
Equitable Access to Higher Education

Abby Gabner¹, Shanta Mills² & Darlene Newman³

^{1,2,3}Millersville University of Pennsylvania, USA

abby.gabner@millersville.edu¹, smmills@millersville.edu² & Darlene.Newman@millersville.edu³

Abstract

Navigating higher education admissions in the United States is a complex process with many components. High school students planning to attend college usually begin preparing in the 9th or 11th-grade year by attending university open houses or other campus visits. Most students take standardized aptitude tests to increase their likelihood of admission and often hire tutors or consultants to help with the process (Scott, 2013). This can cost thousands of dollars, presenting a clear access barrier even before tuition is considered. The average cost of a four-year college education in the United States is \$102,000 for an on-campus student at a public institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Private institutions are more than double this, making financial aid necessary for most American students. This creates paperwork, deadlines for applications, testing, student aid forms, and more. Most students need financial support and the support of an advocate to be successful in higher ed. Considering that post-secondary degrees translate to higher wages and salaries, this contributes to the increased poverty rates of our most vulnerable populations, limiting their access to education (Ma et al., 2016). Foster care youth face special challenges that can impact their academics and are among the most disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for higher education (Wolanin, 2005). These youth experience challenges in education due to the instability of moving from one placement to another. Only about half of foster youth graduate from high school and less than 3% obtain a bachelor's degree. Higher education can be difficult for foster youths due to a lack of support, guidance, stability, and financial resources (Higher Education Research Institute, 2021). Wolanin (2005) finds that many foster youths have not achieved the adult skills and mindset needed to pursue higher education. The past two decades have brought a greater awareness of the impact early childhood experiences have on our neurological, behavioural, and emotional development. Specifically, experiences of trauma, abuse, neglect, grief, and separation, often known as adverse childhood experiences (ACE) (Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2022). The lack of ACE supports for these experiences shape our worldviews, behaviours, and mindset and have been known to have negative effects on mental health, cognitive function, and Interpersonal Relationships. The study of ACE while new is critical in aiding clinicians, children, families,

communities in healing from trauma, building resilience, and cultivating hope. Long-term outcomes of ACES are linked to negative effects on mental health, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and higher rates of substance use, depression, memory issues, and challenges in education. Barriers to higher education can vary greatly internationally. In Europe, there is a complex political entity called the European Union (Pasolea, 2022). This union has been the driving force for improvements in areas such as education and equal human rights. In Northern Europe, tuition fees depend on your country of origin and in which Nordic country you want to study. In Eastern Europe education is not free, but the cost is below average compared to other countries. In Western Europe, students pick their place of study based solely on what they want to study. In Australia, they have University or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) (Marks, 2009). TAFE is a trade school and is paid for upfront. Australian University uses The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt allowing students to repay their debt when they can afford to do so.

Keywords: higher education, equity, adverse childhood experiences

