

WHAT'S NEW WITH KIDS?

Finding a Bridge between High-Achieving, Low-Income Students and Selective Universities

April 2014

Allow me to take you back a couple years, maybe a few years back, to your high school senior year. To many, the unforgettable memory of prom will come to mind, to others it will be their out-of-this-world graduation celebration, and to a few more, it will be an historical moment in their family tree regarding college. Seniors across the United States are breaking records and setting new highs for future generations by becoming the first in their families to attend college. A majority of students from low-income families are first-generation college students. Therefore, it is important that they receive all the relevant information regarding college opportunities. This *Newsletter* explores reasons that low-income, high-achieving students may not apply to selective colleges and universities.

Low-Income, High-Achieving Students and Selective Colleges and Universities

According to Hoxby and Avery (2013), the vast majority of very high-achieving students from low-income families do not apply to a selective college or university. A selective school is one that is in the category of “very competitive plus” to “most competitive” in *Barron’s Profiles of American Colleges* (Hoxby and Avery, 2013). Harvard, Yale, and Princeton are top selective schools in the nation. Their tuition is also over \$50,000 per year.

What may prevent low-income, high-achieving students from applying to selective colleges and universities? Possible reasons include high tuition costs, lack of confidence, and lack of information.

High College Costs

Hoxby and Avery tested whether the high cost of an Ivy League school could be a deterrent for low-income high achievers. They found this was not the case. Because many highly selective universities offer generous financial aid to need-based students, low-income students can attend these universities for less than the cost of attending a two-year community college. As the table on page three shows, when financial aid is considered, less competitive and private community colleges can be far more expensive than highly selective colleges and universities.

Lack of Confidence

If cost is not the deterrent to high-achieving, low-income students applying to selective colleges and universities, then could it be a confidence dilemma? Hoxby and Avery found that high-achieving, low-income students who apply to selective institutions are just as likely to enroll and progress toward a degree at the same pace as high-income students with equivalent test scores and grades.

Lack of Information

A lack of information on college opportunities was found to be the major factor influencing low-income, high-achieving students' applications to selective schools. According to Hoxby and Avery, there are two types of high-achieving, low-income students: (1) achievement-typical students, whose application pattern to universities resembles that of high-income achievers and (2) income-typical students with high ACT scores who apply to colleges and universities that accept students with much lower ACT scores or don't require ACT test scores. Only 1.6 percent of income-typical students applied to one of the ten most selective colleges in the United States. In contrast, 7.6 percent of achievement-typical students applied to the same ten most selective colleges. The difference was the result of information, or the lack of it.

High-income achievers and achievement-typical students who attended a selective college or university had more contact with teachers, counselors, and neighbors during their high school years than their counterparts who did not attend a selective college or university. In contrast, income-typical students had less contact with educated adults and often had high school counselors who were uninformed about selective colleges and universities, both of which created an information disadvantage for the students. Hoxby and Avery conclude that many high school counselors are not sufficiently trained about the application processes for highly selective colleges.

Based on my experience, I believe high school counselors can serve as a bridge of knowledge for high-achieving students, encouraging them to aspire to and choose a highly selective college or university that is appropriate for their academic achievements. Allow me to take you back to my high school senior year. I attended a fantastic magnet school in my home town. I listened to the repeated messages from my school staff and took as many Advanced Placement (AP) classes as I could and studied really hard for my college entrance exams. I graduated with a grade point average above 4.00 (once accounting for weighted AP classes) and great ACT scores.

As a first-generation college student, I was unable to receive family guidance at home to assist with the college search, so I needed to look to my high school for such guidance. Unfortunately, I never had that follow-up conversation from my counselor as to "what was possible as a result of my academic performance." My own lack of information was so great that I didn't know that I needed to seek additional information.

Conclusion

Highly selective colleges and universities desire socioeconomic diversity for a number of reasons (Hoxby and Avery, 2013). First, a diverse student body makes instruction and research at schools more productive. Second, low-income students whose lives were transformed by a selective college education tend to be the most generous donors when they become wealthy. Third, diverse student populations are supported by the public. High-achieving students, regardless of income level, are smart and go-getters, who can seek, find, and understand information they need. High-achieving, income-typical students might need reinforcement from a trusted role model to provide information on the doors that can open to a brighter future. Unfortunately, these students may not know that they need.

College Costs and Resources, by Selectivity of College

<i>Selectivity</i>	<i>Out-of-pocket cost for student at 20th %ile of family income</i>	<i>Comprehensive cost (cost before financial aid)</i>	<i>Average instructional expenditure per student</i>
Most competitive	6,754	45,540	27,001
Highly competitive plus	13,755	38,603	13,732
Highly competitive	17,437	35,811	12,163
Very competitive plus	15,977	31,591	9,605
Very competitive	23,813	29,173	8,300
Competitive plus	23,552	27,436	6,970
Competitive	19,400	24,166	6,542
Less competitive	26,335	26,262	5,359
Some or no selectivity, 4-year	18,981	16,638	5,119
Private 2-year	14,852	17,822	6,796
Public 2-year	7,573	10,543	4,991
For-profit 2-year	18,486	21,456	3,257

Note: Dollars per year

Sources: *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* and Hoxby and Avery's calculations using the colleges' own net

Prepared by Olga de la Cruz
Economic Graduate Assistant