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# College aid offers fail to grow with economy

Even some elite schools find cost of idealistic policy unsustainable

By **Marcella Bombardieri** | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 25, 2013



COLM O'MOLLOY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Student Jaime Morgan gave prospective students and their families a tour of the Tufts campus earlier this month. Tufts is seeing more applicants who need financial aid.**

MEDFORD — It was a goal that former Tufts University president Lawrence S. Bacow highlighted in his inaugural address more than a decade ago: make admissions decisions without considering a student's ability to pay.

Need-blind admissions, as it is known, was a central element of Tufts' last capital campaign, and with that funding boost the university — long committed to meeting the financial needs of all the students it admits — was able to swing two need-blind admissions cycles.

But after the national financial crisis hit, taking many college endowments down with it, Tufts put that ambition on the shelf, where it remains. And it has plenty of company among elite colleges. The economy is improving and endowments are rebounding, but the generosity of many schools' financial aid policies is not.

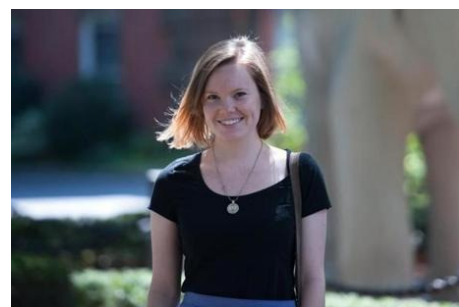
In fact, colleges continue to cut back. Wesleyan University in Connecticut ended years of need-blind admissions when choosing this fall's freshman class, while Williams College in 2010 became "need sensitive" for international applicants. Many more, including MIT, Cornell, and just this month the University of Virginia, have curtailed promises to replace loans, which can burden students for years, with grants for low-income or middle-class families.

These universities all belong to a small, wealthy elite that pledge to give the students they do admit as much financial aid as they need. It is a commitment that becomes even more costly when combined with a need-blind admissions process that can boost the number of economically struggling students.

While most of the schools are setting records every year with their financial aid budgets, that money is being used to cover rising tuition costs and increased family need after decades of stagnant income growth.

At Tufts, students' needs have grown so much that the average grant for incoming freshmen is — at \$36,000 — roughly \$10,000 more than it was in 2007 and 2008, the years when admissions were unofficially need blind, said Lee Coffin, dean of undergraduate admissions.

Those that consider need in admissions decisions do so only for a fraction of applicants, toward the end of the process. Still, the narrowed aspirations for making



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**"Why is there a lack of conversation about economic status, about ourselves?" said Alexis O'Connell, a Tufts sophomore who receives financial aid.**

college available and affordable for all has triggered criticism that colleges are turning away from their mission to serve a broad cross section of society.

Wesleyan's announcement sparked heated protests and even a sit-in at a trustees' meeting.

One 2005 alumna who signed a petition asking Wesleyan to reverse course wrote that she could no longer enthusiastically recommend the university to the Brooklyn public high school students she teaches, who can't afford to apply to many schools, "knowing that Wesleyan just became a little more out of their reach."

Yet it is hard to find anyone in the higher education field who blames these schools for cutting back. Indeed, several experts on financial aid praised Wesleyan for acknowledging openly that it was ending need-blind admissions rather than quietly cutting corners in financial aid packages or slackening efforts to recruit low-income students — as rumored at some institutions.

"The dilemma these institutions are facing is how do they remain accessible and try to attract diverse classes and how do they maintain the quality of what's going on," said Ronald G. Ehrenberg, an economics professor and former trustee at Cornell, which last summer reversed a policy of not asking students with family incomes between \$60,000 and \$75,000 to take out loans.

Ehrenberg, an expert on higher education finance, said colleges face "a very unstable funding model." He believes highly selective colleges will remain generous with poor students, but "what I do worry about is that the middle [class] will melt away."

At Wesleyan, economics professor Gilbert L. Skillman said clinging to the need-blind ideal may have actually worsened inequality on campus, because the school was spread too thin, unable to offer financial aid packages as generous as its peers. Among schools that pledge to fully support their students, there can still be differences in what they offer, including the mix of grants and loans.

Skillman pointed to senior surveys that showed a disquieting shift in the Wesleyan population from 2001 to 2011, even while the need-blind policy was still in place: the proportion of students from families making at least

\$150,000 a year grew from 30 percent to 47 percent, while students whose families make between \$50,000 and \$150,000 dropped from 51 percent to 37 percent.

Wesleyan president Michael S. Roth said that ability to pay came into consideration only for about the last 9 percent of the applicants admitted this year. He promised that recruiting low-income students will remain a major priority.

“It kills me, frankly, that I’m the person who had to make this decision,” he said. “I was one of the protesters when I was a Wesleyan student and I’d probably be with the protesters now. But I felt like I’m responsible when I step down as president [to leave the school financially able to] do more for our students and alumni than when I came.”

Tufts president Anthony P. Monaco, the son of a plumber who went to Princeton on financial aid, also said he regrets the limits he has set on the aid budget, noting that being need-aware has contributed to a plateau in the diversity of the student body.

“We would like to do better,” he said.

Monaco launched a campaign last year to raise \$25 million for endowed scholarships, much of it matched by the university, and he has put diversity and inclusion at the top of his agenda.

Coffin, the Tufts admissions dean, explained how financial need gets factored into admissions decisions: first, every applicant gets reviewed without considering whether they have applied for aid. Then, the financial aid office calculates what each promising candidate needs.

A forecasting model predicts how many would accept Tufts’ offer — and what that would cost.

If that total surpasses the budget, the whole pile of likely students who need financial aid receives a second review. Admissions officers keep plucking out the ones they most want to bring to Tufts until the money runs out. The rest end up on the wait list, Coffin said.

This year, he estimated, 900 to 1,000 out of some 1,200 students in that group

received an offer of admission.

Coffin said the profile of the freshman classes admitted on a need-blind basis was barely different from the classes that followed. But Logan Cotton, who graduated in May just behind the two classes that were admitted under the need-blind policy, said he felt like the campus grew wealthier over his time there.

To his mind, one disturbing symptom was the Tufts party this past winter at the Westin Copley Place Hotel that devolved into drunken mayhem, with students vomiting and urinating in the lobby.

Cotton said a friend, who is black, was in a crush of revelers angling to get on a crowded bus back to campus when a white student tried to push him out of the way, declaring, "I'm not waiting for this bus, I pay for your tuition."

Cotton, a graduate of Chicago public schools whose parents did not finish college, said generous financial aid, which left him with little debt, helped make it possible for him to join Teach for America.

"There needs to be more people who can have that experience," he said.

Sophomore Alexis O'Connell, who is also on financial aid, said some classmates seem unaware of how fortunate they are not to have to think about their tuition or rent, because their parents pay the bills.

"I admire so many of my peers for how much they care about the causes they are involved with," said O'Connell, who is from Colorado. "So why is there a lack of conversation about economic status, about ourselves?"

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