

5 MYTHS ABOUT WHO GETS INTO COLLEGE

RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

A senior fellow at the Century Foundation, Richard Kahlenberg is an expert on K–12 schooling. He is the author of four books on education and the editor of seven more, most recently *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College* (2010). His articles are widely published, and he is a frequent guest on TV talk shows. The following article appeared in the *Washington Post* on May 23, 2010.

PREREADING QUESTIONS In preparation for reading, glance at the five myths the author will examine. Which, if any, myths do you think are accurate? Even if there is just one that you thought was an accurate statement, is that sufficient reason to study Kahlenberg’s analysis?

1 This spring, more than 3 million students will graduate from America’s high schools, and more than 2 million of them will head off to college in the fall. At the top colleges, competition has been increasingly fierce, leaving many high school seniors licking their wounds and wondering what they did “wrong.” But do selective colleges and universities do a good job of identifying the best and brightest? And is the concern about who gets into the best colleges justified?

2 **1. Admissions officers have figured out how to reward merit above wealth and connections.**

A 2004 Century Foundation study found that at the most selective universities and colleges, 74 percent of students come from the richest quarter of the population, while just 3 percent come from the bottom quarter. Rich kids can’t possibly be 25 times as likely to be smart as poor kids, so wealth and connections must still matter.

3 Leading schools have two main admissions policies that favor wealthy students. The more glaring of these is legacy preferences—an admissions boost for the children of alumni. Legacy preferences increase a student’s chances of admission by, on average, 20 percentage points over non-legacies. Schools use such preferences on the theory that they increase donations from alumni, but new research by Chad Coffman questions that premise. Those universities that



These students enjoy one another and their beautiful campus.

have abandoned legacy preferences—or never used them—have plenty of alumni donors. Examples include Caltech, Texas A&M and the University of Georgia.

Less obvious is the role of the SAT, which was, when it was introduced in 1926, supposed to help identify talented students from across all schools and backgrounds. Instead, it seems to amplify the advantages enjoyed by the most privileged students. New research by Georgetown University's Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl finds that the most disadvantaged applicants (those who, among other characteristics, are black, attend public schools with high poverty rates, come from low-income families and have parents who are high school dropouts) score, on average, 784 points lower on the SAT than the most advantaged students (those who, among other things, are white, attend private schools and have wealthy, highly educated parents). This gap is equivalent to about two-thirds of the test's total score range. If the SAT were a 100-yard dash, advantaged kids would start off 65 yards ahead before the race even began.

2. Disadvantages based on race are still the biggest obstacle to getting into college. More than race, it's class: The effects of racial discrimination are increasingly dwarfed by the impact of socioeconomic status. Take that 784-point difference in SAT scores between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged students. All other things being equal, the researchers found that there was a 56-point difference between black and white students. Most of the rest of the gap was the result of socioeconomic factors. To truly even the playing field, the system would therefore need to provide a lot of affirmative action to economically disadvantaged students who beat the odds and a little bit of affirmative action based on race.

Yet colleges and universities today do the opposite: They provide substantial preferences based on race and virtually none based on class. According to researchers William Bowen, Martin Kurzweil and Eugene Tobin, at highly selective institutions, for students within a given SAT range, being a member of an underrepresented minority increases one's chance of admission by 28 percentage points. That is, a white student might have a 30 percent chance of admission, but a black or Latino student with a similar record would have a 58 percent chance of admission. By contrast, Bowen and his colleagues found, students from poor families don't receive any leg up in the process—they fare neither better nor worse than wealthier applicants.

3. Generous financial aid policies are the key to boosting socioeconomic diversity. In response to the growing scarcity of poor and working-class students on campus, roughly 100 universities and colleges have boosted financial aid in the past several years. But these programs have not been enough to change the socioeconomic profile of these schools' student bodies. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for example, a generous financial aid program, the Carolina Covenant, was instituted in 2004. Under its terms, low-income students are not required to take out loans as part of their financial aid packages.

According to research by Edward B. Fiske, the program has been successful in accomplishing one important goal: boosting the graduation rate among low-income students. Traditionally, low-income and working-class students

drop out at much higher rates than do higher-income students, as financial worries and jobs with long hours distract from their studies. Fiske found that the Carolina Covenant raised the four-year graduation rates of low-income students by almost 10 percent.

- 9 Yet the proportion of low-income students at UNC-Chapel Hill remained flat between 2003 and 2008, because the university has not given such students (those eligible for federal Pell grants, 90 percent of which go to students from families making less than \$40,000 a year) any break in the admissions process. A few other institutions, including Amherst and Harvard, have begun to consider a student's socioeconomic status in their admissions decisions; these schools provide a promising example. At Harvard, the percentage of students receiving Pell grants has shot up from 9.4 percent in the 2003–2004 school year to 15 percent in the 2008–2009 school year.

10 **4. Selective colleges are too expensive and aren't worth the investment.**

A selective institution with a large endowment may indeed be worth the money. The least selective colleges spend about \$12,000 per student, compared with \$92,000 per student at the most selective schools. Put another way, at the wealthiest 10 percent of institutions, students pay, on average, just 20 cents in fees for every dollar the school spends on them, while at the poorest 10 percent of institutions, students pay 78 cents for every dollar spent on them.

- 11 Furthermore, selective colleges are quite a bit better at retention: If a more selective school and a less selective school enroll two equally qualified students, the more selective school is much more likely to graduate its student. Future earnings are, on average, 45 percent higher for students who graduated from more selective institutions than for those from less selective ones, and the difference in earnings is widest among low-income students. And according to research by Thomas Dye, 54 percent of America's top 4,325 corporate leaders are graduates of just 12 institutions.

12 **5. With more students going to college, we're closer to the goal of equal opportunity.**

The good news is that students are going to college at a higher rate than ever before; the bad news is that stratification is increasing at colleges and universities. Much as urban elementary and secondary schools saw white, affluent parents flee to suburban schools in the 1970s and 1980s, less selective colleges are now experiencing white flight. According to Carnevale and Strohl, white student representation declined from 79 percent to 58 percent at less selective and noncompetitive institutions between 1994 and 2006, while black student representation soared from 11 percent to 28 percent. American higher education is in danger of quickly becoming both separate and unequal.

Source: *Washington Post*, May 23, 2010. Reprinted by permission of the author.

QUESTIONS FOR READING

1. What numbers demonstrate that selective colleges are not rewarding merit above wealth and connections? What two admissions policies favor the rich?