

How the Academically Rich Get Richer

Judith Lichtenberg

It's not surprising that students from lower-income families are underrepresented in institutions of higher education. At four-year institutions, the disproportion is particularly striking. In 1989–90, entering students from the highest socioeconomic quartile outnumbered those in the lowest by more than 10 to 1. At the most selective colleges, according to a 2002 *New York Times* article, "only 11 percent of students are from the lower end of the economic spectrum." And the proportion of rich students attending selective institutions is increasing.

Explanations are not hard to find. Richer students grow up in households with advantages that contribute to academic success. As a result, they tend to learn more and to acquire the skills necessary for higher education better than do students from less privileged backgrounds. These differences are reflected in a variety of measures of academic performance: test scores, grades, class rank, breadth and depth of academic curriculum. Even if one thinks these measures are flawed, failing to give the full picture of students' qualifications, it's undeniable that low-income students are generally less qualified academically than more affluent students who have had superior educational opportunities.

Yet some advantages more affluent students possess are not relevant to their academic success: they do not genuinely enhance students' qualifications for admission. That richer students possess *irrelevant advantages* as well as relevant ones compounds the inequities in the college admissions process.

Irrelevant advantages are those that do not enhance students' real qualifications yet give them a leg up in admission to selective institutions. Some general and pervasive advantages of this kind include connections, old-boy networks, and the search procedures employers and admissions offices use to simplify their tasks, such as giving more weight to the applications of students from better schools. In this essay I discuss more specific examples of irrelevant advantages: money and financial aid; legacy preference; early admission poli-

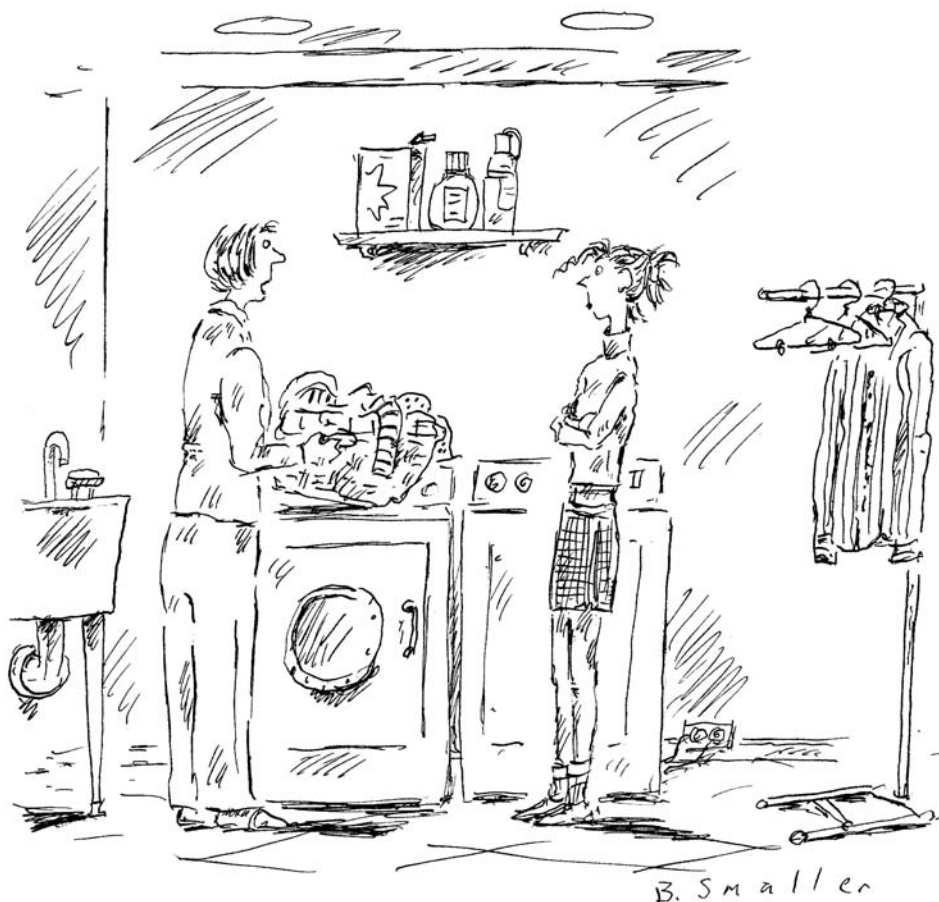
cies; disparities between rich and poor students in the use of special accommodations for disabilities in test-taking; inequities in the quality of college counseling and, more generally, in students' pre-college experiences. (One important issue not discussed here is coaching and test preparation. In *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions*, Robert Fullinwider and I argue that the advantages gained by coaching are in fact more modest than either the coaching companies or the behavior of large masses of students who flock to them suggest.)

Money

Money is the irrelevant advantage *par excellence*. However much socioeconomic status may correlate with academic achievement, no one argues that having money or wealth in itself makes a student more qualified. Yet among equally able students, those who have more financial resources are more likely to go to college, and to graduate, than those who have less.

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High-achieving students who are poor are five times more likely not to go to college than high-achieving students who are rich. And the situation for low-income students has deteriorated over the last twenty years. Between 1980 and 1993, according to economists Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, "the gap in enrollment rates between students from the lowest-income quartile and those from the other three quartiles grew by 12 percentage points." The concentration of students from families with incomes



"We want you to have fun, as long as it's fun that enhances a college-admission application."

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below \$30,000 at community colleges has grown, and low-income students are increasingly uncommon at four-year colleges.

Three main factors account for the deteriorating financial picture for low-income students over the last two decades: rising college costs, the changing nature of federal aid, and the kind of aid provided by colleges and universities.

College costs. The costs of going to college have increased sharply. According to the College Board, between 1981 and 2000 median family income in the US rose 27 percent; tuition at four-year private institutions rose 112 percent and at four-year public institutions it rose 106 percent. One reason is that the contribution of both state and local governments to public colleges and universities has declined over the last fifteen years. In 1979–80, according to Ronald Ehrenberg, "state governments contributed 45 per-

cent of all of higher education revenues, almost all of it through direct support of state-run institutions. By 1992–93, that share had fallen to 35 percent and has almost certainly fallen further since." Offsetting these decreases are rises in tuition at state colleges and universities. Although college enrollments are at an all-time high, lower-income students are, in economists' terms, "price-sensitive"; higher-income students are not.

The changing nature of federal aid. Although the federal government has contributed about the same share of public education revenues through aid to students since the mid-1970s, the nature of its aid has changed. Aid to students falls into three categories: grants or scholarships, loans, and work/study opportunities. Over the last two decades, the proportion of federal loans has increased and the proportion of grants has decreased.

The primary source of federal grants to students since 1974 has been the Pell Grant program, most of whose recipients are poor. A 1995 study by the General Accounting Office shows that increasing subsidies to students through the Pell Grant correlates directly with decreasing the drop-out rate, especially for minority students. Yet the percentage of tuition covered by federal aid has decreased significantly. In 2000-2001, the maximum Pell Grant was \$3,300, covering about 40 percent of the costs at a four-year public college and about 15 percent at a private college. The Pell's purchasing power is much less than it was twenty years ago. And low-income students are often reluctant to borrow money they're not sure they will be able to repay.

Aid from colleges and universities. Apart from federal loans, which account for about half of all student aid, the largest single source is colleges and universities themselves, which provide about 20 percent of student aid. Here again, there have been changes in the way such aid is allocated that have not generally benefited lower-income students. Over the last decade, many four-year institutions, both public and private, have reserved an increasing proportion of their financial aid budgets for merit-based, as opposed to need-based, grants. As a result, even in public institutions upper-income students constitute a larger share of students than they used to. These changes have occurred as many colleges have begun to think of students somewhat as the airline industry conceives of passengers, and as admissions directors have been transformed into "enrollment managers." Potential students are in the market for seats; like air travelers they have different propensities to buy and thus varying "sensitivities to price," so colleges do well to charge them different rates depending on their willingness to pay.

About 20 percent of US colleges and universities say they meet 100 percent of the demonstrated need of students they accept. These are the most selective private colleges and universities in the country. With some exceptions, they practice "need-blind" admissions; they promise to meet the "full need" of students they admit; and they offer only need-based scholarships and no merit scholarships. But few institutions apart from the very richest and most sought after can afford *not* to balance students' financial need against other considerations in making decisions about admissions and financial aid. Even those institutions seemingly committed to need-blind admissions, meeting students' full need, and need-only scholarships sometimes depart from the purity of that model.

Important to the recent history of financial aid at highly selective institutions is a suit brought by the Justice Department in 1991 charging price-fixing against the Ivy League schools and MIT. After World

War II and the Korean War, colleges began to see—in part through the GI Bill—the potential for increasing access to higher education. But students were relatively scarce and colleges had to compete for them. In 1954 the College Scholarship Service (CSS), an offshoot of the College Board, was created to develop objective criteria for determining students' need. The working assumption was that a student with offers at similarly priced colleges should, theoretically, receive roughly equivalent financial aid packages. Students could then choose their college on educational rather than on financial grounds, and the colleges could avoid bidding wars. For some years the Ivy League schools and fourteen other selective private schools—known as the Overlap Group—met every spring to discuss the financial situation of students admitted to more than one of the colleges in the group. In keeping with the CSS's assumption that need is objective, they aimed to offer such students equivalent aid packages.

After the Justice Department expressed concern about anti-trust violations in the late 1980s, the Ivy League schools agreed to stop sharing information about particular students before making offers, although they could still discuss definitions of need in a general way. The result was a resumption of the bidding wars the CSS was created to avoid. The concept of need has been interpreted in an elastic way allowing different colleges to offer a given student varying financial aid packages, and to offer students in apparently similar financial situations different packages.

The current situation clearly benefits some highly sought-after students. But many students gain nothing, and some—those who might have received aid

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that instead goes to a few stars—lose out. The colleges, meanwhile, find themselves in a financial arms race. To keep up with rivals in the competition for students each college has to up the ante; in the end everyone ends up as they would have if no one had bid up in the first place. As the economist Fred Hirsch once put it, when everyone stands on tiptoe no one sees any better.

Such "prisoner's dilemma" situations are not limited to elite colleges and universities. Schools down a notch (or two or three) can find themselves in the same situation, bidding for students against other institutions with similar profiles. These schools—with smaller aid budgets and endowments, and smaller applicant pools, than the most selective colleges—can afford

such wasteful expenditures far less than their higher-ranked cousins.

Yet for these colleges the decision-making context is more complex than for the top-ranked schools. Not only are they trying to attract students away from colleges “in their league” (as are the most selective schools); they also aim to draw students away from higher-ranked institutions, by offering them aid they would not receive at those schools.

So the use of merit aid is associated, as McPherson and Schapiro observe, with two kinds of competition among schools. One is the attempt by colleges to recruit students away from more prestigious institutions. When they succeed, the result is that more qualified students are less concentrated in the most prestigious institutions and are distributed more evenly among colleges of different ranks. That in turn

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may produce certain benefits. First, it could improve the educational and intellectual climate at those institutions. Second, over time the more even distribution of talented students among colleges could mitigate somewhat the name-brand, winner-take-all mentality that characterizes prevailing attitudes. Both effects would be beneficial from an equity point of view, because basic goods—quality education and status—would be more evenly distributed across students attending institutions at different levels.

But the other aspect of competition—schools vying with others “in their league” for the same group of students—benefits no one except the most sought-after students. Students in that group in need of financial assistance ought, of course, to receive it, according to consistent criteria that would dictate similar aid packages at similarly-priced institutions. But arms races in which institutions at the same level compete for students impose costs both on the institutions, and on students for whom the price of an education makes a difference.

The Legacy of Legacy

Most selective colleges follow an admissions policy of legacy preference: they favor children of alumni, accepting them at a higher rate than other applicants. James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen provide data showing that for the years 1976, 1989, and 1999, legacy applicants at 30 selective colleges and universities

were on average 20–26 percent more likely to be admitted than nonlegacies, after controlling for SAT scores. By contrast, the admissions advantage for minorities declined sharply during this period—for men, from 49 percent in 1976 to 18 percent in 1999; for women, from 51 percent to 20 percent.

The argument for legacy preference takes two forms, which might be called the *soft* and *hard* versions respectively. The soft version invokes the value of community; it says that the identity and vitality of a university are partly constituted by tradition and human relationships and are therefore buttressed by the glue of family ties. As Stanford argued in 1958, “Strong family ties with Stanford are valuable in themselves.”

The hard version of the argument for legacy—generally thought to be its main rationale—rests on the assumed financial benefits of admitting the family members, especially the offspring, of alumni. “Without legacy preference,” according to Sheldon Steinbach of the American Council on Education, “there would be a significant decrease in giving from a core body of traditional support—families in which at least a second generation has gone to the institution.”

To put legacy in context, it’s useful to see how it evolved.

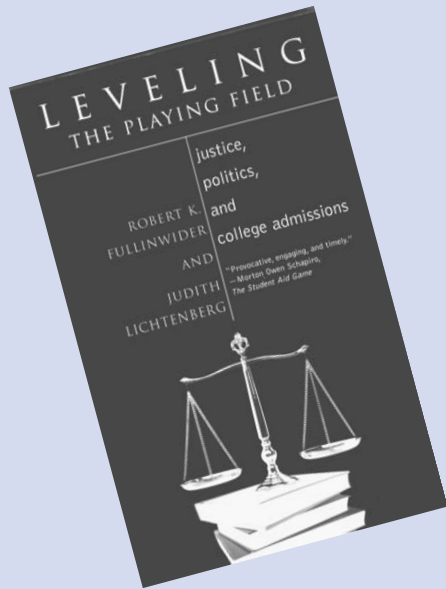
Until well into the twentieth century, few colleges were selective. A survey in 1920 of the most famous colleges and universities in the country showed that only thirteen were turning away any applicants at all; Yale accepted everyone who satisfied its basic entrance

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requirements. As late as 1950, Stanford admitted 77 percent of all who applied; the following year it accepted 85 percent.

Obviously the climate of college admissions has changed a great deal since the 1920s, and especially over the last forty or so years. A legacy with minimally respectable credentials could expect to be admitted even to very prestigious universities in 1960. (It was said that although legacy could not raise the dead it could heal the sick.) That is no longer true. University admissions offices today are more likely to say that a legacy connection is a thumb on the scale or a tiebreaker between otherwise equally qualified candidates. In no sense is legacy status a sufficient condition for admission.

That is a far cry from the old policy. But legacy still plays an important role in admissions to selective col-



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LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Justice, Politics, and College Admissions

by Robert K. Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg

Fullinwider and Lichtenberg examine the admissions policies of American colleges and universities in light of the assumption that enhancing the educational opportunities of lower-income and minority students would make American society more just. Beginning with an analysis of the concept of merit in terms of the missions of contemporary institutions of higher education, they go on to treat a variety of practices and policies. In addition to an extensive discussion of affirmative action, including an analysis of the Supreme Court's 2003 decisions, they consider the appropriate role of standardized tests, legacy preference, early decision policies, the role of athletics, and other controversial issues surrounding the overheated college admissions scene.

leges, as the figures from Shulman and Bowen cited above show. The most selective schools are bombarded with applicants, many of them highly qualified. Over the last decade alone, applications—for approximately the same number of places—have increased at many colleges and universities by 50 to 100 percent. In this climate students have reason to be grateful for the mere thumb on the scale.

Is there anything wrong with preferences for legacies? Compare legacy with “development” cases, where a university admits a student whose family makes or is expected to make a large financial contribution to the institution. Development cases seem to involve a direct tit-for-tat. Although everyone understands why colleges might admit the children of big donors, and while some might think doing so is sometimes justified on pragmatic grounds, the practice makes most people uneasy. It smacks of bribery.

Universities suggest that they approach legacy differently—that they don't look at a family's past giving practices, or its wealth, when deciding whether to admit the children of alumni. Rather, the legacy advantage involves a general assumption by the institution (“Families of legacy admits tend to contribute more than others”), not particular knowledge of a family's

wealth and giving habits (“This family has contributed a lot of money, so we will give their child a boost”). That vaguer basis—the broad generalization as against the particular judgment about a family—seems less odious; it does not imply a clear tit-for-tat.

We say that universities *suggest* that this is how they approach legacy applicants. But suppose that, as some suspect, in deciding which alumni children to admit, universities do look at the family profile. Has the family made contributions before? How much? What are they likely to give in the future? If calculations of this kind enter into the admissions decision, legacy begins to resemble the troubling development cases.

It's natural to reply that the question in both the development and the legacy cases is whether the applicant is *qualified* for admission. If not, our doubts and worries are justified: students are *buying* their way in, and that's wrong. But if a student is actually well-qualified and the preference is simply a thumb on the scale, it might be argued, there's nothing wrong with giving preference to legacies (or to rich applicants).

One problem with this response is that it conflicts with the claims by selective institutions—described in

the previous section—to subscribe to “need-blind” admissions policies. Legacies at selective colleges tend to come from privileged backgrounds; when the motive for admitting them is partly the prospect of financial gain, admissions is in effect not need-blind. More important, in the current climate, where large numbers of students are extremely well-qualified, legacy makes more of a difference than the argument suggests. If the decisive question is “*Could* this student be admitted but for the prospect of financial gain for the university?,” it rules out the unqualified. But if the question is “*Would* this student be admitted but for the prospect of financial gain?” then it chooses a subset of privileged students—on account of their privileged status—from the set of qualified applicants.

One thing is clear. Both defenses of legacy preference—the soft as well as the hard—give a boost to those who need it least, for reasons having nothing to do with their personal attributes.

Early-admission Policies

Today many colleges have adopted early-admission policies, which exert a great deal of influence on the admissions process. The early admission scene is in a state of flux and changes every year. But generally it includes two kinds of programs. Early-*decision* programs require students to apply by November 1 or November 15, in contrast with the January deadlines typical of regular admissions. In exchange for a decision from the college by the middle of December, the student promises to enroll if accepted. It follows that students can apply to only one school early-decision. Students who are deferred or rejected then have a few

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weeks to put in applications to other colleges.

Early-*action* programs adhere to the same timetable as early decision but are nonbinding: students get an answer from the college in December but may apply elsewhere during the regular admissions process and make up their minds in the spring, on the regular admissions cycle.

The rationales for early-decision policies from the colleges’ point of view are clear. The college can be certain of securing a proportion (increasingly, in some cases, a large proportion—30 or 40 percent or more) of its entering class with enthusiastic students who require no wooing once admitted. Moreover, colleges

are in the business of “crafting a class,” in the words of Elizabeth Duffy and Idana Goldberg: not simply admitting a group of qualified students but finding the right mix and filling particular niches. Early decision enables the admissions office to lock in that much-needed French horn player or football quarterback. From the college’s perspective, early decision is a rational and efficient approach to matching supply and demand.

There is also a more strategic reason for it. The more students a college accepts early, the lower its acceptance rate from the larger pool of regular decision applicants and the higher its “yield”—the number of accepted students who ultimately enroll. A low admissions rate and a high yield are marks of a college’s status. Colleges zealously monitor the figures, which—because students monitor them—can affect an institution’s fortunes.

From the student’s point of view, the reasons for preferring early admission also seem clear. To gain admission to your first-choice college in December rather than April after having filed only one application and waiting only a few weeks, instead of sweating over a half dozen or more and learning only months later of the results—what student wouldn’t take that path if she could?

But serious drawbacks accompany the advantages of early-admission policies. Some affect students as a whole, and some affect less privileged students in particular.

The most serious flaw of early-admission policies is that these policies give already privileged students one more advantage in the admissions process—an advantage having nothing to do with superior qualifications. They do so for several reasons.

First, more affluent students have better information, and they have it earlier, than less affluent students. Lower-income students are less oriented toward college admissions generally, less knowledgeable about the pluses and minuses of particular colleges, and less likely to know of the advantages of applying early. Affluent students begin looking at colleges in their junior year (at the latest), and so are more likely to be ready to commit themselves by November. Lower-income students rarely make the junior year spring break tours, and would therefore take a risk by binding themselves early to one college.

Most important are the financial aspects of early decision. Students admitted early tend to receive less financial aid, since they lock themselves into matriculating and the colleges have no incentive to win their favor. (Students can be released from the commitment if the school does not offer sufficient financial aid to make enrollment feasible. But the process is cumbersome and unpleasant—not how a student wants to spend her time while nursing more college applica-

tions.) Those who apply early deprive themselves of the opportunity to compare financial aid packages and negotiate with colleges in the spring.

These problems arise in part from the rules that now govern financial aid decisions at selective colleges. The section on money described how selective schools used to meet to agree on need levels for accepted students, so that students received roughly equal financial aid packages from different schools and the colleges avoided bidding wars. When the Justice Department in the early 1990s struck down this practice, these schools had to change their procedures. As a result, students accepted to more than one school can now receive very different financial aid packages. In one recent case, a student who applied regular decision to both Yale and Princeton received a \$3,000 financial aid offer from Yale and \$19,000 from Princeton. (Since the Ivy League schools offer no merit aid, both were allegedly need-based scholarships.) Clearly, had this student applied early decision to Yale he would have been significantly disadvantaged.

Colleges obviously gain from these student handicaps. And because the pool of early applicants is richer than the regular applicant pool, the greater the number of students a college accepts early the lighter its financial burden is likely to be.

Members of minority groups, financial aid applicants, and public school students are in fact less likely

Students who receive extended time on standardized tests for learning disabilities are much more likely to come from affluent families and schools. . . .

to apply early for the reasons described. Early decision policies, then, give affluent students another leg up over lower-income students in the admissions process.

An Uneven Outbreak of Disabilities

Between 1992 and 1997, the number of students who took the SAT I with “accommodations”—special test conditions—as a result of disabilities doubled; the number of students taking the test with accommodations for disabilities has increased an average of 14 percent a year. From 1989–90 to 1995–96, the number of students who took the ACT with accommodations nearly tripled, from 8,519 to 23,463.

A student may require accommodations because he is blind, and needs a Braille or cassette version of the test, or, as in a recent case, because he has no hands, and needs a computer with a trackball. But according to the College Board “about 90 percent of all requests

for accommodations are for students with learning disabilities and over two-thirds of these accommodations are simply for extended time.” The learning disabilities include ADD (attention deficit disorder), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and dyslexia. Some students with disabilities receive time-and-a-half, some get twice as much time as nondisabled test-takers, and a few are permitted even more than that.

Testing with disabilities raises several questions about fairness and justice. One concerns comparability. Giving disabled students extra time (or other benefits) aims to compensate them for their disabilities so that their opportunities to perform their best equal those of nondisabled students. But the question is how much extra time a particular learning-disabled student should get: too much time would give him an unfair advantage, too little would not compensate him adequately.

A second issue concerns disclosure of the accommodations made for disabled students. In 2000, Mark Breimhorst, the student without hands who took the GMAT on a computer with a trackball, brought a federal lawsuit challenging as discriminatory ETS’s policy of sending out scores with the notation “Scores obtained under special conditions.” Breimhorst and his lawyers argued that the policy is a scarlet letter stigmatizing disabled students and rendering them more susceptible to discrimination. In 2002, the College Board announced that as of September 2003 it would no longer flag the scores of students receiving accommodations. Some fear the new policy will result in an increase in the number of students who apply for accommodations—including requests from students who are not genuinely disabled.

The problem of potential abuse is related to a third question of justice. Students who receive extended time on standardized tests for learning disabilities are much more likely to come from affluent families and schools, and the new policy of not flagging scores is likely to exacerbate the problem.

An audit by the state of California in 2000 showed “wide demographic disparities” among high school graduates in 1999 who took the SAT with extended time because of claimed learning disabilities. Students at private schools were four times more likely to get special accommodations as those in public schools. The auditors found that “in six of seven school districts in wealthy areas,” including Beverly Hills and Palo Alto, there were “questionable and potentially unwarranted cases of students receiving special treatment.”

Claudette Sharpe, a guidance counselor at Eastern High School, a school serving low-income students in the District of Columbia, remembers only three students in twelve years who received extended time on the SAT. According to the National Center for Policy Analysis, 10 percent of students at 20 New England

prep schools got extra time on the SAT, while not one of 1,439 students at ten Los Angeles area high schools did.

Affluent and educated parents often push to have their children classified as learning-disabled as early as elementary school. Parents of poor children, and the teachers and counselors in low-income schools, are less likely to know about special services available for learning-disabled students, and less aggressive in seeking them out.

College Counseling and Conspicuous Educational Consumption

In private and select public schools, a ratio of one counselor to 50 or 60 students is not unusual, and counselors may spend as much as six hours a year with each student. In most large public schools, the ratio may be one counselor to 300 students or more. At Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx, a Catholic school serving many low-income students, the college counselor works with more than 200 students while working a second job supervising custodians; when he explains the college admissions process at an assembly for juniors most of them "have not given it a moment's thought." The college counselor at Grover Cleveland High School in Queens engages in a kind of academic triage, concentrating her efforts on the top third of more than 450 students, many of whom are impoverished immigrants.

Among other things, counselors are responsible for writing a "counselor letter of recommendation" for each of their students. A counselor with hundreds of students—and who is also responsible for other aspects of guidance—will generally be unable to say anything very meaningful about most of them, nor can she adequately advise so many students. In elite schools counselors may be devoted to the college process alone; their letters tend to be replete with detail and nuance.

Rich students who demand more attention than their school counselors can provide sometimes avail themselves of the services of private college consultants. Admissions Consultants advertises a rate of \$95 an hour on its website. Another company, College Admissions Consultants, offers a contractual relationship that provides ongoing access for a fee: four years of consultation beginning in ninth grade for \$1400, three years beginning in tenth grade for \$1200, etc.

At least as important as the services provided by school counselors or independent consultants is the general atmosphere in which more affluent students grow up, and the very different environment in which lower-income students find themselves. There is strong evidence, according to a 2001 College Board report, that by ninth grade and possibly as early as seventh grade

"most students have already developed occupational and educational aspirations," and that these are strongly related to socioeconomic status. For affluent students, going to college—and more specifically going to high-status colleges—has always been in the air. They rely for up-to-date information on parents, other close adults, older siblings of friends and relatives who are already attending college, college guides, and a variety of websites and online chat rooms.

Ambitious high school students know that internships at scientific institutes and nonprofit organizations look good on one's college application. They

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know that colleges like to see Advanced Placement courses on the transcript. (Of course, these activities produce relevant as well as irrelevant advantages.) Until last year, affluent students knew they could employ "Score Choice," which allowed them to withhold SAT II results from colleges unless they were satisfied with their scores. As the College Board explained in its recent decision to abolish Score Choice, the policy "encouraged 'gamesmanship' and favored students wealthy enough to repeat tests."

Low-income students generally lack these resources and role models. Parental encouragement is the strongest factor predicting students' educational aspirations; parents' knowledge of financial aid possibilities is also crucial. But these factors are correlated with socioeconomic status. Low-income students must rely mainly on their guidance counselors for information; their parents don't know the ropes or don't have the time to oversee their children's applications.

But these problems are not unrelated. Students who inflate their qualifications may squeeze out others equally qualified although not as slickly packaged. Admissions officers often deny that they are impressed by the slickly packaged student; they say they look for a student who is "simply being himself or herself." The sentiment is surely sincere, and admissions officers are savvy. But it is also clear that college-conscious students today expend a great deal of effort in their applications to "be themselves."

A Silver Lining?

Yet the news may not be all bad. The mounting frenzy surrounding college admissions and the vagaries of supply and demand may contribute to a leveling effect. With the rise in competition and college

costs, and the growth of merit-based aid, the quality of students at less elite colleges and universities is rising. Students who might have attended fancy private schools may opt for state universities, many of which now offer special programs to attract more talented students. The leveling effect also results from the dismal job market for academics that has endured for thirty years, which has meant that talented scholars have found jobs at colleges—if they have not changed careers because of their poor prospects—of lesser reputation than they might have hoped. As a consequence, the quality of education at those institutions has improved.

There is also some evidence that students do not sacrifice their longterm material prospects in foregoing high-status schools. Economists Stacy Berg Dale and Alan Krueger found that “students who attended colleges with higher average SAT scores do not earn more than other students who were accepted and rejected by comparable schools but attended a college with a lower average SAT score.” Krueger and Dale’s intriguing findings run counter to the conventional wisdom and to other evidence that going to an elite college makes a difference to one’s later material prospects.

Some equalizing of the prestige and the quality among colleges would be a welcome, if paradoxical, side-effect of the heightened competition for places in selective schools. This leveling effect could help to mitigate the disparities in educational advantages between students at different socioeconomic levels, at least slowing the rate at which the academically rich get richer.

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This article derives from *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions*, by Robert K. Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

Sources: Patrick T. Terenzini, Alberto F. Cabrera, and Elena M. Bernal, *Swimming Against the Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education*, College Board Research Report No. 2001-1 (New York: College Board, 2001); Robert M. Shireman, “Enrolling Economic Diversity,” *New York Times* (May 4,

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