

JACK KENT COOKE  
FOUNDATION

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OPENING DOORS

*How Selective Colleges and Universities Are  
Expanding Access for High-Achieving, Low-Income Students*



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# OPENING DOORS

## *How Selective Colleges and Universities Are Expanding Access for High-Achieving, Low-Income Students*

The goal of equal educational opportunity remains unrealized at most of America's elite colleges.\* The children of wealth and privilege fill nearly *all* the seats at these institutions, while the children of poverty are almost completely absent. Far too often, a young person's educational path is determined not by intellect, but by parental income. That a child's academic fate depends more on family wealth than individual ability is a national embarrassment of the first order.

An enormous educational opportunity gap divides our nation. Students born to high-income families are five times as likely to earn a college degree as students from low-income families.<sup>1</sup> This is not because having money boosts a student's intelligence, but because of the sheer unfairness of the college admissions process.

The gap is greatest at our nation's top colleges. As we reported in a [study](#) issued in 2016, students from the wealthiest 25 percent of families make up 72 percent of the enrollment at the elite colleges.<sup>2</sup> In sharp contrast, students from the poorest 25 percent of families account for a *mere 3 percent* of enrollment at these schools. This means that there are 24 high-income students for each low-income student at these elite colleges – an astounding imbalance.

Some enormously talented low-income students are actually deprived of going to college entirely. An earlier Cooke Foundation study found that *7 percent of students (1 in 14) from low-income families who scored in the top 25 percent academically do not enroll in college.*<sup>3</sup> This is a gross unfairness to students who achieved at the highest levels despite being from families of very modest means that cannot afford exotic summer vacations, advanced courses, supplemental programs, and test prep courses.

Nor is the severe underrepresentation of low-income students a function of students' abilities. These students have proven that they can excel at the most selective colleges if given the chance. When high-achieving students from families with limited financial means are admitted to selective institutions, they thrive. *They earn high grades and graduate at rates at least equal to their wealthier peers.*<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, growing numbers of elite colleges are taking steps to open their doors wider to high-achieving, low-income students. **This report examines the success of several of these institutions, explaining how the colleges can serve as role models for other institutions that wish to become more economically diverse.**

The best practices we highlight are drawn primarily from Amherst College, Davidson College, Pomona College, Rice University, and Stanford University. These five institutions were all finalists for the 2016 Cooke Prize for Equity in Educational Excellence, a \$1 million award to a selective college that has demonstrated excellence in admitting, supporting, and graduating outstanding low-income students. Amherst won the prize last year, but the other four schools were strong contenders.

Based on the success of the institutions we studied, this report identifies a checklist of proven, practical steps that we recommend to top colleges that desire to become more accessible to students with big brains and small wallets.

**We have identified 14 practices that facilitate smart, low-income students' entry into the most selective colleges.** The practices are grouped into specific actions that will encourage high-achieving, low-income students to apply, improve their chances of admission, and encourage admitted low-income students to enroll.

## THE APPLICATION PROCESS

### 1. **Make clear the true cost of college attendance after financial aid.**

Many low-income students and their parents don't realize that financial aid can often make an institution – including a private college with a high “sticker price” of \$50,000 or more – actually less expensive than the local community college. *As a result of this erroneous belief, many academically qualified low-income students don't even apply to a selective college.*

\*Throughout this report we use the terms “elite colleges,” “top colleges,” and “selective colleges” to refer to both postsecondary colleges *and* universities that typically admit only a portion of their applicant pool, consisting of students with high levels of initial academic readiness as measured by grades and standardized test scores. For analysis purposes we count as “selective” any institution classified by the Barron's Profiles of American Colleges as “Most Competitive” or “Highly Competitive,” roughly 300 institutions.

## 2. Reduce the costs associated with applying to college.

This includes making prominent the mechanism for waiving the application fee for low-income students.

## 3. Make the college application process simpler.

Many low-income students lack adults in their lives who can help them navigate the application process. Many attend high schools where college counselors have huge caseloads and have not been adequately trained. Expecting low-income students to figure out the complex process of applying for admission and financial aid *completely on their own* places them at a tremendous disadvantage.

## 4. Customize messaging to encourage low-income students to apply.

Many high-achieving, low-income students believe they will not fit in at an elite college, where they have the perception that almost everyone else comes from families with much higher incomes. Schools need to make sure that their websites, written materials, and presentations are welcoming to students from all income levels.

## 5. Partner with high schools and community-based organizations to target outstanding low-income students.

Rather than waiting for low-income students to apply, colleges should reach out to such students to offer information about college choices and the application process, and bring students to campus. Colleges can also educate high school counselors and teachers about the admissions process.

# THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

## 6. In evaluating applications, recognize the barriers low-income students have already overcome.

*High achieving, low-income students often attend schools that lack the same resources as schools that higher-income students attend, such as adequate counseling services, online tools like Naviance, and a selection of Advanced Placement courses. In addition, the parents of low-income students can't afford supplemental learning experiences – such as summer camps, tutoring,*

*college courses, and college advisers. And many low-income students must hold after-school jobs that make it impossible to participate in extracurricular activities. It is extraordinary that despite these barriers *some* low-income students are able to compete effectively for the top colleges in the country. This achievement is worthy of recognition in the admissions process.*

## 7. Critically examine the admissions process to identify all aspects where low-income students are disadvantaged.

Collect income information to examine admissions outcomes by income. In the same way that resources are focused on ensuring diversity of geographic origin, gender, or race and ethnicity, similar attention should be paid to promoting socioeconomic diversity. Colleges should identify the reasons why low-income applicants are being denied admission.

## 8. Remove admissions practices that disadvantage low-income applicants.

Critically assess the use of standardized tests scores (SAT and ACT), eliminate preferences given to legacy applicants (children of alumni), and revise the early admissions process to eliminate its unfairness to low-income students.

## 9. Cultivate the academic abilities of low-income students.

To make up for the limited availability of Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate courses, and other enrichment opportunities, colleges should create opportunities for low-income students to attend academic summer programs on campus; educational programs at K-12 schools; and educational programs for teachers to improve their teaching of high-achieving, low-income students.

## 10. Expand transfer access for students from community colleges.

Community colleges provide an excellent pool of high-achieving, low-income students who selective colleges should attempt to attract. *Yet our research shows that only 63 percent of selective four-year institutions accept transfer credits from community colleges.* This is despite the fact that high-achieving community college students have demonstrated they can succeed at a high level at four-year colleges.

## ENCOURAGING ENROLLMENT

### 11. Make attending as affordable as possible.

Some top colleges provide too little financial aid to cover tuition, room and board, transportation, living expenses, and supplemental costs. As a result, the average net price for attending a selective college varies widely for low-income students. In 2014, students from families making less than \$30,000 annually attending a selective institution paid an average net price ranging from under \$1,000 to over \$30,000. *The majority of low-income students are being asked to spend between one-third and almost all of their families' annual income to attend college.* This is *not* providing financial aid so much as misleading aspiring low-income students to have false hopes that will inevitably be dashed.

### 12. Standardize financial aid letters and clarify the terms of the aid offered.

We reviewed financial aid award letters from colleges that were received by Cooke Scholars and found the letters confusing and easily misunderstood. Institutions need to do a much better job identifying how much aid is coming in the form of grants (which don't need to be repaid) and how much is coming as loans. Estimated costs are often not clear and frequently do not include fees and some other out-of-pocket expenses, which can be substantial.

### 13. Provide estimates of the total costs of attendance for all years.

Many low-income students and their parents understandably assume that they will receive the same amount of financial

aid every year they attend a college. Yet research shows that institutional grant aid for students at private colleges drops between the freshman and senior years. Colleges should give students a multi-year tuition and fee financial aid package, provided the students maintain a specified grade-point average.

### 14. Facilitate travel for admitted students so that they can visit campus prior to enrolling.

Traveling to a college campus far from home is unaffordable for low-income students. As a result, many limit their choices to schools close to home. Colleges should pick up the costs of travel to campus for low-income prospective students.

Each of the steps outlined above is needed to increase the number of smart, low-income students pursuing a higher education at selective institutions. Since an ever-increasing percentage of jobs in the American economy require postsecondary education, these steps are needed to ensure that creativity and industry are rewarded.<sup>5</sup> When education ends at high school, a young person faces bleak prospects.

Committing to expanding access for high-achieving, low-income students and opening the doors of our higher education system to students based on true merit rather than family income is imperative both because it is the right thing to do and because it is the only way we as a nation can remain globally competitive. America needs our brightest minds from *all* economic backgrounds to be well-educated.

**By learning from the best practices of elite colleges that have already opened their doors wider to outstanding low-income students, other higher education institutions can bring us closer to our ideal of treating individuals based on their personal abilities and talents, rather than their ancestry.**

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<sup>1</sup> Martha J. Bailey and Susan M. Dynarski, "Inequality in Postsecondary Education." *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. Ed. Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane. (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), pp. 117-132.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer A. Giancola and Richard D. Kahlenberg, "[True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities](#)," (Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Josh Wyner, John M. Bridgeland, and John J. DiIulio, Jr., "Achievement Trap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Lower-Income Families," (Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Giancola and Kahlenberg, (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 2010).