

**International New York Times**

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The Opinion Pages

Fixes February 5, 2014, 10:00 am

# Improving Economic Diversity at the Better Colleges

By PEG TYRE

Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

**Tags:**

Colleges and Universities, Financial Aid (Education), Franklin and Marshall College

Last month, 80 college and university presidents convened at the White House to discuss ways to get more capable low-income students to and through top colleges.

It's an important topic — especially as concerns sharpen over slowing rates of social mobility in the United States. A college education continues to be the most reliable ladder that allows poor children to climb to the middle class and higher. Economists say a child born in the bottom quintile of the income distribution has just a 5 percent chance of moving up to the top quintile without college. The chance of making it to the top nearly quadruples if the child gets a college degree. But currently, the proportion of children from low-income families who obtain a college degree is low — around 9 percent — compared with 50 percent of children from affluent families.

The reasons for these disparities are clear but the remedies are complicated. Poor kids tend to go to under-resourced high schools and, when they graduate, are often not academically prepared for top colleges. The poor students who try to obtain a degree most often enroll in public two- and four-year colleges near their homes, where attrition rates can be high and graduation rates low.

Poor students who are accepted into selective four-year universities often find themselves adrift — overwhelmed by the financial, academic and cultural challenges created by an environment shaped to serve the habits and needs of the wealthy.

With some notable exceptions, the nation's most selective private college and universities — institutions that tend to produce the majority of the nation's leaders — haven't historically worked too hard to attract and retain low-income students. And many remain bastions of privilege. According to the College Board, two-thirds of students at the nation's 193 most selective colleges come from the top income quartile, and just 6 percent from the bottom quartile.

Recently, some — especially colleges with strong name recognition and a big endowment — have been able to institute policies around recruitment, enrollment and retention that have created a more economically diverse student body. At Amherst, Emory and Vassar — leaders in this trend — 22 percent of students come from low-income families.

But colleges that are slightly less selective, have a regional reputation or have smaller endowments often feel their hands are tied — low-income students tend to have lower SAT scores and admitting them can hurt an institution's standing in the all-important college ratings sweepstakes. And wagering institutional resources on low-income students can be a risky bet. Low-income students and first-generation college-goers tend to have lower G.P.A.s and lower retention rates than their more affluent counterparts. And as college tuition rises to the stratosphere, many second- and third-tier selective colleges now spend as much money on merit aid — which lowers the price of tuition for easier-to-teach-and-retain middle class and affluent students — as they do on financial aid, which goes to low-income students.

All of which makes what's happening at Franklin & Marshall College, a 2,400-student liberal arts college in rural Lancaster, Pa., worth examining. Six years ago, Franklin & Marshall, which was founded in 1787 by Ben Franklin, had one of the least socioeconomically diverse campuses in the country. In 2008, the incoming freshman class was 5 percent Pell eligible (Pell grants are mostly awarded to students who come from families that make \$30,000 or less) while 62.3 percent of the freshmen came from families who could pay the

full freight — usually considered those with a family income of more than \$175,000.

That's changed: for the last three years, 17 percent of the incoming freshman class has consisted of low-income students, more than some of the most highly competitive colleges with endowments three or four times the size of Franklin & Marshall's. The low-income students at Franklin & Marshall are doing well, too. They have roughly the same G.P.A. and retention rate as their more affluent peers.

Franklin & Marshall's president, Daniel Porterfield, says that rather than proving to be a risk, increasing the number of low-income students "has actually improved the long-term health of the college. We have enhanced our reputation as a national institution. We have deepened the bench of academically strong students and at the same time, we are more diverse than ever before." To make this transition, though, the college had to rethink a great deal about how it functioned, from figuring out which students could obtain \$7.20 an hour jobs to persuading deep pocketed alumnae — who in the past might have endowed a chair or made improvement to the athletic facilities — to donate money to support financial aid as well.

To be sure, Franklin & Marshall changed in large part because the trustees felt the school had to. In the early 2000s, the college, which was sitting on a \$280 million endowment, had shifted nearly a quarter of its financial aid dollars toward merit aid in order to attract talented middle class and affluent students whose families could pay a substantial portion of the freight. (In 2002-3, the full sticker price was around \$33,860. Today, it is \$58,000.)

But by 2005, the college, which drew most of its applicants from affluent suburban, private and Catholic schools in the Northeast, saw the demographics of their feeder region changing. The Northeast has been growing older, with states in the South and West seeing the biggest uptick in student population. As tuition prices rose, fewer families were able to afford private college. Too often, high-achieving students from middle-class and affluent families, even those who were offered substantial merit aid, were enrolling at equally selective schools that offered a deeper discount. Franklin & Marshall always attracted smart students, says Porterfield, "but there was the perception among trustees that there were too many students enrolled who were not as engaged as they

should be and so were not benefiting from the small seminar-style learning that our institution has long offered.”

After the financial crisis, while other selective institutions doubled down on merit aid, Franklin & Marshall decided to phase it out altogether. In 2008, the college targeted high-performing low-income students, and to woo them began a process that more than doubled the amount of aid to low-income families, to \$11 million a year from \$5 million.

Franklin & Marshall’s admission policies, though, were tactical. The school wanted to make sure the low-income students who got those financial aid dollars would be the most promising strivers in the nation. Recruiters began connecting with high-performing charter networks and community-based organizations from as far afield as Florida, Texas and California. To capture poor kids from the often overlooked rural high schools, the college began placing four F & M alumni a year in the College Advising Corp, which deploys recent college graduates into high schools to help with college advising.

The college introduced a free three-week summer program for rising high school seniors from low-income families. Coleman Kline, an F & M freshman whose father delivers pretzels and whose mother is a teacher’s aide, figured he’d attend a local college near his rural Pennsylvania home until he attended the program two summers ago. “I never considered Franklin & Marshall. But after spending some time on campus, I began to think that this school might really be an option,” he says.

The college also amped up advising and academic support. All freshmen live in dorms with on-site advisers who are there to help students negotiate academic and social challenges. Low-income students and first-generation college-goers have two additional resources: they meet once week in groups of 10 with a professor, and they are assigned a student mentor, an upperclassman who is paid to meet with them once a week to show them the ropes and allay their concerns. F & M also expanded the strictly academic support. In the past, all academically struggling students could get additional instruction at the campus writing center. This year, the school opened a “Quant Center,” which helps students improve their math skills.

In the fall of 2012, the college began to audit the undergraduate experience in order to spot the scores of small, often unseen barriers that can keep low-income students from getting the most out of their college experience.

For example, although low-income students are routinely awarded campus jobs as part of their financial aid package — and depend on those jobs for pocket money, the audit found that every fall, freshmen found that campus jobs had been taken by upperclassmen. Without a few extra dollars for pizza or Chinese takeout, poor kids felt they were unable to socialize — and exchange ideas — with their fellow students, which can be a key part of the liberal arts learning experience. The college quickly changed policies to ensure that low-income freshmen got work-study jobs as soon as they arrived on campus.

Breaks in the academic calendar — when dorms are shut and the college cafeteria goes dark — were also creating difficulties. For middle-class and affluent students, breaks can be a time to recharge and reconnect with family. But for low-income students who cannot afford the plane fare home, break time meant extended periods without reliable food or, sometimes, shelter. “We began to allow students to stay on campus during the breaks, and organized a van so they could get to the grocery store,” says Donnell Butler, senior associate dean for planning and analysis of student outcomes, whose office is running the audit. Students who remain on campus during holidays are invited for a banquet attended by President Porterfield. “We want our students to understand that they are not the outliers, they are important assets on our campus and as such, the campus culture will meet their needs to ensure their ongoing success,” says Porterfield.

The message that Franklin & Marshall welcomes low-income students has also been heard by the deep pocketed alumnae — often considered the constituency that is most traditional and slowest to change its habits. Between 2011-12 and 2012-13, donors gave 28 percent more to the college to bolster financial aid. “We’re very clear at every level, these are students whose drive and focus and intelligence make them the kind of student we want,” says Porterfield. “They are making a valuable contribution to our campus.”

In order to ensure that a meaningful number of low-income students get degrees, innovations like these will have to take place at public four- and two-year colleges. And Porterfield is quick to point out that what’s working at

Franklin & Marshall will not work everywhere — and may not work at other selective private colleges. “Every institution is going to have to come up with their own formula, based on their own conditions,” he says. But evidence suggests that Franklin & Marshall has taken a big leap toward getting it right.

*David Bornstein is off.*

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