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How and Why You Diversify Colleges

Frank Bruni MAY 14, 2016

THERE'S a whole lot wrong with the conversation about including more low-income students at elite colleges, but let's start here: The effort is too often framed as some do-gooder favor to those kids.

Hardly. It's a favor to us all. It's a plus for richer students, who are then exposed to a breadth of perspectives that lies at the heart of the truest, best education. With the right coaxing and mixing on campus, they become more fluent in diversity, which has professional benefits as well as the obvious civic and moral ones.

It's a win for America and its imperiled promise of social mobility.

"Opportunity for people from every conceivable background is essential to a functioning democracy, and in this country we're not providing enough of it," Biddy Martin, the president of Amherst College, told me last week. "I also think it's a waste not to develop talent in young people wherever it exists, and it exists everywhere."

So what's Amherst doing?

Over recent years, it has devoted significantly more energy and resources than it once did into identifying and recruiting promising students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It works with community-based organizations. It develops relationships with, and sends emissaries to, schools in poorer areas.

It has poured money into making sure that the financial needs of those students are fully met. In accepting transfer students, it has given priority to those coming

from community colleges. And it has set up a variety of programs and services on campus to make sure that students without affluent, college-educated parents get any extra support they need.

As a result, about one in four students at Amherst, one of the country's most venerated and selective institutions of higher education, qualifies for federal Pell grants, which are dedicated to low-income families. Just over a decade ago, fewer than one in seven students qualified for those grants.

This puts Amherst way, way ahead of most of its peers. Early this year, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation released a report on diversity at the nation's 91 most competitive colleges as defined by Barron's, which compiles information on higher education. The Cooke report found that fewer than one in 25 students at these schools came from families in the country's lowest socioeconomic quartile, while nearly three in four came from families in the top quartile.

"It's outrageous," Harold Levy, the foundation's executive director, said when we discussed the issue recently. "What it says to me is that the working class is history at these schools, the middle class is on its way out the door and the upper class is dominating. And that's not what the American dream is about."

To push back at that, the foundation last year instituted the Cooke Prize for Equity in Educational Excellence, to be awarded annually to an elite college or university that defied that disparity. Amherst is this year's winner, an announcement shared in advance with me.

Amherst was among five finalists revealed last month; the other four were Pomona College, Rice University, Stanford University and Davidson College. These schools have also appeared high on The Times's College Access Index, which are yearly rankings done by The Upshot.

The Cooke Prize was open this year only to private schools, though there are public ones — including those in the University of California system and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — that stand out for their commitment to such diversity. It gives the winner \$1 million, but its greater good is in encouraging other colleges to emulate the ethics and practices of institutions like Amherst and

Vassar College, which won last year.

Elite colleges have lately been taking a harder look at socioeconomic diversity and how to achieve it, for several reasons. It's their response to a broader public discussion about growing income inequality and insufficient opportunity to climb the economic ladder.

It's also a preparation for any Supreme Court decision that instructs colleges not to give preferential consideration to applicants based on race. The court is set to rule imminently on *Fisher v. University of Texas*, which challenges such affirmative-action policies.

Levy said that highly selective schools "need to collectively have a strategy to avoid going back to the '50s, when they were white male enclaves."

Race has popped up recently in another way, as some Asian-Americans accuse schools like Harvard of deliberately keeping their numbers down.

Against this backdrop, elite colleges have been talking about de-emphasizing admissions criteria that are strictly numerical and prone to student-to-student comparison. These include standardized test scores — which are deeply flawed measures of college aptitude and predictors of college success — and the number of Advanced Placement classes that a student has taken in secondary school.

Top administrators from many elite schools signed their names to a report this year, "Turning the Tide," that urged admissions officials to take into account the hardships that prevent many underprivileged kids from putting together the kinds of conventionally glittering transcripts that children of affluence do.

And a group of more than 90 schools, most of them highly selective, recently banded together as the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success. It has its own application system, to be used for the first time during the coming admissions cycle, that includes free online tools meant to help children who don't get much guidance. But there's skepticism, widespread and warranted, about whether the tools will really do that.

Unprivileged children certainly need a boost, because the admission process has

typically discriminated against them, as the Cooke Foundation has pointed out.

It smiles on children of the school's alumni. It rewards the sorts of frequent interactions with a school or its alumni that an economically privileged kid is more likely to have. Poor kids often don't get the same preparation for the SAT or ACT or take the exam as many times as rich kids.

Levy noted that the priority given to athletes actually cuts *against* poor kids, because a college fields teams in an array of sports — fencing, crew, water polo — beyond the few big ones that an inner-city school can afford.

The socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges is hardly the most vital concern about higher education. These colleges serve a small fraction of the country's students.

But that diversity is important nonetheless. It's a mirror of our values — in particular, of how well we own up to stacked decks and how willing we are to make adjustments.

Amherst is an exemplar of such adjustments. It's tweaking campus operations to recognize that some less affluent students stick around during breaks. It's marshaling extra resources so students from low-income families can take on the sorts of unpaid internships and research opportunities that other students do.

I mentioned community colleges before: About 10 years ago, Amherst took just seven transfers from those schools. It has taken 34 in each of the last two years.

The college's president told me that one of her current passions is to admit more military veterans, who bring to the campus abilities, experiences and outlooks that other students don't possess.

She wasn't talking about doing them a kindness. She wasn't outlining a social experiment or anything gimmicky. She was embracing the reality that real learning and a real preparation for citizenship demand the intersection of different life stories and different sensibilities. Colleges should be making that happen.

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