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A Collective Path Upward

Working Smarter and Cooperatively to Improve Opportunity and Outcomes

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Even within the contentious field of affirmative action, there is broad agreement in higher education about fundamental goals. College should endeavor to be a pathway to social and economic mobility, rather than a hindrance to it. Both racial and socioeconomic status (SES) diversity on campuses are highly desirable, especially if this diversity broadens friendships and social capital across groups that, before college, have not interacted much. Colleges should also strive to place students in environments that maximize their potential to grow and have the best chance of achieving their career goals. While explicit consideration of race in admissions is still legal through most of the country, prudent universities should begin planning for the day when it may no longer be possible to use race in pursuing campus diversity.

These basic principles command wide support. And while it is true that the devil is in the details, and that there are sharp empirical clashes about both the nature and effect of many current college practices, I will argue in this chapter that there is enough consensus to support

some significant reforms in how colleges gather and use information in the admissions process. After briefly elaborating on some of the key challenges selective colleges face, I will outline three specific initiatives that could significantly enhance the ability of both university leaders and college applicants to surmount those challenges.

Where We Are Now

America's most elite colleges and professional schools have high levels of racial diversity, which is attained using large and fairly mechanical racial preferences.[1] Some of these schools have also made significant strides over the past decade in expanding socioeconomic diversity, through more aggressive financial aid initiatives and better outreach.[2] Low-SES students are nonetheless still relatively scarce at most selective colleges, whether public or private.[3]

At second- and third-tier schools, which are still elite but not at the very top of the rankings, there is significantly less racial diversity in student bodies. Partly because so many talented minority students are captured by the top tier, the colleges next in line find they must choose between using even larger racial preferences, or settling for a student body that is, say, 7 percent rather than 9 percent black.[4] These schools also find themselves in tight competition for rankings, and thus tend to use (their relatively scarcer) scholarship dollars on merit aid or race-based scholarships rather than open-ended guarantees that they will cover all costs for low-and-moderate income students. Their low-SES student numbers are thus often worse than those at the top tier.

Into this mix comes the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Fisher v. University of Texas,* urging campuses to use racial preferences as a last resort, rather than a first resort, for achieving diversity. An increasing number of states and state university systems (ten at last count) have prohibited the use of race altogether as a factor in admissions.[5] These bans seem to produce reductions, but usually not an elimination of racial preferences; and there is not much evidence that other universities have thus far treated Supreme Court jurisprudence as a serious constraint on their freedom of action.[6] Moreover, as the chapters in Part II of this volume suggest, legal observers sharply disagree over whether *Fisher* itself signals a significant tightening in judicial oversight over university admissions (and, implicitly, whether the seeming consensus in *Fisher* might disappear if the composition of the Supreme Court changed slightly).

Finally, a widening drumbeat of research suggests that higher education is neglectful in monitoring many types of student outcomes, and often fails to match students with the academic environments that are most likely to foster their success. A great many talented low-SES students are "undermatched"—attending community colleges or low-tier state colleges where a variety of factors conspire to keep bachelor-degree-attainment rates depressingly low.[7] And while some observers continue to insist that "overmatching" is not a problem in affirmative action programs, there is a growing consensus that at least sometimes in some areas, the overmatching problem is real and serious.[8] In particular, the battery of studies finding evidence of science mismatch, academic mismatch, and social mismatch effects is quite powerful and unrebutted by contrary studies. The social mismatch findings are in one respect particularly important, because they tend to find that overly large racial preferences can directly undermine the degree and utility of social interaction across racial lines—and thus themselves conflict with a central rationale and legal justification for race-conscious programs.[9]

University leaders tend to feel that they have very little freedom of action; one small step to ameliorate Problem A (for example, the scarcity of low-SES students) immediately exacerbates Problem B (for example, finding funds for merit aid, to recruit top students and keep the university's ranking up). Addressing poor academic outcomes among students admitted with preferences can—by acknowledging that a problem exists—undermine efforts to recruit new minority students. The strategies we need, then, are ones that can enlarge the scope for creative action, and initiatives that give us win-win possibilities for both students and institutions, instead of zero-sum or negative-sum alternatives.

The Applicant Pool

As more than one recent study has shown, elite schools are leaving a lot of diversity on the table. Only a small fraction of the brightest low-SES high school students—of all races—end up attending or even applying to highly elite colleges. The numbers involved are not small; there are over twenty thousand high school seniors each year who have SES backgrounds that put them in the bottom half of the American population and who are qualified for admission to top-tier institutions yet do not apply to those institutions.[10] Economists Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery show that admissions officers at selective colleges greatly

underestimate the number of low-to-moderate income but high-achieving students. "What the admissions staff see are eight to fifteen high-income applicants for every low-income applicant. However, the ratio of high-income high achievers to low-income high achievers is only about two-to-one in the population."[11] As former President Derek Bok of Harvard has noted, his school's creation of generous financial aid programs was not, by itself, enough to significantly increase the presence of low-SES students at the school; Harvard also had to develop new and better outreach programs to have a meaningful impact.[12]

Given these missed opportunities—for both schools and students—it seems there are several sensible things we in higher education ought to be doing. An important first step is to help university administrators and admissions officers to better understand the "admissible pool." Most colleges have some informal threshold of academic credentials that makes an applicant "admissible" if she has other sought-after traits. A college may also have a geographic focus (if it is a state institution) or at least a geographic pattern (if it is a selective but somewhat regional college). High school seniors having a combination of the right geography and "admissible" levels of academic achievement form the potential pool from which colleges make selections.

As noted above, a basic finding of the research by Hoxby and Avery is that the applicant pools of most selective colleges do not come close to reflecting the pools of eligible candidates; indeed, most schools probably have not even attempted to measure the disparity. In one current project, I am collecting admissions data from dozens of selective public universities around the country. It is striking to observe what a large majority of these institutions do not even ask applicants for information about family income, parental education, or other measures of socioeconomic status. Private colleges probably do a better job of at least putting such questions on their applications, but I suspect few, if any schools have organized that data and compared it with the potential pool that exists in the field. And even schools interested in this question probably rely on data created by the College Board, which is itself limited to considering students who have taken the SAT. But many "diamonds in the rough" end up attending local community colleges that do not require the SAT, so they may escape measurement altogether.

It would thus make eminent sense for national education organizations to create accessible and comprehensive software that would allow any admissions officer at any institution to compare her existing student

body with the admissible pool. Valuable source data for this software exists in a variety of national longitudinal studies of high school and college students that are undertaken by the federal government, such as the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) conducted by the Department of Education. ELS and other studies track large samples of young people from their early teenage years into their mid-twenties. They gather extensive data on the academic skills and preparation of these students, as well as on their families' socioeconomic status and financial condition. As some of our contributors have noted, it is helpful in measuring "disadvantage" to consider not only family characteristics, but also characteristics of one's school and neighborhood. Data of this type is available in some of these databases, and where it is not, it can be imputed into a merged database that covers a wide range of student characteristics.

Just as important as the data itself would be a software interface that makes it easy for admissions officers to pose questions about the admissible pool. Ideally, one should be able to specify a series of academic thresholds, select a geographic focus (or a "national pool" option), and then choose from a menu of socioeconomic profiles (for example, "comprehensive SES," "family based SES"). The program would then generate an analysis of the actual pool of admissible students, stratified by the chosen SES measure, in (a) the general population, (b) the school's applicant pool, and among (c) the school's enrolled students. More detailed information on the gap between the general population and the actual applicant pool would then help officers see the nature and characteristics of the gap.

It would not be difficult to incorporate into this data-software package the type of information that would let admissions officers also project the financial aid needs of a class that better reflects the socioeconomic makeup of the admissible pool.[13]

Of course, being aware of the potential pool is different from actually locating and admitting its members. The database outlined here is valuable as a planning and consciousness-raising tool, but not as a method of directly contacting potential students. How do we turn identification into recruitment?

Hoxby and Avery point out that many of the diamonds in the rough are isolated; that is, they attend high schools where few or none of their peers are academically competitive or actively considering selective schools. It is hard for such students to find role models; it is hard for counselors at those schools to develop enough expertise about selective

colleges either to identify the promising student or to give her helpful guidance. It is also hard for individual colleges to cost-effectively reach such schools; the vast majority of most colleges' students come from a relative handful of feeder schools, and that is where most current outreach is concentrated.

One solution is for colleges to develop a consortium approach, under which individual institutions make a modest contribution to a collective outreach effort. Outreach officers working for the consortium use available data to provide training and liaisons to counselors at every high school, and make direct contact with promising students identified in a whole variety of ways. What the consortium's officers learn is shared with all participating colleges, so that individual institutions can easily piggyback on the consortium's work.

The outreach experience of University of California (UC), briefly discussed in Chapter 8 of this volume, provides a useful model for the potential effect of such measures. Within California, the University is sufficiently large (both in sheer size and in market share) to enable it to capture a large share of any "pool expansion" it achieves. After the state adopted formal race neutrality in the late 1990s, the university launched substantial outreach efforts, funded annually in the tens of millions of dollars. In the aggregate, these programs substantially increased the low-and-moderate SES pool on which UC schools could draw; and at least some of these efforts have been evaluated and credibly shown to have made a real difference.[14]

An evaluation component is important in any major new effort. Ideally, collective efforts sponsored by a large number of colleges and universities would take on several different forms, and perhaps be operated by different entities in different parts of the country, so that an element of competition would exist and there would be analytic grist for comparative evaluation efforts. Through careful assessment, universities would learn a good deal in a relatively few years about the most effective ways to bring "diamonds in the rough" into the applicant pool.

Facilitating Cooperation

In May 1991, officials from all eight of the colleges that comprise the Ivy League signed a consent decree with the Department of Justice (DoJ), agreeing to end practices that, according to the DoJ, violated American antitrust laws.[15] Over a couple of decades, the Ivy League and a dozen

other elite colleges had developed an increasingly close collaboration around the provision and award of financial aid. Two key goals of the schools were, first, to base financial aid decisions strictly on need, and second, to provide sufficient aid so that, the college leaders hoped, no student would be prevented by a lack of resources from attending those schools. By the time DoJ began to investigate their practices, the schools were holding annual meetings in which they directly compared, and brought into alignment, financial aid offers made to students admitted to more than one member of the group. Students interested in attending a college within this group could not easily lure them into a bidding war; admittees would in essence face a uniform price at all the schools.

From the perspective of DoJ lawyers (who also believed the colleges were cooperating in the setting of tuition levels) the schools' behavior was clearly anti-competitive. But there was, of course, quite another way of viewing the matter. The colleges' cooperation was a way of making sure that each member of the group used their financial aid dollars in a way that furthered a social objective (making college affordable to those in need) rather than the individual objective of each college (attracting the most formidable student body possible). Without some type of collective cooperation, it would be difficult for any but the richest colleges to base aid only on need and be willing to forego any bidding effort for top students that could raise a school's profile.

The generation that has passed since the 1991 consent decree has given us ample time to see the effects of a college pricing regime based solely on competition. The full-ticket price for one year of college at an elite private institution has nearly doubled (in inflation-adjusted dollars) to nearly $60,000 in 2013–14. Only a few dozen colleges still limit financial aid to those students in need.[16] The rest use a wide array of merit scholarships to compete for the most academically talented students, athletes, and, to a lesser extent, desired racial minorities. Both the recruited high-credential students and the recruited minorities tend to come from very affluent families. Merit aid quadrupled (in constant dollars) in the decade after the DoJ settlement; by 2010, according to one industry source, the average student admitted to a private college received a 40 percent discount on tuition, and most of that discount was based on academic considerations rather than financial need.[17] A major deterrent to the adoption of stronger efforts to admit and recruit low-SES students is the concern among college administrators that they will simply be unable to afford the cost.

With even the limited permitted forms of college cooperation on need-based aid policies set to expire in 2015, this is a ripe time to rethink federal policy. One can imagine a scenario in which the government's role is not to hunt down and halt cooperative practices among colleges,[18] but instead lead them and try to keep them channeled in the most benign way. The principal form of federal grants to college students—the Pell Grants program—is, of course, based almost entirely on the financial need of the recipient. But Pell Grants are capped at less than $6,000 per year—enough to enable many students to attend public institutions, but hardly enough to make a private college affordable. What if the federal government actively encouraged to the extent that it can, private institutions to channel the bulk of their financial aid toward students in need? It seems hard to imagine any step that could more significantly advance that goal than reducing the "arms race" among colleges to compete against one another with merit scholarships.

As a step toward that goal, one could imagine the Department of Education (DoE) creating a "need-based-aid incentive program" with several components. First, DoE could enroll colleges in a voluntary program in which they commit to adopt one of a menu of "best practices" in allocating financial aid among admitted students. These practices could all have the general purpose of aiding those with genuine economic need, while allowing institutions the flexibility to design policies that fit their own idea of optimal aid. Second, DoE could maintain a public registry of schools that participate in the program, and audit the programs sufficiently to provide a meaningful assurance that the institution actually complies with its announced practices. Third, DoE could give preferment to participating institutions in awarding other need-based aid. Fourth, the government could provide modest additional need-based aid subsidies to colleges that can demonstrate they award less merit-based aid than other schools in their competitive cohort. Such a policy would recognize that only the most affluent colleges can afford to enjoin themselves from all merit-based aid, while providing incentives for schools to break from the "merit competition/higher tuition cycle" to a virtuous cycle in which schools lead the way toward less merit aid, lower tuitions, and more need-based aid.

Some combination of these policies would provide even greater and broader benefits than the old Ivy League consortium, and would avoid the aura of price-fixing that brought the old system down. And it would complement well the Obama administration's recent focus on creating competitive accountability in higher education.

Improving Matching

The values I have discussed in the previous two sections—improving information, transparency, evaluation, and intercollegiate cooperation in the social enterprise of improving college access—apply to another goal: maximizing beneficial college *outcomes*. Almost all conversations about college diversity begin and end with a focus on the number of underrepresented minority faces in the freshman class at each college. Colleges are expected to achieve goals of rough racial proportionality on their own, and they do so primarily through admissions preferences. What if we instead move to a regime that emphasizes a collective responsibility in higher education to maximize social mobility outcomes for underrepresented populations?

The single most important way that colleges and universities can change the conversation from diversity toward mobility is through the sort of information they create and their willingness to share this information with one another and with applicants. The principal data available from colleges today concern the entering credentials of freshman, the school's racial demography, and graduation rates. What we would like to know, and need to know, are learning outcomes. What sets of skills are students acquiring at college? How far do they progress beyond their high school levels of achievement? With what success to they persist in their chosen fields? Efforts such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment are flawed but valuable steps towards a focus on what students learn, and toward greater accountability in higher education. If colleges develop better information about how students within their community learn, and share this information collectively, there will be both more incentive for internal improvements and a greater likelihood that students will end up at institutions where they are well matched.

Consider, as an example, the problem of science mismatch. Although as high school seniors, African Americans are more likely than whites to aspire to careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), they are far less likely to secure bachelor degrees in these fields, and only one-seventh as likely as whites to secure a STEM doctorate. Moreover, a disproportionate number of blacks who do achieve STEM doctorates attend historically black colleges. As several studies have documented, black students often fall off the STEM track because they receive preferences into highly competitive colleges where they are poorly matched in first-year science courses; learning little and getting poor grades, they transfer to less demanding majors.[19]

Dozens of programs across the country try to identify promising minority high school students and mentor them toward science careers. A number of leaders in these programs, distressed by the evidence of science mismatch, are rethinking traditional strategies of equating success for their students with winning admission for them at the most elite college possible. Increasingly, they recognize the importance of tracking long-term outcomes and considering match alongside selectivity in mentoring students towards a successful path.

Imagine a consortium in which these high school mentoring programs share data with colleges and graduate programs on the longitudinal outcomes of both minority students and low-SES students interested in STEM careers. The cooperative developing and sharing of data would, before long, greatly aid both students and mentors in evaluating optimal paths toward science careers. It would also help colleges share information on ways of providing academic support, and evaluate particularly successful methods that participating schools have developed for keeping promising students on the paths they have set out to follow.

A different but not unrelated problem is posed by the task of maximizing the benefits of diversity on college campuses. Alongside the social mobility goals of affirmative action programs is the broad aim of binding together a diverse society, by increasing levels of interracial and inter-class communication, understanding, and friendship. Yet, as most college administrators can confirm, campuses are often marked as much (or more) by segregation and isolation as by interracial networking. And several important (and so far as I know, unrebutted) studies have found that very large preferences can directly undermine the goal of diverse interaction.[20] An ethnic group whose members have a disproportionate rate of academic struggle and attrition on campus are likely to be alienated and turn inward; in general, students are far more likely to form friendships on campus with students who have similar academic accomplishments. It follows—and has been shown empirically in at least one study—that the level of cross-racial interaction would increase substantially if the most elite schools used somewhat smaller racial preferences, and some blacks and Hispanics currently attending super-elite schools instead attended schools that were merely elite.[21]

Here again selective colleges and universities could greatly improve their collective success by developing better information on social interactions and integration on campus, sharing this information, and focusing more heavily on optimizing the aggregate outcomes of disadvantaged

students rather than competing directly with one another to maximize particular—and particularly superficial—measures of diversity.

Conclusion

There are unquestionably some very big, challenging things we need to do in American society to improve social mobility. But this chapter has sought to point out that there are some comparatively easy things that higher education leaders can do that would very substantially further the broad goals we share. The common theme of these suggestions lies in doing a smarter job—through greater transparency, better information, and cross-institutional cooperation—of finding the talented pool and successfully channeling that talent. The legal and administrative environment in the United States today is ideally primed for making these reforms. Let us seize the opportunity.