



THE ROOSEVELT INSTITUTION

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The Roosevelt Institution is a national network of student think tanks, dedicated to connecting college students' ideas to policy makers, and in the process, changing how our generation views policy and government.

During the 2006-2007 school year we focused on developing policies to solve the energy crisis, increase socio-economic diversity in higher education, and make the economy work for working families.

To find out more about the Roosevelt Institution or to download all of our ideas related to these challenges, please visit our website at rooseveltinstitution.org.

A Campaign for “Wealth Blind” Admissions

Rachel Rybaczuk, University of Massachusetts

Press higher education institutions to adopt “wealth blind” admissions policies that admit students based on merit, not based on legacy, family wealth, or celebrity status.

For several decades, there has been a divisive national debate over affirmative action policies in higher education. Yet there has been little serious discussion about the privileged access some students have to colleges and universities as a result of legacy, wealth, sports, or celebrity status. As the cost of education rises, college admissions departments are under enormous pressure to look for “development admits,” students whose wealthy parents will donate substantially to the institution or bring celebrity cache to its halls. Some college development offices put together their own lists of “development cases” for admission, even when they are less academically qualified.

Most people think that sports scholarships go largely to lower-income and minority students to play basketball. But at many private colleges, alumni have established

scholarships for elite sports such as crew, equestrian, fencing, and polo. These elite sports scholarships are another form of affirmative action for the privileged. The cumulative impact of these admissions preferences is to fill the seats of entering classes with the sons and daughters of alumni, wealthy or celebrity families, and recipients of elite sport scholarships. More deserving students without wealth or connections are left standing at the college gate.

KEY FACTS

- Legacy admissions dominate 13 percent of the entering class at Harvard. At Notre Dame, they average between 21 and 24 percent.
- In the 1990s, Duke University admitted over 100 students a year who would have been turned away without pressure from the development office because they had family money.
- Alumni contributed \$7.1 billion to higher education in 2005, representing 27.7 percent of all private giving to colleges.

HISTORY

A number of top colleges and universities boast that they are “need blind,” meaning they offer enough financial aid so that non-affluent students can afford to attend.

But they are not “wealth blind.” The admissions preferences given to the wealthy and connected undermine excellence, equality of opportunity and meritocracy. There are institutions in higher education that bar non-merit based legacy admissions, such as Berea College, the University of Texas, and Cal-Tech, which can serve as reference points for this broader vision.

TALKING POINTS

- Leveraging the small number of existing policies that bar non-merit based legacy admissions could create an effective “peer pressure” movement in higher education.
- Utilizing campus organizing brings students into the process of addressing social class inequality in higher education.

In 2003, as the Supreme Court was ruling on the University of Michigan affirmative action case, a great deal of attention was focused on the injustice



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Campus Chapters
active or organizing at:

- American
- Amherst
- Arizona State
- Bates
- UC Berkeley
- Binghamton
- Brown
- Carnegie Mellon
- U Chicago
- Claremont
- Columbia
- Cornell
- UC Davis
- Denver
- Duke
- George Mason
- Georgetown
- George Washington
- U Georgia
- Georgia Tech
- U Hartford
- Harvard
- U Iowa
- Iowa State
- Johns Hopkins
- Kalamazoo
- Kent State
- Kenyon
- Lesley
- Louisiana State
- Marist
- U Maryland
- MIT
- McGill
- U Michigan
- Michigan State
- Middlebury
- UMN Twin Cities
- Morehead
- UNLV
- UNC Chapel Hill
- Northwestern
- NYU
- Oberlin
- Ohio State
- Otis
- U Penn
- Penn State
- Pepperdine
- Princeton
- Rice
- Rutgers
- UC Santa Barbara
- U South Carolina
- Stanford
- UTenn Chattanooga
- UT Austin
- Tulane
- U Utah
- Vanderbilt
- Vassar
- UVA
- Wash U St. Louis
- Wesleyan
- Wheaton MA
- Whitman
- UW Madison
- UW Whitewater
- Yale

of legacy admissions as a form of “white affirmative action.” Senator Kennedy began talk of legislation, which greatly agitated what Golden calls the “legacy establishment.” Clearly there is recognition of this issue but no concrete action has been taken.

ANALYSIS

Abolishing wealth-based admissions will increase diversity on college campuses, which benefits students, faculty, and staff. Having integrity in the admissions process will uphold the standard of excellence and meritocracy integral to most college’s pedagogical and philosophical missions. A wealth-blind admission policy addresses the hidden privileges available to the wealthy that uphold the inequality prevalent in higher education.

There may be backlash in the form of public criticism in the media from politicians, public relations offices on behalf of shortsighted administrators worried about their funding base, alumni, and the current beneficiaries of these policies. Anticipating and responding to this criticism by engaging the media will be an integral part of this campaign. Generating publicity can serve to broaden the prevalent discourse on equality that focuses on disadvantage to now include the “over-advantage” that makes up the other end of the spectrum. A wealth blind admissions campaign will go a long way toward making unearned privilege and over-advantage visible. This visibility is the first step in dismantling these unfair advantages. The initial organizing effort would include the publication and dissemination of materials to college campuses, as well as organizing efforts. A preliminary budget for materials and a paid student organizer to get the project underway would be approximately \$6,000.

NEXT STEPS

Tactically, we should simultaneously press for reform legislation and advance a voluntary code of conduct that universities and colleges could adopt in relation to admissions. The threat of government intervention would ultimately move higher education institutions to change their practices (and give them cover with their alumni). The publicity garnered by congressional hearings about proposed legislation will draw enormous media attention, publicity, and visibility to the need for wealth blind admissions. Colleges will complain loudly about government meddling, and may condemn advocates for being unconstructive. But we should understand that this is part of the process of change.

It would be a victory if an initial number of colleges and universities developed and adopted a “Wealth Blind Admissions Code of Conduct.” Then a campaign could move to pressure individual institutions to adopt the Code. The preparation and dissemination of an *Organizing Around Class on Campus* toolkit could mobilize current students to address class issues on campus—between students, faculty and staff, as well as with the administration. Additionally, training student organizers to work with individual students, student groups and student government will generate a movement to put pressure on admissions, development, and administrators’ policies and practices.

SOURCES

* A full list of sources is available upon request.