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# Efforts to Recruit Poor Students Lag at Some Elite Colleges

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With affirmative action under attack and economic mobility feared to be stagnating, top colleges profess a growing commitment to recruiting poor students. But a comparison of low-income enrollment shows wide disparities among the most competitive private colleges. A student at Vassar, for example, is three times as likely to receive a need-based Pell Grant as one at Washington University in St. Louis.

“It’s a question of how serious you are about it,” said Catharine Bond Hill, the president of Vassar. She said of colleges with multibillion-dollar endowments and numerous tax exemptions that recruit few poor students, “Shame on you.”

At Vassar, Amherst College and Emory University, 22 percent of undergraduates in 2010-11 received federal Pell Grants, which go mostly to students whose families earn less than \$30,000 a year. The same year, the most recent in the federal [Department of Education database](#), only 7 percent of undergraduates at Washington University were Pell recipients, and 8 percent at Washington and Lee University were, according to research by The New York Times.

Researchers at Georgetown University have found that at the most competitive colleges, [only 14 percent](#) of students come from the lower 50 percent of families by income. That figure has not increased over more than two decades, an indication that a generation of pledges to diversify has not amounted to much. Top colleges differ markedly in how aggressively they hunt for qualified teenagers from poorer families, how they assess applicants who need aid, and how they distribute the available aid dollars.

Some institutions argue that they do not have the resources to be as generous as the top colleges, and for most colleges, with meager endowments, that is no doubt true. But among the elites, nearly all of them with large endowments, there is little correlation between a university’s wealth and the number of students who receive Pell Grants, which did not exceed \$5,550 per student last year.

Washington University has an endowment similar in size, per student, to those of Emory and Vassar — between \$300,000 and \$400,000 as of mid-2012, wealthier than all but a few dozen colleges in the country, and Washington and Lee’s endowment is significantly larger, the Times research shows. At Harvard and Yale, with the largest endowments in

the country, Pell enrollment was near the 15 percent average for the 50 most competitive colleges; at Princeton, with the largest per-capita endowment, it was lower, 12 percent, though its officials say the rate is higher for the freshman class starting this fall.

John Berg, the vice chancellor for admissions at Washington University, said one reason its numbers are so low is that the disadvantaged students it admits usually have offers from other top colleges with better name recognition.

Bob Strong, a professor of politics at Washington and Lee who oversaw admissions there for two years as interim provost, conceded that his institution historically did a poor job of recruiting low-income students, but said that it has improved and “we’re still working on it.”

Groups that work with poorer students and administrators at colleges with high disadvantaged enrollment say that one main factor is simply making the effort to get low-income students to apply. Last year, researchers at Stanford and Harvard reported that the vast majority of high-achieving, low-income students **do not apply** to any selective colleges.

“Kids who’ve never heard of most elite institutions, who don’t know anyone who’s gone to one, who assume they can’t afford one, aren’t going to apply unless you go out and recruit them,” said Anthony W. Marx, president of Amherst from 2003 to 2011.

Most of the top private colleges rely on nonprofit groups like [Questbridge](#) and the [Posse Foundation](#) to help them find promising disadvantaged students. However, some recruit heavily that way while others only take one or two students per year. And some elite institutions, like Washington University, do not work with such groups.

For colleges that have the resources, another factor is how willing they are to spend the money to hunt for those applicants, and the much larger amount needed to help lower-income students go to a \$60,000-a-year college. In addition, poor students **face bigger challenges** to remain enrolled and colleges often spend money on support services for them.

Among the 50 most selective private colleges, as measured by test scores and the percentage of applicants admitted, about four-fifths have need-blind admissions, meaning that they pledge to judge applicants without considering their ability to pay. Most of the colleges that do consider financial need to varying degrees, including Colby College and Washington and Lee, have lower Pell enrollments than most of their peers.

At a forum last fall, Mark S. Wrighton, the chancellor of Washington University, said of need-blind admission, [according to the student newspaper](#), “It’s not our highest priority” — a comment that Mr. Berg said was taken out of context.

Colleges award financial aid based either on need or merit, which can be defined as anything from earning good grades to being a virtuoso cellist. Colleges can use merit scholarships to attract students they consider desirable, and administrators stress that often, the donors who endow the scholarships dictate how the money is used.

Most of the elite colleges give only need-based aid. But a handful devote a significant part of their aid budgets to merit aid, and those, including Davidson College and Oberlin College, also tend to have fewer Pell recipients.

Critics who want colleges to do more to enroll poor students say the colleges are too motivated by ranking systems, which reward schools not only for recruiting higher-performing students, but also for increasing spending on salaries and buildings, but not on financial aid or diversity. Mr. Berg insisted that at Washington University rankings are never discussed in the admissions office.

The question of socioeconomic diversity has gained new urgency in recent years, as economists and sociologists debate whether social mobility is declining in the United States, and educators ask what role top colleges play in helping or hindering that movement.

Socioeconomic diversity also became an issue in the debate over race-conscious admissions in the past year, as the Supreme Court considered a case that could have led to the abolition of affirmative action. [The court decided](#) not to address that issue head-on, but it is likely to return before the justices.

Some opponents of affirmative action argue that eliminating it would prompt colleges to give students more of a leg up based on disadvantage, rather than race, a system that they argue would be fairer. Affirmative action supporters voice doubts that its elimination would change colleges' recruitment of poorer students, noting that a review of [elite public universities](#) shows no consistency among them, whether or not they consider race.

Among the top private schools, the disparities are even greater. Some private college administrators say they do not have the same moral obligation as public colleges to serve all strata of society, though they are loath to say so publicly.

Ms. Hill, of Vassar, disagrees.

“We receive public support through federal grants, state grants, our tax exemptions, so I think we have the same duty,” she said. “And if young people don’t have an equal shot at getting a great education, we’re going to create a society we’re not very happy with.”

