

Early admissions policies give children of the rich an edge

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This week the College Board released its annual report on college pricing - and as many feared, tuitions continue to rise, while the average Pell Grant, the cornerstone of federal funding for higher education, failed for the fourth year in a row to keep pace with inflation.

For the wealthy, however, their own affirmative action is just heating up. Early admissions - the first round of college admissions deadlines - are upon us. The lucky few who are chosen are exempted from the agony of completing dozens of applications and the daily ritual of anxiously checking the mail or the Internet next spring once colleges have decided.

Early admission provides an opportunity for students who are ready to commit to a college or university to know whether the feelings are mutual. For colleges, it is their chance to lock in a portion of their freshman class with high GPAs or excellent test scores or unique talents.

Everyone wins, right? Not exactly. As it turns out, applicants for early admissions slots are not just lucky and not just the most qualified. They have better odds of getting in than do regular applicants, but only wealthy students who don't need financial aid can afford to make their choice based solely on the school they think they'd like to attend. Recognizing the inherent unfairness, Harvard and Princeton have ended this practice.

But it's not just early admissions practices that are unfair.

A college coach asserts that 95 percent of her teenage clients are accepted by their first-choice school, usually one in the Ivy League. The price for coaching services: \$40,000. (To put this figure into perspective, two-thirds of Pell Grant recipients came from families with annual incomes below \$30,000.) A summer camp for writing college admissions essays (\$3,500) boasts that more than 70 percent of its alumni are accepted into their first-choice college. For \$7,000, you can buy a summer experience for a high school student to describe on their college application as community service.

While some high school seniors enjoy these fruits of their parents' wealth, other equally talented students from less affluent families do not have these options.

Advantages for the rich often begin long before an application is even submitted. Before the college applications hit the mailbox, parents with the financial means are exercising their purchasing power to the hilt to secure competitive advantages for their children to compete for entry. Can their applications truly be viewed as equal to those of a poorer student whose parents can't afford the costly prep work? Can the applications of two students be fairly evaluated when one received years of SAT prep and personalized coaching sessions and the other had no such luck?

One answer is for universities to require mandatory disclosure by students and parents of each and every form of purchased help. Parents could disclose and certify the level of college coaching their child received, including the amount of assistance provided by a high school; any private college counselors/coaches retained; the number of PSAT, SAT and any other standardized test preparatory classes taken; the number of times the tests were actually taken; any assistance on essay writing; and activities pursued to bolster the student's record, including community service activities, trips and unpaid internships.

Another solution, partly in place at many universities, is comprehensive review. This process is designed to look at the applicants' entire circumstances and put their achievements into context. For example, if two students from different schools have comparable high school transcripts and each took three advanced placement classes, it should matter that at one student's school this was the total number of AP courses offered, while in the other student's school, 25 AP classes were available.

Similarly, if a student's SAT score was 610 in math, it's reasonable to consider whether that represents the 90th percentile or the 30th percentile among that student's classmates. With a broader understanding of raw talent versus coached and coddled talent, admission committees can make better decisions. With a full understanding of how perks available to children of the well-to-do put children of lower socioeconomic groups at an unfair disadvantage, we can begin to bring an end to a system of reinforcing wealth and privilege and create a fairer admissions process.

In other words, we can support meaningful efforts to level the playing field and make our institutions of higher education more meritocratic. And what does this mean for business? Recruiters touting a desire to hire a diverse staff frequently complain of a limited pool of people of color. The first step in fostering a diverse environment needs to come well before they are reviewing resumes. It is a role and responsibility of corporate leaders to press for hidden barriers to be removed early in their communities, in schools and elsewhere. Businesses will, in the end, reap the benefits for prompting changes in schools.

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