



An American Perspective

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After leaving work the other day, I found myself threading my way through the crowd emerging from a nearby college graduation ceremony. This isn't as coincidental as it sounds, as there are several universities within easy walking distance from DePaul. At this time of year, in fact, you almost expect to run into a graduation ceremony or two on your way home.

The crowd was spilling out onto the pavement in the best urban university tradition. The parents looked proud, as did the students. That is, they looked as proud as they reasonably could draped in academic robes at one of the busiest (and windiest) intersections in the city. And the pride would have been both genuine and appropriate, for many of the students at this university are from low-income and first generation college families. Indeed, the scene was a welcome reminder of how far the country has come in opening up access to higher education. In age, gender, race and class, it would have been a very different gathering just a few decades ago.

Four decades to be precise. For it was in 1965 that Lyndon Johnson engineered the passage of the landmark Higher Education Act. This was the legislation that placed colleges and universities in the front line of the War on Poverty and which did so much to open up educational opportunity for all Americans. At its core were two related provisions: federal financial aid for low to moderate income students, and the federal TRIO programs, a national network of grant funded (but college administered) activities designed to expand higher education access and attainment for low-income and first generation students.

In fact, the essential premises and vision of the legislation had been anticipated some years earlier. The constitutional responsibility for higher education in the United States lies with the states. Yet the GI Bill had provided ample precedent for using federal funds to support student access by assisting thousands of returning World War II servicemen to complete a college education. And by 1947, the economic, political and social justice arguments for an expanded higher education system were laid out by President Truman's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy. Barriers of race, income and religion, it

declared, should no longer deny to 'millions of young people what the democratic creed declares to be their birth-right: an equal chance with all others to make the most of their native abilities.'

That, as they say, was then. Forty years later we are learning that despite the massive expansion of college enrollments in this country, the gaps in higher education access and attainment between rich and poor are as wide as ever, and may even be widening. With college tuition continuing to outstrip both the rate of inflation and median family income, with federal financial aid policy shifting away from its initial focus on grants to low-income students to loans and tax credits for middle and upper income families, and with proposals to cut federal TRIO programs by over 50% in next year's federal budget, the goal of equal education opportunity for all Americans is beginning to look as elusive as ever.

Nor is this all. What we are also learning is just how stratified the American system of higher education has become. Much of the post-War expansion has been at the sub-baccalaureate level which is where most low-income students tend to be clustered. The likelihood of such a student making it to one of the country's elite universities is not much greater than it was a half century ago.

In appearance, of course, it's hard to tell one graduation ceremony from another. The gowns – if not the material – are essentially the same, and everyone receives a diploma. But that is where the similarity ends, for there is little equivalency of value among degrees in a marketplace so differentiated by brand and prestige. And yet the college graduation ceremony remains one of the most deeply iconic rituals in contemporary American life. It expresses and celebrates an abiding faith that it is through education (along with hard work and possibly a bit of luck) that the American Dream may be realized. It is a faith that was written all over the faces of the graduates and parents I saw the other day, though perhaps one that never required too much evidence. These days that may be just as well.