A college degree is the ticket to a good job and the gateway to the middle class. But regrettably, the chance of gaining admittance to a top college today is often based more on parental wealth than student achievement. This is unfair, contrary to American values, and harmful to our nation’s future because it deprives us of the talents and brainpower of some of our brightest young people.

Instead of being the Land of Opportunity, America is the land of an income-based educational caste system, too often turning poverty into an inherited condition. A cash ceiling prevents many outstanding low-income students from entering college – especially the nation’s top colleges and universities. This cash ceiling must be smashed. Selective colleges and universities can further this effort by supporting equal educational opportunity for academically qualified students regardless of family income, opening their doors wider to high-achieving students from low-income families.

Intelligence and ability are spread across the population without regard to family wealth. But the enrollment at America’s most prestigious schools is dominated by the sons and daughters of affluent families, in part because the outreach and admissions practices used at these institutions result in affirmative action for the rich.

These unintentional biases are described in detail in a study issued by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation in January 2016 called “True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities.” This study found that a mere 3 percent of students at America’s most selective colleges and universities come from the poorest 25 percent of families. But a full 72 percent come from the wealthiest quartile of families. As a result, there are 24 wealthy students for each low-income student at America’s elite colleges.

Many flagship public universities are leaders in admitting students with financial need, but others lag far behind. For example, in 2014 over 35 percent of students at the University of California-Los Angeles received Pell Grants, which help low-income students pay for college. But at the other end of the scale, only 11 percent of students at the University of Virginia received Pell Grants in 2014.
Following up on our “True Merit” report, we launched a study to identify realistic steps that colleges and universities could take to remove barriers to equal educational opportunity, or at least reduce them. The study, still in progress, examines lessons learned from colleges that have succeeded in sharply increasing enrollment by high-achieving students from low-income families.

This Cooke Foundation Issue Brief looks at some preliminary findings of our new study, and makes six recommendations to shrink the huge educational opportunity gap between the economic haves and have-nots. The full report, which will provide greater detail, will be issued later this year.

Our six recommendations to selective colleges and universities are:

1) Make clear the true cost of college attendance after financial aid.
2) Encourage more low-income students to apply.
3) Make the college application process simpler.
4) Practice need-blind admissions.
5) Remove other poverty penalties in the admission process.
6) Recognize the barriers low-income students have overcome.

**1) Make clear the true cost of college attendance after financial aid**

The stated cost of attending college – tuition, fees, books, room and board, and transportation – has never been higher. According to the College Board, a “moderate” cost for all these things in the current academic year is about $24,000 for an in-state student at a public college or university and almost $48,000 at a private institution – with some schools charging much more.

Understandably, looking at these high costs gives many low-income students and their parents “sticker shock,” because the cost of a year of college can exceed the family’s annual income. This leads many families to conclude that going to college – especially a private college – is an unaffordable dream, so students simply don’t apply. This is a tragic mistake.

More affluent students and their parents – who are often college graduates themselves – have a greater understanding of financial aid and how it can lower costs of attendance. There is much colleges and universities can do to make clear to low-income students, who are frequently the first in their families to apply to college, that the real cost of attending is likely to be far lower than the sticker price because of financial assistance. This includes letting students and their parents know that financial aid can make it much cheaper for a low-income students to attend a private college than a public college with an ostensibly lower price.
Colleges and universities should:

• Discuss financial aid and discounted prices whenever attendance costs are mentioned. In other words, schools should state tuition as follows: “Tuition is $62,000 per year, except for students who come from families with limited financial means, in which case the tuition may be much lower or waived altogether.”

• Provide easy-to-access and easily understood information about financial aid, fee waivers and other financial supports on admissions websites. This is not a place for legalese.

• Allow students to estimate attendance costs using Pell Abacus, a net price calculator for low-income students who are eligible for federal Pell Grants. Pell Abacus is designed to be easy to use for students with limited knowledge about their family’s financial resources. Unfortunately, 40 selective institutions currently inexplicably block Pell Abacus.

2) Encourage more low-income students to apply

Selective colleges and universities have an important role to play in educating high-achieving students from low-income families about their institutions and encouraging them to apply.

Tenth grade students in the top academic quartile nationwide are only half as likely to apply to a selective college or university if they come from a poor family rather than a wealthy one. Many low-income students lack adequate guidance from their parents or counselors, who often are advising too many students and have limited experience with students applying to top colleges.

Colleges and universities should:

• Partner with K-12 schools and community-based organizations to identify outstanding low-income students. Use targeted messaging to tell the students about applying to selective institutions and financial aid.

• Bring high school students to campus for recruiting visits.

• Educate high school counselors about postsecondary options for high-achieving students.

3) Make the college application process simpler

Even for middle-class and wealthy students with college-educated parents and high school guidance counselors who have a reasonable number of students to advise, applying to college is complicated. For low-income students, applying to college can be an overwhelming challenge. Most have parents who have not gone to college and their high school counselors are overworked and understaffed.
Selective colleges and universities can help bright students from low-income backgrounds successfully apply by making the application process easier and offering extra guidance to students who need it.

Colleges and universities should:

• Provide more guidance and advice to student applicants upfront, without requiring applicants to ask for help.

• Automatically waive application fees for students who appear to be from low-income families. Our previous research suggests that not all low-income applicants eligible for fee waivers request them. Some colleges have begun automatically to give applicants a fee waiver if they are on free or reduced lunch or likely to be low-income based on other indicia in their applications.

4) Practice Need-Blind Admissions

To the greatest extent possible, colleges and universities should admit students based on their abilities, not parental income. By ignoring income in their admissions decisions, the schools create a need-blind admissions process that does not penalize students who require financial assistance. Realistically, however, this is not always possible for 100 percent of the student body, because colleges have limited funds to devote to financial aid.

Institutions with limited financial resources should practice need-blind admissions as much as they can. One selective college we spoke to, for example, indicated that it is need-blind for the first 70 percent of the admitted class, after which financial need comes into consideration.

Colleges and universities should award financial aid to students who need it, rather than on awarding so-called “merit aid.” Merit aid goes to students with high test scores, grades or other achievements regardless of family income. While the merit aid is good for college budgets because it helps attract middle-class and wealthy students who can pay most of their college costs, it reduces the amount of money available to make college affordable for low-income students.

5) Remove Other Barriers in the Admissions Process

Many common admissions practices at top colleges and universities unintentionally disadvantage outstanding low-income students. We encourage selective institutions to re-examine their admissions processes to assess how low-income applicants fare, when they fall out and whether certain practices give an unfair advantages to wealthy applicants.

Colleges and universities should:
• Track the progress of low-income students in the admissions process to identify “dropping out” points. One study of 19 selective colleges found that low-income students made up 12 percent of the applicant pool, but only 9 percent of admitted students.

• Critically assess how SAT and ACT scores are used to make admissions decisions. High-achieving students from low-income families are only half as likely as wealthier students to spend the money to take ACT and SAT prep courses, which raise student scores. And few low-income students can afford to take the tests more than once, giving an advantage to wealthier students who can take the tests repeatedly and submit only their best scores. As a result, heavy emphasis on small differences in scores can hurt low-income applicants.

• Examine the effects of admission preferences for athletes. At selective institutions, recruited athletes are as much as four times more likely to be admitted than similarly qualified applicants. However, athletic scholarships often don’t benefit low-income students. Many are offered for sports like squash, sailing, crew and water polo, which are not sports played in the vast majority of public high schools. In addition, many low-income students must hold part-time jobs during high school, making it impossible to participate in sports teams.

• Examine the value of continuing the admissions preference for so-called “legacy” applicants – students whose parents or relatives attended the college. The legacy preference constitutes the equivalent of a 160-point boost on the SAT, but rarely benefits students from low-income families. Research shows that the legacy preference does not lead to increased alumni giving, yet 80 percent of selective institutions still use it.

• Not penalize low-income students by rewarding applicants for “demonstrated interest.” For example, colleges that reward applicants who visit their campus disadvantage low-income students who can’t afford to travel. And many selective institutions are up to five times as likely to admit applicants who apply early, yet low-income students are half as likely to do so as they cannot commit to attending schools before having seen their financial aid package.

6) Recognize the Barriers Low-Income Students Have Overcome

Low-income students have access to fewer advanced learning opportunities. They attend schools that lack adequate resources and are focused on bringing students up to proficiency (rather than challenging advanced students), and that offer fewer college-level courses.

Parents of low-income students are often unable to provide academic support at home, and can’t afford to purchase many of the supplemental learning experiences – such as summer camps, tutoring, college courses and science competitions – that wealthy students receive.
When it comes time to complete college applications, low-income students receive less guidance. Their counselors are overworked and their parents, usually not college graduates, are often unable to help them write essays or navigate online applications.

As a result, college applications from low-income students often can appear less impressive than those of wealthier students. Institutions committed to admitting more low-income students are learning how to review more fairly applications from students from all economic backgrounds. From these colleges, we offer the following recommendations.

Colleges and universities should:

• Take note of a student’s background. Many things can provide clues as to whether a student grew up with limited means. These include the parents’ level of education, the parents’ occupations, whether they are racial or ethnic minorities, languages spoken at home, the number of siblings, the quality of the student’s high school, the high school’s catchment area and the student’s ZIP code.

• Review applications holistically and use the above-mentioned information about a student’s background during the review. Research shows that having more complete information on a student’s background increases acceptance rates of low-income students.

• Look carefully for signs of academic aptitude. A low-income student who travels a long distance to get a better education demonstrates ambition and dedication, even though the extended commute may preclude the student from extracurricular activities. Low-income students may also report fewer extracurricular activities because they lack funds to pay fees, or may need to spend time after school working or caring for a sibling.

• Recognize that students’ commitment, drive, “grit” and other factors are better predictors of collegiate success than grades and test scores.

• Compare applicants with students who attended similar types of high schools, rather than comparing students from a school serving primarily low-income students to students from wealthy schools. Recognize that letters of recommendations from overworked public school teachers may not read as well as glowing accolades from private school teachers.

• Give low-income students who have reached high levels of academic achievement credit for overcoming the barriers of growing up in poverty. A student from a low-income background who gets high grades or test scores despite growing up poor has accomplished more than a wealthy student with similar accomplishments but far more advantages.

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The American Dream is built on the belief that our nation offers those who are ambitious, work hard and play by the rules the opportunity for upward mobility and success. But without a college degree, the dream remains unfulfilled. By locking most bright but poor young people out of our most prestigious institutions of higher education we turn our back on them and betray our nation’s fundamental values. But by opening the doors of colleges wider through equal educational opportunity, we fulfill our heritage as a nation of endless possibilities for all our sons and daughters.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation is dedicated to advancing the education of exceptionally promising students who have financial need. It offers the largest scholarships in the U.S., comprehensive counseling and other support services to students from 8th grade to graduate school. Since 2000 it has awarded about $147 million in scholarships to more than 2,000 students and $90 million in grants to organizations that serve outstanding low-income students. www.jkcf.org