IHEP

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open"

Realizing the Mission of Higher Education Through Equitable Admissions Policies

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DEAR HIGHER EDUCATION ADVOCATE:

In signing the Higher Education Act of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson described education as "the most important door that will ever open." Earning a college credential can mean a better living and a better life for students and their families. But to earn that credential, students must first navigate the admissions process. Education is indeed a door, but recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices dictate how wide that door is open.

In the report you now hold in your hands, we demonstrate how these policies and practices limit opportunities for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American Pacific Islander students and students from low-income backgrounds. As IHEP has done for nearly 30 years, we also provide research-backed, data-informed, student-centered solutions to disrupt these inequities and promote opportunities for underrepresented students.

Accompanying our report, *"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education Through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies*, is a set of advocacy tools designed to drive change and increase equity in access and success. We outline the context, prevalence, and equity impact of eight recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies:

- Recruitment practices
- Demonstrated interest
- Early admission
- Legacy admission
- Standardized tests in college admissions
- Criminal justice information in college admissions
- Policies that support transfer for community college students
- Institutional need-based financial aid

Over the course of this project, the IHEP team conducted a review of research, analyzed data, and connected with institutional leaders and experts in the field to carefully examine the impact of current policies and practices, including those that seem neutral on their face but perpetuate or worsen inequities in practice. Our thorough examination of how college recruitment, admissions criteria, and the application process impact underserved students yielded tangible ways the postsecondary community can rethink the "enrollment funnel" to open wide the door of opportunity. We hope that the report and advocacy tools will prompt a reexamination of existing recruitment, admissions, and enrollment strategies and put equity at the forefront.

We know that you share our commitment to fully realizing the promise of higher education for students, families, communities, our workforce, and society writ large. Truly transforming college admissions will require all of us—from institutional leaders and decision makers to recruiters, admissions professionals, and financial aid administrators, along with the support of policymakers at every level of government—to prioritize equity and put students first. Thank you for being part of ensuring that this most important door is open to everyone, regardless of race, background, or income.

Sincerely,

Mamie Voight

Interim President

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INTRODUCTION

Do you remember the big envelope? The one that meant you had been accepted into college? Each year, prospective college students send out applications hoping for the good news that envelope signifies—getting into their dream college.

By the time an admissions decision arrives in a student's mailbox or inbox, institutions have already spent significant resources recruiting prospective applicants and poring over their application materials. Indeed, the recruitment, admissions, and enrollment process is high-pressure for both institutions and students. Institutions must meet enrollment goals and are charged with building a diverse incoming class—all within the context of very real financial pressures.[1]

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies

Meanwhile, the stakes are also high for students and their families, for whom earning a college degree can lead to a better living and a better life. More than ever, postsecondary education is vital for achieving economic mobility, with an estimated two-thirds of jobs in the United States requiring at least some postsecondary education.[2] For students traditionally underserved by higher education—such as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students and students from low-income backgrounds—earning a college credential has the potential to profoundly alter their life course.[3] However, before any of them can reap the benefits of postsecondary education, they must first get their foot in the door. **Recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices dictate how wide that door is open.**

Racial and socioeconomic inequities have been a hallmark of the postsecondary education system throughout our nation's history—starting with the barring of Black and Indigenous peoples from formal education through slavery and extending to school segregation and subsequent discriminatory laws and policies that impact all aspects of our society. While there has been much progress in dismantling racist policies and diversifying the nation's degree and credential holders,[5] postsecondary opportunities are still too few and far between for many historically underrepresented students.

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed national focus on racial injustice, research made clear that deep inequities in access and completion persist in postsecondary education.[6] The pandemic has thrown into stark relief just how entrenched the educational access barriers are for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds. In fact, in 2018, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) found persistent, and in some cases, widening access gaps across race/ethnicity and income at six flagship universities in the Great Lakes region.[7]

> **"The President's signature upon [the Higher Education Act of 1965] passed by this Congress will swing open a new door for the young people of America. For them, and for this entire land of ours, it is the most important door that will ever open—the door to education."[4]**
>
> **–President Lyndon B. Johnson**

Inequitable access to higher education, is not just a regional issue; it is a national one. Recent research shows that White students are consistently overrepresented at colleges and universities in ways that cannot be explained by the demographics of nearby communities.[8] This is especially true at selective institutions,[9] which is troubling given that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI communities[10] and students from low-income backgrounds[11] who attend such institutions are more likely to graduate and experience stronger post-college outcomes than those who attend less selective institutions.[12]

Colleges and universities have the power to address longstanding inequities in college access through their recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices. Yet many institutions, including public universities with an explicit mission to serve qualified state residents of all backgrounds, continue to use admissions policies that disproportionately and gratuitously benefit students from White and affluent families. Such policies judge applicants based on factors like whether and where their parents attended college, the resources and connections of the high school they attend, and their ability to afford expensive test preparation materials, rather than their academic potential.

In the aftermath of the 2019 Varsity Blues scandal and amidst the ongoing upheaval caused by COVID-19, college admissions have gained national attention and sparked fierce debate.[13] The nation was understandably outraged when news of the Varsity Blues scandal broke, revealing both how far some affluent families are willing to go to ensure their children attend well-resourced institutions and how the admissions process can be manipulated to accommodate them. While the federal investigation made clear the illegal ways those with resources can work the admissions process to their advantage, there are many legal and widely accepted ways that students from privileged backgrounds benefit from recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices. This report shines a light on the equity implications of eight such policies that institutions across the country use to form their student body (see Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies that Shape Postsecondary Access).

Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies that Shape Postsecondary Access

Recruitment practices: The process and strategies colleges and universities use to engage potential applicants.

Demonstrated interest: The contact students make with a college during the application process that signals their preference to enroll there if admitted.

Early admission: An institutional policy that establishes an earlier application deadline for students to apply in exchange for an earlier admissions decision.

Legacy admission: An institutional policy that gives preference to applicants who are related to alumni (e.g., their children or grandchildren).

Standardized tests in college admissions: Institutional policies that determine how standardized tests (e.g., SAT and ACT) are used in admissions decisions and financial aid disbursement.

Criminal justice information in college admissions: An institutional policy that requires the use of criminal histories in admissions decisions, collected through applicant self-disclosures or background checks.

Policies that support transfer for community college students: The policies and practices that four-year colleges and universities use to recruit and enroll bachelor's-degree-seeking students who begin their coursework at two-year institutions.

Institutional need-based aid policies: The policies that determine how colleges and universities allocate their institutional financial aid dollars, whether based on applicants' financial need or other non-need factors.

Together, these policies and practices shape the opportunities available for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds. Each chapter of this report spotlights one such policy, exploring the context, misconceptions, and prevalence of the policy and how it impacts equity in higher education. We focus on their use at selective public and private institutions, which often provide a strong chance of success for historically underrepresented students and, in some cases, are mission-bound to do so. Each chapter also offers recommendations for improving equitable access via recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies. Throughout the report, we share insight collected from practitioners who lead admissions and enrollment management efforts, as well as advocates for postsecondary access (see Technical Appendix).

Together, these policies and practices shape the opportunities available for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Alongside this report, we developed a set of eight advocacy tools to help lead institutions and postsecondary advocates to become equity-centered in their policies and practices while promoting actionable change. Each of the policies and practices discussed here and in the advocacy tools contributes to persistent inequities in higher education. Addressing any single policy or practice can lead to meaningful change for students, their families, and their communities. Institution leaders and those in the room when admissions decisions are made—and everyone in between—must consider the ways in which these policies and practices operate on their own and in tandem to shape opportunities for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds and truly open the door to higher education.

A Word About Language

Language is important, particularly when discussing identity. In promoting equity, IHEP engages with and reports on a wide variety of historically marginalized, underrepresented, and underserved communities. Throughout our work, particularly as it relates to these communities, we endeavor to be inclusive, accurate, and respectful.

We recognize the meaning and importance of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities by capitalizing them. We use the terms *Black, African American, Latinx, Hispanic, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American, Native Hawaiian, Indigenous*, and *White* as more than a simple description of people; these are identities, not adjectives, and our capitalization recognizes that many of these terms reflect a shared culture, origin, or history. Capitalization of these terms also gives appropriate weight to the ways that socially constructed concepts of race and ethnicity have created and sustained inequities in our society.

Furthermore, just as we advocate the use of disaggregated data in higher education policy, we ourselves strive to be accurate—and thus specific—when referring to racial and ethnic identities. As just a few examples, we recognize that the experiences of people from Chinese and Vietnamese, Mexican and Peruvian, and Liberian and Nigerian backgrounds may vary greatly. Unfortunately, the country's postsecondary data system still utilizes aggregate race/ethnicity groups, which disguises differences in experiences and nuances in outcomes.

At IHEP, we seek to support community collaboration while reflecting the experience of unique populations, and we advocate for data that does the same. Where necessary to ensure that our research is accurate and replicable, we reflect aggregate groups in our writing while, as part of our commitment to racial equity, continuing to push for greater disaggregation of race/ethnicity in federal and state postsecondary data collections—and welcoming everyone to join us in doing so.

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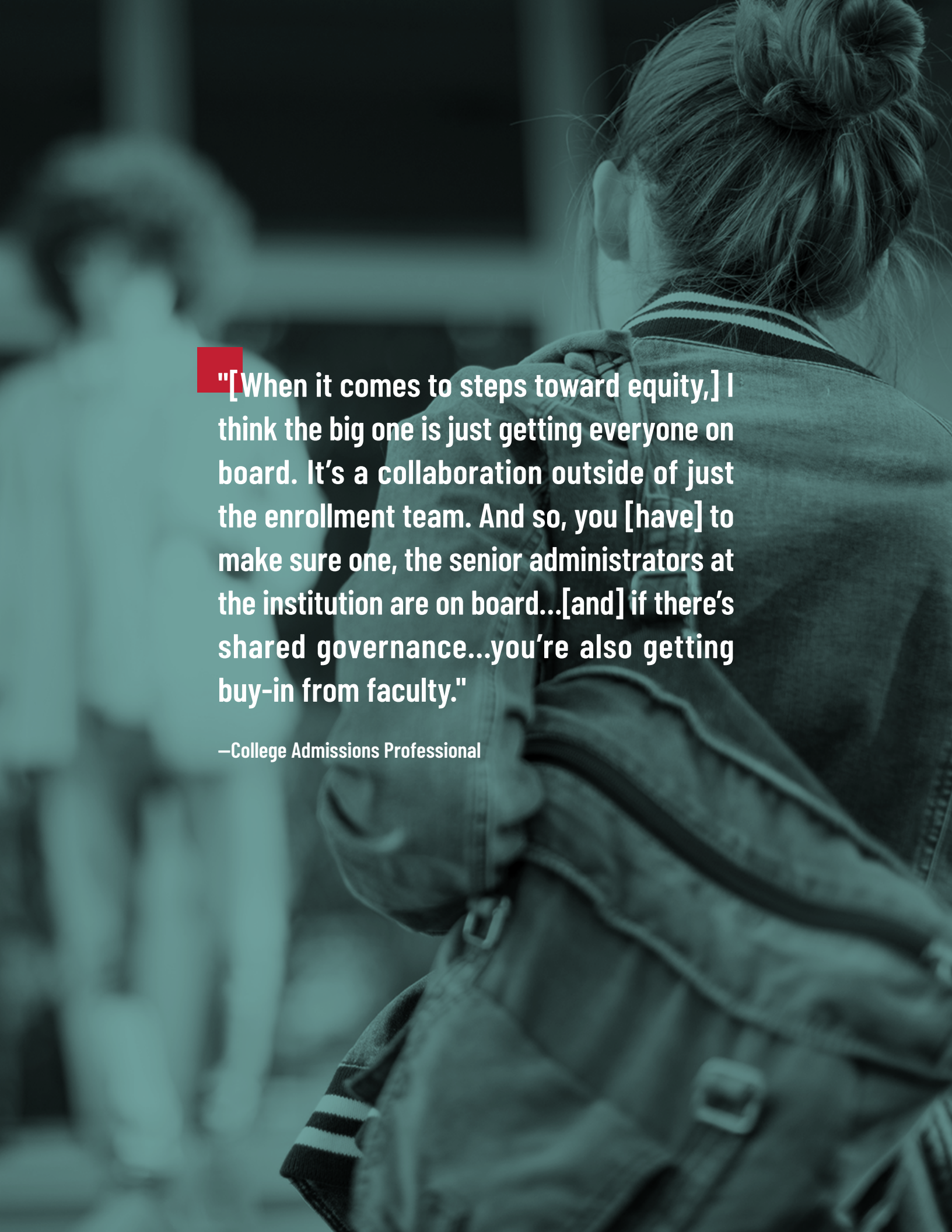
CHAPTER 1

RETHINKING RECRUITMENT POLICIES

Recruitment can be thought of as the set of policies and practices that an institution uses to introduce itself to prospective students and families. Research suggests that universities are purposeful about which students they pursue, and are intentional about the time, money, and efforts expended to recruit a student body. When done equitably, recruitment policies and practices can promote the inclusion of historically underrepresented students—Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students or students from low-income backgrounds—in higher education. However, at many institutions, recruitment practices have the opposite effect: perpetuating privilege for White or affluent students and supporting a system in which an applicant's zip code determines his or her future.[1]

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies



"[When it comes to steps toward equity,] I think the big one is just getting everyone on board. It's a collaboration outside of just the enrollment team. And so, you [have] to make sure one, the senior administrators at the institution are on board...[and] if there's shared governance...you're also getting buy-in from faculty."

—College Admissions Professional

RECRUITMENT EFFORTS ARE STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS OF TIME AND MONEY THAT REVEAL INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES

Student recruitment is not a simple tool used by enrollment managers; it is an expensive[2] and well-orchestrated science[3] crafted to attract and engage with prospective students during the college admissions process. Recruitment strategies incorporate techniques from marketing and economics to influence the makeup of incoming classes.[4] These strategies come at a price, with public institutions spending a median of $536 to recruit a single undergraduate student.[5] And these costs add up: universities spend, on average, approximately $600,000 per year solely on vendors for enrollment management, a figure that includes spending on recruitment.[6]

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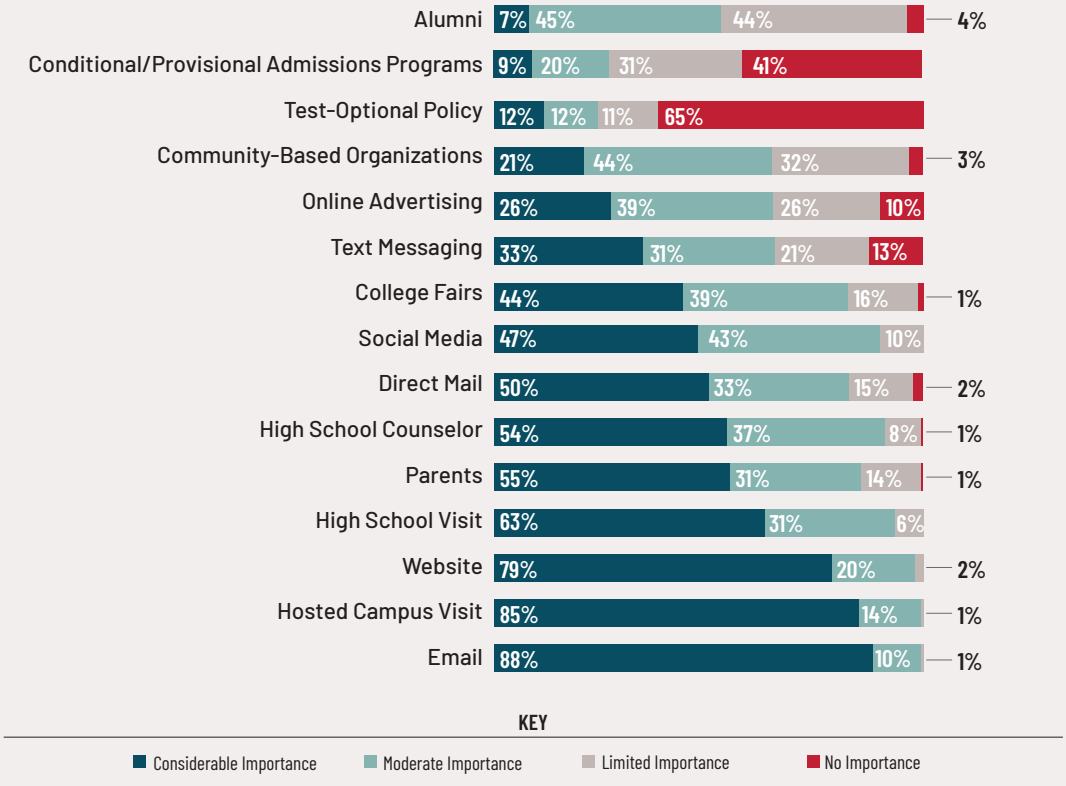
Admissions offices deploy a wide variety of recruitment methods to connect with prospective students (Figure 1.1). Institutions report that the most important strategies to recruit first-time freshmen include contacting students through email, engaging with them through the college or university website, and hosting campus visits.[7] Fifty percent or more of institutions that responded to a National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) survey indicated that high school visits, outreach to parents and high school counselors, and direct mail are also of "considerable importance" among recruitment strategies.[8] (These survey data reflect pre-COVID-19 realities, when tactics like high school visits were more feasible.)

FIGURE 1.1

Importance of Various Recruitment Strategies at Four-Year Colleges

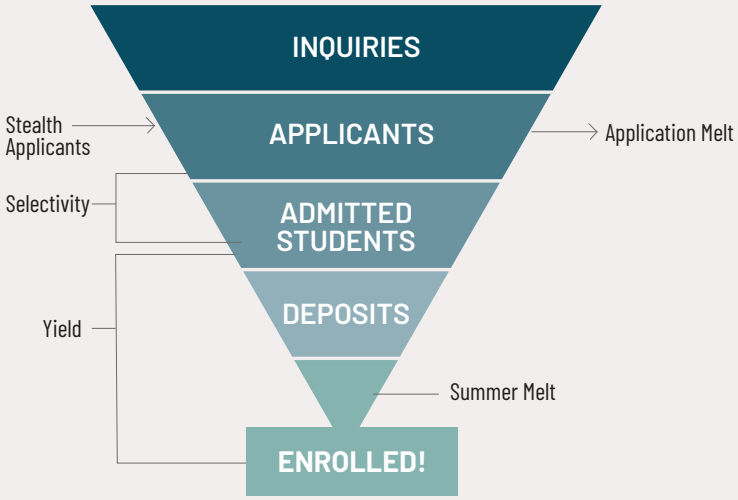


Source: Adapted from NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018–19. Retrieved from https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2018_soca/soca2019_all.pdf

To prioritize these tactics and determine which potential students to target, colleges and universities use the "enrollment funnel"—a conceptual tool for setting enrollment yield rates and informing targeted recruitment interventions throughout the admissions process (Figure 1.2).[9] The widely used framework answers enrollment teams' questions about how many applicants are needed, how many students should be accepted, and how many students need to commit to attend the institution to meet their enrollment goals.[10]

FIGURE 1.2

Higher Education Enrollment Funnel

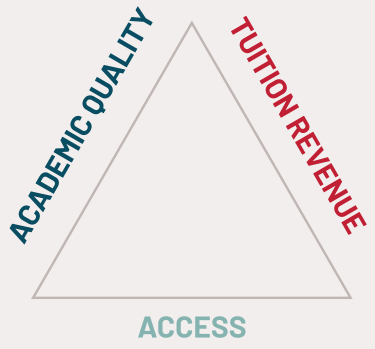


Source: Adapted from EAB. (2019). The 5 key stages of college enrollment—and which metrics to track during each. Retrieved from https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/enrollment/the-5-key-stages-of-college-enrollment-and-which-metrics-to-track-during-each/

Enrollment management professionals also frequently evoke the idea of an "iron triangle" (Figure 1.3) in guiding their decisions about whom to target in their recruitment with three priorities in mind: student academic profile, revenue, and access.[11] Who ultimately enrolls in a college or university is dictated by universities' strategies to move prospective students through the enrollment funnel to meet institutional targets within the iron triangle.

FIGURE 1.3

Iron Triangle of Enrollment Management



Source: Adapted from Jaquette, O. & Han, C. (2020). Follow the money recruiting and the enrollment priorities of public research universities. Retrieved from https://www.thirdway.org/report/follow-the-money-recruiting-and-the-enrollment-priorities-of-public-research-universities

At the most basic level, institutions must recruit students to fill their incoming class. Enrollment managers and admissions officers are under extreme pressure to fill a target number of seats each year, and recruitment strategies, like high school visits and direct mail campaigns, are essential for achieving these goals. However, in recent years, many colleges and universities have struggled to meet their enrollment goals by the traditional May 1 target, leaving admissions directors concerned about filling their classes.[14] The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these concerns for many institutions across the country, forcing colleges and universities to operate in an uncertain admissions environment (see College Enrollment During a Global Pandemic).[15] With these enrollment goals and the iron triangle framework in mind, institutions develop recruitment strategies based on the following objectives:

» **Academic Profile: Improve ranking and prestige.** Many colleges prioritize their performance in well-known college rankings and consistently chase and compete for the perception of prestige that these rankings convey.[16] For example, to improve on the selectivity portion of the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking, some institutions tailor recruitment practices to encourage students who have high test scores and high school class standing to apply and enroll.[17]

» **Revenue: Meet revenue goals.** Faced with revenue challenges caused by state budget constraints over the last decade,[18] some institutions sacrifice their diversity and equity goals to balance their books. Many institutions have developed a reliance on full-pay and out-of-state or international students for tuition revenue.[19] Some public institutions turn to this revenue source in the face of financial strains in an effort to provide a suitable learning environment, pay faculty and administrative salaries, and offer student services. Yet, some institutions with large budgets increase expenditures on unnecessary and luxurious campus amenities such as rock-climbing walls and lazy rivers.[20]

» **Access: Shape the student body.** Institutions use recruitment strategies to target the students they want to apply and enroll.[21] Recruiting practices reflect an institution's priorities, whether by targeting students who will make the institution appear more elite, focusing on revenue generated by tuition, or working to enroll students from demographic groups the institution deems important, such as more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI, low-income, or in-state students.[22]

While the shape of the iron triangle framework (Figure 1.3) suggests that each priority requires equal attention, institutions may favor one or more of the three. The stakes of these relative prioritizations for students are high because they determine which students are targeted in recruitment efforts, which ultimately influences who enrolls. Research shows that when selective colleges place too much emphasis on the academic profile and revenue points of the triangle and insufficient attention to equitable access, racial and socioeconomic gaps in access widen.[23]

College Enrollment During a Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened equity gaps in college enrollment. Colleges and universities felt the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2020 as first-time undergraduate student enrollment declined by 3 percentage points compared to fall 2019.[12] Indeed, among high school graduates in the class of 2020, immediate fall enrollment declined by 7 percent compared to the class of 2019, with graduates of high-poverty, low-income, and high-minority high schools least likely to enroll.[13] These trends are a reflection of the challenges associated with enrolling in and attending college that many students of color and students from low-income backgrounds face every year—and demonstrate the urgency with which institutions need to approach adapting their recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies to promote equitable access.

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COLLEGE RECRUITER VISITS ARE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE EQUITY

The vast majority of administrators surveyed by NACAC indicated that high school visits and college fairs are of considerable or moderate importance in terms of recruitment strategies (94 percent and 83 percent, respectively; Figure 1.1). These strategies enable college and university staff to meet students where they are and build recruitment pipelines. As such, high school visits and college fairs also are some of the most resource-intensive recruitment tactics. In fact, public four-year universities spend nearly 20 percent of their marketing and recruiting budgets on travel to high schools and college fairs each year.[24] Institutions with limited budgets are forced to make difficult decisions about which high schools their admissions officers should visit, and those decisions impact who applies, is admitted, and enrolls.

Travel to high school visits and college fairs is the third-largest source of eventual enrollees at public four-year institutions, accounting for 16 percent of enrollees.[25]

High school visits and college fairs are particularly impactful for first-generation students, for whom these experiences exert a strong influence on where they choose to apply and enroll.[26] Such visits also help institutions maintain relationships with feeder high schools that provide new prospects year after year.[27] As a result, the high schools that institutions choose to visit have a notable impact on which students ultimately enroll. The enrollment and diversity goals set by campus leaders should directly influence decisions about where to recruit and the resources to allocate to off-campus recruitment.

Travel to high school visits and college fairs is the third-largest source of eventual enrollees at public four-year institutions.

Research suggests that many institutions—particularly those best positioned to invest financially in underserved students' success—prioritize recruiting White and affluent high schoolers to the detriment of students of color and low-income, first-generation, rural, adult, and community college transfer students. A 2019 study by Han, Jaquette, and Salazar examined 15 public research universities' recruitment patterns and found that most prioritize visiting wealthy high schools where the median neighborhood income was approximately $68,000 to $110,000.[28] Institutions were less likely to send admissions officers to visit out-of-state high schools with higher proportions of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, where White students are in the minority.[29]

Recruitment strategies that prioritize urban and suburban areas limit the opportunities rural students have to meet institutional representatives, learn about the application process, or boost their chances of applying and being accepted.

When students from rural areas are the first in their family to attend college, they benefit significantly from direct interactions with institutional representatives, such as through high school visits and college fairs.[30] Unfortunately, research indicates that institutions are less likely to visit rural high schools, prioritizing urban and suburban schools instead.[31] The cost of traveling to rural areas with lower concentrations of high schools likely influences these patterns, along with the perception that rural students are more reluctant to leave home due to cultural and financial barriers.[32]

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The COVID-19 pandemic has upended off-campus recruitment practices, leading institutions to adjust to a virtual format and offering lessons for future recruitment cycles. Recruitment during COVID-19 has included virtual campus visits and college fairs, online groups to meet other students virtually, increased communication with admissions staff, and paper mailings.[33] The pandemic has proven that institutions can adapt and should continue using these tactics to engage more prospective students, including rural students, moving forward.

Deciding which high schools to visit is difficult given the financial, time, and other constraints that institutions operate within, but choosing to disrupt historical inequities is not easy. Institutions that prioritize visits to predominately White and affluent high schools are, in practice, investing in the perpetuation of postsecondary access gaps for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and rural students. Furthermore, recruitment strategies that center on high school students fail to consider the needs of prospective community college transfer students, or to create opportunities to reengage the 36 million adults with some college experience but no degree.[34] Institutions should evaluate how their high school visits—and recruitment strategy as a whole—do or do not contribute to enrolling diverse incoming classes.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES TOO OFTEN DEVOTE RESOURCES TO RECRUITING WEALTHY OUT-OF-STATE STUDENTS

Out-of-state students usually pay two or three times more to attend an institution than in-state students.[35] For this reason, many colleges and universities recruit large numbers of out-of-state students from wealthier public and private high schools to generate revenue, especially in the face of state budget cuts.[36]

While prioritizing out-of-state students is a choice made by institutional enrollment managers, state lawmakers can play a key role in stemming out-of-state recruitment. Research has shown that a 10 percent decline in state appropriations correlates with a 2.7 percent increase in out-of-state enrollment at public four-year institutions and a 5 percent increase at public research institutions.[37] As total state appropriations for higher education fell between 2001 and 2016, the share of incoming out-of-state students at the country's 63 public research universities increased from 19 percent to 26 percent.[38]

An analysis by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that 51 selective public universities (out of the 92 it studied) enroll more than one-quarter of their students from out-of-state.[39] At 11 of those institutions, more than half of students are out-of-state enrollees.[40] A similar study examining recruitment practices at 15 public universities found that nearly all (12 of 15) made more out-of-state recruitment visits than in-state visits, with approximately half (7 of 15) making more than twice as many out-of-state than in-state visits.[41]

The preoccupation with out-of-state students has resulted in some public universities sending more regional recruiters to cover out-of-state areas.[42] For example, 17 of the 24 regional admissions counselors at the University of South Carolina work full time in states other than South Carolina.[43] Additionally, some institutions direct their financial aid dollars to non-need-based aid programs to attract affluent nonresident applicants, rather than spending their limited resources on tuition discounts for non-wealthy applicants.[44]

EXAMPLE

OUT-OF-STATE ENROLLMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

The University of Alabama decreased in-state undergraduate student enrollment so drastically that state resident freshmen became the minority on campus. The university's share of in-state undergraduates has decreased each year since 2010, when it was 68 percent, to just 40 percent in 2019.[45]

Public institutions that prioritize recruiting out-of-state students crowd out in-state students who are more likely to be Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, or students from lower-income backgrounds than their out-of-state peers.

These investments in out-of-state students exacerbate inequities because they tend to focus on neighborhoods with high proportions of White and Asian high school students. In contrast, out-of-state communities mainly comprised of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, or students from low-income backgrounds receive very few visits.[46]

These institutional decisions are highly consequential for students, with research showing that a 10-percentage point increase in out-of-state students at prestigious public flagships is associated with a 2.7-percentage point decline in the share of Pell Grant recipients.[47] These trends signal alarm as they crowd out in-state students and negatively impact campus diversity.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINK RECRUITMENT POLICIES

Recruitment efforts are a significant investment of time and money for institutions, often guided by the three sides of the iron triangle. Decisions about which schools recruiters visit, which students to target, and whether to focus efforts in or out of state all have equity implications. Regardless of the reasoning, research suggests that institutions overwhelmingly devote resources to recruiting White, wealthy, out-of-state students rather than Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds or rural areas, and in-state students.

These decisions shape the makeup of incoming classes. Institutions can use recruitment policies and practices to diversify their student body and advance equity in postsecondary education. Doing so requires a commitment from the highest levels of institutional leadership.

TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A MORE EQUITABLE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

RECRUIT IN DIVERSE LOCATIONS:

When institutions skip visiting high schools or participating in recruitment events in communities with high proportions of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, they miss an opportunity to engage with prospective students from all backgrounds. College leaders also must diversify their recruitment roadshows and offer training to ensure that recruiters are culturally competent when engaging with prospective students of various races and backgrounds.

OFFER ALTERNATIVE RECRUITMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS:

Researchers estimate that nine million students attend high school in rural communities in the United States and have difficulty participating in recruitment opportunities.[48] A lack of high school visits or college fairs in rural areas forces many rural students to navigate the admissions process without the support of institutional representatives.[49] To improve college access for rural students, institutions should continue to develop flexible options for recruiting them, including those that have been implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., virtual campus tours and visits with admissions counselors, direct prospect, mobile-friendly marketing/recruiting, etc.). They should also, when possible, conduct campus visits or attend college fairs in rural areas.[50]

TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A MORE EQUITABLE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

PRIORITIZE STATE RESIDENTS IN RECRUITMENT EFFORTS:

Flagship universities and other selective public colleges should ensure that state residents make up the core of their incoming classes. Public institutions have a mission to provide an excellent education to state residents, and their recruitment policies should reflect this mission.[51] Institutions and states can adopt policies that place a cap on out-of-state enrollments, which may alter recruiting behavior and encourage institutions to devote more resources to in-state students, rather than out-of-state marketing and recruitment efforts.

ACTIVELY RECRUIT RETURNING ADULT AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS:

Focusing recruitment efforts on this population, who are also disproportionately Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds,[52] can open access to students outside of the traditional first-time freshman pathway and help returning students finish what they started. For example, IHEP's Degrees When Due initiative[53] assists institutions identify students with "some college, no degree" through data mining and degree auditing in order to support degree reclamation efforts. Recruiting and enrolling community college transfer students can increase diversity on campus.[54] For more recommendations on recruiting community college transfer students, see Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 2

RETHINKING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES

While recruitment strategies (addressed in Chapter 1) determine how institutions proactively interact with prospective students, demonstrated interest policies are the reverse, gauging applicants' interactions with the institution. Demonstrated—or applicant—interest is broadly defined as the contact students make with a college that signals their preference to enroll if admitted.[1] Students can demonstrate interest in an institution in many ways, including visiting campus, attending on- and off-campus information sessions, participating in interviews, calling admissions offices, and applying via early application deadlines. Some institutions consider signals of interest from students engaging with the university's website, reading emails sent from the school, and clicking on links in emails.[2]

"What about the low-income, first-gen[eration students] [and others], how do we make sure they don't get lost?"

—Michael Walsh, dean of admissions, James Madison University

Recruitment strategies and demonstrated interest policies are intertwined. Students who are actively recruited by institutions—for example, through high school visits or college fairs—have more opportunities than those who are not to demonstrate their interest in attending a specific college or university. As noted in the previous chapter, flagship and other selective public institutions often recruit out-of-state students, primarily from wealthy and predominantly White high schools, to generate revenue, to the neglect of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, underrepresented AAPI, rural, and non-wealthy high school students.[3] Consequently, demonstrated interest policies, in which an institution considers this interest in admissions decisions, reinforce inequities baked into institutional recruitment strategies can further limit access for underserved students.

Furthermore, when any institution—even those with equitable recruitment strategies in place—considers demonstrated interest in admissions decisions, it privileges students who can afford to visit campus.[4] Travel costs make participating in on-campus events too costly and difficult to access for many rural students and students from low-income backgrounds.[5] For example, at one medium-sized selective university, 81 percent of students who made in-person visits to catch the eye of college recruiters identified as White and lived relatively close to campus.[6]

The inequities of demonstrated interest policies extend beyond in-person campus visits. White students, those from families with relatively high incomes, and those living in suburban areas are more likely than their peers who live in rural and underserved communities to have access to broadband and other technology required to engage virtually with admissions officers.[7] As a result, more privileged students also have greater access to off-campus opportunities that indicate interest. Further, intricate knowledge of the college admissions process—and the fact that institutions may be tracking engagement with their emails, for example—is more readily available to White, high-income, or non-first-generation students. They are more likely to have access to college counselors,[8] institutional representatives visiting their high school,[9] and networks of adults with postsecondary experience.[10]

Demonstrated Interest and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions to adapt many of their long-standing policies and practices. With stay-at-home orders, travel bans, and social distancing requirements, institutions had to rethink the opportunities available for students to demonstrate interest and how interest is factored into admissions decisions. Moving forward, colleges and universities should consider making permanent changes that improve equity, such as treating virtual campus visits or interviews like on-campus engagements. This is especially important given that experts in the field suggest that "demonstrated interest is likely to get more emphasis in the current environment," because, when faced with unpredictability, enrollment-reliant institutions are likely to prioritize students who they expect will attend if admitted.[11]

INSTITUTIONS USE DEMONSTRATED INTEREST TO PREDICT ENROLLMENTS, INCREASE YIELD, AND DECREASE ACCEPTANCE RATES

Many colleges use demonstrated interest to determine who is most interested in attending if admitted and, in turn, to predict enrollments, increase yield rates, and lower acceptance rates.[12] Data show that nearly one-third (31 percent) of selective public institutions—those that are well-resourced to support underserved students' success—consider demonstrated interest in admissions decisions, as do approximately two-thirds (67 percent) of private nonprofit institutions (Figure 2.1). Also, while more than half of campuses weigh students' work experience when making admissions decisions—a factor that could benefit students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds—more institutions consider demonstrated interest an important or very important factor than work experience (Figure 2.2).

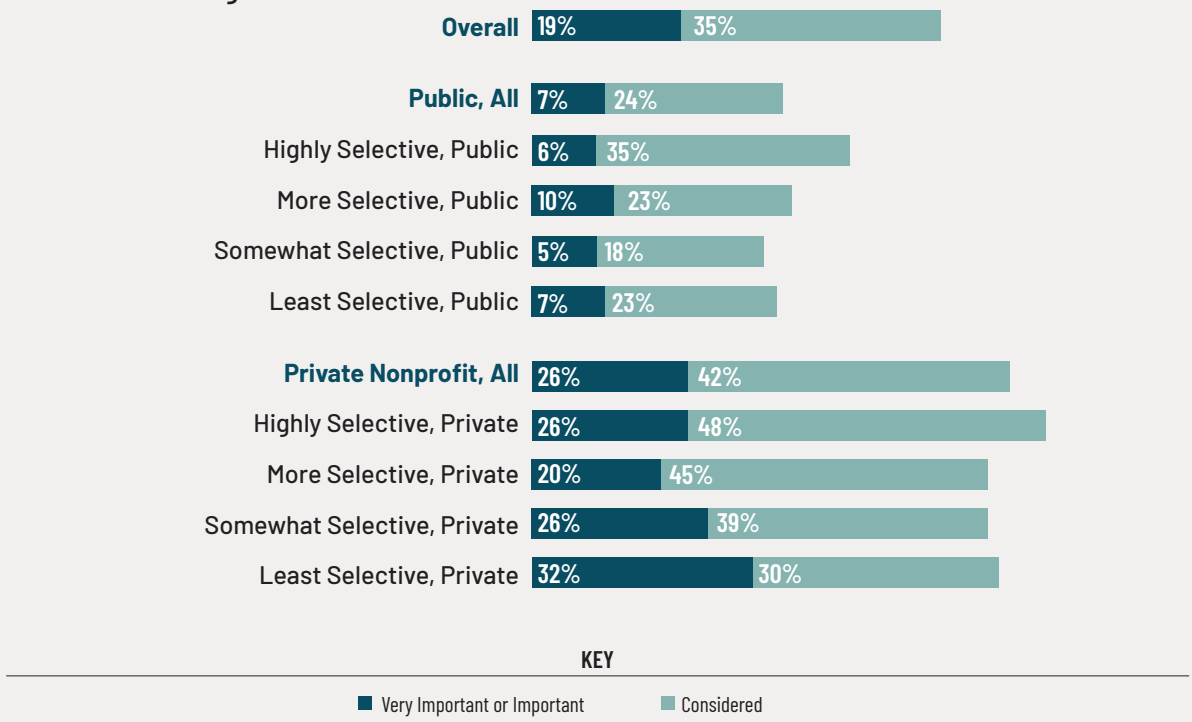
Defining Yield

Yield is the share of students who choose to enroll at a college or university after being admitted.[13]

students enrolled / # students admitted

FIGURE 2.1

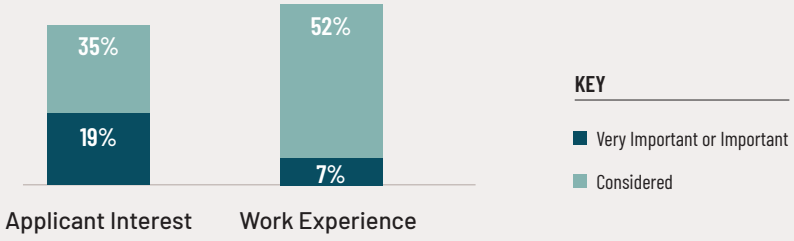
Colleges' Consideration of Applicant Interest in Admissions, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

FIGURE 2.2

Importance of Applicant Interest and Work Experience in College Admissions, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

By admitting applicants who are more likely to accept their offer, institutions can increase their yield and reduce their acceptance rate, which helps them appear more selective and prestigious.[14] In practice, this can play out in two ways. Demonstrated interest may be more important when making admissions decisions for students with high test scores who are likely to have many options when deciding where to enroll. For these students, signaling a strong interest in a particular school increases that institution's confidence they will choose to attend. In fact, demonstrated interest has been shown empirically to correlate more strongly with admissions for such students.[15] On the other hand, institutions may consider applicant interest when making decisions about whether to admit borderline applicants—students near the cutoff between those typically admitted and those who are not.[16]

Some institutions measure applicant interest even if they do not officially consider that interest in admissions decisions.

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Some institutions measure applicant interest even if they do not officially consider that interest in admissions decisions. They do so to predict yield more accurately at the admissions cycle's onset, which helps them prevent under- or over-enrolling their incoming class.[17] Increases in the number of applications colleges receive have made it more difficult to predict which applicants are likely to enroll if admitted,[18] so many institutions engage in a delicate balancing act that leads them to seek information about who wants to attend.

DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES ARE MOST BENEFICIAL TO STUDENTS WHO KNOW ABOUT THEM

The Varsity Blues scandal revealed that applicants from wealthy families are often aware of tactics (both legal and illegal) to help them achieve their college admissions goals.[19] Demonstrated interest policies are one legal tactic institutions offer students to increase their chances of admission, and the greatest benefits go to students who know these policies exist and can adapt their behavior accordingly.

Tracking Applicant Interest

While it is clear that many institutions consider demonstrated interest in admissions decisions, it is less clear how they track and assess interest. For example, Seton Hall University gives students who show interest a score between 0 and 100, calculated using approximately 80 variables, including how early in high school applicants started viewing the university's website, how long they spend on the site, and whether they open emails from the institution.[20] As colleges and universities adjusted to restrictions on in-person engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they relied more heavily on online engagement, such as virtual tours, signing up for mailing lists, opening emails, and clicking on links.[21] These virtual engagements could hold promise for students who cannot afford to travel to campus, but institutions must remain attuned to accessibility for applicants without broadband or home computer access.

First-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds often do not have equitable access to college counselors who can advise them that institutions consider demonstrated interest.

Students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college-goers are least likely to have access to information about demonstrated interest practices. Parents or other family members who have gone to college are more familiar with the college process and are likely better equipped to explain to students how it is structured, how it works, and how to prepare.[22] Likewise, for many students, college counselors in high schools are a primary source of information about the application process, including the importance of demonstrating interest using the strategies institutions are most likely to value.[23] However, huge caseloads can overburden college counselors at under-resourced high schools,[24] limiting students' access to information about practices that will increase their college admissions chances. This is especially true in schools that serve high proportions of low-income and first-generation students.[25] Put simply, this suggests that first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to hear the "inside scoop" on the importance of clicking links in emails, regularly visiting an institution's website, or visiting campus.[26]

Inequities within High School College Counseling

High school college counselors play an important role in the college admissions process, and a more equitable higher education system requires more equitable access to these critical resources. Unfortunately, many high school counselors have limited appointment availability to assist low-income and first-generation students with college applications.[27] This is particularly true in public high schools, mainly due to large student caseloads and competing work priorities.[28] For example, in the 2018–19 academic year, only 29 percent of public high schools reported employing at least one counselor (full or part time) whose exclusive responsibility was to provide college counseling, compared with 48 percent of private high schools.[29] Overall, public high school counselors also report spending less time on college counseling than counselors at private high schools (19 percent compared with 31 percent of their time, respectively).[30] Counselors at high schools where more students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch report spending less time on college counseling than those at schools with more affluent student bodies.[31]

MOST OPPORTUNITIES TO SIGNAL INTEREST ARE NOT EQUALLY ACCESSIBLE, AND ON-CAMPUS ENGAGEMENTS ARE PARTICULARLY INEQUITABLE

Applicants can demonstrate their interest in two main ways: off-campus engagements and on-campus engagements. Off-campus engagements can include making phone calls to an admissions office, attending locally held or online information sessions, or interacting with an institution via website or email. On-campus engagements require campus visits, including going on a tour, attending an information session, or speaking with a faculty member or admissions counselor one-on-one.[32] While students can demonstrate their interest in several ways, admissions decisions tend to be more favorable for students who undertake these potentially costly on-campus visits. One study found that students who make on-campus contacts—alone or in combination with off-campus contacts—at a medium-sized, highly selective university were more likely to be admitted, a pattern which disadvantages students from low-income backgrounds or rural areas who may not have the time and money to make such visits.[33]

On-campus engagements require substantial investments of time and money, making it difficult for rural students and students from low-income backgrounds to participate.

When institutions value costly on-campus engagements more highly than lower cost off-campus engagements, they advantage well-off students and contribute to socioeconomic inequities in college access. Students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have the resources necessary to participate in on-campus engagements and receive the boost in their chances of admission that comes with such engagements. For example, students and families from low-income backgrounds may not have the means to travel to campus or the ability to take time off of work to do so.

Aside from on-campus visits, an overwhelming majority of institutions consider email interactions, website visits, and participating in high school visits as the top three engagements of considerable importance.[34] While speaking with an admissions officer during a high school visit can be less costly than traveling to campus, research shows that institutions are less likely to visit rural, low-income, and Black, Latinx, or Indigenous communities, opting instead for White and affluent neighborhoods in major metropolitan areas (see Chapter 1).[35] Students cannot demonstrate interest through a high school visit unless the institution chooses to visit their high school. It also is clear that even virtual recruitment events are not equally accessible to all students: only 63 percent of adults in rural communities and 56 percent of low-income adults reported having broadband access at home,[36] patterns which could limit some students' ability to engage via email, visit a college's website, or participate remotely in a campus tour or information session.

Students cannot demonstrate interest through a high school visit unless the institution chooses to visit their high school.

Rural students and students from low-income backgrounds have few opportunities to demonstrate their interest in an institution via meaningful off-campus engagements.

In sum, demonstrated interest can be used to predict enrollment—but it can also be misused in ways that reinforce historical inequities in our higher education system. To benefit from demonstrated interest policies, students must know the opportunities exist and how to take advantage of them—and have the means to do so. Affluent students with access to college counselors, whether high school or private, and family members who have graduated from college can work the system and strengthen their admissions chances via demonstrated interest policies. However, these opportunities are not necessarily open to students who lack the resources to travel to campus or who happen to live in neighborhoods oft ignored by institutional recruitment strategies.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINK DEMONSTRATED INTEREST

Many institutions make decisions about who they will admit based on the likelihood that students will enroll, but these demonstrated interest policies are inherently inequitable. Advancing equity requires university leaders to make tough decisions that rid their campuses of policies that disproportionately benefit students who have traditionally had access to postsecondary education and exclude those who have not.

TO IMPROVE EQUITY IN THEIR ADMISSIONS POLICIES AND, THROUGHOUT THEIR CAMPUS CULTURE, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

RETHINK CONSIDERING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Left unchecked, demonstrated interest policies perpetuate privilege and can exclude qualified candidates. Institutions should not consider demonstrated interest when deciding whether to admit an applicant, unless paired with extensive training for admissions staff to appropriately contextualize applicants' interest and deliberate, equity-minded recruitment strategies to level the playing field.

IF USING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

ENSURE ALL STUDENTS CAN MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE WITH THE INSTITUTION DURING THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS:

Institutions should recruit students from diverse locations and backgrounds by ensuring on- and off-campus engagements are available to all students. For example, institutions should subsidize on-campus visits for students from low-income backgrounds who may not otherwise have the resources to participate.[37] And they should do everything in their power to ensure that students from low-income backgrounds and rural students have equitable opportunities to demonstrate their interest in the most effective ways.[38]

STOP PRIORITIZING ON-CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT:

Rural students and students from low-income backgrounds are significantly disadvantaged by policies that reward costly on-campus engagements, like taking a campus tour or attending an on-campus information session. Institutions should not value on-site contacts more than high-impact off-campus engagements, like calling or emailing the admissions office or attending a local college fair.

IF USING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

RECRUIT IN DIVERSE LOCATIONS:

Regardless of whether they consider applicant interest in admissions decisions, institutions should recruit students from diverse locations. It is even more incumbent on institutions to diversify their recruitment efforts if they advantage students who attend a college fair or meet with an admissions counselor in these decisions.

INCREASE TRANSPARENCY ABOUT HOW DEMONSTRATED INTEREST IS CALCULATED AND CONSIDERED:

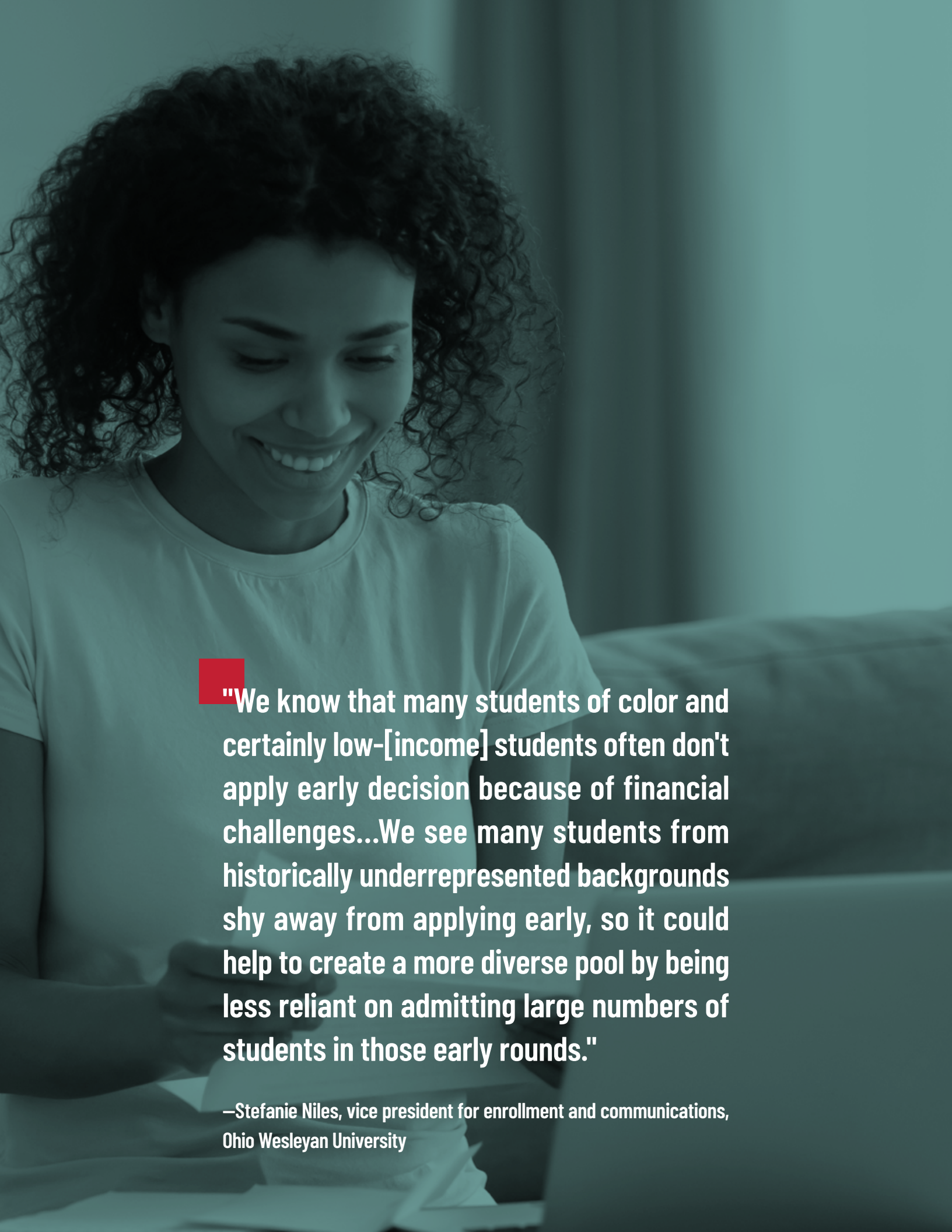
Colleges and universities must be intentional and transparent about communicating all of the factors that inform an admissions decision.

CHAPTER 3

ELIMINATING EARLY DECISION POLICIES

Applying to college is a multi-step process that requires applicants to make many decisions about where to apply and when they will submit their application. Many colleges and universities offer multiple deadlines to submit applications, including "early decision" or "early action" deadlines.[1] Through early admissions policies, institutions have created a tiered approach to their application deadlines that turns a positive unwritten rule—being an "early bird"—into a policy that advantages applicants with the most resources. Students who submit early decision applications receive a boost in their admissions chances simply because they can apply early in the admissions cycle to one institution—a luxury many students from low-income backgrounds do not have.[2]

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies



"We know that many students of color and certainly low-[income] students often don't apply early decision because of financial challenges...We see many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds shy away from applying early, so it could help to create a more diverse pool by being less reliant on admitting large numbers of students in those early rounds."

—Stefanie Niles, vice president for enrollment and communications, Ohio Wesleyan University

Students who apply via early decision are often wealthier than those who apply via regular deadlines, and they are more likely to be admitted,[3] especially at the most selective institutions.[4] Research suggests that some institutions have lower admissions standards when they review early decision applications, which means those who apply early—typically higher-income, White students—are judged more leniently than those who apply via the regular deadline.[5]

The use of early admissions policies is especially prevalent at the most selective institutions. In 2019, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of students who applied to highly selective public institutions via early admissions deadlines were accepted, compared with just more than half (55 percent) of students who applied via regular decision deadlines (Figure 3.1). In fact, *U.S. News & World Report* identified 10 institutions with significantly higher acceptance rates for early admissions applicants than for those who apply regular decision in fall 2019, with the average difference in acceptance rates approaching 50 percentage points.[6] Similar trends hold at Ivy League institutions: students who apply early decision or early action to the Ivies are accepted at a rate at least twice as high as all other applicants.[7] Indeed, research indicates that applying early decision or early action to a selective institution is equivalent to an increase of 100 points on the SAT.[8]

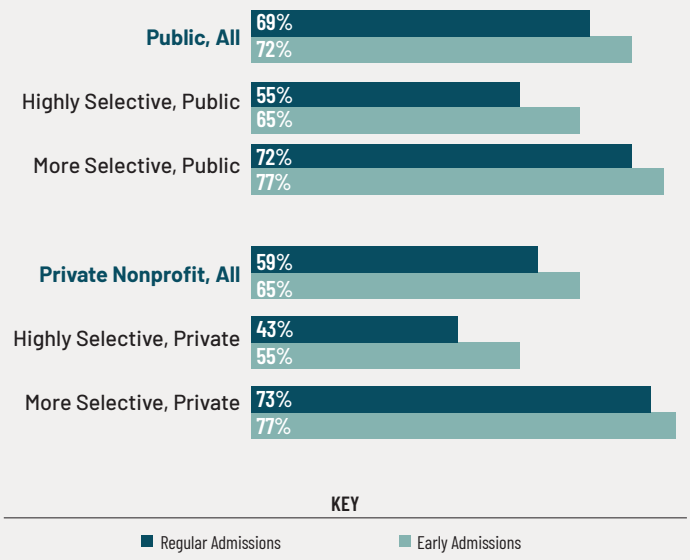
The use of early admissions policies is especially prevalent at the most selective institutions.

Early decision policies offer advantages to students who are most likely to attend and benefit from college in the first place. Applying early decision requires students to commit to a first-choice college by agreeing to enroll if admitted and withdraw any other college applications (Table 3.1). Applying via an early decision deadline requires students to accept the college's offer of admission and financial aid award and submit a deposit prior to May 1.[9] In many cases, institutions will make exceptions to the binding early decision contract if a student cannot afford to attend based on his or her financial aid award, but these exceptions are not always clear to students and families and may require them to jump over hurdles to be released from the terms of the offer. For example, Duke University makes these exceptions but requires the student's family to discuss the matter with the financial support office and admissions office before releasing the student from the commitment.[10]

Early action policies are similar to early decision policies, except students who apply early action are not required to accept the college's offer of admission and withdraw their other applications (Table 3.1). While early action policies offer more flexibility, they can still be difficult for underserved students to use due to barriers in information or ability to complete an application before the earlier deadline. Further, understanding the rules and meaning of each type of deadline, as well as how they overlap from college to college, can be strikingly complex and confusing.

FIGURE 3.1

Acceptance Rates by Application Type, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Somewhat and less selective colleges are not shown, because these schools are less likely to use early application cycles small sample sizes among these schools make these figures unreliable. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

TABLE 3.1.

How Do Admission Deadlines Compare?

Early Admission: An institutional policy that allows for an application deadline prior to the institution's regular admission deadline.

Type of Admission	Regular Admission	Rolling Admission	Early Action (EA)	Restrictive Early Action (REA)	Early Decision (ED)
Definition	Students apply and receive decisions by the institution's specified date. This is the most common type of admission deadline.	Students can apply at any time, and institutions review and render decisions at any time.	Students must apply by the specified early deadline to receive an early decision. Accepted students are *not* required to make a commitment to the institution.	Students must apply by the specified early deadline to receive an early decision but are restricted from applying EA, ED, or REA to any other institution.	Students apply early to one institution and commit to attending if accepted and offered adequate financial aid.
Commitment	Non-Binding	Non-Binding	Non-Binding	Non-Binding	Binding
Typical application deadline	December-February	No Deadline	November 1st or 15th	November 1st or 15th	November 1st or 15th
Typical receipt of admission decision	January-March	Ongoing	January or February	January or February	December
Restrictions	These policies are considered non-restrictive application deadlines and accepted students have until May 1 to consider their options and confirm enrollment.			Students may have restrictions when applying.	

Sources: College Board. (n.d.), Early decision and early action. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from College Board website: https://professionals.collegeboard.org/guidance/applications/early; Safier, R. (2019), Early action deadlines for every college with EA. PrepScholar. Retrieved from https://blog.prepscholar.com/early-action-deadlines.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR LOW-INCOME APPLICANTS TO BENEFIT FROM EARLY ADMISSIONS

Researchers have found that wealthy students are more likely than students from lower-income backgrounds to apply through early admission programs.[11] Ways that wealthy students learn about early admissions programs include their college-educated family members, expensive SAT/ACT exam prep courses, high school counselors, or private college coaches hired to boost their chances of admission.[12]

Early decision and early action policies benefit well-resourced students with the guidance to select a first-choice college early in their senior year of high school.

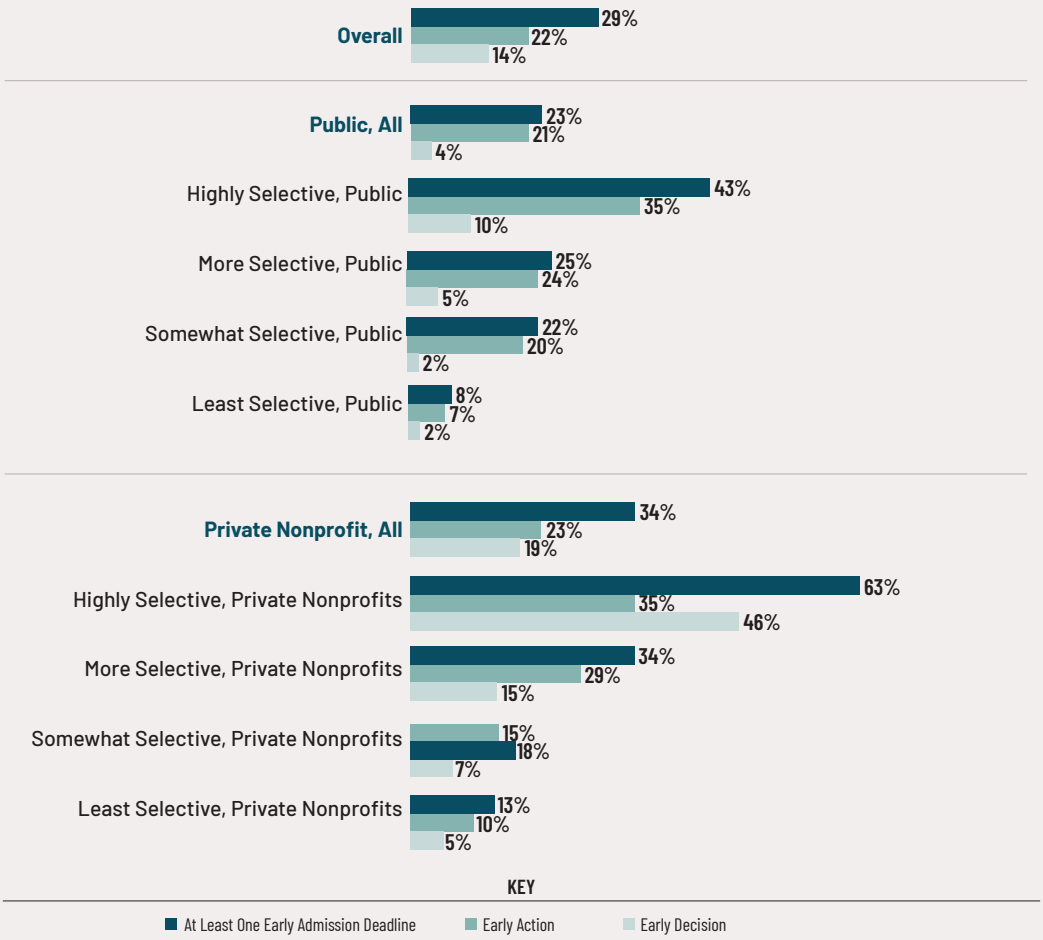
Even if first-generation students or students from low-income backgrounds are aware of early admissions deadlines, they may not have the necessary resources to select a first-choice college early in their senior year of high school. For example, they may not have had the opportunity to visit one or multiple college campuses (due to inequities discussed in Chapter 2) or to find funds to cover standardized test fees or submit their application (further discussed in Chapter 5).[13] They may need more time to create and submit a competitive admissions packet, making it challenging to meet early deadlines that offer students the best shot at admission.[14]

Early admission policies benefit well-resourced students who can commit to a college or university without comparing financial aid packages.

Binding early decision policies are particularly problematic because they require admitted students to commit before knowing their out-of-pocket cost and without the benefit of comparing financial awards from other institutions. Even though many institutions make exceptions if students cannot afford to attend based on their financial aid award, these exceptions are not always clearly conveyed to potential applicants. Financial aid packages play a critical role in enrollment decisions for students from low-income backgrounds, so applying early decision is

FIGURE 3.2

Institutions' Use of Early Decision and Early Action Programs, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

often not a realistic option.[15] Research shows that students from affluent families apply early decision nearly twice as often as lower-income students, even if they have the same academic credentials.[16] For example, students whose families earned more than $250,000 per year and who scored at the 90th percentile or above on the SAT or ACT tend to apply early decision 29 percent of the time.[17] In comparison, students with the same qualifications but whose families earned less than $50,000 per year applied early decision just 16 percent of the time.[18]

While seemingly innocuous, early decision and early action deadlines can jeopardize an institution's ability to build a diverse student body.

While seemingly innocuous, early decision and early action deadlines can jeopardize an institution's ability to build a diverse student body by caring more about the point at which a student submits his or her application and ignoring the structural barriers that can prevent students from low-income backgrounds from applying early.[19] These policies can impact racial/ethnic diversity on campus as well.[20] Colleges and universities are more likely to experience enrollment declines of Latinx and Asian American students as they fill larger shares of their incoming classes via early decision deadlines.[21] Indeed, the University of Michigan evaluated its data on early admission applicants by race and found that a larger percentage of students of color applied via regular admission than early.[22]

INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS OF EARLY ADMISSIONS POLICIES COME AT THE EXPENSE OF DIVERSITY

Nearly one-third of selective institutions offer applicants the option to apply either early decision or early action (Figure 3.1). Early admissions policies are more common at more selective institutions—schools with the lowest acceptance rates and the highest student test scores. For example, 43 percent of highly selective public institutions have an early action or early decision program in place, compared with just 8 percent of the least selective public institutions (Figure 3.1). The adoption of these policies has increased over the last decade, with the use of at least one of these deadlines rising by 7 percentage points since 2008.[23]

Institutions adopt these policies because they stand to benefit from enrolling high shares of their incoming classes early in the admissions cycle. And many do so. For example, the University of Pennsylvania admitted approximately 50 percent of its fall 2021 class through its first-choice Early Decision Program.[24] Early decision and early action policies are commonly used by admissions offices to manage their enrollment figures for the entering class.[25] Enrollment managers can assume that many applicants who apply via early admission deadlines—especially early decision—will enroll if admitted,[a] which reduces uncertainty about the final class size.[26] One study found that the percentage of students who enroll via early decision deadlines is significantly higher (87 percent) than the yield rate for students who apply through the regular admissions process (25 percent).[27] While the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings no longer consider yield, favorable yield rates can increase an institution's prestige by cultivating the perception that it is a selective institution.[28]

There may also be financial incentives for an institution to offer early decision deadlines. Some assert that colleges are motivated to accept early applicants to stretch their limited financial aid budgets.[29] Essentially, since students who apply early decision are often from high-income backgrounds and are required to attend the institution if admitted, those accepted through this process may need less financial support. On the other hand, institutions may offer more generous financial aid packages early in the admissions cycle to persuade affluent students to apply early or to boost their yield.[30]

But research demonstrates that when institutions fill a large share of their incoming classes with early applicants, they are more than likely admitting an abundance of affluent, White students, hindering diversity on campus.[31] Institutions must understand the impact of their admissions policies and practices on students and campus diversity. Reviewing those practices with a focus on equity will require acknowledging that early admissions policies are rigging the system against students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and first-generation students.

a. Research reveals that applying early action to an institution does not necessarily indicate that it is the student's top choice. For example, those applicants who apply via the less restrictive early action deadlines may have two or three top choices and wish to maximize their probability of being accepted at one or all of those institutions by applying early to all three. For more information, see Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser (2001).

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: ELIMINATE EARLY DECISION POLICIES

To realize equity in higher education, it is essential that institutional leaders have a clear understanding of how admissions policies like early decision and early action can—intentionally or unintentionally—stifle the development of a diverse incoming class. Institutional leaders can change their enrollment approaches to foster broader access, no matter students' racial or socioeconomic backgrounds.

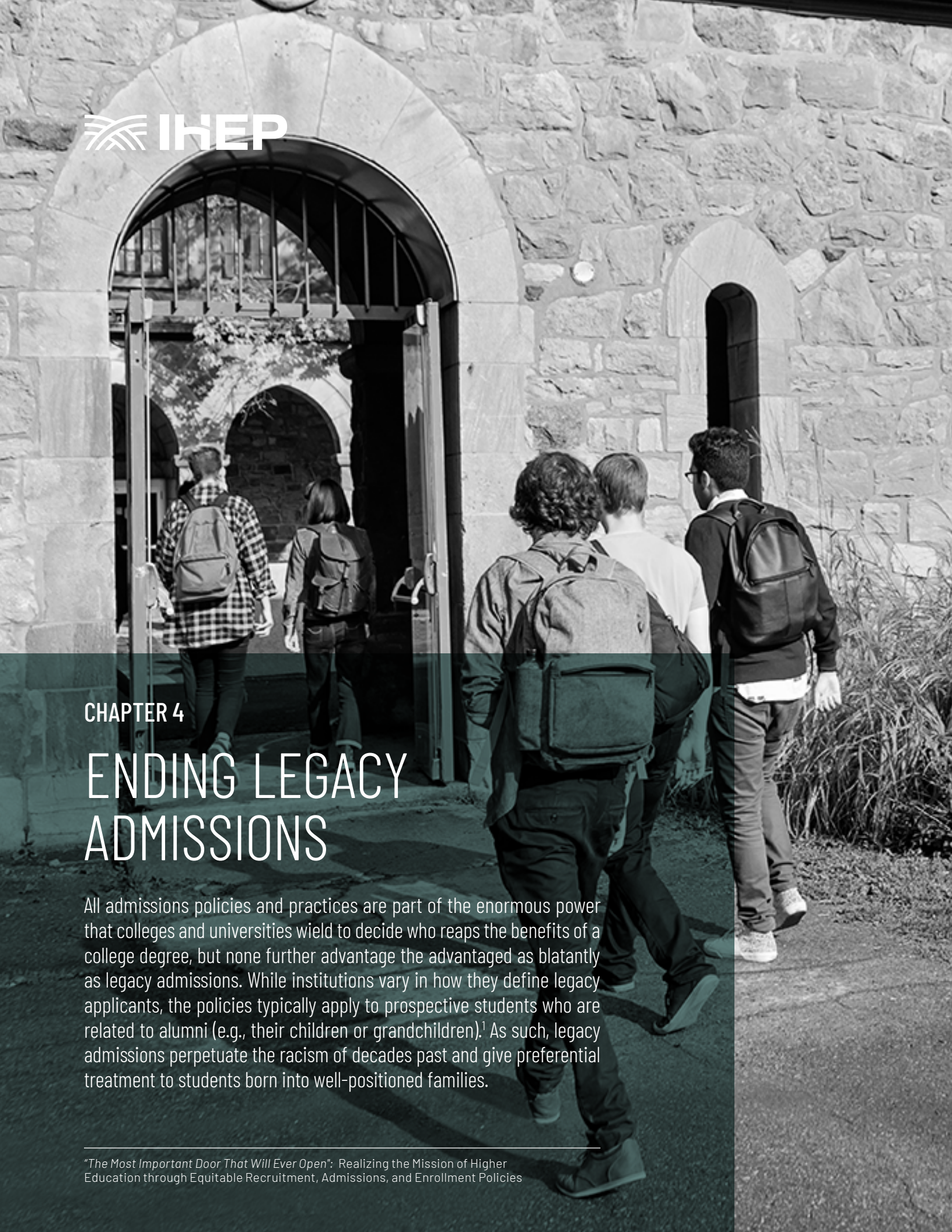
TO FOSTER BROADER ACCESS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

STOP OFFERING EARLY DECISION DEADLINES:

The research makes clear that early decision deadlines are at odds with equitably enrolling students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color. Applying early decision can boost a student's likelihood of being admitted to an institution[32]—particularly a selective institution—but it is difficult for underserved students to take advantage of this benefit.[33] Institutions that cannot eliminate all early admissions deadlines should, at a minimum, offer only non-binding early action deadlines. These enable students to compare financial aid packages from different institutions and therefore may be accessible to a more diverse group of potential applicants.

USE INSTITUTIONAL DATA TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW EARLY ADMISSION DEADLINES IMPACT EQUITY:

Institutions can and should use their data—disaggregated by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status—to examine how application deadlines impact the diversity of their incoming classes. They should use these data to make informed decisions about early admissions policies. For example, the University of Michigan analyzed the demographics of early and regular applicants to make changes to the ratio of those it admitted from each admissions pool to ensure its early admissions policies were not unintentionally limiting access for underserved students, especially students of color.[34]



IHEP

CHAPTER 4

ENDING LEGACY ADMISSIONS

All admissions policies and practices are part of the enormous power that colleges and universities wield to decide who reaps the benefits of a college degree, but none further advantage the advantaged as blatantly as legacy admissions. While institutions vary in how they define legacy applicants, the policies typically apply to prospective students who are related to alumni (e.g., their children or grandchildren).[1] As such, legacy admissions perpetuate the racism of decades past and give preferential treatment to students born into well-positioned families.

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies

"It seems unjust that just the privilege of birth should give you any sort of credit in [the college admissions] process."

—David Hawkins, chief education and policy officer, National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)

Across a sample of institutions with legacy admissions, children of alumni are 3.13 times more likely to be admitted than their non-legacy peers.[2] Legacy status can increase an applicant's chance of admission by 45 percentage points compared with equally qualified candidates who are not legacy, even when controlling for SAT scores, athlete status, gender, and race.[3] In fact, legacy status alone provides a boost equivalent to scoring 160 points higher on the SAT (out of 1600 points).[4] Beyond favoring legacy applicants in admissions decisions, some institutions offer other advantages to legacy students, such as special guidance during the admission process (e.g., interviews or consultations) or special tuition assistance opportunities.[5]

LEGACY ADMISSIONS GIVE THE MOST SUPPORT TO THOSE WHO NEED IT THE LEAST

In recent years, several media outlets have equated the legacy admissions process to receiving an exclusive "red carpet" treatment that creates two separate and unequal pathways to college.[6] Sure enough, some institutions provide legacy applicants extra privileges such as special interviews, consultations, advice, or even recommendations directly from the university president.[7] After admissions decisions are made, legacy applicants can receive preferential treatment through access to private events, like welcome receptions, early move-in, and alumni weekend campus tours.

Legacy students receive special treatment from institutions during the admissions process—support that underrepresented students need most but are least likely to obtain through legacy policies.

For example, in 2019, Northwestern University's president personally read the files of and made admissions decisions for well-connected applicants, including legacy students, family members of donors, and relatives of individuals with connections to the president.[8] Another example of unfair advantages extended to legacy applicants are the University of Pennsylvania's First Friday Information Sessions, where legacy applicants, along with faculty/staff families, gain access to small-group information sessions with the dean and/or the regional admissions officer that are not available to other applicants.[9]

Legacy students receive special treatment from institutions during the admissions process—support that underrepresented students need most but are least likely to obtain through legacy policies.

EXAMPLE

EXTRA PRIVILEGES FOR APPLYING AS A LEGACY APPLICANT

In 2002, the University of Miami created the Legacy Admission Program that encourages legacy applicants to submit their information via a special web portal to ensure the Division of Alumni Relations acknowledges their legacy relationship.[10]

Legacy tuition programs and other financial assistance opportunities maintain affordability gaps by benefiting well-off students rather than directing financial assistance to students from low-income backgrounds. At some institutions, legacy students also receive financial benefits in the form of legacy tuition programs, which provide tuition subsidies to students with a parent who is an alumnus of the university. Some institutions grant in-state status to out-of-state legacy applicants by providing fee waivers.[11] For example, at the University of Kentucky (UK), legacy applicants who do not reside in Kentucky can pay in-state tuition if their parent is a member of the UK Alumni Association.[12]

SEPARATE BUT UNEQUAL PATHWAYS PERPETUATE HIGHER EDUCATION'S RACIST AND ELITIST ROOTS

These separate and unequal pathways are deeply problematic. Our higher education system has historically been closed to Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities,[13] while rising tuition costs deter students from low-income backgrounds from enrolling.[14] Legacy policies reinforce those inequities by typically privileging White and wealthy students whose families have had access to college for generations, while limiting the economic mobility that can come from a college degree for non-White and non-wealthy students.[15]

Our higher education system has historically been closed to Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI communities, while rising tuition costs deter students from low-income backgrounds from enrolling.

The history of legacy admissions in the United States reveals that these policies are rooted in racism. In the early 1600s, colleges were havens for White, wealthy men, while the practice of slavery restricted the freedoms of Black people and colonization stripped the rights of Indigenous people—limiting their opportunities for formal education.[16] Even after slavery was abolished in 1865, colleges continued to bar access to Black and Indigenous people through racist and prejudicial laws, forcing the creation of segregated colleges.[17] Deep divides on religious beliefs also stratified educational opportunity.[18] The nation's elite took active steps to preserve the status quo at colleges and universities created during the colonial period which were open only to White, wealthy, Protestant men.[19] One such tactic was to create scholarships for the "sons of Protestant ministers, New England schoolmasters, and Yankee farmers" to perpetuate class stratification between those with and without education.[20]

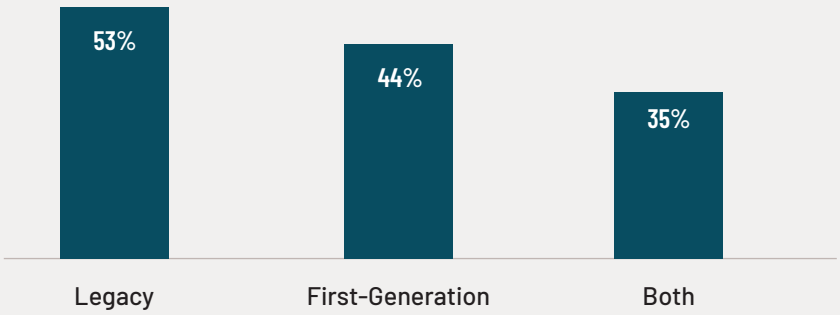
Despite these racist and elitist (as well as creedist and sexist) policies, many Jewish immigrants enrolled and received the designated scholarships.[21] Institutions began changing their admissions standards, adding requirements such as "proper social standing" (or lineage, character, and solidity).[22] Alumni at well-resourced institutions feared that a higher volume of diverse applicants would displace their children. Hoping to appease their White, wealthy, and male graduates, institutions implemented policies to maintain their institutional identity.[23] Legacy admissions policies, formally introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are still used today by selective public and private institutions.[24]

INSTITUTIONS PERPETUATE PRIVILEGE THROUGH LEGACY ADMISSIONS, DESPITE NO EVIDENCE OF BENEFITS

Even though legacy admissions policies continue to disadvantage Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, approximately half of institutions consider legacy status when deciding whom to admit. Particularly at highly selective universities, legacy admissions policies mean that institutions over-select from the ranks of their wealthy alumni which, by definition, do not include first-generation applicants, who are most likely to be Black, Latinx, or Indigenous or from non-wealthy families. Data from the Common Data Set[25] reveal that while approximately 44 percent of institutions include a student's status as a first-generation college-goer in their admissions decisions, 53 percent of institutions evaluate legacy status (Figure 4.1). This overemphasis on factors that signal a student's privilege of wealth or background further divides postsecondary opportunities by race and class.

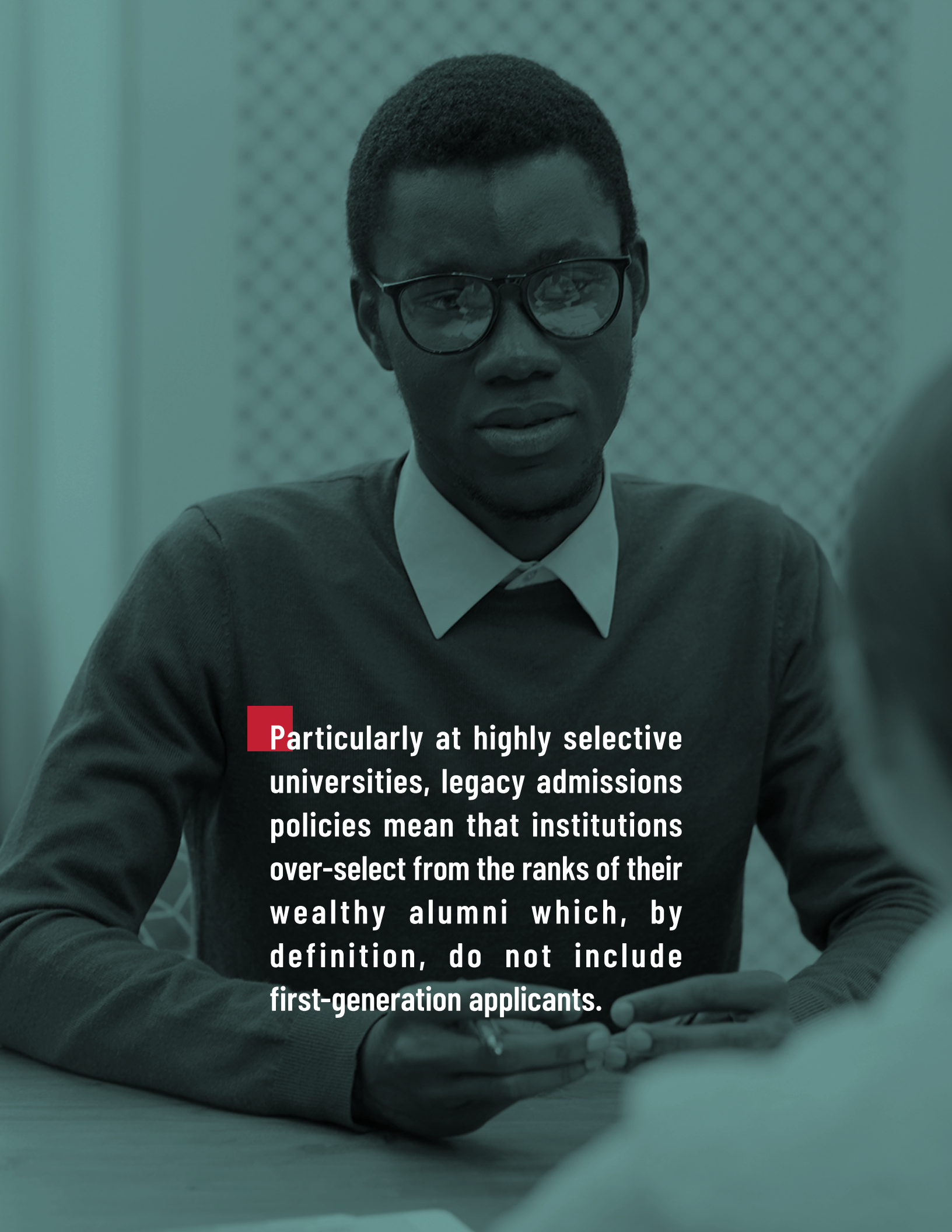
FIGURE 4.1

Share of Selective Four-Year Colleges that Consider Legacy and First-Generation Status in Admissions Decisions



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

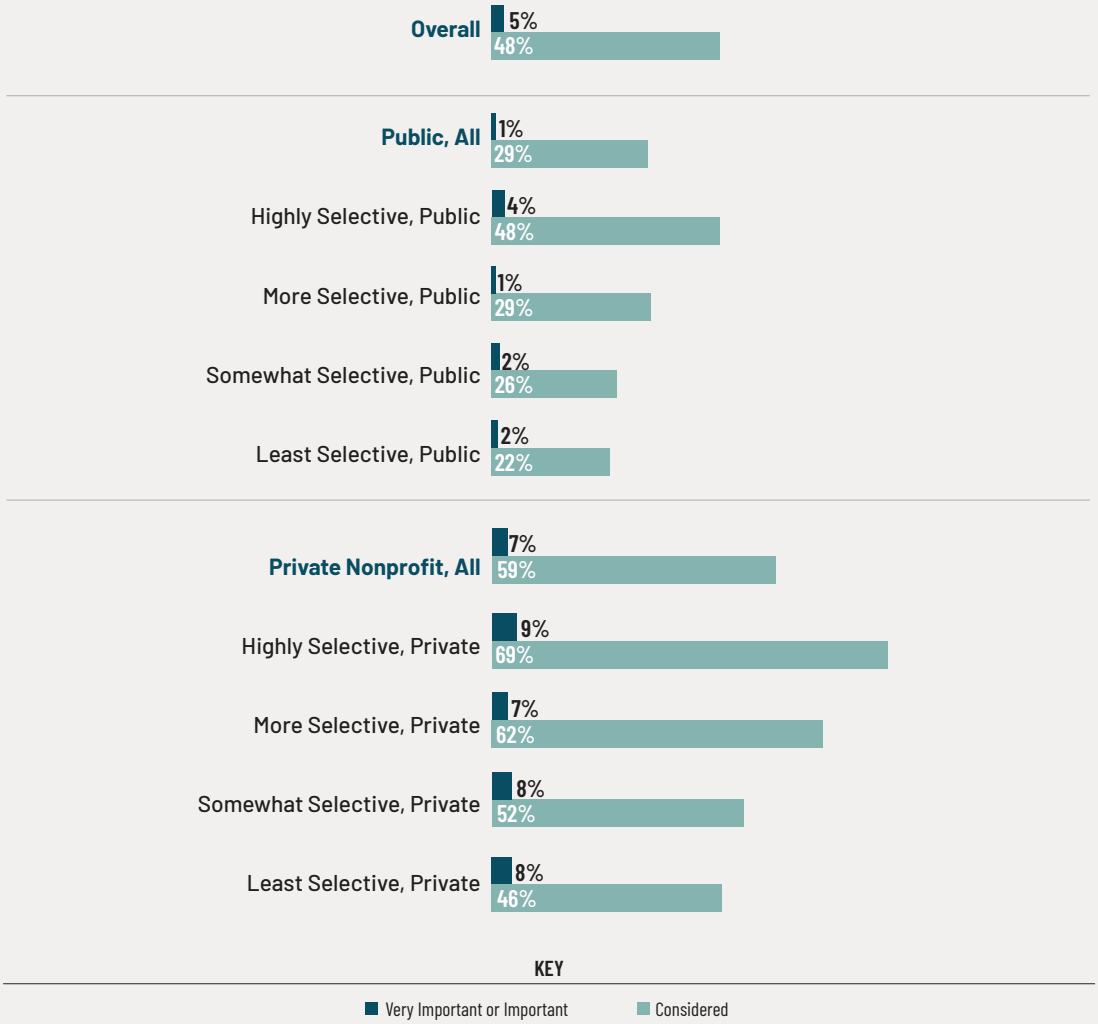
Legacy preference is most common at selective private nonprofit institutions, more than three-quarters of which use an applicant's relationship to alumni in admissions decisions (Figure 4.2). As a result, legacy applicants are more likely to gain admission to these schools. For example, while Harvard University admitted only 5 percent of applicants in fall 2018, legacy applicants made up roughly 37 percent of the admitted class.[26]



Particularly at highly selective universities, legacy admissions policies mean that institutions over-select from the ranks of their wealthy alumni which, by definition, do not include first-generation applicants.

FIGURE 4.2

Colleges' Consideration of Alumni Relations in Admissions, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

These policies are not relegated only to private colleges. More than half of highly selective public institutions, such as flagship universities, also use them to form their student body (Figure 4.2).

While all institutions, regardless of sector, should discontinue legacy admissions, the policies are particularly pernicious at public institutions charged with serving their state residents. Public colleges and universities are well-positioned to promote upward mobility in their communities and produce the next generation of college-educated innovators, business owners, community leaders, and more.[27] But when institutions consider legacy status when deciding which applicants to accept, they do just the opposite—reinforcing racism, elitism, and exclusion.

Institutions may now see legacy status in admissions decisions as a tool to foster better alumni relationships and encourage alumni support. This rationale is especially common among institutions seeking to boost endowment revenue.[28] Institutions may also use these policies to increase perceptions of prestige.[29] For example, the *U.S. News & World Report* uses alumni giving as 5 percent of its algorithm and financial resources as another 10 percent, which means that institutions may be reluctant to remove legacy preferences if leaders believe doing so will discourage alumni donations (see Do Legacy Admissions Policies Influence Alumni Giving?). Similarly, institutions may assume legacy admits will attend if accepted due to family loyalty, thus increasing their yield rates.[30]

Some institutions may claim that using legacy policies fosters an institutional community through alumni loyalty and keeping school traditions in the "family."[31] These institutions argue that legacy students possess a special knowledge of and desire to protect university traditions that they learned from their family, reinforcing their institutional memory and culture.[32] In this vein, institutions justify using legacy preferences to cultivate a collective identity—an identity that they claim supports philanthropic efforts and prestige-building. But this idea is outdated and exclusionary, rooted in racist and elitist beliefs that assume that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI communities and people from low-income backgrounds would not fit into or enhance and strengthen the institution's culture.

Do Legacy Admissions Policies Influence Alumni Giving?

Institutions may believe they cannot eliminate legacy preferences because doing so will reduce alumni giving and hurt their endowment growth. However, an analysis of the top 100 universities in *U.S. News & World Report* between 1998 and 2008 shows that prioritizing legacy students in admission decisions has no statistically significant impact on alumni giving behavior, even if the university has high levels of alumni giving.[33] Also, the seven universities in the study that dropped legacy policies between 1998 and 2007 saw no immediate decline in donations after making the policy change.[34] The rationale to keep legacy admissions as a mechanism for financial survival is not supported by the research.

Proponents of legacy admissions policies may argue that, in time, the size and racial composition of the legacy application pool will expand as more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students graduate from college.[35] This argument relies on the future diversity of college enrollment while actively undermining it. In the face of centuries of racial discrimination and growing disparities in access and attainment by race/ethnicity,[36] institutions should not hope for diversity *in spite of* their admissions policies. Now is the time for institutions of higher education to use all tools at their disposal, including admissions policies, to *promote* diversity.

Now is the time for institutions of higher education to use all tools at their disposal, including admissions policies, to promote diversity.

In sum, legacy admissions are a quintessential example of policies and practices that keep Black, Latinx, Indigenous, underrepresented AAPI, first-generation, and non-wealthy students out of higher education. Legacy admissions divert resources from those who need them most in order to benefit those who need them least. These policies create separate and unequal pathways, neither of which leads to the benefits that some use to justify their continued practice, such as alumni giving or traditions that would not otherwise continue. In fact, the only thing these policies accomplish is reducing the number of seats for first-generation students, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds at the institutions with the most resources to support college success.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: ENDING LEGACY ADMISSIONS

Institutions today should be part of dismantling the structures that resulted in inequitable college enrollment for too many generations. It is not enough to simply denounce racism and elitism; institutions must make actionable, intentional decisions not to use policies that perpetuate inequity—like legacy admissions policies.

TO DO SO, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

In the words of higher education leaders:

"Public universities have a public purpose, including serving students of all backgrounds. That starts with an admissions process rooted in fairness.... Preferential admissions decisions for relatives of alumni—known as legacy admissions—are not consistent with this commitment to fairness."[38]

—Peter McPherson, President, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

"Maintaining the long-standing tradition of affording...students a routine admissions advantage based solely on their parentage had come at a high cost. It was impairing our ability to educate qualified and promising students from all backgrounds and to help launch them up the social ladder."[39]

—Ronald J. Daniels, President, Johns Hopkins University

STOP CONSIDERING LEGACY STATUS WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Ending these policies would provide first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color a fairer shot at college admittance, especially to selective institutions that are well-positioned to support their success. Research undermines the justifications for their continued use, including the idea that legacy admissions policies increase alumni donations.[37]

CONSIDER FIRST-GENERATION STATUS WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

If colleges are to truly transform postsecondary attainment, increasing the number of first-in-the-family college students should be a goal of all institutions. For example, at James Madison University, first-generation status is more likely to be used to break a tie between equally qualified candidates than legacy status.[40] The institution also allows flexibility in its enrollment class size to admit both students instead of selecting one over the other.

FOCUS SUPPLEMENTARY ADMISSIONS GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES TOWARD UNDERSERVED STUDENTS:

Incentives that are extended only to legacy students, like legacy tuition programs or special legacy applicant interviews, give an unfair advantage to students least likely to need that advantage and extra support. First-generation college students and low-income applicants have the least access to advising, resources, and financing during the admissions and enrollment process. Equitable policies should target resources toward those who need them most.

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CHAPTER 5

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

For nearly a century, colleges and universities have used standardized test scores as a measure of applicants' academic skills and a predictor of their future academic performance.[1] Standardized tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) exam were initially intended to help find the "diamond in the rough," or high-achieving students from underserved backgrounds.[2] Putting aside the bias embedded within the tests themselves, this very notion perpetuates the idea that only a few, rare students of color or students from low-income backgrounds are deserving of an education at a selective college.[3]

"There's talent everywhere. There's talent in rural America, there's talent in black and brown communities, and...the standard metrics that we may use to identify such talent are inadequate."

—Wendell D. Hall, PhD, during his tenure as senior director, higher education, The College Board

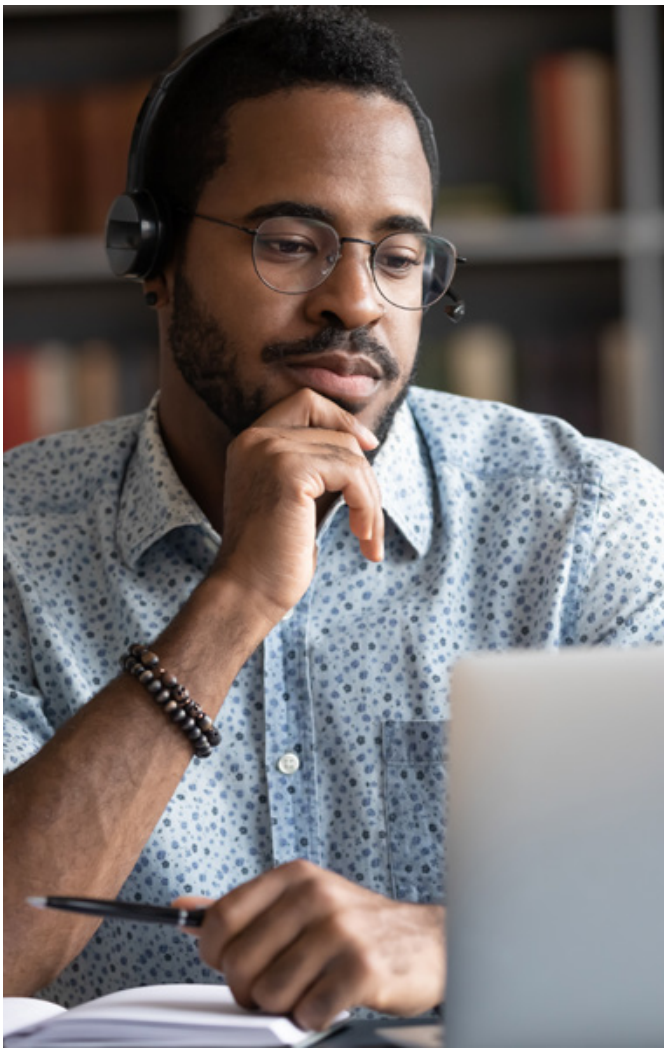
Today, standardized test scores serve as a gatekeeper to the upward mobility that higher education offers, on their face a neutral judge while, in practice, maintaining racial and socioeconomic disparities. Indeed, David Hawkins, Chief Education and Policy Officer at National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), characterized the use of the SAT and ACT as grounded in "layers upon layers of privilege."

Institutions use standardized tests in their admissions process for several reasons, including as a way to generate recruitment leads and as a strategy for assessing the large volume of applications they receive.[4] It is true that institutions face significant administrative pressures in their recruitment efforts (as discussed in Chapter 1) and, in some cases, receive overwhelming numbers of applications. However, these reasons do not reduce the inequities embedded within the SAT and ACT, especially for wealthy institutions with substantial admissions budgets. Institutions need to allocate the resources, financial and otherwise, required to review applications in an equity-minded way.

In the wake of widespread testing closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, just under 2.2 million students took the SAT in 2020, about 22,000 students fewer than the previous year.[5] The pandemic had a clear impact on students from low-income backgrounds: test takers using the fee waiver fell from 427,442 in 2019 to 376,468 in 2020.[6] Despite the drop in test-takers, highly selective public and private colleges saw increased application numbers for the 2021–22 academic year, suggesting that temporary test-optional policies adopted by many colleges due to the pandemic may have encouraged new applicants to these schools.[7]

STANDARDIZED TESTS PERPETUATE RACIAL BIAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The SAT and ACT were adapted from undeniably racist standardized intelligence, or IQ, tests.[8] During World War I, the U.S. Army used some of the earliest aptitude tests on recruits, resulting in scores that varied based on race and ethnicity.[9] These scores were improperly used to claim that Black and immigrant recruits were of inferior intellect due to biological differences—a belief later used to justify policies of racial segregation.[10] In 1926, the SAT was created and adapted from the Army test to measure student intelligence and college readiness,[11] and the ACT followed in 1959.[12] While the SAT and ACT have since been revised, they are still used widely to determine who is qualified to attend which colleges, despite research demonstrating the tests' continued racial and cultural biases, the influence of inequitable K–12 funding and tracking policies, and the relative predictive value of standardized test scores on college performance.



Institutions need to allocate the resources, financial and otherwise, required to review applications in an equity-minded way.

College Rankings

The outsized influence of college rankings, like those published by *U.S. News & World Report,* is seen most clearly in conversations surrounding the role of standardized tests in admissions. This sentiment was repeated throughout our interviews with admissions experts: colleges and universities are hesitant to entirely remove standardized testing from the admissions process for fear of dropping in college rankings, selectivity, and prestige.

Five percent of *U.S. News & World Report's* ranking is based on the institution's standardized test scores. If fewer than 75 percent of students submit scores, the publication reduces the score awarded to that institution in this category, impacting its ranking.[13] While there has been some momentum behind infusing equity-minded metrics into college rankings, the rankings continue to be a force that incentivizes the use of inequitable recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies. Indeed, institutions that choose to put their ranking first and equity second risk limiting access for postsecondary education's most underrepresented students—Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Research shows that racial and cultural biases persist in the modern-day versions of the tests.[14] For example, questions on which Black and Latinx students perform well are often omitted.[15] Too often, the test relies on questions that appear neutral but are actually based on the background knowledge that a typical White, middle-income student would possess. For instance, test question wording can affect how questions are interpreted. The use of idioms may be especially difficult for non-native English speakers, while words with multiple dictionary definitions may be used differently—though still accurately—by various cultural groups.[16] And while the College Board subjects test questions to rigorous analysis before they are added, independent researchers still find differences across racial groups on certain test items.[17] Such bias establishes and reinforces stereotypes about who is likely to perform well and is therefore qualified to attend an institution. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if institutions then use test scores to make decisions about who and where to recruit for incoming classes.

For decades, policymakers have failed to equitably fund schools in underserved communities, depriving many students of color the educational resources that facilitate gaining high SAT or ACT scores.

In addition, persistent racial and socioeconomic disparities within the K–12 education system influence performance on the SAT and ACT. For decades, policymakers have failed to equitably fund schools in underserved communities, depriving many students of color the educational resources that facilitate gaining high SAT or ACT scores. One study found that across the country, school districts with more than 50 percent Black and Latinx enrollment are nearly twice as likely to require greater public funding to meet student needs (or a "funding gap") than districts with less than 50 percent Black and Latinx enrollment—on average roughly $5,000 per pupil.[18] Districts with the highest concentrations of poverty have an average funding gap of roughly $6,700 per pupil.[19] Black, Latinx, and low-income students in those districts have access to fewer resources that can prepare them to score well on the SAT or ACT.[20]

Finally, standardized tests aim to assess applicants' comprehension of academic content presumably covered from kindergarten through high school in the interest of predicting whether they will be successful in college if admitted.[21] If a student was not, in fact, exposed to that content, the test is not an appropriate tool. Relying on SAT scores can undervalue the potential of students of color, because evidence shows that high school grade point average is a much stronger predictor of college success both during and after a student's freshmen year. For example, a study commissioned by the University of California found that high school grades were a more reliable

predictor than test scores of a student's college GPA and the likelihood of graduating within four years.[22] Other studies have confirmed that when controlling for socioeconomic factors, high school grades—not the SAT—are more predictive of first-year college grades, second-year persistence, and five-year graduation rates.[23]

STANDARDIZED TESTS ARE EXPENSIVE AND PERPETUATE SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUITIES

Conversations about college affordability typically focus on rising tuition costs, food and housing insecurity, and racial disparities in student loan borrowing and default rates. However, students incur college-related costs well before they are admitted to a college or university—especially if they are seeking to boost their standardized test scores. The Varsity Blues scandal revealed just how much money some wealthy parents are willing to spend to ensure their children have the test scores necessary to gain admittance to well-resourced institutions. Indeed, preparing for and taking standardized tests can cost thousands of dollars (see Standardized Test Cost Calculator).

Standardized Test Cost Calculator

$52 - $70 per test

SAT AND ACT TEST COSTS

Applicants spend $52 ($68 including the essay)[24] for the SAT or $55 ($70 including the essay)[25] for the ACT.*

$15 - $60

SAT AND ACT ADDITIONAL COSTS

For example, applicants may be charged additional fees if they register late ($30) or if they need to change their test date or location ($30).[26]

$20 - $35

TEST PREP BOOKS COSTS

Applicants can purchase the official ACT and SAT study guides for approximately $20 to $35.[27]

$1,000 - $10,000

TEST PREP CLASSES/TUTORING

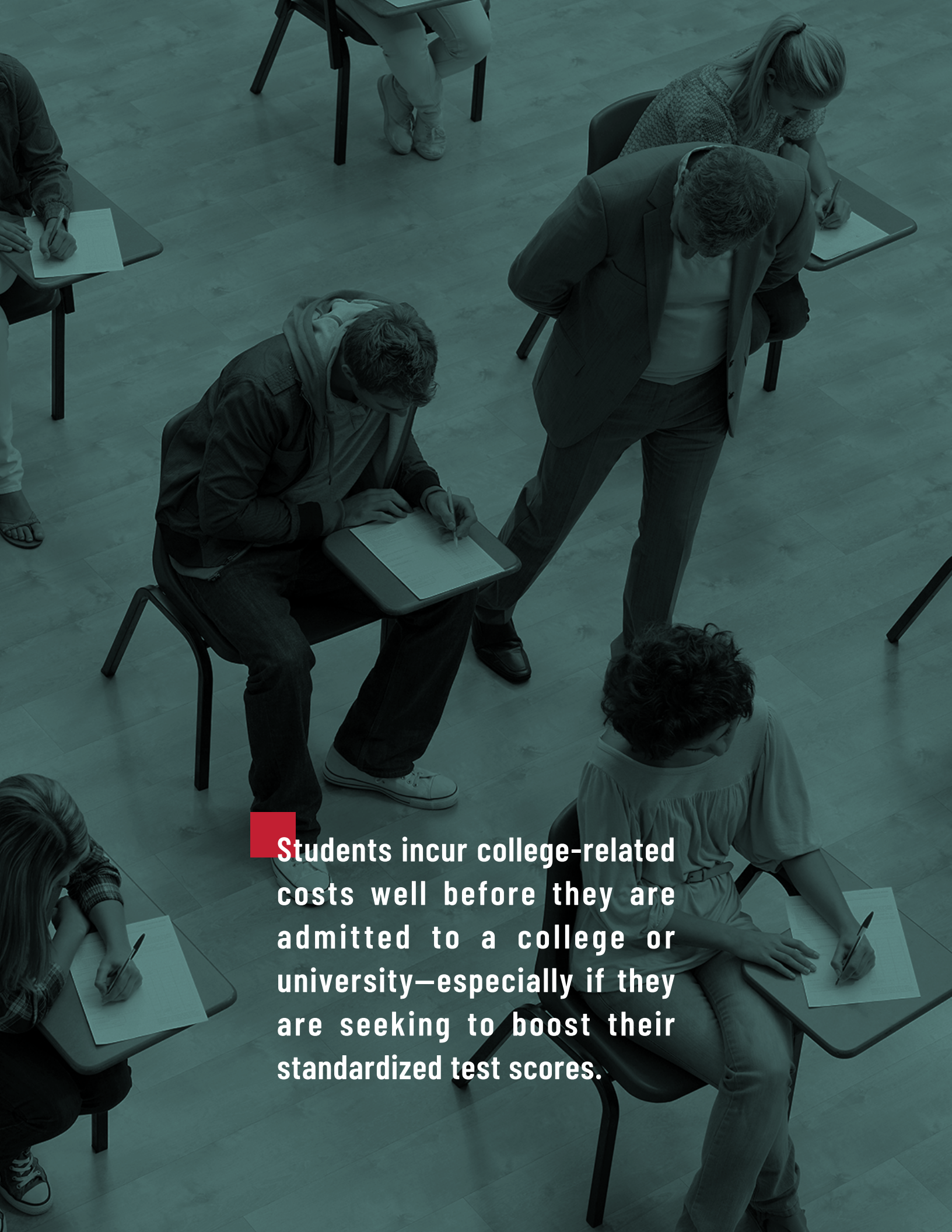
Preparatory classes range from $1,349 for the Princeton Review's SAT and ACT Guaranteed[28] classes to upwards of $10,000 with private tutoring companies. For instance, Arbor Bridge costs range from $213 an hour for 12 hours ($2,556 total) to $168 an hour for 60 hours ($10,080 total).[29]

$52 - $10,160**

ESTIMATED TOTAL COST

* Fee waivers are available for students who meet certain eligibility criteria and must be obtained through their high school guidance counselor or a representative of an authorized community-based organization.[30] Applicants cannot use fee waivers for more than two SAT registrations or four ACT registrations.[31]

**Total costs can be as low as $0 if, for example, the student is eligible for a fee waiver and does not purchase or participate in test-prep resources or classes.



Students incur college-related costs well before they are admitted to a college or university—especially if they are seeking to boost their standardized test scores.

Students who re-take standardized tests or participate in expensive test preparation tend to receive higher test scores.[32] Working with a private tutor—the costliest form of test preparation—is particularly effective at improving an applicant's retest score. Other, less expensive forms of test preparation activities, such as reviewing online test prep materials, have a smaller or negligible impact on scores.[33]

The College Board encourages students to re-take the test, due to the fact that 63 percent score higher on subsequent SAT exams.[34] High-income students are more likely to take college admissions tests multiple times.[35] This may be because applicants from low-income backgrounds can only use fee waivers to take the SAT twice or the ACT four times, meaning they must pay out of pocket for any additional testing.[36] This also means that students benefit by first taking the test early in high school, a strategy high-income students are more likely to employ because of their greater access to college counselors who advise them to test early and often.[37] In fact, students from low-income backgrounds may be less likely to take the test at all. In one study, just one-third of students from lower-income urban neighborhoods in Boston who planned to attend a four-year institution had taken an exam by the fall of their senior year, compared with 98 percent of students in a wealthier nearby suburb.[38]

Institutions may also require students to submit scores to be eligible for institutional non-need-based aid—even when test scores are not factored into admissions decisions.[39] Since students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students are likely to opt out of sending their scores when given the option, these policies can limit their access to vital financial aid opportunities. Research reveals that it is harder for students who do not submit test scores to secure institutional non-need-based aid compared with those who submit scores.[40] For example, Hofstra University, which is test-optional for admissions, only considers students who submit test scores as eligible for the most generous non-need-based scholarships.[41] A study of 33 public and private test-optional colleges found that academically talented students who did not submit test scores—and were disproportionately first-generation students, Pell Grant recipients, and women—were less likely to receive non-need-based financial aid than those who did submit test scores.[42]

THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS

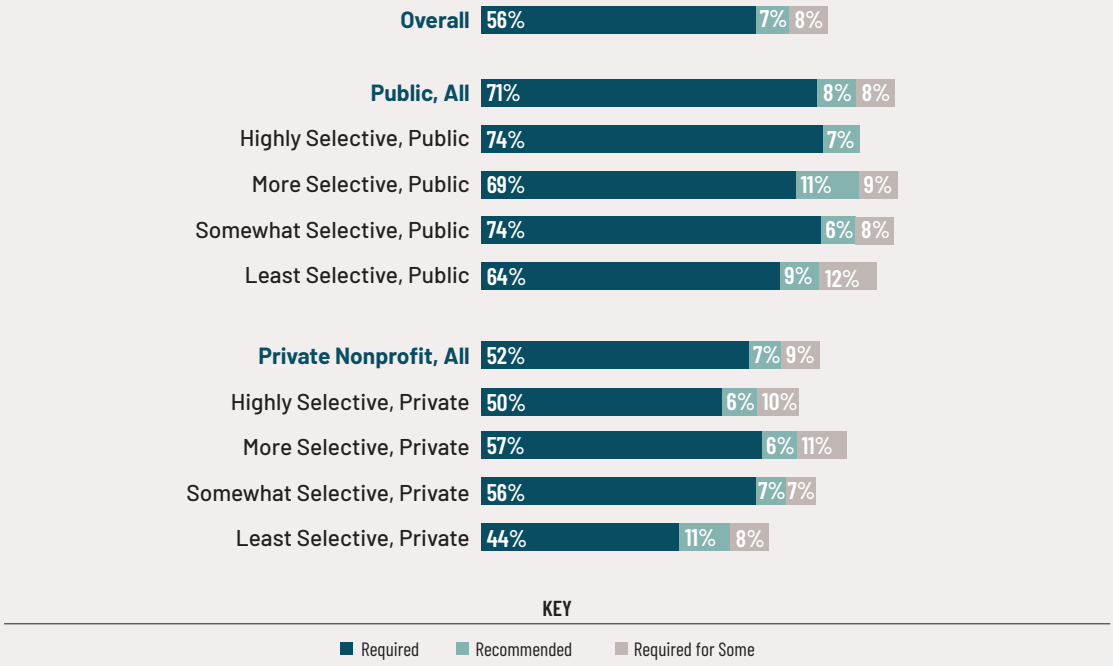
Over the last decade, selective institutions have started to recognize that requiring students to submit standardized test scores perpetuates racial and socioeconomic inequities in higher education. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of institutions requiring applicants to submit scores for the SAT and/or the ACT had declined by 23 percentage points.[43] Approximately two-thirds (68 percent) of selective private nonprofit institutions require student test scores, whereas the vast majority of selective public institutions (87 percent) require them for admissions decisions (Figure 5.1).

Some colleges and universities have changed how they use standardized tests by implementing the following policies:

- **Test-flexible:** Students are allowed to submit scores from other exams, such as the Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), rather than the SAT or ACT.[44]
- **Test-optional:** Students are allowed, but not required, to submit test scores as part of their application for admission. If students choose to submit their scores, institutions may consider them in admissions decisions.
- **Test-free:** Students are not required to submit any standardized test scores and an institution will not consider submitted test scores when deciding whether or not to admit an applicant. Test-free institutions often take a more holistic approach to making admissions decisions, considering applicants' grades, extracurricular activities, essays, and other factors like the academic rigor of their courses.

FIGURE 5.1

Test Requirements Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, foreign institutions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

While test-flexible and test-optional policies represent incremental progress, they do not necessarily offer a guaranteed path to increasing campus diversity.[45] When given the option, first-generation college students, students of color, women, Pell Grant recipients, and students with learning differences are most likely to be "non-submitting applicants," meaning they opt out of including test scores in their application for admission.[46] However, just allowing students to forgo submitting scores does not necessarily change which students are accepted and ultimately enroll. A study of more than 100 liberal arts colleges between 1999 and 2014 found that going test-optional led to higher average SAT scores—since students with lower scores were less likely to submit those as part of their application—but enrollment among students of color did not increase.[47] Similarly, when researchers examined changes in diversity at 180 selective liberal arts colleges over nearly two decades, they found that the 32 institutions that adopted test-optional policies had lower proportions of Pell Grant recipients and students of color enrolled than the institutions that continued to require test scores for admission.[48]

Another analysis found no significant effect of test-optional policies on racial, socioeconomic, or gender diversity at private, nonprofit, and public institutions.[49] However, more recent studies of test-optional programs that include more institutions and consider outcomes over a longer time period find that when institutions with these policies are compared to similar institutions that require tests, evidence emerges that the policies do indeed increase diversity.[50] These new findings may indicate that test-optional polices implemented in a thoughtful, equity-minded way can advance access for historically underrepresented groups.

In sum, White and wealthy students stand to benefit the most when institutions consider standardized test scores in admissions decisions. And the idea that test scores may uncover a "diamond in the rough" is no justification for the continued use of an exclusionary tool. Beyond the substantial costs associated with taking and performing well on the test, research makes clear that standardized tests reinforce historical racial inequities in our higher education system.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINK THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

To truly cultivate diversity, address the inequities that standardized tests propagate, and dismantle racist and classist practices within higher education, institutions should go test-free. That is, they should stop considering standardized test scores in admissions decisions and take a more holistic approach.

AS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES PREPARE FOR THEIR NEXT ADMISSIONS CYCLE, THEY SHOULD IMPLEMENT CHANGES TO THEIR ADMISSIONS POLICIES THAT IMPROVE EQUITY ON CAMPUS, LIKE THESE MEASURES:

NO LONGER REQUIRE TEST SCORES IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Privileged students who are better positioned to receive high scores will continue to benefit from their use in admissions and financial aid decisions, even when tests are optional. Therefore, institutions should remove test score requirements altogether (go test-free) and adopt more holistic admissions approaches that consider multiple measures, including a student's unique, nonacademic experiences alongside traditional metrics such as grades.[51] Holistic review allows institutions to view an applicant through a more nuanced lens to judge if a student will be successful at the institution.[52]

MAKE TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES PERMANENT:

If institutions are not willing to eliminate their use of standardized test scores in admissions and financial aid decisions, they should consider making permanent any temporary policies that deemphasize its role. Due to logistical challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have temporarily waived test score requirements.[53] But underserved students face limited access to the tests and test prep services even when not facing a global health crisis.

ENSURE TEST FREE AND TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS POLICIES ALIGN WITH INSTITUTIONAL FINANCIAL AID POLICIES:

Even when test scores are not factored into admissions decisions, some institutions require students to submit scores to be eligible for some institutional grants and scholarships.[54] Admissions and financial aid policies must work together for colleges and universities to reach their access and diversity goals.

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CHAPTER 6

ELIMINATING THE USE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION

In the United States, more than 70 million Americans have been involved in the justice system in some capacity.[1] The "tough-on-crime" policies of the 1980s and 1990s disproportionately impacted communities of color, especially Black and Latinx communities. Adult Black men are 5.7 times as likely and Latinx men are 2.5 times as likely to be incarcerated as their White counterparts.[2] Women are less likely than men to face incarceration, but here again, Black women are 1.7 times more likely and Latinx women are 1.3 times more likely than White women to experience incarceration.[3] When examining certain types of crimes, the disparities are even more startling. For example, while Black and White people sell and use drugs at the same rate, Black people are 6.5 times more likely to be incarcerated for drug-related crimes than White people.[4]

"For the first time in my life, I am hopeful that I will be able to enter the professional workforce as a valuable and educated employee. [My education] has expanded my perspectives in many ways, and it has truly changed my life for the better."

—Letter from higher education student to the Department of Education regarding his experience earning a degree while incarcerated in a state prison facility (copy on file with authors).

The racism evident in our policing and justice systems reverberates to all corners of our society, limiting the opportunities available to people of color. Higher education is not immune. In fact, when colleges and universities collect criminal justice information (CJI) and use it to help make admissions decisions, they not only fail to combat the racist policies and practices in our justice system, they reinforce and perpetuate them.

Racial disparities in incarceration and criminal justice involvement begin as early as elementary school, with the school-to-prison pipeline primarily affecting Black and Latinx students. Due to zero-tolerance policies, many schools refer students to the justice system for punishment, becoming "conduits for the juvenile justice system."[5] Black youth are five times more likely to be held in juvenile facilities than White youth,[6] meaning that Black students are more likely to develop criminal records well before the time they apply to college. The school-to-prison pipeline affects Black boys and Black girls, who are both disproportionately and unfairly disciplined by the U.S. education system.[7] Not only are Black college applicants more likely to have a criminal record to disclose, but those who do disclose a criminal history are at particularly high risk for being denied admission due to their criminal justice involvement when compared with their White and Asian peers.[8]

Using criminal histories in college admissions means either that students must self-disclose any past interaction with the justice system or that the institution uses background checks to reveal any involvement with the justice system, even if records are sealed or expunged.

Racial bias in the justice system means that CJI policies reinforce racial inequities in higher education, serving as a *de facto* race-based system of discrimination in three key ways:

- **Applicant attrition:** Asking applicants to disclose CJI can deter students of color from applying to college
- **Admission denial:** Using CJI to make admissions decisions limits postsecondary opportunities for students of color—particularly Black students—but is not proven to improve campus safety
- **Ongoing restrictions:** CJI policies that subject students to ongoing restrictions and surveillance can negatively impact their college success

The systemic exclusion of people with criminal histories from applying or being accepted into higher education institutions also negatively affects efforts to reduce recidivism rates. Research has demonstrated that education can provide an alternative pathway for people who have been previously involved with the justice system.[9] Postsecondary education programs in prisons have been shown to reduce recidivism rates by as much as 40 percent.[10] Post-release higher education opportunities, while less studied, likely have a similar positive impact.

However, formerly incarcerated people have lower rates of postsecondary attainment than the general population. Only 4 percent of incarcerated people and 18 percent of people on probation have attained a bachelor's degree, compared with 34 percent of the general population.[11] By including criminal history screenings in admissions processes, institutions limit opportunities for large swaths of the population, especially Black and Latinx individuals, and stymie the great potential of education to reduce the overall prison population and build a more equitable future.

ASKING APPLICANTS TO DISCLOSE CJI CAN DETER STUDENTS FROM APPLYING TO COLLEGE

There are two primary ways that colleges and universities collect CJI in the admissions process: self-reporting and criminal background screening. Most institutions ask applicants to self-report CJI, which is usually collected via responses to questions included in the admissions application. Background checks can be conducted in a variety of ways, including via public databases or contracts with private companies.[12]

Simply asking for criminal history on a college application can have a psychological and emotional impact and can deter someone from submitting it.[13] This attrition effectively limits postsecondary access for students impacted by the justice system, who may endure trauma, the emotional burden of having to relive past incarceration, and the many collateral consequences of criminal justice involvement.[14] But unless they complete their application, students impacted by the justice system may never have the opportunity to begin their postsecondary journey.

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Ban the Box

The Ban the Box movement is addressing discrimination by calling for an end to the practice of employers asking potential employees to detail history with the justice system on job applications. A movement within higher education mirrors this one and seeks to end the use of CJI in college admissions while encouraging an examination of CJI policies, why they are implemented, and their equity implications.[15]

A growing number in higher education are questioning the usefulness of incorporating CJI in the admissions process. For example, the Common Application incorporated questions related to criminal history in 2006, thus automatically making this information available to all institutions using that system. Fifteen years later, in 2019, due to advocacy led by people who were formerly incarcerated and based on legislation that "banned the box" from employment and housing applications, the Common Application removed these questions from their main application.[16] Individual institutions are still able to include questions about criminal history in their supplemental application sections.[17]

Since these prospective students do not complete their applications and are rarely asked why, it is difficult to quantify how many students are deterred from applying due to the collection of CJI.[18] However, qualitative reports and interviews make clear that questions about CJI can have a chilling effect on this process. For example, the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) analyzed application data from nearly half of the institutions in the State University of New York (SUNY) system and found that the applicant attrition rate is almost three times higher for those who disclose a criminal record than for the general population.[19] Despite this fact, nearly 72 percent of institutions require applicants to disclose their criminal history, with more selective institutions being the most likely to include questions about criminal history in the application process.[20]

CCA has examined the use of CJI in admissions decisions (see Center for Community Alternatives and the Study of CJI) and found that, among the institutions surveyed, private four-year universities were much more likely to consider criminal history in their admissions processes than public universities or two-year institutions.[21] In contrast, open enrollment institutions are more likely to provide opportunities for individuals involved in the justice system to start or restart their education. However, for students with criminal justice involvement who start at two-year institutions and ultimately hope

to earn a bachelor's degree, transferring into a four-year institution may be challenging. Institutions with articulation agreements should examine the role of CJI in participating institutions' admissions processes and ensure that students understand the opportunities available to them (see Chapter 7 for more on transfer pathways).

CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES (CCA) AND THE STUDY OF CJI

In 2010, CCA released its landmark study of the use of CJI in admissions decisions entitled *The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions Reconsidered.*[22] This study used the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers' (AACRAO) professional network and membership; 273 colleges and universities responded to questions regarding their admissions offices' usage of CJI in admissions, housing, and student life decisions. In 2015, CCA updated the results with all 60 SUNY institutions, providing more detail on their policies and practices, including 30 of those providing information on their use of CJI.[23] In both studies, CCA analyzed policy documents, surveyed admissions offices and administrators, and interviewed administrators and formerly incarcerated students in order to understand the experiences of individuals involved in the justice system and their postsecondary educational journeys. Combined, these studies provide a comprehensive view of institutional use of CJI in admissions decisions. Many of the findings presented in this chapter are based on CCA's institutional survey or later studies building from CCA's work.

A student peers through a microscope in his Botany course at the Moreau College Initiative, which offers higher education to students while incarcerated. CREDIT: PETER RINGENBERG

USING CJI TO MAKE ADMISSIONS DECISIONS LIMITS POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR BUT IS NOT PROVEN TO IMPROVE CAMPUS SAFETY

Many institutions that collect CJI cite campus safety as the primary reason for doing so.[24] There is an overwhelming but unsupported belief that individuals who have been involved in the justice system will negatively impact campus safety and are more likely to commit crimes against their peers or institution. Public reporting of campus safety statistics and incidents of crime required by the Clery Act may also fuel concerns about admissions decisions. As higher education stakeholders are made more aware of the crimes happening on college campuses, it may be easy to make assumptions that those who have a history with the justice system are involved.

However, research to date does not support this assumption. While further study is needed, research has not found a link between considering CJI in admissions decisions and rates of campus crime.[25] Furthermore, such conjecture discounts—and contradicts—the transformative nature of higher education most colleges and universities claim to provide. **By collecting CJI and using it in admissions decisions, these institutions perpetuate the stigma and collateral consequences of past incarceration.**

Only a small share (16 percent) of institutions surveyed by CCA collect but do not use CJI in admissions decisions.[26] For the greater share of institutions that do collect and use CJI, disclosure of a criminal record is more likely to trigger additional screening than an automatic denial of admission.[27] **Different CJI can impact admissions decisions differently, and the methods for evaluating the information matter a great deal, as shown by CCA's results:**

- **CJI factors considered in admissions decisions:** Institutions report using a wide array of convictions as negative factors in admissions decisions. Violent or sex offense convictions are most likely to result in automatic denials, although 90 percent of institutions that used CJI in admissions decisions consider any felony conviction negatively.[28] Three-quarters of institutions consider drug and alcohol convictions, approximately half consider any youthful offender adjudication, and one-third consider pending misdemeanors or misdemeanor arrests.[29] About one-third (32 percent) of schools also reported that a failure to disclose a criminal record would result in automatic denial of admission, as it would be considered a deliberate act of falsification.[30] Some institutions consider more than the conviction itself, and also report automatically denying admission if an applicant had not yet completed his or her term of community supervision.[31]

- **Procedures for evaluating criminal justice information:** Most institutions that collect CJI implement additional screening procedures for applicants with criminal records, often by convening a group of people who are not involved in the standard admissions process, such as academic deans (53 percent), campus security (40 percent), legal counsel (26 percent), counseling or mental health staff (20 percent), or risk assessment personnel (12 percent).[32]

  Implicit or explicit biases among any of these individuals can negatively impact applicants' chances of admission. Yet less than half of the institutions that responded to CCA's survey and that collected and used CJI in their admissions processes had written policies to guide admissions officers and others who were involved in the decision-making process.[33] Only 40 percent of schools that reported collecting CJI trained staff on how to interpret criminal records.[34] Without proper training and explicit knowledge and regard to the inherent biases of the justice system, these screening panels can exacerbate the harm caused by using CJI in the admissions process.

  About two-thirds of institutions that use CJI in admissions allow for an appeals process, but not all institutions share appeal-related information with applicants denied due to their criminal record. While approximately half of institutions provide this information to all such applicants, 28 percent reported that they do not share any information about applicants' option to appeal.[35] Failing to provide appeal information serves as yet another barrier to college access for students impacted by the justice system.

  Some universities only collect CJI from a subset of applicants, focusing on programs that prepare students for jobs that exclude people with criminal histories. For example, institutions may require students to disclose their CJI when applying to health-related, education, or criminal justice programs because of licensing or other requirements for employment in these fields.[36] Indeed, colleges and universities have a responsibility to prepare students for employment and career advancement, and CJI may be important for providing students with appropriate and targeted career services. However, this information can be collected after the point of admission, for use solely in advising students about selecting a program of study and navigating licensure processes. Also, career services and/or institutional leadership can leverage their connections with industry leaders to design equitable employment policies that provides more opportunities for justice-impacted students.

CJI POLICIES THAT SUBJECT STUDENTS TO ONGOING RESTRICTIONS AND SURVEILLANCE CAN NEGATIVELY IMPACT THEIR COLLEGE SUCCESS

Even if students with a criminal record make it through the admissions and appeal process, they still face many hurdles in persisting through college. In fact, formerly incarcerated students are eight times less likely to complete college than those who have not been involved in the justice system.[37] Institutional policies and procedures can either raise or lower these hurdles, yet too often they are stigmatizing and have a negative impact on student success.

For instance, more than half of CCA's responding institutions reported that they distinguish or require some level of supervision for students with criminal records who are admitted.[38] These procedures range from imposing specific class registration restrictions, entering students' names into special databases, restricting housing options, providing court documentation of their criminal history and judgments, paying for criminal background checks, assigning additional surveillance by campus security, or restricting students to exclusively online classes.[39] Nearly one-third (32 percent) of these institutions restricted access to student services (like student housing and Greek life) for students with a criminal record, and 6 percent included an annotation on the student's transcript.[40] While some students have created supportive networks for formerly incarcerated individuals, these are typically developed without guidance or support from the administration.[41]

In sum, it is clear that criminal screening of college applicants is common, and yet research has not found evidence that CJI admissions policies have served their intended purpose: making campuses safer. Such policies do, however, dissuade potential students from applying, yield denials of admission, and limit postsecondary opportunities for students of color, particularly Black and Latinx students, because of racial disparities in criminal justice involvement.

It is clear that criminal screening of college applicants is common, and yet research has not found evidence that CJI admissions policies have served their intended purpose: making campuses safer.

The graduating class of 2019 from the Moreau College Initiative in Westville, Indiana celebrates earning their degrees while at the Westville Correctional Facility.
CREDIT: PETER RINGENBERG

CREDIT: REBECCA SANABRIA

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: ELIMINATE USE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE INFORMATION

Our nation's correctional facilities disproportionately incarcerate people of color, people from low-income backgrounds, and people without college degrees. In other words, the justice system imprisons individuals from the same populations that have been historically excluded from our nation's postsecondary institutions. Higher education holds the unique potential to fundamentally transform society and help neutralize key facets of injustice.

TO REALIZE THIS POTENTIAL AND REMEDY THESE INEQUITIES, INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS SHOULD:

NO LONGER CONSIDER CJI OR CRIMINAL HISTORIES WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Using CJI in the admissions process discriminates against Black people and other people of color, as they are more likely to have been involved with the justice system due to racist and oppressive policing and sentencing practices. These policies close doors for already marginalized students, in addition to missing the opportunity for potential recidivism reduction and personal growth for justice-involved individuals.

PROVIDE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO STUDENTS WITH CRIMINAL HISTORIES TO NAVIGATE PROGRAM SELECTION AND TRANSITIONS INTO CAREERS:

While college admissions offices may not have control over employment laws and regulations around licensing, they can support students in applying for and declaring majors that will provide educational enrichment, social mobility, and employment opportunities post-graduation. If institutions are collecting CJI, they also should be providing guidance and support for students to select majors. Should institutions no longer require CJI as part of the admissions process, they can partner with career services to make this advising available to all students.

IF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS CONTINUE TO USE CJI, THEY SHOULD:

EXAMINE THE INTENT AND EFFICACY OF COLLECTING THIS INFORMATION:

Institutions should carefully consider why and how they are currently using CJI and use their own data to better understand the impact these policies have on campus diversity.

PROVIDE OPEN-ENDED SPACES FOR CONTEXT:

Applications should provide enough open-ended space for the prospective student to provide the full context of their CJI that only they understand. Further, applicants should never be required to pay for a background check. To give these students the chance to be considered for admission, institutions must reevaluate how to best collect CJI in a holistic way to provide students with the dignity and agency to best share their own stories.

INVOLVE DIVERSE DECISION MAKERS:

If CJI is to be reviewed through a secondary panel review process, institutions should convene a diverse group of practitioners, including diversity and inclusion officers, individuals with counseling or social work backgrounds, and administrators who have developed a deep and nuanced understanding of the justice system, including how parole impacts students. There should be training on the history of and persistent inequities in the mass incarceration system so decision makers are equipped with the necessary nuance to review these applications.

RESPECT STUDENTS' PRIVACY:

Students should have full control of their own story, so while admitting students with criminal histories may make for interesting or uplifting news, admissions offices should never publicly disclose this information without explicit informed consent.

ISSUE STANDARD TRANSCRIPTS:

Institutions should not mention criminal history on transcripts, as it may impact future housing, employment, insurance, income, and other professional development opportunities.

IHEP

CHAPTER 7

STRENGTHENING TRANSFER PATHWAYS

The majority of students attending selective four-year institutions arrive via a traditional college admissions pathway: applying during their senior year of high school and enrolling as first-time students the following fall.[1] But the traditional pathway is not the only pathway, and failing to account for that means failing to meet many students' needs.

There are a variety of reasons a student may choose to start college at a two-year institution. For some, the high costs of attending four-year institutions may be insurmountable. Others find that family obligations and work responsibilities make flexible schedules and the ability to stay close to home a priority. For others, the opportunity to demonstrate their academic ability in a college setting can help them gain confidence, while increasing their odds of admission to more selective four-year institutions.[2] In all of these circumstances, starting at a two-year college can appear to be a more affordable, flexible, and accessible route to a bachelor's degree. But research suggests transfer pathways are complex—and too often, institutional barriers halt student progress.[3]

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies

"I feel like you don't have that one person to walk you through the transferring process. It's like you're independent...you're on your own."

—A student from a low-income background who transferred from a two- to four-year college

Four-year institutions should do more to improve this process, including: (1) recruiting and enrolling transfer students; (2) applying transfer credits toward a degree; and (3) supporting transfer students through to completion. Four-year institutions' actions to improve the transfer student experience have profound equity implications for our higher education system. That is because community colleges disproportionately enroll students of color and students from low-income backgrounds: 15 percent of community college students are Black; 24 percent are Latinx; 2 percent are American Indian or Alaskan Native; 7 percent are Asian; and 45 percent are from families making less than $25,000 per year.[4] Currently, these students are not receiving the support they need to achieve their postsecondary goals: despite the fact that the vast majority of community college students enter college with the intention to earn a bachelor's degree, few transfer to a four-year institution or finish a bachelor's degree.[5]

Many four-year colleges and universities—especially selective institutions that have substantial resources to support student success—do not meet the needs of community college transfer applicants. To better serve this promising and diverse population, four-year institutions should actively recruit community college students. Recruitment efforts should include clear and proactive communication with prospective transfer applicants early in their postsecondary careers. Such communication should specify expectations and requirements for admission to help transfer students navigate their options and feel valued by prospective four-year institutions. Further, four-year schools must prioritize the development of clear, straightforward, and affordable pathways to admission for community college transfers that include seamless transfer of credit, so that students are not forced to waste time and money repeating coursework at their receiving institution. Finally, four-year institutions should create supportive and welcoming environments to meet transfer students' unique needs to ensure their academic progress continues post-transfer. These supports should include academic and student services as well as financial aid.

Many four-year colleges and universities—especially selective institutions that have substantial resources to support student success—do not meet the needs of community college transfer applicants.

MANY STUDENTS OF COLOR AND STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS START THEIR JOURNEY TO A BACHELOR'S DEGREE AT A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE, BUT INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS MEAN FEW SUCCESSFULLY TRANSFER AND COMPLETE

Community colleges are often highlighted for their role in the democratization of higher education.[9] **Serving five million students across nearly 950 institutions, they typically attract students seeking lower tuition and more flexible schedules, such as returning adult students and students who need to balance work, school, and family responsibilities.**[10] Despite these advantages, the research consensus suggests that the uncertainty and complexity of transfer pathways mean that students who start at community colleges are less likely to reach their educational goals compared to similar students starting at four-year schools.[11] Indeed, while more than three-quarters (77 percent) of community college students start college with the intention to earn a bachelor's degree, only 25 percent of all students, and 15 percent of students from low-income backgrounds, successfully transfer to a four-year college.[12]

White students who start at two-year institutions are approximately twice as likely as their Black and Latinx classmates to complete a bachelor's degree within six years.[13] These patterns echo inequities at the system level. For example, California community colleges with more Black and Latinx students and those in lower-income areas had lower transfer-out rates than those with higher White enrollments or in higher-income areas.[14]

Low transfer-out rates among community college students are mirrored by low enrollment of community college transfer students at four-year colleges, and in particular, at selective institutions that are well resourced to support transfer students' success. An analysis of enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reveals that less than 10 percent of students at selective four-year institutions are transfer students, and transfer enrollment rates are even lower at highly selective public (6 percent) and private (6 percent) institutions (Figure 7.1). These numbers capture transfer enrollment from *any* institution, including other four-year colleges, so the enrollment rates of community college transfer students are even lower. Indeed, research finds that transfer students who are admitted to selective institutions tend to come from other four-year colleges and universities, rather than community colleges.[15]

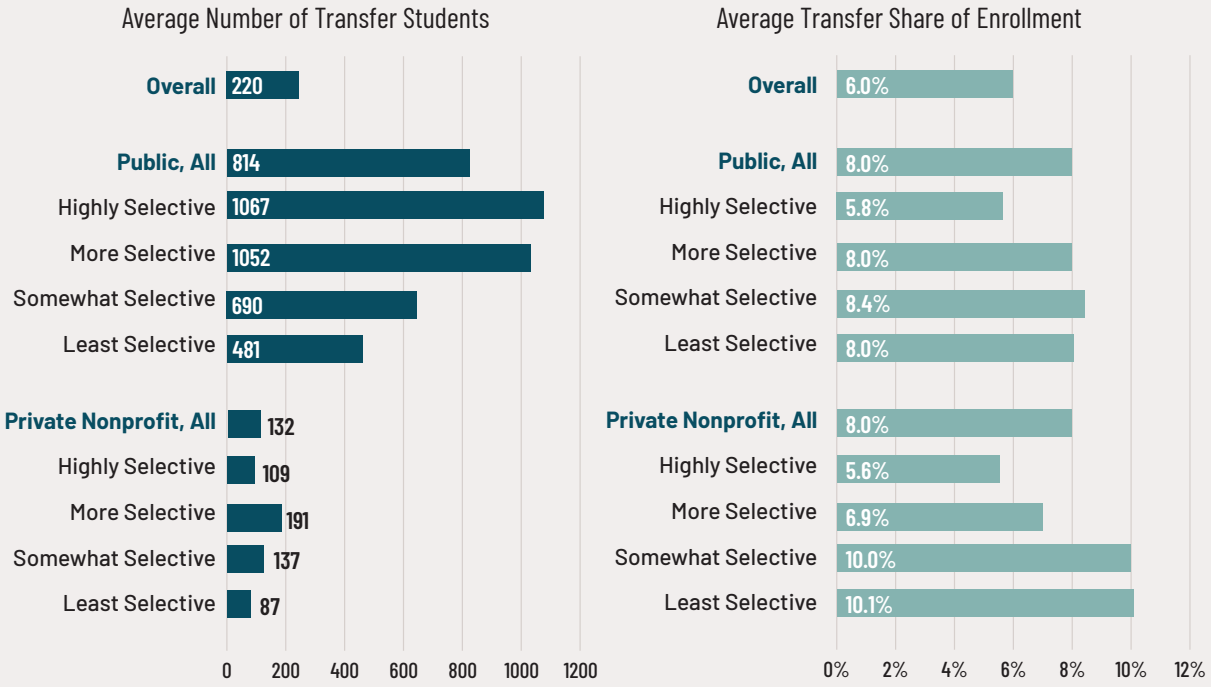
Low enrollment rates of transfer students and low bachelor's degree completion for students who start at a community college occur in part due to inadequate recruitment at community colleges, restrictive credit acceptance policies, and insufficient focus on the specific needs of transfer students at their receiving institutions. **Four-year institutions can do better, and indeed, as more and more colleges face enrollment challenges, it is in their best interest to do so.**

What is a Community College?:

Community colleges are public two-year institutions that predominately offer associate's degrees and short-term certificates. The term "community college" primarily refers to institutions that serve the local community. These schools often provide coursework and degree programs in technical fields, recreational or non-degree courses,employer-sponsored training, dual credit courses for high school students, and associate's degree programs in a variety of fields, including transfer-oriented liberal arts degrees.[6] Community colleges often serve students who already reside close to campus; often strive to provide flexibility to students juggling work, child care, or other commitments; and typically charge much lower tuition than four-year institutions.[7] Community colleges also offer open access admissions: all students who have obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent can enroll, regardless of previous academic performance or test scores.[8] While public two-year institutions might use other naming conventions or describe themselves as technical colleges or junior colleges, we use the term "community colleges" in this report to encompass all public two-year institutions.

FIGURE 7.1

Average Transfer Enrollment Among Selective Four-Year Institutions



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions and for-profit institutions. Because selective public institutions tend to be larger, these schools, on average, enroll higher numbers of transfer students than private institutions—though the share of the student body who is admitted via transfer is similar to the share at selective private institutions. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

INADEQUATE RECRUITMENT JEOPARDIZES THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER

Selective colleges and universities understand the importance of proactively recruiting students and supporting them throughout the admissions process. But their application of these practices to recruit prospective community college transfers is limited. (For more information on recruitment strategies of selective institutions, see Chapter 1). Some college officials recognize the benefits of community college partnerships: in a survey of admissions professionals at four-year schools, 62 percent said partnerships with local community colleges were an important piece of their transfer admissions strategy.[16]

The research suggests that receiving institutions can and should play an active role in recruitment of community college students, and that these efforts can lead to higher rates of transfer and baccalaureate attainment among community college students.[17] A handful of institutions have seen firsthand the advantages of developing tailored recruitment strategies for transfer students (see Selective Institutions with Promising Approaches to Transfer Student Recruitment). These strategies include beginning to recruit potential transfer students before they graduate from high school, working closely with community colleges to identify students who are most ready to transfer, accommodating the need for quick enrollment decisions, and providing credit evaluation in a timely manner.[18] The evidence remains limited,

but these recruitment practices have shown potential for increasing transfer student enrollment from community colleges, creating pathways for more students to earn bachelor's degrees, helping institutions meet their enrollment goals, and improving equity on campus.[19]

Selective Institutions with Promising Approaches to Transfer Student Recruitment

While many institutions do not prioritize recruiting, enrolling, or funding transfer students, there are several selective institutions that serve as an exception to the rule. For instance, the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill recruits prospective transfer students while they are still in high school, in part through guaranteed admissions for in-state high schoolers who first attend community college and complete certain course requirements. The University of Central Florida provides academic advising to community college students to help identify and provide guidance to prospective transfer students. Several others have implemented quick turnaround credit evaluation services, which helps students understand which credits will transfer before they enroll at a four-year college. These institutions include St. John's University, the University of Scranton, and Loyola University of Maryland.[20]

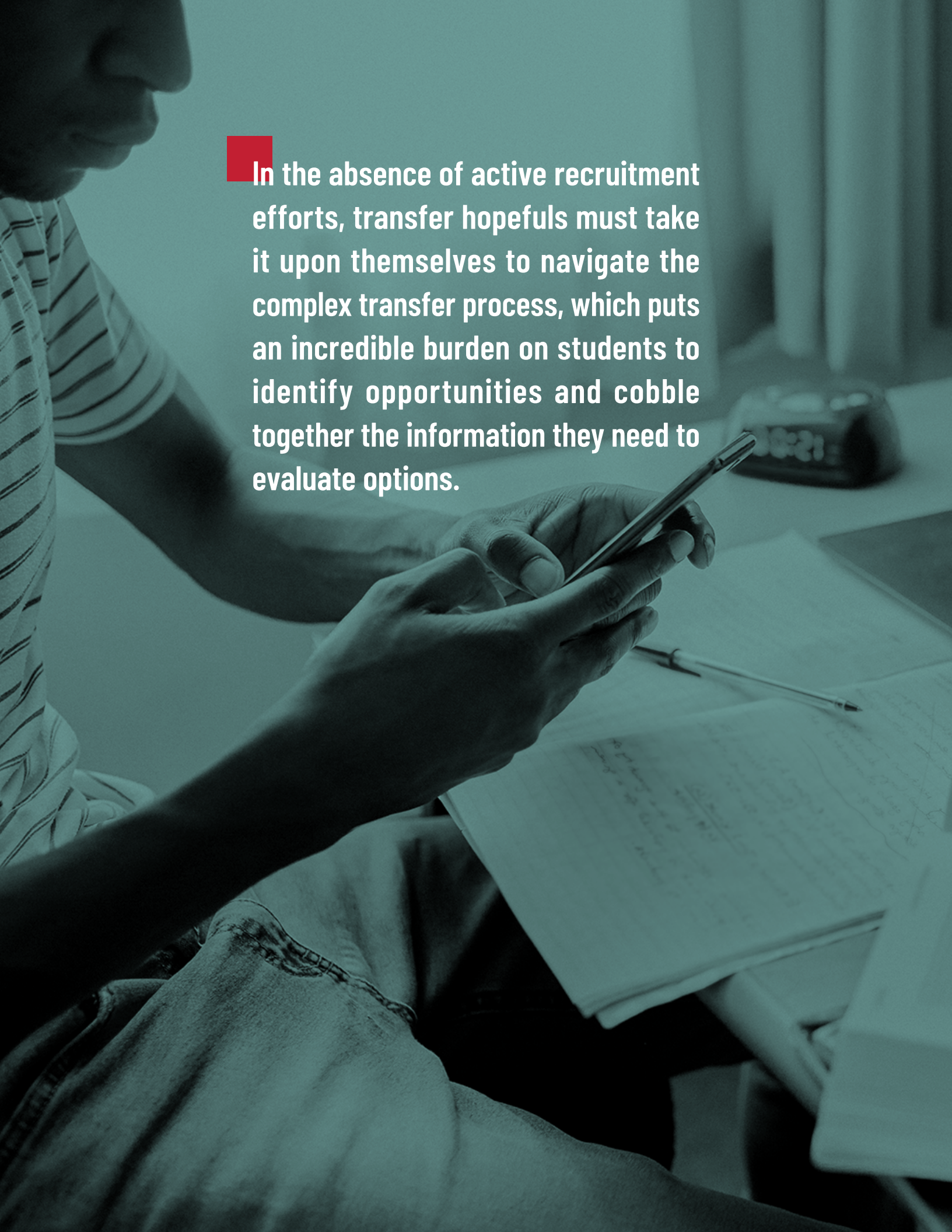
Unfortunately, many selective colleges and universities have not yet implemented these strategies or realized their benefits, and community college students are much less likely to transfer to these more selective institutions.[21] While four-year institutions spend substantial sums to recruit undergraduates—expenditures that have been increasing over time—the median four-year institution allocated just three percent of its recruitment budget to transfer student recruitment.[22] Furthermore, many four-year schools prioritize recruitment strategies designed with high-school students in mind, such as high school visits, communication with parents, and relationships with high school counselors.[23] These practices are unlikely to reach prospective transfer students. To strengthen transfer pathways, selective institutions should consider additional recruitment strategies, such as building relationships with nearby community colleges and developing a national and regional strategy for recruiting community college students from other areas. Such efforts can encourage community college students to consider broader geographic areas for their educational careers,[24] which is particularly important for students living in regions with limited educational options.[25]

POOR INFORMATION CREATES BARRIERS TO ADMISSIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

In the absence of active recruitment efforts, transfer hopefuls must take it upon themselves to navigate the complex transfer process, which puts an incredible burden on students to identify opportunities and cobble together the information they need to evaluate options. At a minimum, institutions should provide clear and readily available information about transfer admissions and requirements on their websites to assist students in navigating these complex pathways to a bachelor's degree.[26]

Even with comprehensive transfer policies, limited information about the process and requirements can create barriers. For example, although the University of California (UC) system has a systemwide guaranteed transfer process for applicants enrolled in state community colleges, each UC campus retains the autonomy to set its own admissions requirements. The resulting variation in requirements makes it difficult for California's community college students to navigate their various transfer options, course requirements, and admissions criteria. Ultimately less than half of students who applied through this guaranteed transfer program were admitted to a UC school.[27] Unsurprisingly, other research has demonstrated that a lack of clear transfer information can cause students undue stress during the process, and the high degree of uncertainty in whether their credits will transfer can prove discouraging.[28]

While admission websites and online resources for four-year institutions may provide the information students need to transfer successfully, research has found that this vital information is not readily available on many institutional web pages. A report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 29 percent of these websites lacked information on the articulation agreements that are currently in place.[29] So while at least 30 states have statewide articulation policies that should ensure the transfer of lower-division courses and guarantee transfer of an associate's degree obtained at a public community college, the students who could benefit from this information are unlikely to find it.[30]



In the absence of active recruitment efforts, transfer hopefuls must take it upon themselves to navigate the complex transfer process, which puts an incredible burden on students to identify opportunities and cobble together the information they need to evaluate options.

How Can Articulation Agreements Smooth Transfer Experiences?

Articulation agreements are one common strategy to develop transfer pipelines and reduce or eliminate structural barriers to transfer success. Articulation agreements can be mandated by state legislation or other state policies. Or they may be developed on a case by case basis by an institution's leaders, including the board of trustees or board of regents, state governing boards, or community college system leaders.[31] Common types of articulation agreements include:[32]

- **Bilateral agreements or 2+2 transfer degree agreements:** Also referred to as "guaranteed transfer," students who earn an associate's degree or complete transfer requirements are guaranteed transfer of all credits. They enter the four-year institution at the junior-standing level.[33]
- **Transferable general education core courses:** All public institutions offer a set of general education courses and this set of courses is fully transferable across institutions, even if institutions use different naming conventions.
- **Common course numbering:** All lower-division courses at participating public institutions have a uniform system of course numbering, which makes the credit transfer process easier.
- **Reverse transfer:** Public institutions retroactively grant an associate's degree to students who transferred from a two-year to four-year institution before completing the full requirements of an associate's degree.

Despite evidence that properly designed articulation agreements can help students transfer their credits *once admitted* to a four-year institution, the research shows that articulation agreements currently in use have limited success in increasing transfer rates.[34] The design and implementation of these policies matter if they are to effectively support smooth two- to four-year transfer.

AFTER STUDENTS TRANSFER, CREDIT LOSS CAN WIPE OUT THEIR PROGRESS TOWARD A DEGREE

A receiving institution has the discretion to determine whether to accept an incoming student's credits, and it is often difficult to predict which credits will transfer before a student has gained admission.[35] Without a smooth transfer of credits, incoming students risk losing valuable time and money, to the detriment of their progress toward earning a four-year degree. The GAO estimates that approximately 43 percent of credits are lost nationwide through the transfer process.[36] In fact, students who transfer from public two-year to public four-year institutions lose approximately one in five credits (22 percent) while transferring.[37]

Students from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately harmed by this credit loss.[38] Repeating coursework requires additional financial resources, time, and energy, undermining the notion that two- to four-year transfer is an effective strategy for keeping overall college costs low.[39] And transfer students who retake classes that did not transfer often pay higher tuition and fees at their new school, adding to the expense of retaking courses.[40] Racial disparities in credit loss are also concerning. One study of transfer students in North Carolina found that the average White student lost about 6 percent of his or her credits during the transfer process, compared to 15 percent for the average Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander student, 10 percent for the

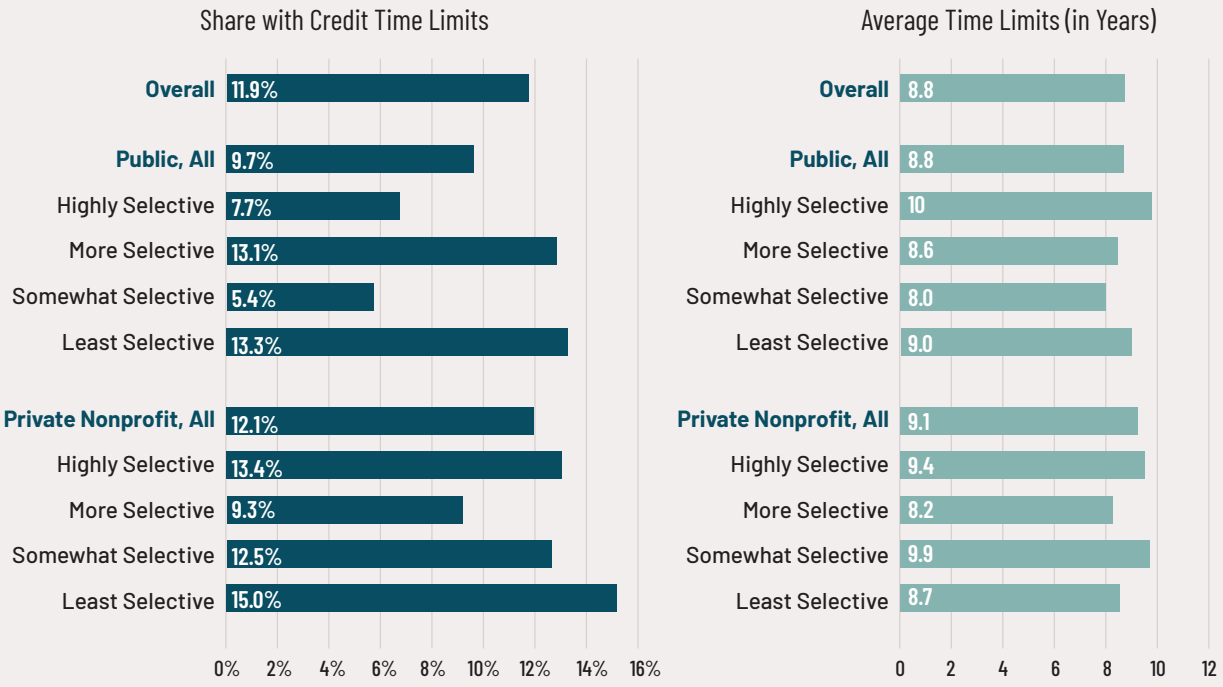
Repeating coursework requires additional financial resources, time, and energy, undermining the notion that two- to four-year transfer is an effective strategy for keeping overall college costs low.

average Black or Asian student, and 9 percent for the average Latinx student.[41] Credit loss during the transfer process often extends the amount of time it requires students to ultimately earn their degree, delaying their entrance into the workforce[42] and reducing their chances of eventually obtaining a bachelor's degree.[43]

Transfer students can lose credits for a number of reasons, including when prior coursework does not meet the requirements of the receiving institution, an issue that poor advising or a lack of clarity in credit equivalencies exacerbates.[44] Students can also lose credits if the receiving institution sets time limits on which credits will transfer, a practice used by approximately 10 percent of selective public and 12 percent of selective private institutions (Figure 7.2). These policies function much like "expiration dates," after which prior coursework will no longer be recognized. The average institution with time limits reported that credits were no longer transferrable after 8–10 years. Some institutions reported much shorter time limits. **This can mean that those who seek to return to school after stopping out for a few years may be unable to have their previous coursework recognized, further disadvantaging returning adult students, who are typically students from low-income backgrounds or students of color.**

FIGURE 7.2

Credit Loss Policies Among Selective Four-Year Institutions



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative. 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, foreign institutions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

In other cases, credits that are considered transferable may not align with or count toward general education requirements or prerequisites for a particular major. In these cases, students would receive credit but still risk entering their new institution behind schedule to graduate.[45] Certain majors like nursing or engineering might carry specific prerequisites and transfer students might find themselves already behind on these progressions by the time they enroll. In other cases, admission to specialized schools within an institution—such as education or business—requires students to apply in their freshmen or sophomore year, meaning that transfer students might miss out on the application cycles and find it difficult to access the necessary courses when they do enroll. Overall, transfer students are underrepresented in STEM fields, and difficulties with credit transfer may be one reason for this disparity.[46]

FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS MUST PROVIDE FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT TO HELP INCOMING TRANSFER STUDENTS THRIVE

Just like those students who attend four-year institutions directly after high school, transfer students require—and deserve—the financial and social supports that can increase their chances of college success.

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Institutional practices can help boost the success of transfer students. For example, research shows that while students can experience "transfer shock," or difficulty adjusting to the culture at the receiving institution, those colleges and universities that engage in proactive outreach to incoming students and develop welcoming campus environments can help them maintain their academic performance and overall well-being.[47] One study, based on in-depth interviews with Mexican American community college transfer students, noted the "isolation" and "insecurity" these students felt at their four-year institution.[48] Quantitative work has also found that transfer students are less connected with their campus communities and use fewer support services provided by their school,[49] which may adversely impact academic success.[50] Institutions that cultivate a clearer understanding of the needs of transfer students—along with appropriate practices and programs to meet those needs—could help incoming students avoid these negative experiences.

Developing a transfer-receptive culture[51] among four-year institutions can help alleviate the frequency and severity of transfer shock and improve academic outcomes for transfer students. Four-year institutions with strong transfer cultures are defined by their support of students both before and after transfer,[52] including financial and academic support and an inclusive racial climate on campus. Extensive interviews with transfer students suggest that trusted authority figures, such as faculty or administrators, who take a personal interest in students' success can reduce transfer shock and promote degree completion. Likewise, support programs for transfer students that encourage a sense of belonging and develop social ties help them succeed. (However, these strategies are only effective when alongside robust affordability and financial aid policies,[53] discussed in detail in Chapter 8.)

At a time when more than one-third of Americans have either canceled or changed their education plans due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring students can transfer between institutions is as important as ever.[54] If implemented well, transfer policies can provide an alternative path to obtain a bachelor's degree for many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds and students of color. Four-year colleges and universities have an opportunity to improve the transfer student experience by better recruiting and enrolling transfer students, remedying shortcomings in their transfer policies, and better supporting the students who transfer into their institutions.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: STRENGTHEN TRANSFER PATHWAYS

Since students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students are often likely to start their journey to a four-year degree at a community college, four-year institutions that—intentionally or unintentionally—make it challenging for students to transfer perpetuate historical racial and socioeconomic inequities in higher education. Institutions have the power to implement equitable admissions policies that can disrupt these longstanding inequities. But doing so requires a commitment from the highest levels of institutional leadership and from those in the room when admissions decisions are made.

TO MORE SUCCESSFULLY ENCOURAGE STUDENT TRANSFERS AND IMPROVE EQUITY ON THEIR CAMPUSES, FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

ACTIVELY RECRUIT AND ENROLL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS:

Recruiting and enrolling transfer students can increase diversity on campus and can boost an institution's enrollment and tuition revenue.[55]

PARTICIPATE IN—AND CLEARLY COMMUNICATE—ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES:

Clear, straightforward, and affordable transfer articulation agreements can help prevent loss of credits and its subsequent cost burden, giving students from low-income backgrounds and students of color a clearer pathway to a four-year degree. Flagship universities and other public selective universities can work with community colleges or with state leaders to create equitable articulation agreement policies in the best format for their students, whether common transferable general education requirements, common course numbering, guaranteed transfer of an associate's degree (2+2), or reverse transfer or a combination of these strategies.[56]

SUPPORT STUDENTS DURING AND AFTER THE TRANSFER PROCESS:

To help students from low-income backgrounds and students of color successfully transfer and thrive after they arrive on campus, community colleges and four-year institutions should work together to offer additional supports, such as mentoring, academic advising, faculty engagement, tailored transfer orientation and transition programs at the receiving institution, and career counseling.[57] These services can help increase transfer rates and reduce "transfer shock."[58] Financial aid policies are a key part of four-year institutions' transfer support programs, and eligibility requirements for all aid programs should be reviewed with these students in mind.

Transparency on Transfer: Federal and State Policymakers Can and Should Leverage Data to Promote Equitable Transfer Policies

Federal and state policymakers should push for more transparency around transfer—including linking information about students' outcomes and experiences at their receiving institutions to their first school. Given that preparing students to transfer successfully is a key piece of the community college mission, understanding how students fare after they change schools is critical. This information could also help the public understand the odds of transfer admission, how effectively receiving institutions are meeting the needs of incoming transfer students, and which institutions transfer students previously attended—important factors for ensuring students who transfer from community colleges are effectively served by the four-year institutions in which they enroll.

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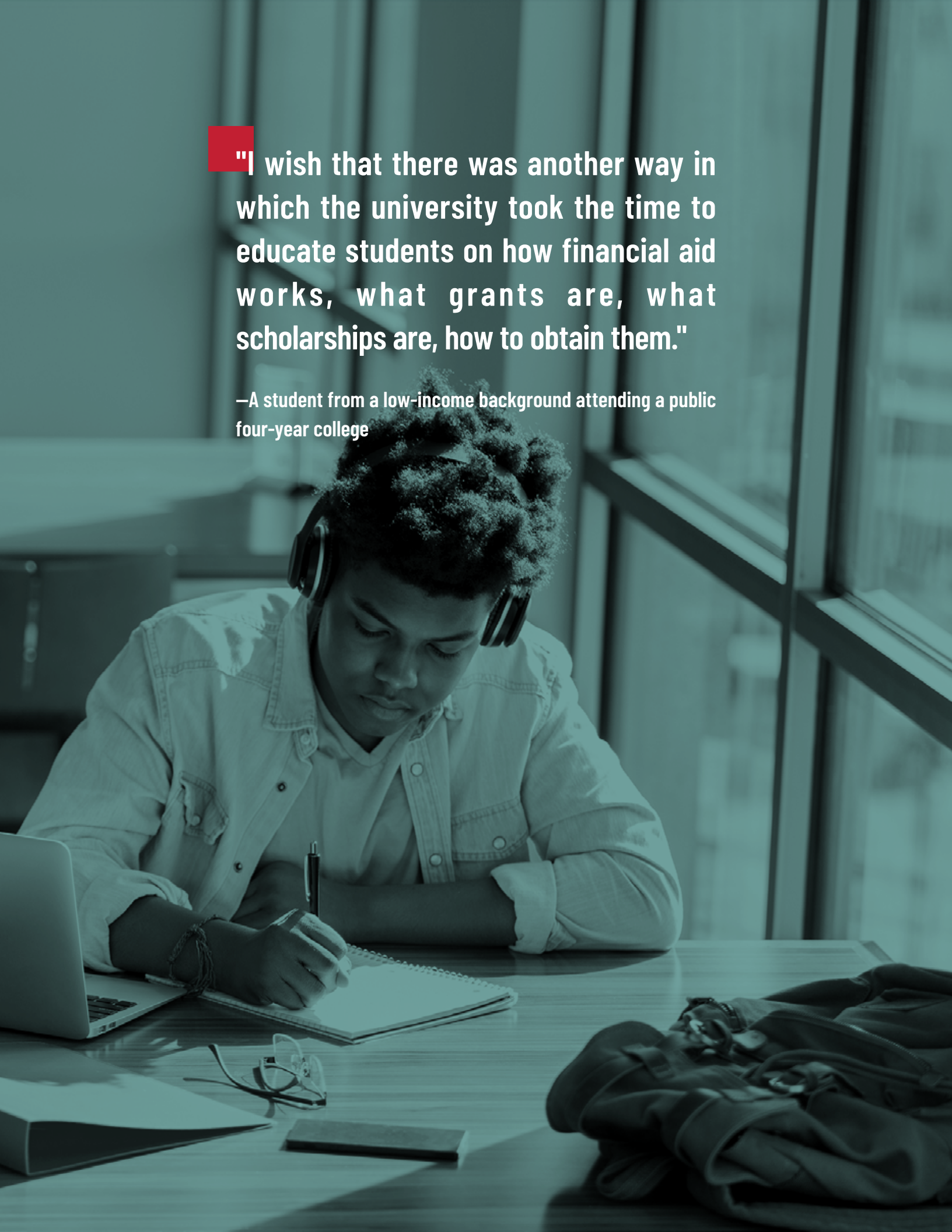
CHAPTER 8

INVESTING IN NEED-BASED FINANCIAL AID

For students who do gain admission to a selective college, figuring out how to pay for their education can pose substantial challenges to their enrollment and success.[1] Given the high costs of higher education today, need-based financial aid—from the federal government, states, and institutions—is a critical factor as students determine whether and where to pursue higher education. This is especially true for students with limited financial means. Along with rising costs, the declining purchasing power of the federal Pell Grant,[2] and falling per-student state appropriations for higher education,[3] the financial challenges students face today are greater than ever.[4] Institutional aid programs are a key lever for ensuring low-income and low-wealth students are not priced out of the education provided by selective, well-resourced institutions.[5]



"I wish that there was another way in which the university took the time to educate students on how financial aid works, what grants are, what scholarships are, how to obtain them."

—A student from a low-income background attending a public four-year college

Research consistently shows that financial aid awards influence student decisions about which college is right for them, both through the direct effect it has on putting an institution within reach financially, and because these awards signal to students how much a particular institution values them.[6] A significant body of evidence indicates that financial aid is an important recruitment tool,[7] consistently showing that financial aid awards increase the likelihood of a student enrolling at a particular school, especially for students from low-income backgrounds[8] and for Black[9] and Latinx students.[10] While research examining this relationship among Indigenous and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) populations is harder to come by, presumably the enrollment decisions of these groups are similarly impacted by the availability of grant aid.[11]

Indeed, the availability of financial support can affect whether students attend college at all,[12] whether they attend their first-choice institution,[13] and their academic outcomes during and after enrollment.[14] Given these realities, and because many selective four-year institutions have significant yet limited financial aid funding, prioritizing need-based scholarships ensures support for the students who need it the most.

Unfortunately, as discussed in Chapter 1, many selective institutions choose to recruit and financially support out-of-state students, those with high test-scores, and those from high-wealth families, a misallocation of limited financial aid dollars that has the effect of sacrificing access and diversity.[15] This institutional choice leaves Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, and students from low-income backgrounds, with a gap between what their family can afford and what they must pay. This gap, often referred to as "unmet need," can lead to dire situations for these students, including difficulty paying for basic needs like housing and food, working more hours than are conducive to keeping up with studies, and taking on unreasonable debt to finance college expenses.[16] In fact, material hardship generated by high levels of unmet need can cause students to leave higher education altogether.[17]

The research clearly shows that students' awareness of financial aid and perceptions of their own eligibility for grants can influence their application and enrollment decisions.[18] Without this information, students from low-income backgrounds and students of color are disproportionately likely to choose less selective education options or forgo higher education altogether.[19] Targeted outreach, streamlined aid eligibility, and support in financial aid application processes have been proven to increase the likelihood that students from low-income backgrounds will apply to and enroll in selective institutions with generous financial aid programs.[20] Therefore, to encourage socioeconomic and racial diversity on their campuses, institutions should effectively convey financial aid availability and criteria and provide support in completing the application process.

Because many selective four-year institutions have significant yet limited financial aid funding, prioritizing need-based scholarships ensures support for the students who need it the most.

How will COVID-19 affect institutional need-based aid?

The March 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic will have far-reaching implications for society at large, and higher education is no exception. Colleges and universities continue to wrestle with economic pressures, even as institutions move toward resuming in-person instruction. For public institutions, the adverse impact of the pandemic on state budgets has also generated fears of future cuts in higher education appropriations and spurred some institutions to compete with others to meet their revenue goals. For students, the financial implications of COVID-19 have been even more devastating, with a lagging economy exacerbating their financial needs at a time when institutions are relatively ill-suited to provide support.

At the same time, many institutions and states historically have awarded financial aid based in part on standardized test scores. In the face of pandemic-induced ACT and SAT cancellations, many schools have announced test-optional admissions policies (see Chapter 5), either on a temporary or permanent basis.[21] If institutions and states do not adapt their financial aid policies to follow suit, students from low-income backgrounds and students of color may miss out on critical financial aid. Institutions should take advantage of this moment to revisit institutional aid allocations, emphasize student need in the distribution of resources, and pivot toward more equitable financial aid policies.

Institutions typically allocate financial aid dollars using a combination of factors, including financial need and academic criteria.

Need-based aid provides money to students who demonstrate financial need. Institutional need-based aid programs typically determine need as the difference between a student's cost of attendance (COA) and their Expected Family Contribution (EFC).[22] COA is an assessment of the total cost of enrollment, including tuition and required fees as well as an estimate of living expenses, books and other necessary materials, and transportation.[23] EFC is an assessment of a family's financial strength based on income, assets, benefits, family size, and number of family members who will attend college that year, as reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).[a,24] Because COA is included in the definition of need, applicants at more expensive institutions, such as highly selective colleges that charge more in tuition and fees, are more likely to have need and to show higher amounts of need than those applying to low-cost institutions.

Non-need-based aid—or so-called "merit-based" aid—is typically awarded to students based on academic factors, such as high school GPA, SAT or ACT scores, or high school class ranking.[25] Given the well-documented racial[26] and socioeconomic biases[27] in standardized testing, and the unequal distribution of resources across K–12 schools,[28] the measures of "merit" used by many of these aid programs disproportionately benefit wealthy and White students[29] (see Chapter 5). Some aid programs include both need-based and non-need-based criteria, while others can include eligibility criteria unrelated to academics, such as athletic ability, military status, or plans to select a specific major or profession, among other factors.[30]

a. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 made changes to federal needs analysis, replacing the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) with a new calculation, called the Student Aid Index (SAI). Like EFC, SAI assesses a family's financial strength based on a variety of factors to determine eligibility for federal need-based aid and to serve as a financial indicator for state and institutional need-based aid. SAI will not consider how many family members attend college at the same time. These changes are set to take place for the 2023–24 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and academic year. See the text of this act at https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr133/BILLS-116hr133enr.pdf.

NON-NEED-BASED AID PROGRAMS DISPROPORTIONATELY BENEFIT WHITE AND AFFLUENT STUDENTS

Research on financial aid's impact on enrollment is robust and reveals a clear relationship between grant aid and higher education enrollment. In fact, enrollment rates increase by about four percentage points for every $1,000 in additional grant aid available,[31] and students from low-income backgrounds are even more responsive to additional grant aid.

Institutional aid, especially need-based aid, is vital for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color to enroll in postsecondary education. An additional $1,000 in grant aid has the potential to increase college going rates by three to four percentage points.[32]

Non-need-based aid programs, particularly those using academic criteria to allocate aid, disproportionately benefit students from wealthy or White families, who typically have access to better funded schools and other benefits like test preparation services (see Chapter 5).[33] For example, a recent study found that a high-income student from a household earning more than $167,000 per year would receive state or institutional grants to attend 34 of the nation's 50 public flagships.[34] At one-third of these flagships, this high-income student would receive $5,000 or more in aid—a substantial amount of funding that could be re-directed toward students from low-income backgrounds for whom aid is the deciding factor in whether they can attend college.[35]

Not surprisingly, research also shows that when institutions award aid using non-need-based factors, they enroll fewer students from low-income backgrounds. After statistically adjusting for other factors, selective private nonprofit institutions that adopted non-need-based aid policies between 1987 and 2005 had lower percentages of both Pell recipients and Black students than those that did not.[36] Indeed, Black and Latinx students are disproportionately represented in the ranks of students who receive need-based aid, while non-need-based aid dollars primarily support White students.[37] **Since institutional financial aid dollars are limited, devoting significant resources to non-need-based aid programs means fewer dollars are allocated for need-based programs.**[38]

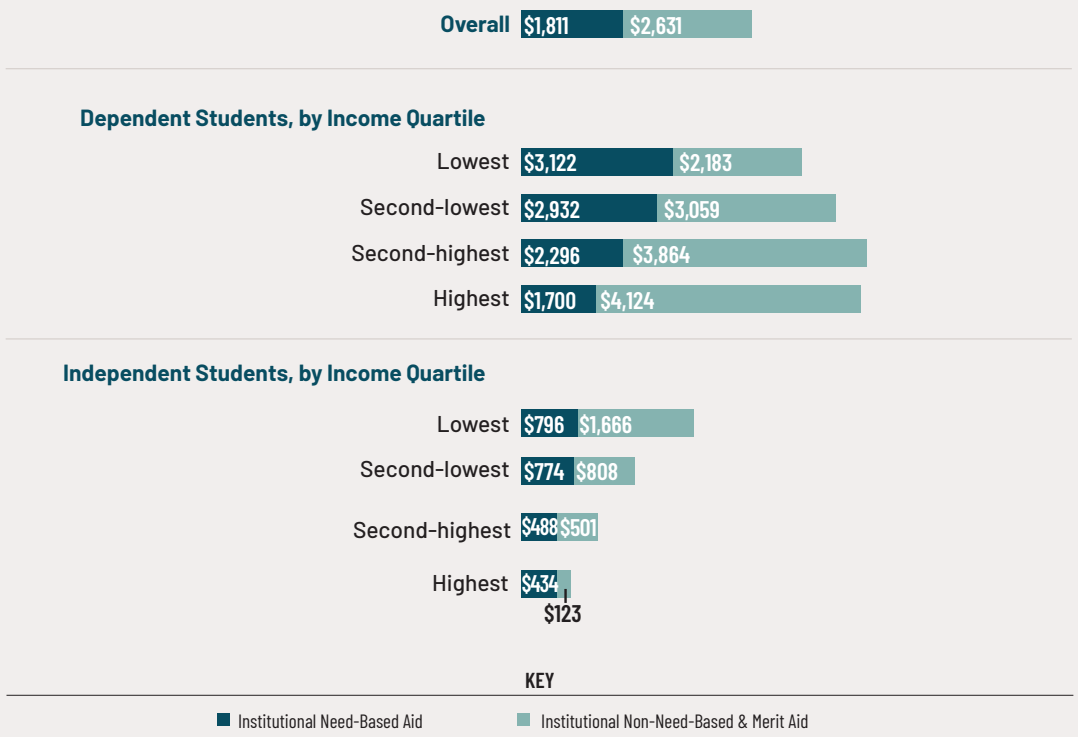
Despite this, as Figure 8.1 illustrates, four-year institutions that are at least minimally selective award substantial amounts of need- and non-need-based aid to high-income students. In fact, dependent students[b] from the second-highest income quartile receive the most institutional aid, with a majority of that funding coming from non-need-based sources. And despite receiving larger need-based grants than other students, low-income dependent students receive *less overall* in institutional grant aid on a per-student basis than students in any other income bracket. Independent students—those who do not rely on their parents for financial support and, as a result, tend to have fewer resources for college—receive even smaller amounts of institutional grant aid, need-based or otherwise, significantly limiting their ability to afford selective four-year schools.

Low-income dependent students receive less overall in institutional grant aid on a per-student basis than students in any other income bracket.

b. Financial aid determinations for dependent students are determined based on financial information of students and their parent(s) or guardian(s), while awards are made to independent students are based solely on the students' financial profile. Independent students include those who are at least 24 years old, legally married, enrolled in a graduate program, supporting children or other dependents, active-duty military or veterans, in foster care or designated wards of the court, emancipated minors, and those who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

FIGURE 8.1

Average Institutional Need and Non-Need-Based Grants, Among Selective Four-Year Institutions



Note: Includes public and private non-profit four-year institutions designated as minimally selective or higher. Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of data from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, a product of the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Computation by NCES PowerStats. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

Aggregate spending confirms these inequitable patterns of aid distribution. A recent analysis of institutional aid at 339 public four-year universities found that from 2001–2017, these universities spent $32 billion on financial aid programs that did not consider student need.[39] In fact, more than half of these universities doubled the amount they spent on non-need-based aid in that time period, with regional universities allocating more toward non-need-based aid programs than public flagships. One egregious example is the University of Alabama, which spent approximately $136 million, the largest amount of any university in this study, on non-need-based aid.[40]

The University of Alabama is not alone. In the face of mounting budgetary pressures, many public institutions provide large grants to students who can already afford college.[41] As state appropriations remain stagnant, tuition revenue from wealthier and out-of-state students bolster an institution's bottom line.[42] Some public universities therefore prioritize recruiting wealthier students, many from outside the state, because of their ability to pay more in tuition.[43] In order to convince many of these wealthy, out-of-state students to enroll, institutions offer them modest non-need-based aid awards, which limits the aid available to in-state students with financial need. (See discussion of out-of-state student recruitment in Chapter 1.)

While institutions spend large sums of money on non-need-based aid to recruit wealthy or high-scoring students, others—particularly Black, Indigenous, Latinx, underrepresented AAPI, and students from low-income backgrounds, all of whom have high levels of unmet need—are left with insufficient funding. In 2015–16, more than three-quarters of students received financial aid insufficient to fully meet their need, with Black and Latinx students experiencing unmet need at even higher rates. That year, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students were the most likely to have unmet need, while Asian American students had the highest dollar amount of need.[44] Nationally, despite low-income and independent students selecting lower-cost schools, they still face, on average, substantially higher levels of unmet need than their higher income peers (Figure 8.2).

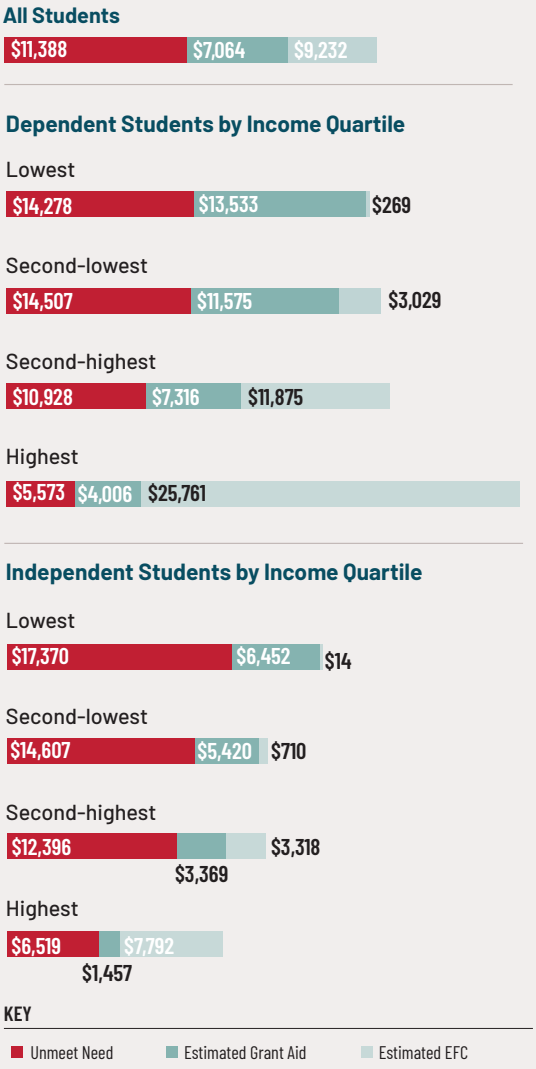
Furthermore, while annual figures are troubling, these costs add up over time. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds at some flagship institutions may need to cover as much as $80,000 more than what they can afford over four years—assuming they attend full time and complete their degree within four years.[45] In light of these affordability challenges, some universities have committed to awarding their aid dollars primarily based on need. The University of Kentucky, for example, announced in 2017 that it planned to significantly scale back its use of merit-based aid and award aid predominantly based on need.[46]

State Aid Programs Often Exacerbate Financial Aid Inequity Found in Institutional Aid Programs

States also play a key role in higher education affordability, both through providing direct appropriations to schools and through state-based financial aid programs. Unfortunately, 24 states spend more on non-need- than need-based aid, and many others have increased funding for scholarships based on test scores or high school GPA instead of need. One highly studied state non-need-based aid program is Georgia's Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) Scholarship. Studies have found that the HOPE scholarship provides students an average of approximately $1,600 (in 2020 dollars) in additional aid and increases college attendance rates by 3.7 to 4.2 percentage points.[47] However, research also shows that the HOPE program disproportionately benefits higher-income families and White students[48] and widens the college attendance gap between high- and low-income students and between White and Black students.[49]

FIGURE 8.2

Student Unmet Need by Dependency, Among Selective Four-Year Institutions and Income



Note: The full height of the bar represents a student's Cost of Attendance. Includes public and private nonprofit four-year institutions designated as minimally selective or higher. Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of data from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, a product of the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Computation by NCES PowerStats. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

INSTITUTIONS MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR INFORMING STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR ABOUT THEIR FINANCIAL AID ELIGIBILITY

Some selective institutions have already demonstrated that effective financial aid strategies can create affordable degree pathways for students from low-income backgrounds. For instance, the University of Michigan,[50] the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill,[51] and the University of Wisconsin–Madison[52] have all committed to providing sufficient grants and work-study opportunities to put their schools within reach for students from low-income backgrounds. However, these well-resourced institutions enroll relatively few such students. In 2017–18, less than 15 percent of students at the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin-Madison received Pell Grants, while just 21 percent of students at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill did.[53]

Many other institutions have implemented "no-loan" policies for some or all of their students, effectively promising students that they do not need to take out loans because their full need will be met through grants, scholarships, or work-study awards. School-wide no-loan policies are most common among highly selective, wealthy liberal arts colleges like Amherst and Pomona Colleges and Ivy League schools. However, several highly selective public institutions—including Michigan State University, among others—have also adopted no-loan policies for low-income and low-wealth students.[54]

In such a landscape, selective institutions that *do* meet the financial need of applicants from low-income backgrounds, via generous need-based aid programs or by guaranteeing students will not need to borrow, must also ensure that they actively provide information about admissions, financial aid availability, and eligibility to prospective students. Doing so has been proven empirically to dramatically increase application and enrollment rates among underrepresented students.[55] For example, research shows that the complexity of the federal financial aid system imposes cognitive and time costs on all applicants, and that these costs disproportionately burden students with fewer resources.[56] At the same time, uncertainty in aid eligibility—driven in part by large differences in aid packages from one school to the next and the fact that students do not receive aid notices until well into the application cycle—can deter students who are the most sensitive to financial factors from ever applying.[57]

Simple and transparent processes are most effective in ensuring that students from all backgrounds can access higher education and successfully earn a degree.[58] The extensive research supporting this conclusion includes one study that found students from low-income backgrounds often do not consider applying to selective institutions due in part to poor information on financial aid eligibility and cumbersome financial aid application processes, even when generous financial aid programs would make these options less expensive than others.[59] A similar study finds that when given information about financial aid eligibility as well as financial aid application support, students from low-income families are much more likely to apply and enroll in college.[60] Another study demonstrates that direct outreach to high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds, along with a promise of free tuition, *doubled* their application and enrollment rates.[61]

Designing Inclusive Financial Aid Programs

Institutions should ensure that their financial aid policies and eligibility standards do not exclude students who could benefit most. For instance, age limits can exclude older students from aid programs. Credit load requirements can pose challenges for working adults, student parents, or near-completers. Criminal history policies (see Chapter 6) can disproportionately disadvantage students of color.[62]

Taken together, these findings show that generous need-based aid programs are critical supports for historically underserved students. However, these programs alone are insufficient to radically improve access and success for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color at selective institutions. Instead, the evidence suggests that institutions' responsibility is threefold: (1) prioritize need-based aid programs; (2) invest in targeted recruitment of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color; and (3) offer adequate support throughout the application and financial aid processes.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: INVEST IN NEED-BASED FINANCIAL AID

Even as institutions face intensifying budget pressures amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, they should work to prioritize equity in tough financial aid decisions. Need-based financial aid improves access for students from low-income backgrounds and helps them afford, persist, and complete their education.[63] The available evidence confirms that need-based aid has an especially large effect on Black[64] and Latinx[65] student enrollment, findings that are likely to extend to other underrepresented groups, including Indigenous and underrepresented AAPI students. It follows that these programs are important tools for reducing racial inequities in higher education.

IT IS THEREFORE VITALLY IMPORTANT THAT INSTITUTIONS—PARTICULARLY WELL-RESOURCED INSTITUTIONS—DO THE FOLLOWING:

AWARD FINANCIAL AID DOLLARS BASED ON STUDENT NEED:

The allocation of financial aid dollars can make or break students' decisions about enrolling in selective institutions, and in earning a degree. High levels of unmet need put students from low-income backgrounds and students of color in precarious situations, often forcing them to choose between working more to meet their basic needs at the expense of their academic performance or dedicating time to academic studies and borrowing significant amounts to do so.[66] The best way to allocate limited institutional aid is to target aid to students with the most financial need and increase the likelihood that all students have a chance at a postsecondary education. Doing so will require difficult conversations about institutional priorities, in which equitable access and success should be centered. Prioritizing equity may also require difficult conversations with donors, who should be encouraged to give flexible funds that can support students from low-income backgrounds. While some institutions have shown leadership in directing aid toward students with the most need, financial aid remains poorly targeted at far too many institutions.

ADEQUATELY FUND TRANSFER AND PART-TIME STUDENTS:

Four-year institutions, particularly well-resourced selective four-year institutions, should ensure that part-time students and students who transfer from two-year institutions are eligible for and receive institutional financial aid. These students are disproportionately likely to be Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and

underrepresented AAPI students or students from low-income backgrounds. Providing them with adequate financial aid is necessary for them to persist and complete their degree.[67]

CLEARLY INFORM PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS ABOUT FINANCIAL AID AVAILABILITY, ELIGIBILITY, AND APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS:

For institutions that already provide generous need-based financial aid, or those seeking to adopt such policies, recruitment of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color must include clear, targeted information about aid availability and eligibility. General guidance on aid availability may be insufficient if students do not perceive financial aid programs as applicable to their specific situations. Tailored outreach is the most effective in promoting application and enrollment of students from low-income backgrounds and of students of color.[68] Institutions should avoid cumbersome aid application processes and should provide support to students throughout the application process. Institutions should ensure that their financial aid award letters use plain language, list grant aid and loans separately, and calculate students' net costs and estimated bill.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEDERAL AND STATE AID POLICIES

Federal and state policies also can improve access to need-based aid, supplementing institutional efforts to improve affordability for low-income and low-wealth students.

FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS SHOULD:

DOUBLE THE MAXIMUM PELL GRANT,

the cornerstone of federal need-based financial aid, and index it to inflation so the program catches up to and keeps pace with the rising costs of college.

PURSUE A FEDERAL-STATE PARTNERSHIP

in order to provide financial support to states in exchange for improvements in affordability.

STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD:

PROTECT AND INCREASE FUNDING

for state need-based aid programs, and award state grants on the basis of financial need.

REQUIRE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS TO AWARD A HIGHER PROPORTION OF INSTITUTIONAL FUNDS

to students based on financial need.

PROVIDE SUFFICIENT SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

to alleviate the pressure on institutions to turn to high-income and out-of-state students for revenue.

CONCLUSION

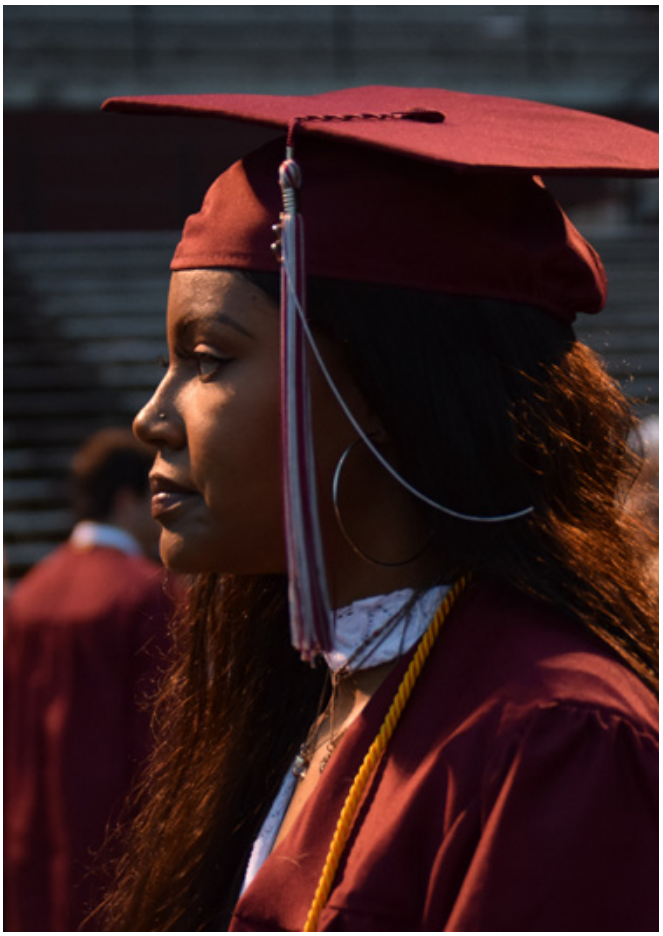
The research presented in this report makes clear that recruitment practices, early admission deadlines, the consideration of demonstrated interest, legacy status, standardized test scores, and CJI in admissions decisions, as well as unclear transfer pathways and the inequitable allocation of limited financial aid dollars, coalesce to limit postsecondary opportunities for underserved students. The college recruitment, admissions, and enrollment process has the potential to interrupt racial and socioeconomic inequities. But doing so will require institutional leaders to take a deliberate, critical look at all aspects of their recruitment, admissions, and enrollment pipeline and then adjust their policies and practices to prioritize equity.

This work starts with enrollment managers, admissions and financial aid officers, college presidents, policymakers, and advocates asking questions like:

- Do my institution's recruitment practices exclude any groups of students (e.g., low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, justice-impacted students, rural/urban/suburban students)? Do they favor certain students?
- Who benefits by placing a high value on certain criteria when deciding who is admitted? Who is harmed?
- Do my institution's admissions policies favor high-income, high-wealth, White, or non-first-generation students?
- Does my institution provide access to extra admissions resources and information or specialized opportunities to any students? If so, on what basis?
- How often does my institution review enrollment data to assess the impact of recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices on racial and socioeconomic diversity?

If the Varsity Blues scandal, COVID-19 pandemic, and continued acts of racial injustices have taught the nation anything, it is that the systems that structure our society are designed to maintain the privilege of those who have it. Unfortunately, this is true of too many colleges and universities. Institutions should not tout diversity, equity, and inclusion statements without interrogating the racist and elitist impacts of their admissions policies and practices. Institutions must move beyond words; they must take action to rid their campuses of policies that were designed to preserve White, wealthy spaces.

Colleges and universities wield great influence over who can access the life-altering benefits of higher education. That access not only impacts the life of individual students, their families, and community; it influences positions of power that determine societal structures for decades to come. History is rife with examples of institutions of higher education rising to great challenges. We saw this most recently with a global pandemic that forced colleges and universities to rethink many components of the system as we know it. These challenges offer opportunities for institutions of higher education to not accept the status quo, to change for the better, and to utilize their power to open that "most important door" to a racially and socioeconomically just world for everyone.



Colleges and universities wield great influence over who can access the life-altering benefits of higher education.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX: DATA AND METHODS

ANALYSIS FROM COMMON DATA SET AND INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM (IPEDS)

Unless otherwise noted, the figures and data analysis presented in this report and accompanying advocacy tools are licensed from the Common Data Set (CDS) through Peterson's merged with data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The CDS includes basic institutional characteristics, including IPEDs institutional identifiers, or "UNITIDs," in the file UX_INST. Peterson's describes this file as containing "general information about institutions....[which] includes institution name, location, functional definition, institutional control, religious affiliation or denomination, etc. Provides links to other internal and external data."

Data on institutional control are based on data reported to IPEDS in 2019. In the handful of cases where control data are not reported to IPEDS, the institutional control most recently reported to CDS is used. We exclude open access institutions, for-profit or federally controlled public institutions such as military academies and tribal colleges, and non-U.S. based schools from all analysis using CDS data.

Not all schools in the CDS file report a valid IPEDS UNITID. In 2019, there were 426 schools without valid UNITID information. Because any information provided to the CDS is strictly voluntary, it is impossible to fully explain missing UNITIDs across all institutions and survey years. However, it is also impossible to identify IPEDS information for these schools without making strong assumptions necessary to impute missing data. These schools are therefore excluded from all analyses utilizing CDS data.

Many of the schools with missing UNITIDs would not have been included in our analysis based on other sample criteria. For instance, of the schools with missing UNITIDs in the most recent survey year, 163 of are based outside the United States. Likewise, 159 schools without UNITIDs reported for-profit status to the CDS. An additional 70 schools without UNITIDs are classified as Associate's Colleges are not typically four-year schools, while 20 are private religious schools, which may opt out of IPEDS as well as federal funding and regulations.

DEMONSTRATED INTEREST AND LEGACY CONSIDERATION

Information on consideration of first-generation status, demonstrated interest, and legacy preference are drawn from the CDS file UG_ADMIS_FACTOR_ASSIGNS. Not all institutions providing institutional characteristics to CDS complete the admissions factors segment. The admissions factors segment of the CDS is only applicable to institutional admissions of first-year, first-time degree-seeking students; institutions that do not primarily serve this population typically do not appear in the admissions factor survey.

In 2019, 2,480 institutions completed this survey component. Of the institutions that completed this portion of the survey, 2,277 have valid UNITID information necessary to pair with IPEDS. Eleven of these schools are not found in the most recent year of IPEDS data, due to restructuring or closures, accreditation issues, or other valid reasons, leaving a total of 2,266 schools in our sample in 2019. An additional 194 institutions are either foreign-based, for-profit, or open access, and are therefore not included in our analyses.

TABLE A-1

Respondents and Analysis Sample for Demonstrated Interest and Legacy Consideration

Year	Total Respondents	Missing IPEDS UNITID	Not found in IPEDS	Merged Sample	Other Exclusions (open access, military, foreign schools for-profits)	Final Sample
2019	2,480	203	11	2,266	194	2,072

This section of the survey asks institutional representatives to rate these and several additional factors according to how highly they are valued in the admissions process, with options that include "very important," "important," "considered," and "not considered." In most cases we combine the "very important" and "important" categories in order to simplify the analysis.

We use variables for "level of applicant interest" to measure demonstrated interest, "alumni/ae relation" to indicate legacy status, "work" to measure colleges' consideration of work experiences, and "first generation" to reflect being the first in a family to go to college. However, CDS does not provide detailed definitions for any of these categories, and it is possible that variation in how institutions interpret these factors may affect how they respond to the survey questions.

TEST-OPTIONAL AND TESTING POLICIES

This section is compiled from data contained in UG_ENTR_EXAM_ASGNS section of the CDS analysis. Our analysis focuses on test score requirements for U.S. residents, because test score requirements for international applicants differ significantly from those used for domestic applicants. In 2019, only 2,139 institutions completed this portion of the survey. Of these, 140 were found to have missing UNITID information, while 51 were not found in the IPEDS universe. An additional 259 schools were dropped because they were not based in the United States, were for-profit or open access, or were military schools, leaving a final sample of 1,689. Table A-2 shows the number of respondents and exclusions from our analysis sample.

TABLE A-2

Respondents and Analysis Sample for Test Optional Policies

Year	Total Respondents	Missing IPEDS UNITID	Not found in IPEDS	Merged Sample	Other Exclusions (open access, military, foreign schools for-profits)	Final Sample
2019	2,139	**140**	**51**	1,948	**259**	1,689

On this portion of the survey, institutions are asked to report whether test scores such as the SAT and ACT are "required for all," "recommended," or "required for some." Schools are also given an opportunity to report which tests are required. For our purposes, if an institution requires any combination of SAT, ACT, or SAT subject tests for applications to be complete, that institution is considered as requiring admissions tests. Similar considerations are used for determining which institutions recommend or require testing of only some applicants. Because the categories used by the CDS do not map perfectly to "test-optional," "test-flexible," or "test-free" as described in the report, we present the data on testing requirements as it is reported to CDS.

EARLY DECISION

Information on early decisions policies is taken from the UG_ADMIS portion of the CDS survey, which includes information on application deadlines and application requirements for undergraduates and other student subgroups. In 2019, 4,126 institutions completed this portion of the survey. Of these, 426 did not provide valid UNITID information for pairing with IPEDS and cannot be merged. This leaves 3,700 institutions for analysis of early decision and early action policies. Table A-3 shows the number of institutions responding to the UG_ADMIS survey, as well as exclusions from our analysis sample.

TABLE A-3

Respondents and Analysis Sample for Early Decision and Early Action

Year	Total Respondents	Missing IPEDS UNITID	Not found in IPEDS	Merged Sample	Other Exclusions (open access, military, foreign schools for-profits)	Final Sample
2019	4,126	**426**	**59**	3,641	**1,888**	1,753

The admissions survey asks institutions to report separately whether they have an early action policy or an early decision policy. These responses are used to identify institutions that have either early action or early decision policies, as well as institutions that have both types of admissions programs. Institutions that do not affirmatively check these boxes are assumed to not have an early action or early decision program. These figures are used to calculate the number and share of institutions with an early admissions program, by type of program and type of institution.

Institutions also report the number of applications received and the number of students admitted under each admissions cycle, including regular admissions and early action or early decision programs, if applicable. These numbers are used to calculate acceptance rates under each type of program, enabling us to compare acceptance rates under different application types. However, because there is substantial missingness in these student counts for less selective institutions, some selectivity categories cannot be reported separately, and these categories are combined or excluded to improve data reliability.

NEED-BASED AID

Data on institutional financial aid packages are computed via the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16), through PowerStats. Using these data, we calculate the average amount of institutional grant aid received (variable name used: INGRTAMT), the average need-based award (INSTNEED), and non-need-based award (INSTNOND). Average awards are calculated by student dependency status (DEPEND) and by income percentiles within dependency groupings (PCTDEP and PCTINDEP). To mirror other analyses used in this report, only public and private nonprofit institutions that are categorized as minimally selective or higher are included in these calculations (SECTOR4 and SELECTV3).

To contextualize these awards in the context of student budgets, we also calculate the average student budget or cost of attendance (BUDGETAJ) in each dependency and income category for minimally selective private nonprofit and public institutions (SECTOR4 and SELECTV3). In addition, total need, or the difference between a student budget and his or her expected family contribution, as well as unmet need, or total need minus all grant aid and scholarship funds received, are used to compare how students attending different types of institutions are covering their higher education costs.

TRANSFER

The UG_ADMIS file (described above in the section on *Early Decision*) contains information regarding whether existing credits can be transferred to the receiving institution, and after how long they can no longer be transferred.

In addition, we leverage enrollment data from IPEDs to explore the number and share of admitted students who are transfers by selectivity and sector of institution. In this case, the analysis is drawn entirely from IPEDS data and is not merged with CDS files.

RECRUITMENT AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

The CDS does not include data on recruitment practices or admissions treatment of criminal justice involvement. For these chapters, we rely on aggregate survey results published by outside sources, including the National Association of College Admissions Counseling and the Center for Community Alternatives.

CATEGORIZATION OF INSTITUTIONAL SELECTIVITY

IPEDS data are used to compute selectivity categories for all institutions reporting data to IPEDS in 2019, and these selectivity rankings are later merged with CDS data. This ensures that selectivity categories are generated relative to the entire universe of postsecondary institutions, rather than only based on institutions reporting to CDS.

Selectivity categories are designed to approximate those used in the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which combines percentile rankings of admitted students' test scores and the percentage of applicants admitted to a school. In replicating these categories, we first combine SAT reading and math scores to produce a single score comparable to the ACT composite score. Institutions that submit test score data are ranked by percentiles according to the 25th and 75th percentile composite test scores. Since many institutions rely more heavily on either ACT or SAT scores in admissions, we generate percentile rankings only for schools where at least 25 percent of students report scores on that test. In addition, percentile ranks are generated at all schools according to the share of applicants admitted to the university. A composite score is then created, based on the combination of schools' percentile rankings on each measure for which they have valid data. For example, if a school does not submit test score data, its score is based only on the percentile rankings for which it does have valid values.

TABLE A-4

Average Test Scores and Acceptance Rates by Selectivity Category

Percentile	Highly Selective	More Selective	Somewhat Selective	Least Selective
25th Percentile ACT	26.1864	20.5519	17.9919	16.4387
75th Percentile ACT	31.1797	26.5683	23.7162	21.4151
25th Percentile SAT	1315.561	1136.975	1046.475	987.4279
75th Percentile SAT	1401.608	1241.854	1150.939	1086.125
Percent Rejected	79.1909	50.5304	48.1925	22.8682

Table A-4 shows the average test scores reported to IPEDS at both the 25th and 75th percentiles for ACT and SAT, as well as the average share of applicants rejected by institutions in each category. Open-access institutions are not included in these calculations and are instead considered their own category of selectivity. Open-access institutions are also excluded from tabulations of admissions considerations because they generally have much different application and recruitment processes. Foreign and for-profit institutions are similarly excluded from the analysis due to admissions policies that are not comparable to those of selective public and private nonprofit institutions.

COMPARISONS TO OTHER SURVEYS

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) Admissions Trends Survey gathers data from four-year colleges that are NACAC members.[1] The report provides findings related to a number of issues that impact the transition from high school to postsecondary education in the United States including recruitment strategies; the process for making admissions decisions; application, admission, and yield rates; and practices of high school counselors related to college admissions. NACAC received 447 responses from postsecondary member institutions to its admissions trends survey in 2019, with 326 completing all survey components. Because CDS data compiled and provided by Peterson's also is used by *U.S. News & World Report* in calculating institutional rankings, participation rates are much higher than for the NACAC survey. However, the NACAC survey provides information about recruitment practices which are leveraged in Chapter 1 of our report.

QUALITATIVE APPROACH AND DETAILS ON PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

IHEP spoke with a number of admissions practitioners and higher education policy experts to gain insight into the policies covered in this report. We used the CDS data to identify selective public institutions that use a particular practice in the most recent survey year as well as institutions that reported a change in their admissions policies in each area between 2013 and 2018 to develop a list of potential interviewees. We narrowed the list by prioritizing public flagship universities; institutional members of the College Board's Access and Diversity Collaborative (ADC), of which IHEP is a member; and interviewee diversity. Eight institutions were selected through snowball sampling. Ultimately, we were able to speak with representatives from 10 institutions. We also spoke with representatives from four peer organizations with expertise on these issues.

We created an interview protocol based on literature reviews and analysis of CDS data that were tailored to topics pertinent to each institution and organization. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, participant interviews were conducted via video conferencing software. Conversations lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and the majority were recorded and transcribed.

Additionally, we drew on qualitative interviews with low-income college students conducted for IHEP's Cost of Opportunity project.

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