

## The Opinion Pages

# How Colleges Can Again Be Levelers of Society

Tina Rosenberg

FIXES MAY 3, 2016

*Second of two articles.*

Last week I wrote about the College Advising Corps program at Jamaica Gateway to the Sciences High School, which helps students navigate the application process for college admission and financial aid. Advisers make a difference at schools like Gateway, where virtually all students who go to college will be the first in their families.

Bukola Oloyede, now a senior at Gateway, entered it thinking she would go to a college within New York's city-run or state-run universities. Two weeks ago, however, she enrolled at Vassar.

Oloyede had more than 20 face-to-face sessions with her Gateway college adviser, Justine Rosenthal. But she also benefited from the policies of Vassar.

Most highly rated colleges say they seek qualified low-income students. But a vast majority enroll very few. At the most competitive colleges, only 17 percent of students are poor enough to receive the federal education stipends known as Pell Grants. That's just one percentage point higher than in 2000.

At Vassar, by contrast, 24 percent of the student body qualifies for Pell grants. “We have a lot of luck with Vassar,” said Rosenthal. Getting a bachelor’s degree is the best way to escape poverty. So it’s worth looking at what Vassar does that other schools don’t.

Higher education, once seen as the nation’s great leveler, has become a guardian of class division and privilege in America. At the country’s most selective schools, three percent of students come from families in the bottom economic quartile, while the top economic quartile supplies 72 percent. A high-achieving poor student is only one-third as likely to go to a competitive school as her wealthier counterpart.

Talented students should go to the best college they can — and not just for the career advantages later. A student who could get into a top school is nearly twice as likely to graduate there than if she goes to a noncompetitive school. The top colleges are the only ones where students of all income levels graduate at the same rates. The reason is money: Selective colleges are richer. They can afford to provide specialized counseling and lots of financial aid. And running out of money is the most common reason people drop out.

It doesn’t seem as if closing this gap should be so difficult. Some 30,000 low-income high school seniors in America each year are top students but don’t go to selective schools, or to college at all. Catharine Bond Hill, a prominent economist who studies equity in higher education, found that the share of low-income students at highly selective colleges could rise by 30 to 60 percent with no decrease in academic quality.

So why don’t colleges just grab these students?

One big obstacle is what I wrote about last week — many students don’t apply because they don’t know elite schools are an option. The top students among them are also hard for recruiters to find, since they are scattered around the country.

But when poorer students do apply, they are accepted less often than similar students from high-income families, or they get in but don’t receive enough financial aid to go. Some elite private colleges cost \$60,000 per year or more. Just thinking

about graduating with a five- or even six-figure amount of debt sends many students from financially strapped families scurrying back to state schools.

Colleges that enroll the highest percentage of low-income students are need-blind, which means they make admissions decisions without considering ability to pay. They offer enough financial aid to completely close the gap between the cost of college and what a student's family can pay. And they actively recruit low-income students.

Stephen Burd, a senior policy analyst at New America, a public policy institute, said that between 20 and 25 private schools and many public colleges do all three things, among them many Ivies, Stanford and small colleges like Pomona, Wellesley and Amherst (another leader in educating low-income students).

The vast majority of colleges don't. Enrolling poor students is costly, especially because each scholarship student will take the place of someone who could pay in full. The financial crisis of 2008 sliced into endowments. States are cutting public schools' budgets.

In addition, the money colleges do have increasingly goes to students who don't need it. Private colleges engage in bidding wars for talented *wealthy* students. Burd writes that the same thing is happening at public colleges, where tuition is higher for out-of-state students, and bidding wars for them gobble up a growing percentage of aid. While this crowds out low-income students, and many colleges say they would like to stop, they do not because their competitors are still doing it.

Tied to money is the death grip of U.S. News & World Report's much-criticized college rankings. Colleges seek to move up in the rankings by competing on selectivity, student test scores, alumni giving and academic spending, among other metrics on which colleges do best when they stick to privileged students. The college ranking system of *The Washington Monthly* provides a valuable alternative. It rates colleges for their contribution to the public good, considering (in addition to graduation rates, which U.S. News also looks at) the percentage of students from low-income families, innovative research and the percentage of students who do national service.

In January, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which focuses on helping promising poor students, published *True Merit*, a report that details many other obstacles in the way of low-income students:

- Colleges give more weight to students who take Advanced Placement or International baccalaureate classes. These are often unavailable at poorly funded high schools.

- Students who apply for early admission often double their chance of acceptance. But early admission is not an option for students who need to see and compare all of their financial aid offers.

- Colleges look for interesting extracurricular activities. A student who can afford to take an unpaid internship in a research lab moves ahead of a student who spent evenings working at Burger King.

- Students who have a parent or close relative who attended the school get preference (a practice believed to increase alumni contributions). Harvard's admission rate for these legacies, for example, is four times higher than for regular applicants. There is no more direct way to perpetuate privilege.

- Colleges depend heavily on SAT and ACT scores. But these standardized tests are discriminatory — the richer you are, the better you'll do, even without test-preparation services and professional tutoring, to which poor kids have no access.

- Colleges like to see students “demonstrate interest” by visiting campus.

- Water polo scholarships. And sailing, crew and squash scholarships. Some schools don't offer athletic scholarships, but do hold places for students who play these sports.

- Most controversially, even affirmative action can discriminate against the poor, the report said. Nearly 90 percent of African-American students at selective colleges, some of whom were admitted through racial preferences, are middle- or upper-class.

Bukola Oyolede visited Vassar for the first time in mid-April, for Focus on Vassar weekend, a three-day visit for incoming students who are first-generation or

from underrepresented minorities. She was struck by the beauty of the campus — and the gender-neutral bathrooms. She felt part of the group. That, and her new mentor, who told her all about negotiating freshman year, helped calm her nerves about the extreme switch in environment that looms. “It opened up a book full of friends I can communicate with,” she said.

Vassar was founded to serve another group that wasn’t accepted at elite colleges: women. Traditionally, white, wealthy Protestant women. Vassar began admitting men in 1969. But in 2006, when Hill, the economist of higher education, became president of the college, rich and white were still very much the norm. At the time, about 11 percent of students received Pell Grants, Hill said.

Since then the school has doubled its financial aid budget — which it spends only on needy students; 58 percent of students get some financial aid. Pell grant students are now 23 or 24 percent, Hill said, and the percentage of students of color has doubled. Academic standards are unchanged, and Hill said that the graduation rate of the low-income students is slightly higher than the college’s average.

In 2015, the Cooke Foundation established a \$1 million prize to recognize a college that supports low-income students. Vassar was the first winner.

Vassar had the most decisive factor for broadening its student body: a leader’s commitment. And it was fortunate that Hill began in 2006, before the financial crisis. “That buy-in was easier,” she said in an interview. “The trade-offs didn’t look quite as complicated. With the financial crisis we certainly talked about whether we could stay committed to it.” The school decided to continue to be need-blind and to provide enough aid to allow every accepted student to come. “To say we’re going to balance the budget by reducing aid to the families that were getting hit hardest by the crisis didn’t seem like the right way to go,” she said.

Beside refocusing its financial aid on needy students, the school also expanded its recruiting. It became a partner of Questbridge, an organization that finds talented low-income students and matches them to elite colleges, and also of community organizations in several cities that do the same on the local level. And it established programs to support those students through graduation.

Art Rodriguez, the dean of admission and financial aid, said Vassar has shifted its recruiting, dropping visits to some high-income secondary schools to add more poor schools. And it pools recruiting efforts with Bowdoin, Carleton, Davidson and Haverford to be able to meet more low-income students.

Part of the aid for needy students came from ending merit aid, which often went to students who didn't need it. But other cutbacks were necessary. "Before the crisis we had let both faculty and non-faculty staff increase," Hill told *The Washington Monthly*. "We pulled that back, primarily by not renewing contracts, and also saved money through vacancies and retirements. That was a little harder. We had to make some changes to the curriculum, too. In the heady days before the financial collapse we would allow a class to go forward even if only two or three students registered for it. That doesn't happen any more. We also postponed on some renovating of buildings."

American colleges get large government subsidies to help them provide social mobility for all. They benefit from Pell Grants and federal loans. Colleges get huge tax breaks for their nonprofit status. "Some 25 to 35 percent of our revenues probably come from these privileges," Hill told *the Washington Monthly*. She argues that the government should be doing "anything it can" to encourage elite colleges to take more low-income students. It is an understatement to say that this is a minority view among college presidents.

Burd has one idea. He suggests that schools at which Pell recipients constitute over 25 percent of the students be paid bonus Pell Grants.

Harold O. Levy, the executive director of the Cooke Foundation, believes that need-blind is the wrong approach: instead, colleges should give *priority* to low-income students. The True Merit report argues that it is relatively easy for a wealthy student at a prep school to get top grades and test scores. A poor student from a poor school who does so must be someone with unusual amounts of grit and tenacity. "Current admissions fail to acknowledge this difference," the report says, adding that "they actually punish the striver."

But it's hard to imagine what could make most colleges see things this way. "Every incentive these days is to *not* get low-income students," said Burd. "It takes a

huge personal commitment from a leader. The only thing driving it is their conscience.”

*Tina Rosenberg won a Pulitzer Prize for her book "The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism." She is a former editorial writer for The Times and the author, most recently, of "Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World" and the World War II spy story e-book "D for Deception." She is a co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, which supports rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.*

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter, and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.*

---

© 2016 The New York Times Company