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The Dismal Pell Numbers at Wealthy Colleges

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By [Richard Kahlenberg](#)

Earlier this week, *The Chronicle* published a [devastating analysis](#) outlining the dearth of low-income students at the nation's elite colleges and universities. Despite a slew of financial-aid initiatives announced in the past decade, the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants at the wealthiest 50 institutions remained flat between 2004-05 and 2008-09. Thirty-one colleges and universities actually saw declines in the proportion of Pell recipients.

The Century Foundation, where I work, has long been a champion of socioeconomic diversity. In 2004, Century organized a meeting of researchers and school officials concerned about economic inequality in elite institutions, including the presidents of Amherst, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, and Princeton. One of the presidents said that when he sat in on admissions committee meetings, a metaphorical light flashed on in discussions of students who were athletes, or legacies or minorities, but that no light was lit for low-income students, who lack backers in the college admissions process. It seemed, in 2004, that leadership at the top of some of the nation's best colleges might make promoting social mobility a genuine priority.

To great fanfare, a number of leading colleges and universities did commit to providing more generous financial-aid programs, which represented a very important step forward. But it does no good to have strong financial-aid programs if students are not also admitted. And the most recent evidence suggests that the race for prestige—which is linked to high SAT scores—blunts the desire to admit “strivers,” low-income students who beat the odds, and have a great deal to offer, but bring marginally lower scores. At the University of North Carolina, for example, a wonderful financial-aid and support program, The Carolina Covenant, has not by itself lifted Chapel Hill's Pell numbers because the campus has rejected the idea of affirmative action for low-income students.

The Chronicle's analysis, put together by Beckie Supiano and Andrea Fuller, shows a few bright spots. Williams College, for example, saw a 4.4 percentage point increase in Pell recipients, from 10.5% in 2004-05 to 14.9% in 2008-09. The admissions director at Williams, Richard L. Nesbitt, noted, “It was a very conscious decision on our part to increase our share of low-income, high-ability students.”

The school with the highest Pell proportion was the University of California at Los Angeles, where 30.7% of students receive Pell grants, double the share found at the 50 wealthiest institutions generally. UCLA was followed by Smith College (23.6%), the University of Texas at Austin (21.4%), Michigan State (18.8%), Ohio State (17.8%), the University of Washington (17.4%), Case Western Reserve (17.3%), and Texas A&M (16.2%).

What's striking is that of the top eight most socioeconomically diverse schools, five are public institutions in four states where universities created aggressive plans to counteract bans on affirmative action by race. Could it be that an important reason these universities are leaders in socioeconomic diversity is that they had to seek alternative methods (such as socioeconomic affirmative action or a top 10% high school plan) to indirectly create racial diversity? (UT Austin has reinstated the use of race but continues to aggressively use race-neutral plans as well.)

The discouraging *Chronicle* report makes clear that opening the doors to low-income students requires universities to address both financial aid and admissions. The nation's wealthiest institutions admirably took the first step. When will they take the second step and turn on the admissions light for poor and working class kids?

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It is neither overstatement nor bias to observe that the elites are economic parasites. While they have erected a variety of barriers to throttle the admission of deserving underclass students to a token level, they quietly accept taxpayer support in excess of \$40,000 per student per year, largely in the form of forgone taxation on property, endowments, use, and income. For the most part, this \$40,000 benefit accrues to students of upper middle-class or upper class families. In addition, by limiting their admissions largely to students who would be successful with our without them, elite colleges and universities add less social value than do community and career colleges who, each day, lift deserving individuals out of the underclass and into middle-class positions of self-respect and career potential. Am I arguing against the contributions of the elites? No. I am suggesting that they deserve fewer tax breaks. We could start with transparency. Only education economists and a handful of others understand the extent to which taxpayers underwrite schools like Yale, Princeton and 50 others. Public understanding might then give support to the idea of taxing endowments. In today's low interest economy, the immediate effects would be immaterial, giving the schools time to adjust to the changes as the economy continues to recover. After that, we could require more underclass admissions. Keep the elites but make them participate a little more and pay a little more of their own way.

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