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ABSTRACT

Both students and society have similar interests in higher education. It is valued by students as the key to lucrative and desirable careers and society needs trained personnel. Secondly, a college education can provide aesthetic and intangible experiences and society needs an enlightened and culturally concerned citizenry. The primary interest of colleges and universities, however, is in maintaining prestige. To maintain status, the "best" schools enroll the "best" students; their graduates, in turn, are the most valued. Interm of 2 major concerns--the welfare of and the equitable treatment of individuals--it can be contended that all college applicants should have an equal chance of being admitted to the college of their choice. This could be accomplished by adoption of a random admissions procedure such as a lottery system. (JS)

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Let us look for a moment at higher education in terms of a set of trade-offs between three interests: students, society, and the colleges. The students have two, not entirely separable, interests in higher education. First, and most obviously, higher education is the path to desirable and lucrative jobs. And a college education is increasingly necessary for such jobs. Second, there is a range of aesthetic, self-fulfilling and maturing interests which higher education can satisfy. These are internal--they are intangibles.

Society or "The Public" has interests very much parallel to those of students. First, it has a need for trained personnel: engineers, lawyers, doctors, soldiers, and so forth. Second, there are collective benefits from having an enlightened citizenry which is somewhat knowledgeable about and interested in art, science, public affairs, and so forth. We can note at this point that these social or public interests match up with the interests of the students: in both cases there is an occupational and also an "enlightenment" concern.

Consider, for a moment, that the primary interests of the colleges and universities may be altogether different. They are largely concerned about prestige--their own prestige as compared to that of other colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education are popularly misunderstood to be primarily concerned with teaching and research. This is a fallacy. They are primarily concerned with raising or at least maintaining their position in the academic hierarchy or pecking order. An administrator's prestige and status are very much a function of the prestige of the college or university where he works. A faculty member's prestige and status are also very much related to the pecking-order of the college where he is employed, but it is

also a function of his personal standing in his field, which is determined by his research.

None of this should be taken to mean that colleges, administrators, or faculty are not concerned with teaching. They are. Nor does this mean that faculty members and administrators are not concerned with serving the public interest. In fact, it might be argued that, taken as a whole, the professional academic community is more personally and sincerely concerned about furthering the public interest than any other major occupational group.

Nonetheless, we must continue and ask: In what form is this concern expressed? The suggestion here is that, like almost all people, their own interests, careers, ambitions, status, and so forth come first. I see the colleges--faculty and administrators--working on behalf of the public interest once their own fundamental and personal prestige concerns have been satisfied. And this satisfaction comes from their particular college admitting the most highly qualified students they can lay their hands on. The reason is simple: the better the students attending a particular college, the greater is its prestige. Of course, there are secondary reasons too. For instance, most faculty members derive more pleasure from teaching bright students than from teaching the duller ones. But the primary motive remains that of maintaining or enhancing the academic status of the institution.

Another way of looking at academic prestige and status--and the terms in which it is usually discussed by administrators and faculty members--is in terms of standards--maintaining standards. One might well ask: Well, what's wrong with maintaining standards? Certainly we do not want low quality higher education. The question here concerns the definition of "standards" and "quality." And the problem is that these terms--standards and quality--are usually used to refer to the students themselves as inputs to the higher education process, not to their growth, development, or learning. It refers to something that has already happened to the students before they attend college, rather than to the quality of the process they

undergo while attending college. It is worth noting that there are virtually no measures of the "value added" to an individual, or his learning, in the course of his college education. We can observe that the "best" schools produce what are in some sense the "best" graduates, but we cannot tell if this is simply because these schools begin with the best high school graduates in the first place. This tells us nothing about how much the college adds to its students. Nor does it tell us anything about which sorts of schools are most likely to make the greatest contribution to which types of students. In this area there is almost a total knowledge vacuum, despite the fact that it is the single most important question about the substance of higher education.

* * *

There is, of course, a social equity principle behind the notion that the best students should be admitted to higher education, and that the best students should be placed in the best colleges, the mediocre students in mediocre colleges, and so forth. The principle has been labelled "merit." The best high school students are seen as being the most deserving of or the most able to utilize the best higher education. As was pointed out above, there simply is no data available on who is able to utilize what sort of higher education how well. And the former point--concerning who deserves any or what sort of higher education--constitutes an enormous, problematic assumption. One might equally well argue that the academically dullest deserve it the most, because they are the most in need. Similarly, one could argue that since higher education is increasingly a publicly provided service, and that since "possessing" a higher education confers enormous monetary benefits on the specific individuals who receive it that all persons should be provided an equal chance to gain this publicly conferred benefit. Given that there exists a hierarchy or pecking-order of colleges, and given that the educations

and degrees offered by the "top" schools are more valuable than those offered by the "bottom" schools, it can be contended that all applicants should be provided an equal chance of being admitted to the school of their choice. This could be done by a device similar to that now employed for distributing a major publicly conferred burden: the military draft lottery.

We must now ask what all of this has to do with public policy and the public interest. It seems reasonable to look at this in terms of two major concerns: First, the welfare of the society as a whole--our collective interests, and, second, the fair and equitable treatment of the individuals comprising our society.

Concerning the first of these, it is clear that we, as a society, benefit from having the best possible doctors, lawyers, politicians, engineers, and so forth. It is possible to extend his concern into a very "elitist" position: This top leadership strata of our society is by far our most important national resource--the better they are, the more developed and advanced our entire society becomes, and we all share in this progress. Therefore, every possible educational advantage should be directed to these future leaders. But it is also possible to look at this same concern in an entirely different way. It is quite reasonable to argue that these same "heir apparents" to the power structure of the nation will rise to the top positions regardless of whether or not they go to Harvard and Berkeley. Furthermore, if one senses that the major problems and crises confronting this society fall into the range which can broadly be described as "human" and "distributional" rather than "technical" and "aggregate," such as poverty and the distribution of income and jobs, racial antagonisms, interpersonal cooperation, communication, and coordination, and so forth, then doesn't it seem quite reasonable to suggest that the last thing we need is a fairly rigid, hierarchical system of education in which the wealthy and middle class tend to dominate the "better" schools, while the lower income classes and the blacks tend to populate the "worst" schools?

The second major public policy concern--the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals in the society--can be looked at in similar terms. There are several different principles of equality which can be employed, and they result in drastically different conclusions. The "merit" or "excellence" principle has already been described: Those who are in some sense most "able" or most "accomplished" are seen as being the most deserving. This can be viewed as entirely complementary to the "elitist" and "heir apparent" positions just outlined.

But there is also a contrary, more egalitarian, principle of equity, which is the one to which I subscribe. This, too, was mentioned earlier--higher education is in fact increasingly a public activity. It confers considerable monetary and other advantages upon those who receive it. Certain individuals should not be favored over other individuals in this gigantic public sweepstake? Furthermore, it would do much to reduce such enormous domestic crises as poverty and the distribution of income, and frictions between races and income classes were we to establish a more fully equal system of higher education in which everyone regardless of race, creed, sex, academic achievement, or native intelligence, is given an equal chance to reap the benefits of higher education. A lottery system for selection into higher education and into particular institutions of higher education appears to be one way to accomplish that social objective.

So far I have talked rather broadly about social interest and social equity. These clearly are fully legitimate public policy concerns. But there is also a more immediate way in which a lottery system is of relevance to educational policy.

Throughout this century--and especially during the last twenty years--higher education has undergone an enormous quantitative expansion. This has been the direct result of an increasing demand by the public for the benefits which a college education provides. So far higher education has

done a fairly satisfactory job of meeting this demand. But I suspect that this satisfaction will be very short-lived, even if the number of new openings in higher education continues to grow at past rates.

The reasoning is simple. For those social groups recently admitted for the first time to higher education, this has represented a dramatic step forward for themselves personally and for the society as a whole. But where have those "newly admitted" social groups been placed in higher education? I referred earlier to the existence of a fairly clearly defined pecking-order of higher education institutions. It is fairly obvious that the newly admitted social groups (largely middle class and lower middle class blacks and whites) have been funneled for the most part into the lowest reaches of the higher educational hierarchy. So far this has not caused many problems because the simple act of admission to higher education--any form of higher education--has seemed quite impressive. After all, it is a college education. But the real question is not simply "Who gets a college education." It also involves asking "What kind" of an education and "How good" an education.

Starkly put, for how long will lower-middle and low income parents and students, especially black ones, be content with what they have good reason to regard as a "second class" higher education? Not only are more public dollars spent on your education if you go to a "better" school, but also you are more likely subsequently to earn a higher income.

Given the massive criticism of higher education from many quarters in the past few years, a new attack on higher education from this equity ("who goes where") basis could expect to find many allies waiting in the wings. This would be especially so if such new discontent was expressed in terms of equal educational opportunity. And this seems most likely.

A random admissions procedure would be one obvious institutional response to such discontent and criticism. Less extensive, but still

satisfactory, responses might be possible. But if my prognosis is correct, the institutional response will have to be quite drastic--drastic on the order and degree of widespread adoption of a lottery system for admission to colleges.