



## EDUCATION

## University of Chicago Acts to Improve Access for Lower-Income Students

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA OCT. 1, 2014

With elite colleges under growing pressure to enroll more low-income students, the University of Chicago is taking a series of rare steps to make applying faster, simpler and cheaper, and to make studying there more affordable.

The package of measures, to be announced Wednesday, includes several that are highly unusual, like eliminating the expectation that low- and middle-income students take jobs during the academic year, guaranteeing them paid summer internships after their first year in college and providing them career counseling beginning in that first year.

“This is all part of a strategy to create a common and equal platform for all students,” for access to the university and “to be successful once they’re here,” said John W. Boyer, the dean of the undergraduate college.

The effort, to be phased in over five years, will mean significantly more spending on some students, and even more costs if the university succeeds in raising the number of low-income students. Mr. Boyer said he could not cite an overall price, but noted that one goal of the university’s coming five-year fund-raising campaign was to raise \$150 million to \$200 million for financial aid.

The share of low-income students at elite colleges has barely changed in decades, and the University of Chicago has had less economic diversity than most. The widening gap between rich and poor, and increasing competition for admission to top colleges, contribute to concerns that they fuel inequality rather than social mobility.

“It’s exciting to see the University of Chicago taking some significant steps to make the college more affordable for low- and moderate-income students,” said Stephen Burd, senior policy analyst at the New America Foundation, a policy research group. He added that the real test would be to see if more low-income students end up at Chicago.

While talk of cost and other barriers has often focused on the highly selective colleges, there have been scattered efforts to improve access at all levels of higher education.

One of those will also be announced Wednesday in Chicago: Mayor Rahm Emanuel will offer free community college education for anyone who graduates from a city public high school with a grade-point average of 3.0 or higher and can place into college-level math and English. Led by Gov. Bill Haslam, Tennessee has promised tuition-free community college or technical school for all students.

Highly selective colleges note that few low-income students apply, even if they have strong credentials; the students do not understand the system, they find it daunting, or they think it cannot work in their favor. So the University of Chicago is taking steps to explain and streamline the process, hoping that results in more applications.

As the university’s admissions officers tour the country, talking with students and parents, their pitch will include a tutorial on how to apply for admission and financial aid — a shorter version of presentations they already make in Chicago high schools.

“Our students have found it extremely important and helpful, in knowing the little nuances and details, understanding the terms they use,” said Lindsey R. Hunter, a college and career coach at Kenwood Academy, a public high school on the city’s South Side.

James G. Nondorf, a university vice president and the dean of admissions, said, “A barrier to students taking advantage of many top schools was not that we weren’t going to help them, but that they didn’t know how to ask for help.”

To apply for financial aid from the federal government and from almost any college, students must fill out the federal government's financial aid form. But in addition, most highly competitive schools require a more complex form, the CSS/Financial Aid Profile. Mr. Nondorf said 20 percent to 30 percent of families that started the paperwork did not finish.

The university says it will no longer require the CSS and some other forms — for example, automatically waiving the college application fee for people seeking financial aid, rather than asking them to apply for a waiver.

When colleges offer financial aid, it is usually a mix of grants and loans, and their estimate of what families can pay usually includes student earnings from a part-time job during the academic year. The university will eliminate loans in aid packages, a step a small number of other top universities have also taken, and for low- and middle-income students, it will no longer assume a school-year job. Those steps, and increases in the size of certain scholarships, will mean bigger aid grants.

The university will also provide precollege orientation programs and tuition-free summer school for some students.

A version of this article appears in print on October 1, 2014, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: University of Chicago Acts to Improve Access for Lower-Income Students.