

The Opinion Pages | LETTERS

Leveling the College Playing Field

SEPT. 1, 2014

To the Editor:

Re “Generation Later, Poor Still Rare at Elite Colleges” (front page, Aug. 26):
When my children and I were touring schools last year, admissions officers and student guides often seemed oblivious to the economic or cultural concerns of some of the prospective students.

At Vanderbilt, the admissions officer asked students to give their name, say where they were from and, as an icebreaker, name their favorite vehicle. Person after person stood up and answered the icebreaker with “my Audi A6” or “my father’s Mercedes,” to which the admissions officer would reply, “Love that car” or “Smooth ride.”

During Case Western’s tour, when asked about the diversity of the student body, our student guide answered, “It’s very diverse here — we have a lot of students from China.” The tour guide at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte volunteered that she would have preferred Justin Timberlake to the performer the school had just presented, the hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar.

It is clear that these comments probably are unknowing or innocent. What is not clear is whether the schools, by not training their admissions representatives to be culturally and economically competent, are wittingly or unwittingly self-selecting their potential applicants.

ELIZABETH KUNREUTHER

Raleigh, N.C., Aug. 26, 2014

To the Editor:

To generalize that our country’s top colleges are bastions of privilege is to ignore the significant gains in socioeconomic diversity made by women’s colleges.

For example, since the late 1990s, 15 percent to 20 percent of the students at

Smith College, where I am president, have been eligible for federal Pell Grants, a program supporting students whose families typically earn less than \$40,000 a year. Roughly the same percentage are the first in their families to attend a four-year college.

As the article correctly notes, this commitment to elite education, and the social mobility it confers, is expensive. I was the first in my family to go to college and was supported almost entirely by federal and institutional aid. My education was made possible by those who paid it forward on my behalf.

Women of promise from all walks of life deserve that opportunity and are finding it at women's colleges.

KATHLEEN McCARTNEY

Northampton, Mass., Aug. 28, 2014

To the Editor:

Your article correctly describes the difficulty in finding comparative net price information about colleges, but a bigger problem is the language that government and professionals use to explain the cost. The current explanations of price and financial aid are unique to higher education; the concepts are abstract and inconsistent; the words are unfamiliar.

At a minimum, the language of college pricing and financial aid should display the appropriate amount of money with a commonly used vocabulary, adopt words that describe typical purchases of goods and services, include documentation and warning about risk and borrowing, and translate word-for-word into Spanish. This would help inform prospective students and families about the cost of college and the choice and opportunity available to them.

C. ANTHONY BROH

Brookline, Mass., Aug. 26, 2014

The writer is the founder of Broh Consulting Services, which specializes in higher education.

To the Editor:

Conspicuously missing from the discussion of economics and elite college admissions is any mention of the disproportionately large number of students at these colleges who come from private high schools.

When I arrived at Yale as a freshman in 2006, I met a good number of students who had also been admitted to Harvard and Princeton, something that none of the

high-achieving students from my public high school had been able to accomplish. What the majority of these students had in common was not that they were especially strong academically but that they came from private schools. In fact, Yale's own statistics reveal that 45 percent of its students come from nonpublic schools.

The tuition at these private schools places them largely out of reach not just for the poor but for the overwhelming majority of the middle class. If elite colleges wish to make their admissions processes more fair to talented students of all economic backgrounds, they should start by increasing the percentage of students admitted from public schools.

DAVID GOLUB

New York, Aug. 26, 2014

To the Editor:

Your article states: "Getting low-income students onto elite campuses is seen as a vital engine of social mobility." I believe, however, that educational opportunity for students from the bottom half of the income ladder can best come from supporting the institutions that increasingly serve those students — not from efforts to get a tiny number into elite colleges.

State universities, including their nonflagship branches, generally provide a stronger teaching focus and understanding of students from modest backgrounds and often a higher quality of education over all than elite universities do. With public universities increasingly inaccessible because of cost to a large slice of the bottom half, state legislatures must step up to promote the historical role of these schools as the true engine of equal opportunity.

LAWRENCE BLUM

Cambridge, Mass., Aug. 27, 2014

The writer is a professor of liberal arts and education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

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