

AAUW Leader Outlines Challenges to Higher Education

By Allyson Johnson, Co-President, AAUW Silicon Valley Branch

On December 3, 2025, the Silicon Valley Branch of AAUW (American Association of University Women) hosted a Zoom event, "Higher Education at Risk – How You Can Protect It," featuring Meghan Kissell, AAUW Senior Director of Policy and Member Advocacy. Over 90 people tuned in, including branch members from around California. Kissell focused on how the current administration has challenged AAUW's policy positions on higher education and offered action items to counter those challenges.

Kissell started with a brief history of the Department of Education (ED), now under attack from the current administration. The ED was spun off from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1979 with three goals: to enforce civil rights laws in education, to administer federal aid to students, and to promote equal educational opportunity for all.

The current administration has announced its intention to functionally eliminate the Department of Education by re-assigning its programs to other federal departments. (As the Department was established by a Congressional act, it cannot be legally disbanded.) The current head of the department is a supporter of using public money for vouchers to be applied toward private school tuition. AAUW opposes the diversion of money from the public school system as this will especially impact low-income students who have few alternatives to public education.

The Department of Education under the current administration has dismissed civil rights complaints "at an unheard-of pace", said Kissell. It has also allowed a campaign to discourage international students from studying in the United States by limiting visa approvals and blocking re-entry if a student returns home. This creates a climate of fear and deprives schools of premium tuition payments which help sustain programs that help all students.

The current administration has also pressured schools to remove any teaching of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. "These are very fuzzy terms", said Kissell, but the administration is threatening loss of federal funds as reprisal if the content of curriculum does not adhere to traditional "Manifest Destiny" and "American Exceptionalism" teachings. These moves disproportionately harm women, students of color, low-income, LGBTQ+, and disabled students who have been left out of traditional curricula. Under the administration's Contract for Academic Excellence, proposed as a requisite for universities to receive federal funding, "we can't talk about race or gender."

Trump's Big Beautiful [Budget Reconciliation] Bill also raises concerns, said Kissell. It slashes financial aid, eliminates vital student-loan programs, and channels public dollars into private voucher schemes without strong civil-rights safeguards.

The Department of Education will be making recommendations for levels of public funding for higher education in January. One controversial idea has been to offer different levels of loan caps for higher degrees depending on the profession; under the proposal nurses, for example, would have a loan cap of

\$100,000, while doctors would have a cap of \$200,000. Kissell urged her audience to write letters and make their ideas heard during the period when these recommendations are open for public comment.

AAUW offers advocacy training programs and quarterly policy briefings to help members stay up to date on issues and protest effectively against harmful policies. Kissell urged AAUW members who tuned into the Zoom meeting to take action by participating in these programs, attending the briefings, meeting with elected officials, and most important, by voting to defend equity and demand inclusion for all segments of our society.

The talk was organized by the AAUW - Silicon Valley Branch, which includes members from Los Altos, Mountain View, and Palo Alto. For information about activities and membership in the local branch, see the website: <https://siliconvalley-ca.aauw.net>

=====

For more information, please contact
Allyson Johnson
650 833-8594