

Membership Requirement – Key Talking Points

- The reasons we should drop the education requirement are simply:
 - **Because it is the right thing to do**
 - **Because it is in keeping with our mission to advance gender equity**
- AAUW needs to include members with diverse backgrounds and perspectives to meet our mission of advancing gender equity and society's needs today.
- Simply put, this is about inclusion. AAUW's vision is Equity for All. Our membership practices should align with this vision.
- The educational requirement is counterproductive to recruiting diverse members as well as younger members.
- There are many paths to education beyond colleges and universities. As important as the P-12 and four-year college system is, education comes in many forms, including Career Technical Education, on-the-job training, and similar education routes.
- Those who do not have degrees can be strong advocates for our mission.
- We are an organization that promotes equity, yet we do not treat non-degree individuals as equal. This is simply unacceptable.
- Times have changed. Younger feminists care about our mission but don't join us because they see us as an exclusionary or elitist organization, one that hasn't evolved into modern thinking about equity and inclusion.
- Corporations and foundations prefer to work with and/or fund organizations that adhere to their diversity, inclusion, and equity policies and practices. We lose out on dollars that could help us move forward with our mission and vision which puts a bigger burden on our members to contribute to AAUW.

Members May Ask

Question: If we drop the degree requirement, how can we say that we still care about education?

Response:

- Education and educational initiatives are foundational to our mission and work – it’s always been and always will be a focus for AAUW. Our mission has also evolved to include promoting women’s economic security and leadership as well as education—yet we (of course) don’t require members to meet a certain income level or leadership status; similarly, requiring a degree is in no way necessary for our continued work to promote education and training.
- Our current endowment (which provides permanent, annual funds for fellowships and grants) ensures that AAUW will continue to be a national leader in funding women’s graduate education. Eliminating the degree requirement will not change this now or in the future.

Question: Don’t we need to honor the legacy of our founding mothers by retaining the degree requirement?

Response:

- Remember the context of the times when the degree requirement was set. When Marion Talbot and the other founding mothers began the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (ACA), it was uncommon for women to have college degrees, and women who tried to attain them were actively discriminated against. They formed the ACA to remove the roadblocks to getting an education and subsequent work for women of their generation and beyond. Times have certainly changed since then, and today women outpace men in earning degrees at all levels. In 2019, women earned approximately:
 - 61% of associate degrees
 - 57% of bachelor’s degrees
 - 58% of master’s degrees
 - 53% of advanced degrees, including doctorate and professional degrees.
- If Marion Talbot—a woman who believed deeply in equality—formed AAUW today, we have no doubt she would allow all women to fight to achieve our expanded vision of attaining equity for all. We do not honor AAUW’s legacy with the degree requirement, quite the opposite. Being open to new ideas and adapting to change are the very essence of what it means to embrace education in our mission. Non-degreed women should be able to work for their own equity alongside the rest of us.
- Just like our founding mothers, we can be role models for positive change in the world. But we cannot have the impact we seek when our membership criteria don’t match our mission and values.

- AAUW seeks to empower women, why does one need a college education to do that? Don't we aim to serve all who care about advancing equity?

Question: The only reason members support dropping the degree requirement to gain more members for the organization, isn't it?

Response:

- Eliminating the degree requirement will bring AAUW membership criteria in line with our mission – to advance gender equity.
- Eliminating the degree requirement will not substantially increase membership.
- Expanding membership to include men in 1987 and those with an Associate's degree in 2005 did not have a major impact on membership. These actions were taken because they were the right thing to do. Now it's the right thing to do to fully open our membership.

Question: Won't dropping the degree requirement end what is unique about our organization?

Response:

- AAUW is unique due to our breadth of programming, research, policy and advocacy, fellowships & grants, and most importantly, a grassroots membership that can be mobilized to fight for what we believe in: full equity, including fair pay and equal opportunity in education and the workplace. We should open this powerful grassroots network up to all who want to join the fight as we know the work ahead is at the municipal, state and federal levels.
- Unfortunately, AAUW is also unique for its exclusionary practices that hold us back. Many diverse voices are stronger than a few insular ones.

Question: Won't we have to change our name if we drop the educational requirement?

Response:

- Why would we? The American Association of University Women name has not represented who we are and what we do in a very long time. While we do not have plans to change our name today, AAUW has gone through different naming iterations over the decades. Consider the following:

- A is for American – we have been working internationally for over 100 years, so we are actually I for International
- A is for Association – our member dues constitute only 15-20% of our total revenues so we are more than an Association
- U is for University – outdated since 2005 when we allowed Associate degree and higher to be members, meaning the U should at the least be a C for College
- W is for Women – we voted to include men into the organization in 1987 and currently have women, men and non-binary members. We are about gender equity for all, and we need all in the fight.

Question: I joined AAUW to be with like-minded women – won't allowing non-degreed members change that?

Response:

- Greater diversity can only strengthen AAUW and our ability to advance equity. But the educational requirement disproportionately prevents people of color and young people from becoming members. According to the US Census, in 2016 46% of non-Hispanic white women aged 25-29 years completed four years of college. For African American and Hispanic women, the numbers drop to 25% and 31%, respectively. This eliminates 54% of non-Hispanic white women, 75% of African American women, and 69% of Hispanic women from becoming AAUW members. Generation Z is the most diverse generation in history. This cohort and millennials view the educational degree requirement as elitist and out of sync with today's feminism.
- AAUW membership is comprised of nearly 60,000 members who have diverse attitudes and opinions.
- A college degree does not and cannot make us all like-minded, nor is having an entire membership who think the same way conducive to our own continued education and growth as people. If we were all like-minded, we would not be debating the issue of dropping the degree requirement, we would already all agree.
- We should not deny membership to those who seek us out because they wish to work for women's equity but they lack a required degree. Requiring a college degree for membership mistakenly implies that only those with degrees could possibly value or advocate for equity and education for girls and women. Shared values do not come with a college degree.

- We recognize the hard work of our members who hold educational degrees and they should not think that working with women without degrees will demean or diminish their accomplishment in any way.

Question: It's not that hard to get a degree these days. Why can't they just get one?

Response:

- Barriers to education still exist.
- While college is an option for many, others face significant barriers, like skyrocketing educational costs, childcare, elder care, transportation, working multiple jobs, and language barriers. And some may simply opt to pursue careers that do not require a college degree. This doesn't make them less interested in equity or less susceptible to the bias and discrimination that women face.
- Why should they have to? Shifts in the workplace have led to many more opportunities for skills-based jobs that do not require formal degrees—positions that policymakers and politicians from all political parties point to as critical to our country's economic growth. At AAUW's founding, women who lacked a degree had limited career options. In the 21st century, that's no longer true. Women today are firefighters, pilots, entrepreneurs, artists, politicians, manufacturers, and so much more; these jobs don't technically require a four-year degree, but they still necessitate a commitment to learning.
- Having a degree does not exempt women from discrimination, just as not having a degree does not make women unqualified to advocate for equity and fair treatment. Those on the receiving end of discriminatory treatment often make the strongest and most convincing advocates for the change we need.

Question: AAUW has been this way for a long time. Why do we need to change now?

Response:

- Times have changed and society has changed. Look at all that is happening in the world right now that would have seemed impossible 30 years ago.
- AAUW is also in a much different place than 30 years ago. If we truly want to preserve AAUW's long legacy, we must reinvent ourselves.
- AAUW empowers women. This is a time to consider all of your past objections to eliminating the degree requirement and ask yourself – what am I doing to help empower *all* women? How does keeping the membership requirement help me do this work?

- We're all reexamining our world and it is time to reexamine our assumptions about AAUW's work. Fundamentally, AAUW fights for equity. How can we do that to the fullest extent while keeping an unequal membership system?
- We need non-degreed women to fight with us and serve as role models to the next generation.

Question: Haven't we voted on this many times before? Why is this coming up again?

Response:

- It is never too late to do the right thing.
- While the degree requirement made sense when AAUW was created, it is now counter to our mission.
- AAUW has not always been on the right side of history and while we'll never be able to change the past, we can learn and grow as individuals and in our beloved organization.
- This is an opportunity to do the right thing, so that when future generations look back they can be inspired by our actions.