Our Branch Could Ensure AAUW's Future Success

This April, we will again vote on a bylaws amendment to eliminate the degree requirement for AAUW membership. The state board recently voted to support the move because they believe it will help AAUW become the inclusive organization that many of us strive to see. Our branch could join the effort to set AAUW up for success in the coming years.

Many of us have been in the situation of meeting prospective members who are interested in AAUW and share our mission of equity for women and girls. We are then faced with having to ask them about their educational attainment to see if they would qualify for membership. It is difficult to ask and can lead to embarrassment for the prospective member if they don’t meet the standard and the loss for us of their passion, skills, and potential contributions.

They cannot join due to a requirement that was established 143 years ago.

Over the years AAUW members have voted to modify the membership requirements to reflect the ever-changing social climate:

* 1949 – Allowed those with approved degrees from sanctioned and accredited four-year colleges or universities to join both National AND branches (which effectively allowed women of color to join AAUW)
* 1963- Admitted those holding degrees, including nursing, education and home economics, from any regionally accredited institution
* 1987 – Extended membership to male college graduates
* 2005 – Relaxed membership requirement to include graduates who hold an associate or equivalent degree from a qualified educational institution

How many potential members are we losing because AAUW has this eligibility requirement?

* We lose younger women and men who meet the education requirement but don’t want to join an organization that seems elitist to them.
* We lose women and men who share our vision for the future but because of a myriad of circumstances they were not able to attain a college degree. This did not keep them from having careers or joining other activist organizations. They just cannot join AAUW.
* We lose donations from organizations that support our mission but do not understand why one must have a college degree to work towards gender equity.

Some members object to open membership because they wonder, “What will our name be?” AAUW’s name doesn’t need to change at all. We have been known as AAUW since the 1920s (two separate organizations merged) and so it has historic value as well as name recognition. We have allowed men to belong for nearly 40 years and no one felt the need for a change back then. We will be like other long-time organizations who have changed membership requirements over their histories but retained their names (e.g. GEICO, YMCA). When we talk about the organization, we can say "I belong to AAUW and we work for equity for women and girls." The initials are less important than our wonderful mission and actions.

While AAUW is an organization that fully supports women getting a college education in the field of their choice, we need to recognize that education comes in many forms. In our professional lives, we have worked with many women and men who did not have a formal degree. This is not a measure of intelligence or ability…sometimes it is the lack of opportunity or choices made early in life that are difficult to reverse. According to the 2021 Census, just 34% of Americans aged 25 to 29 years completed four years of college. We are missing out on many voices that we need in this fight for equity.

Throughout the past 143 years, AAUW members have never stopped advocating for education while expanding our focus on ensuring effective policies around family leave, reproductive rights, equal pay, and policies against sexual harassment and violence against women. Welcoming those without a degree will not change who we are and what we are working towards- it will enhance our efforts by including anyone who is as passionate as we are about equity for women and girls.

We need every woman and man who supports our mission – empowering women and girls – to join us in the ongoing challenge of achieving gender equity.