



May 19 Reality Check

Equalizing Merit and Economic Opportunity

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

The conversation about access to college has passed through multiple incarnations, each time with a different focus, but always concerned with the fundamental question: Who gets to go to selective colleges?

Sometimes we worry about access for individuals of particular races, ethnic groups, and gender, underrepresented in selective college enrollment. Sometimes we worry that the expansion of capacity in American higher education will not accommodate the growth in the number of college prepared high school graduates.

Solutions to these problems vary, sometimes expressed through massive investments in the expansion of public higher education capacity, and in other instances demonstrated through preferential recruitment and admission of underrepresented individuals into existing selective institutions.

The new [focus](#) for this ongoing debate looks closely at the admissions practices of selective colleges and universities and finds them deficient in attracting and retaining individuals from less prosperous families. The issue, perhaps oversimplified here, targets the admissions practices of selective institutions as biased against those students with the least ability to pay and highly favoring those students from affluent or at least middle class families.

The mechanisms for this discrimination against the poor appear in many forms. The most obvious is that selective institutions have high, required fees, and their predominantly residential character almost doubles the cost of attendance. If the basic cost of selective institutions prices them out of the range of the poor family, the selection criteria also appear biased against the poor.

Most selective institutions rely heavily on standardized test scores to identify the elite offered admission, and define the merit the selective institutions seek by these scores, along with high school grades, and a portfolio of additional student achievements in sports, the arts, overseas travel, community service commitments, and other similar engagements.

These elements all appear to favor the middle class and above because only those students with families capable of paying the cost of good academic high schools, test preparation courses, extensive extracurricular activities that often require not only money but constant parent availability, and freedom from any obligation for the student to work to contribute to the family income. Taken together, the argument goes, these things all define the poor but potentially academically talented student out of the selective college admissions pool.

A simple solution, of course, is to provide full financial aid to students with talent and no family resources, and in truth, most selective institutions operate need blind admissions and package financial aid to meet anywhere from 90 to 100 percent of the federal formula that defines need. The critics, however, tell us this is not enough. The formula leaves a gap, and the financial aid package often includes a loan portion that discourages poor students from attending because they choose not to graduate with debt.

However, the critics go further and argue that the admissions selection criteria themselves, focused on a specific form of merit, discriminate against poor students with academic promise because such students can never get the benefits that translate into high SAT scores, good high school preparation, and the opportunity for extensive extracurricular portfolios.

This critique strikes at a much more fundamental issue. What do we mean by merit?

Most colleges mean many things: high SAT, high grade point average, extensive activities lists, relatives with prior connections to the institution, relationships with donors or trustees or political leaders, all these combine into the merit process that results in an offer to attend a selective college or university. Some of these are easy to criticize.

It is nonetheless hard to accept that the high scores on standardized tests, extensive work in advanced placement courses, high energy commitments to athletics and community service are somehow inappropriate preparation for college admission simply because families invested in the future of their children. Such a conclusion would appear to strike at a core value that has sustained American colleges and university for at least a generation. Parents who in their time attended college to acquire the skills for economic success may not appreciate learning that their children's achievements will be discounted because the parents were successful.

The argument that the poor are less likely to get a good high school education and have fewer advantages in the selective college admissions process is one of those arguments that is true by design. Colleges and universities are engines of social and economic progress, and they have demonstrated their ability to help move their graduates into middle to high earning occupations. These institutions reflect the values of economic advancement and they have always rewarded those families who invest in their children. If we accept the notion that it is unfair to give an advantage to college applicants whose parents invest in their children, the remedies are several.

We can make a token adjustment by continuing to reward family investment in children but set aside a portion of our admissions pool for the academically deserving poor. This might work, but it does not clarify how we will identify the academically deserving poor when we also may recognize that standardized test scores and similar criteria significantly discriminate against those we want to help.

We can have a full conversion and reject the economically biased admission process of most selective colleges by relying only on recommendations, interviews and other qualitative mechanisms for sorting applicants, and avoid looking at standardized scores, grades and activities as reflections of family wealth rather than demonstrations of individual student merit and promise. Unfortunately, even qualitative evidence of this kind favors the wealthy whose children have superior teachers to write about their accomplishments, sports coaches to write about their commitment, hospital administrators to testify to their engagement in social and public service.

Even if we can find a socioeconomically neutral way to identify admission (by using a mathematically pure random selection), we still have to deal with the issue of the cost of selective colleges and universities. We can reallocate our financial aid so that we pay nothing in the competition for high performing students (using the economically biased test scores) and only invest in equalizing the opportunities for poor students to attend selective colleges. This would mean no wasted funds on merit-based scholarships and instead investment only in scholarships designed to meet the total need identified for students without family means to support their education and selected for admission by our neutral random number process.

All of this is heady stuff. Those of us who have to talk with parents will anticipate a less encouraging conversation.

"My daughter Kneisha was denied admission?" "Yes," I say. Her mother responds, "But she has a 1500 on her SAT and A+ high school average, and was debate team captain and field hockey championship scorer. She worked three nights a week in the local inner city hospital children's center for the last six years, and she won the Urban League prize for the best community service project in her city. She has superb recommendations from distinguished individuals. What was wrong with her application?"

"Well," I say, "Kneisha's achievements are surely admirable, but her place in the class went instead to Suzie, whose SAT scores were 1250. Our random number selection pulled up her application, and we hope she had great academic promise in spite of the fact that her parents have no money and work three jobs to feed themselves and so could not provide her with all the advantages you gave Kneisha. We all know that Kneisha excelled because you could afford to give her those opportunities so we didn't really count all that, and instead used our fair random numbers to select the class."

Kneisha's mother paused and then said, "So if we had lost our jobs, and qualified as poor, Kneisha would have had a much better chance of admission?"

"Yes," I said, "if her number was selected, she would be given admission but no financial aid. This is how we

ensure that we do not confuse merit achieved because of parental support with potential merit denied because of economic circumstances.”

Keneisha’s mother hung up, and enrolled Keneisha in a highly selective college that valued the SAT, activities, recommendations, leadership activities, community service and sports engagement.

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