

A nighttime photograph of a cityscape. On the left, a tall, dark Gothic tower with intricate stonework and a spire is silhouetted against the orange glow of the sunset or city lights. The rest of the image shows a dense urban area with numerous lights from buildings and streets, creating a warm, golden-orange atmosphere.

**Crisis or Opportunity:**  
When will the widening access  
community find its voice?

**Rewarding Strivers**

**First Students at FACE**



# Rewarding Strivers

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**W**ho should go to college? It's a question that is probably asked more in the UK than the US where the popular assumption has long been that a college education should be available to anyone who wants it. Here the question isn't so much about whether students should go to college as about what sort of college they should go to. But in the end perhaps the questions are not so different.

We know that the expansion of higher education over the past fifty years or so has been accompanied by differentiation and stratification. This has taken different forms in the US and UK - more minimally selective institutions at the baccalaureate and sub-baccalaureate levels in the former, the creation of 'new universities' in the latter - but the basic dynamic has been similar. While many more students are continuing their education beyond the age of eighteen, their distribution across various levels of postsecondary education is less encouraging. It's a distribution that remains closely tied to class and race.

In fact, this is becoming more pronounced according to *Rewarding Strivers*, a new book from the Century Foundation.\* As the editor of the book, Richard Kahlenberg, puts it: "Just as public elementary and secondary schools saw affluent white flight to suburban schools in the 1970s and 1980s, so higher education is seeing wealthy white flight to selective institutions." Today students in America's top tier of universities are more likely to be affluent and white than they were two or three decades ago; conversely, students in the bottom tier of minimally selective universities and 'two-year' community colleges are more likely to be low-income or minority. To be fair, a number of the most prestigious institutions have been making efforts to diversify their student populations; the book explores one such effort at the University of North Carolina. But the title of the book's main chapter (by Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl from Georgetown

University's Center on Education and the Workforce) doesn't mince words: 'How Increasing College Access is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do about It.'

The argument -- and the authors have no shortage of data to support it -- runs roughly as follows. First, stratification in American higher education is increasing. Second, this matters because going to a more selective university confers differential benefits in terms of institutional resources, graduation rates and career earnings. Third, low-income students tend to get squeezed out of the more selective institutions in part because admission policies and measures tend to underestimate their abilities and potential. This is exacerbated to the extent that institutions have become locked in a pursuit for prestige which invests such measures with an importance (as indicators of institutional reputation) beyond their intended purpose (as indicators of college preparedness). Fourth, two policy conclusions follow. Either selective institutions need to enroll more low-income students or greater resources need to be channeled to less selective or open access institutions. Or both.

What has come to be known as "under-matching" in this country, the phenomenon of low-income and minority students who are qualified to attend selective universities but in fact tend to enroll in minimally selective institutions with low-graduation rates -- or not enroll in college at all -- has become a matter of some concern in this country. It's not a new concern but it has gained greater traction over the last two or three years following studies by the Consortium on Chicago School Research showing just how under-matching was playing out in Chicago schools and universities. It's a matter of basic equity and talent wastage, of course, but beyond that it simply goes against the grain in a country where talent and hard work are supposed to find their reward. Still, it is an idea that needs refining. It certainly confounds those who like to assume that the reason there aren't more low-income and minority students

in selective institutions is that they're not qualified. But in its apparent equation between institutional quality and selectivity (something that the Consortium study authors were at pains to avoid) there is perhaps a danger that it will further contribute to the selectivity mystique. We don't know enough about why students from less advantaged backgrounds do better at more selective institutions, or whether they would continue to do as well if their enrollments at such institutions increased. And to the extent that top tier colleges owe their higher graduation rates as much to the socioeconomic and academic profile of students they attract as to what they actually do with them it's an argument that may have its limits.

In any case, top tier institutions don't exactly have excess capacity; that's part of what it means to be a top tier institution, after all. Nor, presumably, do they have any interest in substantially altering the socioeconomic profile of their student populations. And while moderately selective institutions do have the capacity, their lack of brand confidence and more limited resources make it equally unlikely that they will embrace larger numbers of low-income students.

In thinking about these questions I'm reminded of a couple of pieces I read many years ago. It seems to me that they are as insightful now as they were then. The first was Burton Clark's 1960 article in the *American Journal of Sociology*: The 'Cooling-Out' Function in Higher Education. Clark was reflecting on the expansion of community colleges in the context of what he saw to be the underlying (and often unacknowledged) tension in modern mass democracy between democratic values on the one hand such as universal opportunity and mobility - the meritocratic ideal if you like - and the realities of occupational specialization, hierarchical organization and limited opportunity on the other. On the face of it, community colleges were agencies of opportunity. But in fact, Clark thought, they often served (not intentionally of course) to diminish expectations and by tracking students into lower level occupations. In this way they gave the appearance of a college education, but not the reality. When we look at the expansion of higher education over the last fifty to sixty years we can see that most of it has been at the community college level. And on the whole, the rates of baccalaureate transfer from community colleges remain pretty low. This isn't an argument against community colleges which perform many functions very well and have been effective agencies of economic development. But Clark's more general point remains.

The other piece was Michael Young's seminal *Rise of the Meritocracy* which incidentally came out a couple of years earlier. It was Young, I believe, who coined the term 'meritocracy' but the important thing is that he meant it ironically. It's been a while since I read the Young so I may not be doing him justice. But for him, it seems, it wasn't just a question of a fine ideal running up against a more complicated reality; the ideal itself was flawed. For what would a meritocracy look like? For a start there would still be winners and losers; it's just that they would no longer be determined by the accident of birth but 'objectively' through educational testing. And who else do you have to blame but yourself if you've been tested again and again and still come out on the bottom? Young's dystopia is a fairly grim sort of place. Indeed, we might think of it as we consider the marginalized populations in today's 'knowledge' society. As we have come to see, education is not only a means of providing opportunity but also of denying it.

But who are these 'strivers' that need to be rewarded? The Century Foundation book builds on Carnevale's research of a decade ago that identified low-income students scoring better than predicted on standardized tests. In some respects this sounds similar to efforts in the UK to use standardized tests to identify talented students from disadvantaged populations, an effort that might seem counter-intuitive in this country where there is continuing sensitivity to the fairness of such instruments in college admissions. But Carnevale and Strohl are sensitive to this and are critical of standardized tests for their lack of connection to teaching and learning in the secondary system. In their judgment, assessments grounded in achievement (rather than general aptitude) would send a better message to low-income students and be more effective in encouraging upward mobility.

An excellent illustration of this would be the International Baccalaureate students in Chicago's neighborhood high schools. As I tried to show in the last issue, these students tend to be from low-income and minority backgrounds but through some combination of personal drive, family and teacher support and sheer hard work they are able to benefit from this highly rigorous curriculum. By the time they graduate from high school they are ready for college, even a highly selective college. The fact that too many of them find themselves at a community college, or not attending college at all, reminds us that when it comes to college choice in this country qualifications may not be enough. Could it be that we're not such a meritocracy after all?

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\*Richard D. Kahlenberg, ed., *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Survive in College*, Century Foundation, New York, 2010. For more information on Richard Kahlenberg and the Century Foundation go to: <http://www.tcf.org/list.asp?type=PB&pubid=715>

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