



Elite Colleges Struggle To Recruit Smart, Low-Income Kids

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Across the United States, college administrators are poring over student essays, recommendation letters and SAT scores as they select a freshman class for the fall.

If this is like most years, administrators at top schools such as Harvard and Stanford will try hard to find talented high school students from poor families in a push to increase the socioeconomic diversity on campus and to counter the growing concern that highly selective colleges cater mainly to students from privileged backgrounds.

Top schools often offer scholarships that not only include free tuition, but also free room and board for top students from poor families — meaning it can be less expensive for these students to attend Harvard than a state school or a community college, says Caroline Hoxby, an economist at Stanford who tracks these students.

Each year, however, colleges are confronted with a paradox: No matter how many incentives they provide, enrollment of highly talented, low-income students barely seems to budge.

After Harvard offered what was, in essence, a free college education to students whose families earned under \$40,000 a year, Hoxby says, "the number of students whose families had income below that threshold changed by only about 15 students, and the class at Harvard is about 1,650 freshmen."

Hoxby says some college administrators had confided to her that they had reluctantly come to the conclusion that the pool of low-income students with top academic credentials was just limited, and there wasn't much they could do to change that.

But in an analysis published with Christopher Avery in December, Hoxby has shown that this conclusion isn't true. There is in fact a vast pool of highly talented, low-income students; they just aren't ending up in top schools.

Hoxby says in an interview that she asked herself why talented students might escape the attention of college administrators, when the administrators were looking so hard for these students.

"The students whom they see are the students who apply," she says, of admissions officers. "And if a student doesn't apply to any selective college or university, it's impossible for admissions staff to see that they are out there."

Hoxby found that the majority of academically gifted low-income students come from a handful of places in the country: About 70 percent of them come from 15 large metropolitan areas. These areas often have highly regarded public high schools, such as Stuyvesant in New York City or Thomas Jefferson in the Washington, D.C., area.

Low-income high-achieving students at these schools have close to 100 percent odds of attending an Ivy League school or other highly selective college, Hoxby says.

The reasons are straightforward: These schools boast top teachers and immense resources. They have terrific guidance counselors. Highly selective colleges send scouts to these schools to recruit top talent. And perhaps most important, students in these schools are part of a peer group where many others are also headed to highly selective colleges.

Hoxby and Avery found that top students who do not live in these major metropolitan areas were significantly less likely to end up at a highly selective school. These students were far less likely to find themselves in a pipeline that ended at an Ivy League school.

"Imagine a student who is the only student who is a likely candidate for a place like Harvard or Stanford or University of Chicago — and he's not just the only student in his or her high school, but he's the only student that that high school has graduated like that in, say, three or four years," Hoxby says.

Without mentors and academically talented peers, Hoxby says, many of these students fail to apply to schools that can offer them a premium education free of charge. And because the students are widely dispersed across the 42,000 high schools in the country, college recruiters have a hard time finding them.

Hoxby is working on interventions to reach these students and to give them a clear picture of their choices. She doesn't believe all these students need to necessarily end

up at a highly selective college, but she wants them to clearly understand that they have that choice.

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