bring to the classroom.** Adult learners do not need to replicate what they have already learned on the job.
- **Offer course and college services beyond the traditional 8-5 workday.**
- **Do not penalize adult students who must maintain a job while attending college.**

Opposing Voices:

A student who graduates from an elite private university is likely to make more money and find a better job than someone who attends a local community college. Minority students, who are more likely to be enrolled in community colleges, will likely not fare as well economically or professionally as their white counterparts.

Opponents would also argue that the definition of "qualified" is subjective. Advanced Placement (AP), honors courses, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs are not available in all schools. These are not obstacles that can be overcome by simply working harder.

A Key Tradeoff:

Cost can be prohibitive for poor students, however if everything is paid for them then they may lack the personal investment to finish. However, taking out loans to cover the cost of an education that exceeds a family's income can be a barrier even for the most dedicated young people.

Approach Two: The Most Academic

Supporters of Approach 2 believe that the best investment for the country to advance society and maintain the global marketplace.

What Should Be Done?

- **Admission to college should be based on merit.** Admissions policies should not include preferences for children of faculty and other institutional connections.
- **Increase merit-based scholarship programs.** Merit-based scholarships should emphasize academic achievement and background.
- **Implement a more demanding curriculum.** Only the most successful young students should be admitted to elite universities.
- **Improve standard measures of academic achievement.** To have a standard by which to measure academic achievement.
- **Emphasize scientific literacy.** A high degree of technical competence should be required for all students.
- **Provide additional support for students who are not academically capable.** Students who are not academically capable should not be admitted to elite universities.

Opposing Voices:

In this system, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. While women and minorities have gained access to higher education since the 1960's, their economic and political leadership in the nation's political leadership and professions like medicine and law must be maintained and protected. Further, standardized tests disadvantage students from low-income backgrounds. These measures of academic achievement, civic engagement, and entertainment.

A Key Tradeoff:

Merit-based admissions policies at elite institutions for which they are not prepared to practice allows inequalities in education to be addressed.

Qualified

given our limited resources, on those students most likely to give our country's competitive edge in the global economy.

based primarily on merit. Race, gender, and gender-neutral, and financial need should be eliminated.

These scholarships should be awarded regardless of personal or family income.

2 curriculum.

It should continue on to college.

Equity of opportunity. It is necessary that all students can be compared.

The skills required by many of today's jobs require a college education.

Quality of education. Highly qualified teachers and reduced high tuitions.

Students who are poor remain poor.

It is necessary to make significant progress in providing opportunities for the largely underrepresented and underserved in the influential and high-paying professions and law. Affirmative action

is necessary to fight against women and minorities. It is necessary to account for potential, and to value diverse abilities in the arts, athletics

and other areas. It is vital in matching students to careers. They should be well prepared. However, this should not be compensated for rather

Approach Three: Everyone

Supporters of Approach 3 believe that college education doesn't merely serve individuals; it benefits everyone by strengthening society. Educated people are more engaged citizens and contribute more to society.

What Should Be Done?

• Support race- and need-based affirmative action programs.

We are highly segregated as a nation and need to actively work to eliminate inequality.

• Diversify the college faculties to reflect the racial, ethnic, gender, and physical ability differences of the incoming students.

• Create a sliding scale for cost of tuition. Students should be expected to pay a portion of the cost of their education, but it should be in proportion to their means.

• Increase system wide capacity. There needs to be enough seats in the classrooms to accommodate all interested students.

• Clearly align state high school graduation requirements with college admissions standards.

• Make high quality education available to all students and all communities. High school graduates should not be forced to choose between leaving their community and attending college.

Opposing Voices:

We have limited resources that must be divided among important social priorities such as health care, social security, K-12 education, and new concerns for our personal security. It is too expensive to allow everyone to go to college. Further, a college education isn't even necessary for most jobs in this country when you take into account on-the-job training.

Also, accepting less qualified students in to college will water down the system and lower the overall quality of education.

Lastly, it is not the role of college to teach shape citizens. That is the role of the family, faith, and the community.

A Key Tradeoff:

There are significant benefits to a highly educated population where individuals are better educated and more engaged with the democratic process, but at what cost? Are the benefits of educating more of our citizens worth cutting funding for other priorities or increasing taxes to afford it?

Supporters of Approach 2 believe that given our limited resources, the best investment for the country is in those students most likely to advance society and maintain America's competitive edge in the global marketplace.

Approach Two:

The Most Academically Qualified.

We live in a highly competitive global environment. It is in the best interest of the nation to train the best and brightest students from across the country to provide leadership for the future. It is equally important that the best students attend the top colleges and universities. One of the greatest assets of American higher education is the diversity of institutions that encompasses institutions for students at every level of ability and interest. America should hold high standards for all students and allow the cream to rise to the top.

According to the 2000 census, slightly less than 30% of adults over the age of 25 had college degrees. Indeed, there is much talk of the need for a college education, but many people are successful without it. In reality, college teaches a lot of things that the average person does not need to find a successful career. In addition, too much burden is placed on college to train people for the workforce when, in fact, technology has made jobs so specialized that the only place to learn them is on the job.

Access to college is constrained by finite and limited state and federal resources. At a time when health care, social security, and K-12 education are competing for taxpayer support, governmental funding for higher education cannot keep pace. Supporters of this approach believe that in this environment, investing more money in the best students to ensure their success benefits society. If we do not ensure that the most qualified students – regardless of background or ability to pay – are able to complete a college degree, our future leadership base will erode. Given our limited resources, the best investment for the country is in those students most likely to advance society and maintain America's competitive edge in the global marketplace.

What should be done?

• **Admission to college should be based primarily on merit.** We are not helping students by placing them in academic environments that are more difficult than those for which they have been prepared. Students who are mismatched to a college based on their academic performance may be set up to fail, wasting their time and society's resources. Affirmative action probably served an important purpose when it was instituted, but it has run its course and now does little more than label women and minorities as less qualified. Today, women outnumber men on campuses and minority students are attending college at greater rates than ever before. We need admis-

sions policies that are race and gender-neutral, and that eliminate preferences for children of alumni.

- **Increase merit-based scholarships.** These programs provide students with incentives to achieve their greatest potential in high school. These scholarship programs embody the American democratic ideal because they place appropriate emphasis on achievement regardless of personal background.

- **Place limits on the rates at which tuition can increase in a given year.** Education must remain affordable and institutions should be held accountable for keeping tuition low. The McKeon Bill, which recommended that tuition should not grow at a rate more than twice that of inflation in a year, is one way to address the problem.

- **Implement a demanding K-12 curriculum for all students.** In other nations around the world, all students take the same demanding curriculum and the best young people continue on to college. We may not be ready for a national curriculum, but rigorous state standards for K-12 education will serve all students well and will make clear who should go to college and to what level of education they should aspire.

- **Improve standard measures of achievement including high school graduation and college admissions tests.** Standardized tests are not perfect measures of a student's ability to succeed in college, but they are among the strongest predictors of grades in the first year of college. In the absence of a national curriculum, it is necessary to have a standard by which all students can be compared. It is not fair, for example, to penalize a student who attends an academically challenging high school but has a lower grade point average (GPA), nor does it make sense to promote a student with a high GPA from a poor quality school.

- **Emphasize scientific literacy.** In addition to a growing global marketplace, our understanding of science and technology is becoming increasingly complex. Many of today's jobs require a high degree of technical competence. Yet, there is an exodus of students out of math and science degree programs. The result is a growing number of international students filling these vacancies.

• **Provide additional support for private education.** The best colleges and universities in the nation are mostly private and yet highly capable students cannot always attend because tuition is so high. If states increased support for private education, we could ensure the best and brightest students had the opportunity to attend the best college that fit their interests regardless of their ability to pay.

Opposing voices

In this system, the rich get richer and the poor remain poor. America is supposed to be the land of opportunity, but currently that opportunity is only available to those who earn a college degree. While women and minorities have made significant progress in education since the 1960s, they are still largely underrepresented in the nation's political leadership and in the influential and high paying professions like medicine and law. Census data shows that we are becoming an increasingly diverse society, but we remain nearly as segregated as we were 50 years ago. For this reason, affirmative action must be maintained and protected. The distribution of income in the United States creates greater gaps than in virtually all industrial nations and these gaps are widening. With relatively few African American, Hispanic, Asian, and/or Native American people, and women in the most influential positions of leadership, who will serve as role models for minority youth and young girls? Secretary of State Colin Powell and Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice both acknowledge that affirmative action opened doors for them that might not have existed without such programs.

What Should be Done?

- *Admission to college should be based primarily on merit.*
- *Increase merit-based scholarships.*
- *Implement a more demanding K-12 curriculum.*
- *Improve standard measures of achievement.*
- *Emphasize scientific literacy.*
- *Provide additional support for private education.*

Also, there is more than one way to define merit. Standardized tests and a rigorous curriculum only capture a small piece of the whole person, and these measures discriminate against women and minority students. These measures

also fail to account for leadership potential, determination, civic engagement, and abilities in the arts, athletics, and entertainment. In addition, admissions policies that emphasize standard measures neglect the effects of potential teacher bias in classroom expectations and evaluations of women and people of color. In order to best serve the public and provide the most effective education, admissions policies must equally consider all these factors.

Tradeoffs

Flexible and responsive admissions policies help level an otherwise unequal playing field. At the same time, using college admissions policies to compensate for problems in K-12 preparation may be allowing schools to fail students by not providing a challenging curriculum for everyone. Matching students with institutions ensures that all students are getting the education for which they are prepared. However, it may mean that opportunities are disproportionately distributed across race and gender in elite institutions that train a large percentage of our national and community leaders.

Supporters of Approach 3 believe that college education doesn't merely serve individuals; it benefits everyone by strengthening society. Educated people are more engaged citizens and contribute more to society.

Approach Three:

Everyone.

There are substantial economic benefits to earning a college degree. By age 25, those who complete a four-year degree earn \$9,000 more per year, on average, than people who have completed as much as three years of college. The lifetime earnings of college graduates far surpass those who do not attend. However, in our nation's history, the purpose of education has always extended beyond job training and career advancement. Colleges are intended to prepare each student for full participation in American democracy. A well-rounded education that reflects the diversity of America prepares each of us to contribute in a fast changing world. A. Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale University and Major League Baseball Commissioner, advised us that the purpose of higher education was so that we can be civil, cohesive, and free. Only in the last 50 years have legal barriers to participation have been eliminated for minority students and women, and since that time, access to higher education and all of its benefits has never been truly equal. For this reason, society must change the way we think about access. College education doesn't merely serve individuals; it strengthens society as well. Educated people are more engaged citizens and contribute more to society.

We must also recognize that communities have different perceptions of the benefits of college. Cultural values and norms influence students decisions to go to college and what institutions they may attend. For this reason, we must commit resources and support to maintain the diversity of institutions in addition to the diversity within those institutions. American higher education is renowned not only for the quality of its institutions but also because everyone can find an institution that meets his or her needs and desires. We can only fully provide a public good if we are able to acknowledge that there are multiple publics and an even greater number of possible goods.

What should be done?

- **Support race- and need-based affirmative action programs.** We remain highly segregated as a nation – both in terms of race and economic prosperity – and opportunities in such a system are not equitably distributed. For this reason, we must protect affirmative action programs and simultaneously work to eliminate inequality.

• **Diversify the college faculties to reflect the diversity (i.e. racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, class, religious affiliations and physical ability) of the incoming students.** Attracting a culturally diverse student body is a compelling state interest, but it is difficult to achieve if the university staff and faculty do not reflect that same diversity.

What Should be Done?

- *Support race- and need-based affirmative action programs.*
- *Diversify the college faculties.*
- *Create a sliding scale for cost of tuition.*
- *Increase system wide capacity.*
- *Clearly align state high school graduation requirements with college admissions standards.*
- *Make high quality education available to all students and all communities.*

Increase tuition and increase need-based aid programs. The greater the number of college educated citizens, the greater the collective public benefit. Students should pay a portion of the cost of their education, but it should be in proportion to their means. This approach allows the state to create a sliding scale for the cost of tuition.

• **Continue funding public higher education with appropriate increases to keep pace with inflation and with the growing percentage of high school graduates going to college.** In our current economic climate, some states are cutting funding for colleges and universities and others are either maintaining current funding or increasing at a rate less than inflation. In most cases, this translates into a greater burden for parents and students.

• **Increase system-wide capacity.** The Education Commission of the States (ECS) estimates that by 2015, the college going population will increase by 8-10 million students, particularly in the south and west. The state of California turned 55,000 qualified students away from its community colleges, and the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education estimates that 250,000 potential students were unable to attend college last year across the nation.

• **Emphasize K-16 initiatives that clearly align state high school graduation requirements with college admissions standards.** With 75% of high school graduates continuing their education, it should be assumed that a college preparatory curriculum is appropriate for all students.

• **Make high quality education available to all students and all communities.** High school graduates should not be forced to choose between attending college and leaving their community. Native American students, for example, may choose to attend traditional colleges, which may alienate them from their communities. Improve extension programs, tribal colleges and minority serving institutions so that students are not forced to choose between community and higher education.

Opposing voices

As nations around the world have long recognized, the cost of providing a college education to all qualified citizens is prohibitive, and no one enrolls a higher percentage of high school graduates in college than the United States. In reality we have limited resources that must be divided among important social priorities, such as health care, social security, K-12 education, and new concerns for our personal security. College is unique because there is an individual return on the investment. For this reason, it makes sense that the person who stands to benefit most should bear the responsibility for that cost.

While there is a shortage of spaces in some colleges and in some states, there are other institutions that have not yet met their full capacity. Perhaps more cooperation among colleges and states might be the answer. Access does not mean that every person is entitled to the same education at the same college or in the same major. It means that a door is open if you are willing to walk through it. Watering down a college education may allow us to educate more students, but it is likely to take higher education in the same direction that public high schools have gone. Everyone gets in, but the brightest students are not challenged and the least capable students really don't benefit either. Finally, it is not the role of college to teach values or shape citizens. That is the role of the family, faith based institutions, and the community. Colleges should not attempt to do too much by incorporating the training for citizenship into the curriculum.

Tradeoffs

There are significant benefits to a highly educated population where individuals are fully engaged in the democratic process, but at what cost? With so many competing priorities, are the benefits of educating more of our citizens worth cutting funding for other priorities, reducing the quality of higher education, or increasing taxes and further increasing the burden on everyone? Different kinds of access to different types of colleges might allow everyone to get in the door, and therefore overcome some of the inequity in K-12 education, but it also could lead to stratification in career preparation, civic participation, and leadership roles in our society.

Discussion Notes:



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