

# An Admissions Surprise From the Ivy League

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Abstract/Details

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Exclusive schools say they want more diversity. Will a new application process really get them there?

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AS the country struggles to address extreme income inequality and inadequate social mobility, the most venerated colleges are increasingly examining their piece of that puzzle: How can they better identify and enroll gifted, promising students from low-income families, lessening the degree to which campuses perpetuate privilege and making them better engines of advancement?

That discussion just took an interesting turn.

About three weeks ago, a group of more than 80 colleges – including all eight in the Ivy League and many other highly selective private and public ones – announced that they were developing a free website and set of online tools that would, among other things, inform ninth and 10th graders without savvy college advisers about the kind of secondary-school preparation that best positions them for admission.

What's more, these colleges plan to use the website for an application process, in place by next fall, that would be separate from, and competitive with, the "Common App," a single form students can submit to any of more than 600 schools. If colleges in the new group – which calls itself the Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success – have been taking the Common App, they would continue to, but would clearly be encouraging students to explore this alternate route.

If you know anything about the frenzied, freaked-out world of college admissions these days, you can imagine how much commotion this development generated among obsessed parents, overburdened guidance counselors and others caught up in the whorl. It was something to behold.

It also revealed curious logic at the pinnacles of higher education.

Unlike many of this new coalition's harshest critics, I trust that the schools involved really do want to diversify their student bodies, which don't reflect American society.

But like those critics, I wonder how the new application process will accomplish this and whether it would be more effective to adopt less complicated, confusing strategies.

First, some context, along with details about what the coalition is proposing:

As it stands now, the country's most selective colleges are dominated by students from affluent backgrounds. As my Times colleague David Leonhardt noted in a recent article : "For every student from the entire bottom half of the nation's income distribution at Dartmouth, Penn, Princeton, Yale and more than a few other colleges, there appear to be roughly two students from just the top 5 percent (which means they come from families making at least \$200,000)."

During the 2013-14 academic year, the most recent time period for which figures were available, 38 percent of undergraduates nationally received federal Pell grants, reserved for students from low-income families.

In the Ivy League, the percentage ranged from 12 (Yale) to 21 (Columbia), according to the National Center for Education Statistics. While 31 percent of students at the University of California, Berkeley, received Pell grants, just 13 percent at the University of Virginia did.

Such low percentages largely reflect the flawed education and support systems that too many underprivileged kids in this country encounter. These children don't have the academic grounding, transcripts and test scores that their wealthier counterparts do, frequently because they haven't attended schools of commensurate quality.

From preschool through 12th grade, we've failed them. We can hardly expect higher education to rush in belatedly and save the day.

At the same time, there's evidence that talented kids from low-income families who could handle the work at leading colleges and get ample financial aid often don't realize it. And there are aspects of those colleges' admissions processes that work against them.

Members of the new coalition say that they are trying to change that and to "unlock some of the mystery of what it means to apply to any institution," in the words of Zina Evans, the vice president for enrollment management and associate provost at the University of Florida, whom I spoke with last week. I spoke as well with admissions officials at Yale and at Smith College, which, like Florida, belong to the coalition.

They said that the new online tools are meant to be one-stop shopping for information about financial aid, application requirements and more. Students could also use this online platform to interact with top schools, sending inquiries and receiving answers.

The platform would include a so-called "locker" for creative work -- essays, videos, drawings -- that students would be encouraged to begin filling in the ninth grade, as a reminder that college is on the horizon.

They could share those lockers with mentors. And come application time, they could upload its contents for admissions officers.

The platform would additionally serve as an application portal to colleges in the coalition, which would be able to customize their individual demands more easily than they do with any supplements to the Common App that they currently require.

If you're asking how this makes applying to college easier for poor kids, you're right to, and you're in a mind meld with many confused and skeptical college counselors and higher-education experts.

They predicted that privileged kids with hovering parents would interpret the coalition's suggestion about beginning to fill a locker in the ninth grade as yet another reason to turn the entire high school experience into a calculated, pragmatic audition for college admissions officers.

Meanwhile, underprivileged kids, lacking the necessary guidance and awareness, might never take advantage of the platform.

"We have to make sure we give them the resources," said Emmanuel Moses, the senior manager of college guidance at the Opportunity Network, which nurtures underprivileged kids to and through college. In other words, a set of online tools to be used with mentors won't do much good if there aren't mentors to use them with.

Coalition members conceded that they hadn't fully figured out that part but said they were determined to. "That's the core challenge," Audrey Smith, the vice president for enrollment at Smith College, told me.

The coalition's composition also contradicts its message of unimpeded, universal access. Partly because the coalition is limited to schools with six-year graduation rates of at least 70 percent, it's a league mostly of exclusive schools that seem to be distinguishing themselves from the pack. That has led some critics to question its stated motives.

"A group of America's most high-profile private colleges, already obsessed with prestige, are attempting to grab more," wrote Jon Boeckenstedt, the associate vice president of enrollment management and marketing at DePaul University in Chicago, in *The Washington Post*. DePaul does not belong to the coalition.

He added that they were "making hollow promises to low-income kids they could already serve if they really wanted to."

When I spoke with him last week, he went even further.

"I think the Common App has become much too common for some of these people," he said, referring to coalition members. "I think it completely offends their vanity."

Whatever the case, there's much about their admissions criteria that runs counter to the enrollment of underprivileged children, and it's unclear if the new online platform and application process would really fix that.

High scores on the SAT or ACT correlate with high family income, in part because performance on these tests can be improved with the special classes and private tutoring that money buys. That was one reason cited by Hampshire College when it announced last year that it would stop collecting applicants' scores and would go unranked by U.S. News & World Report, which factors in those numbers.

A transcript brimming with Advanced Placement classes is a testament to the applicant, yes – but also to the resources of the secondary school that offered a broad menu of such classes. And students from certain backgrounds and school districts are more likely than those from others to have hands-on help rounding up the perfect letters of recommendation, orchestrating an attention-getting extracurricular dossier and even writing impressive essays.

Regarding essays, Jeremiah Quinlan, the dean of undergraduate admissions at Yale, conceded his concern that "there's a lot of work being done on personal statements that's decreasing their value in the admissions process."

If the locker and other features of the new platform wind up giving disadvantaged kids additional, untraditional ways to show their mettle, it may turn out to be a step in the right direction. But the schools in the coalition need a more detailed plan than they've articulated for making sure that those kids know about the platform and how it can benefit them.

Any rethinking of the status quo of admissions is terrific. The same goes for any spotlight on the dearth of diversity at many exclusive schools. I just hope the members of the coalition accomplish more, in the end, than merely illuminating education's inequities.

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