

The New York Times

March 29, 2013

A Simple Way to Send Poor Kids to Top Colleges

By DAVID LEONHARDT

WASHINGTON

THE packages arrived by mail in October of the students' senior year of high school. They consisted of brightly colored accordion folders containing about 75 sheets of paper. The sheets were filed with information about colleges: their admissions standards, graduation rates and financial aid policies.

The students receiving the packages were mostly high-achieving, low-income students, and they were part of a randomized experiment. The researchers sending the packets were trying to determine whether most poor students did not attend selective colleges because they did not want to, or because they did not understand that they could.

The [results are now in](#), and they suggest that basic information can substantially increase the number of low-income students who apply to, attend and graduate from top colleges.

Among a control group of low-income students with SAT scores good enough to attend top colleges — but who did not receive the information packets — only 30 percent gained admission to a college matching their academic qualifications. Among a similar group of students who did receive a packet, 54 percent gained admission, according to the researchers, Caroline M. Hoxby of Stanford and Sarah E. Turner of the University of Virginia.

David Coleman, the president of the College Board, told me that he considered the results powerful enough to require changes at his organization, which conducts the SAT. “We can’t stand by as students, particularly low-income students, go off track and don’t pursue the opportunities they have earned,” Mr. Coleman said. The group may soon begin sending its own version of the experiment’s information.

The experiment is part of a new wave of attention on the lack of socioeconomic diversity at top colleges. Mr. Coleman, who took over the College Board last fall, said his top priority was expanding opportunity. Another recent study, by Ms. Hoxby and Christopher Avery of Harvard, found that many low-income students had the high school grades and scores to thrive at the nation’s 238 most selective colleges, but never applied. And the Supreme Court may soon further restrict race-based affirmative action, putting pressure on colleges to try a class-based version instead.

Together, these developments are creating a test of whether colleges mean what they say about meritocracy and diversity.

University officials have long trumpeted economic diversity as a goal. A few colleges, including Harvard and especially Amherst, have in fact significantly increased their ranks of low-income students. But at most top colleges, the student body — while geographically, ethnically and religiously diverse — remains dominated by affluent students.

The new research shows that large numbers of talented, well-prepared low-income teenagers exist. And many of them want to attend selective colleges, once they understand their options.

Ms. Hoxby and Ms. Turner designed the 40,000 information packets they mailed — as well as follow-up material — as a low-cost, customized version of the college counseling that upper-income students take for granted. The packets explained application deadlines and student qualifications at a range of colleges. Students also received coupons to waive application fees — which had a particularly big effect. “We wanted students to find schools for themselves,” Ms. Hoxby said.

Perhaps most important, the packets presented a series of tables making clear that college is often not as expensive as many students and parents fear. Selective colleges frequently cost *less* for low-income students than local colleges, because the selective ones have the resources to offer bigger scholarships.

At the less-selective campuses in the University of Wisconsin system, for example, the average net annual cost for a year of tuition, room, board and fees in 2010-11 was almost \$10,000 for families making less than \$30,000, Ms. Turner said. At the flagship campus in Madison, by contrast, the equivalent net cost was \$6,000. And at Harvard, such students paid only \$1,300 a year.

Given all of the well-publicized scare stories about student debt, these comparisons can be surprising to adults who attended an elite college — let alone to 17-year-olds who don't know anyone who has. No wonder that the information packets had an effect. Students who saw a packet submitted 48 percent more applications than the control group. They were about 40 percent more likely to apply to a college matching their academic qualifications.

Of course, many low-income students who graduate from less selective colleges do very well. The problem is that these colleges tend to have far lower graduation rates. Research by William G. Bowen, Michael S. McPherson and Matthew M. Chingos found that even top students who attended community colleges and local four-year colleges often failed to graduate, leaving them with much-diminished prospects.

They are likely to graduate from top colleges in far greater numbers than from the colleges many now attend. And the more affluent (and slightly less deserving) students they displace will move down only a notch on the college spectrum and still do very well.

“The little trickle down is not going to offset the big leap,” Ms. Hoxby said.

The leap, however, is more expensive for colleges. Today, colleges can celebrate the many ways their students are diverse while also not busting their financial aid budgets. If the College Board and colleges themselves become more aggressive and creative about recruiting top low-income students, the financial aid demands will rise.

Optimists argue that a greater commitment to social mobility will also open up new fundraising opportunities — from foundations and eventually grateful, once-poor alumni. Anthony W. Marx, the president of the New York Public Library, who made economic diversity a priority while running Amherst, said that the effort led to more alumni giving. Colleges can also expand enrollment, minimizing the politically sensitive displacement of higher-income applicants.

Still, there will be trade-offs. Recruiting more top low-income students will probably force colleges to spend less elsewhere, be it on buildings, sports teams or undersubscribed academic fields.

But it is hard to think of a form of spending more consistent with top colleges' self-image and mission than scholarships for low-income students who have managed to overcome barriers and excel.

Not so long ago, many elite colleges resembled finishing schools for well-off white Protestant men. By any measure, the colleges have changed enormously. They are far more meritocratic than they once were. They just aren't yet as meritocratic as they claim to be.

David Leonhardt is the Washington bureau chief of The New York Times and the author of a new e-single, “Here’s the Deal.”