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# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Flagship Universities Must Pursue Excellence and Access

By EDWARD L. AYERS and NICOLE FARMER HURD April 22, 2005

Is success spoiling our great public universities? A growing number of educators, state legislators, and high-school students and their families have been asking that question. The answer is complicated.

The flagship institutions in our public systems of higher education play a crucial role in our civic culture, demonstrating that "public" and "excellent" need not be mutually exclusive. In many states, however, students and their parents believe that their flagship university is beyond their financial and academic reach. The rhetoric about "excellence" and "selectivity" is understood to mean "exclusivity." And there is truth to that suspicion. The drive to excellence may be preventing some of our best public institutions from fulfilling their public role.

The great private and public universities evolved together during the 20th century, and their curricula, faculties, and research agendas now have much in common. Indeed, economists have found that the most able students gain nothing measurable from going to an elite private institution rather than to a good public one; a degree holder from Pennsylvania State University does as well as someone with a degree from Princeton University. That's fortunate for our nation, since more than 75 percent of American students attend public institutions.

Despite the similarities, however, public universities remain accessible in comparison with their private peers. A recent survey of freshmen shows that 38 percent of students at public institutions come from families with incomes below \$60,000, compared with only 25 percent of students at private institutions. At the other end of the scale, 6 percent of the families of public-college students make more than \$250,000, while 16 percent of private-college families enjoy that status.

Students at public institutions are more likely to work while in college, more likely to have grown up in families where neither parent went to college, and more likely to have attended a public high school. Because of differences in tuition, they are also less likely to graduate with large amounts of debt. America's public colleges and universities truly do remain institutions for the aspiring.

So we face a dilemma. Because they are so good, public flagship universities are attractive to students; that has enabled them to be highly selective, which in turn has raised them in national college rankings. The more good students who want to come, the better those rankings; the more good students who are turned away, the better still. Public universities brag about the median SAT scores, high-school standing, and GPA's of their students, just as private colleges do. They have built impressive graduation and retention rates by bringing in students who are likely to stay and to graduate.

Those students deserve their place. They work hard, they serve their communities, they are idealistic, and they are fine young people. It is just that their high scores and accomplishments correlate with high socioeconomic status -- and there are other fine young people who do not come from the same fortunate backgrounds who could also take advantage of their premier state universities.

The flagships are in a bind. How do they pursue excellence and promote democracy at the same time? Both are necessary. It is important that excellence not be equated with private privilege, and that it be available to all.

To address that challenge, the University of Virginia has begun AccessUVA, a program that makes our university free for any qualified applicant whose family's income is up to 200 percent of the poverty level (or, right now, \$37,700 for a family of four). We have also promised that no one will leave UVA owing more than a quarter of the four-year cost of attendance for in-state students.

That is fine policy, but we still need to overcome suspicion and doubt bred by generations of experience. Until 35 years ago, our university admitted only a few women and African-Americans. In the years since, we have become more diverse in terms of gender and race, but we have become increasingly exclusive in terms of academic achievement. In fact, now that UVA's student body is majority female and one-third minority students, we are far more attractive to the most accomplished students. As a result, despite dedicated efforts by admissions-staff members to recruit students from across Virginia, our freshman class looks much like that of a private university in its wealth, family background, secondary schooling, work history, and expectations of pursuing an advanced professional degree. Capable students of modest means come to the University of Virginia, of course; a fifth of our students' families earn less than \$60,000 per year. But just as many families make more than \$200,000 per year.

Our great challenge, like that of other flagship universities, is to attract more students of modest means without diluting our hard-won excellence. A passive approach of merely holding tuition low starves the institution, undermining its excellence without attracting students of need. Instead, we are following an active strategy of cultivating knowledge about, interest in, and confidence toward higher education among students in poorer areas of our state.

A state university enjoys a crucial advantage in creating a socially and economically diverse campus: It is responsible to a geographically bounded area in which socioeconomic diversity often maps onto geographic diversity. Focusing on a poorer part of its state allows it to serve people who could flourish in higher education if given a chance.

To do that, we will be launching the College Guide Program next fall. The premise is quite simple: to join public-school administrators, counselors, and teachers, as well as TRIO programs and other community groups, to increase college-going numbers throughout the state of Virginia. The primary focus will be on those counties that have been underserved -- home to many of our low-income students and those whose families have not attended college.

While many institutions, public and private, serve their local public schools through community outreach, what we are proposing is more aggressive. We want to engage earlier and build collaborative and sustained programming to assist with the challenges throughout the state. Guidance counselors are overworked (the ratio is 353:1 in our public schools), and a recent nationwide survey found that almost two million undergraduates whose families were in the two lowest income brackets failed to complete a FAFSA form.

During the summer, 20 of our public-service-minded new graduates will spend eight weeks training to advise students on applying to college -- to vocational schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and to our flagship university. They will cover topics like applying for financial aid, preparing for standardized tests, and more. These young ambassadors for higher education will be placed as full-time guides in public schools and college-access programs in underserved areas throughout the state. The university will provide the guides, for the year they serve, with housing and service stipends and a \$5,000 grant to be used to pay off college loans or to put toward future education. The lead gift for the program came from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, and Nelnet just pledged \$40,000 in scholarship support for high-school students who are advised by our guides. In addition, numerous faculty members have volunteered to visit high schools throughout the state to discuss their fields of study and the nature of higher education in general.

The message that we hope to bring to high-school students is clear: Higher education, in all its various forms, is the path to a brighter future and is within reach. A student from southwest Virginia, one of the most economically depressed parts of the state, told us that the College Guide Program could give hope to his friends and family back home. Upon further research, we learned that in 2003, 293 students graduated from his high school. When the students were surveyed on their plans, 35 planned to attend a two-year institution, 16 planned to attend a four-year institution, three had other continuing-education plans, 13 were headed for employment, 10 for military service, and 216 had "no plans." We think our guides can help change that.

At a time when capital campaigns and efforts to increase endowments are the norm for colleges, cited as ways to ensure future excellence, why would UVa choose to create and support a program of this nature? The answer lies in our commitment to the public and the Jeffersonian ideal that education is the "resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the conditions, promoting the virtue and advancing the happiness of man."

The College Guide Program helps our state's high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities. It also helps our flagship institution in Charlottesville fulfill its democratic responsibility. By taking the lead in preparing all kinds of students for all kinds of postsecondary education, UVa enacts its public mission in a visible way.

The challenges we face in Virginia are those faced across the nation. Our flagship universities must reach out to all the young people of our states, valuing socio-economic and geographic diversity in the same way as other forms of diversity on our campuses. As public institutions, we need to enter into conversations with our elementary and secondary partners, our fellow institutions of higher education, and the citizens we are to serve. We must prove that there can be such a thing as inclusive excellence.

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