

Contact: Christy Hicks ~ Phone: (212) 452-7723 ~ Email: hicks@tcf.org

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**Are Efforts to Increase Equity in Higher Education Working?
New Report From The Century Foundation Offers Plans to Help Low-Income Students
Succeed in College**

June 17, New York City — Over the last several years, new policies have been enacted to make higher education more equitable. Roughly 100 colleges and universities have reached out to lower and moderate-income students with more generous financial aid packages. Likewise, the Obama Administration has recently boosted funding for Pell Grants and community colleges. But are these and other efforts to increase equity in higher education working?

Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College, a new book from The Century Foundation, examines two strategies to increase socioeconomic diversity: better financial aid programs and admissions policies that level the playing field for hard working, economically disadvantaged students of all races. This report follows a 2004 Century Foundation study, *America's Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education*, which found that, at selective universities and colleges, 74 percent of students come from the richest quarter of the socioeconomic population and just 3 percent from the bottom quarter. Moreover, it comes at a time when a new legal challenge to racial preferences at the University of Texas may be headed to the Supreme Court, which is prompting new discussions about the future of affirmative action and what alternative forms it may take in coming years.

Rewarding Strivers is edited by Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation and a highly regarded expert on education policy. Included in the volume are:

***“How Increasing College Access Is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do about It,”** by Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl of Georgetown University. This research updates and expands Carnevale’s controversial “strivers” research from his stint at the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the late 1990s. The research seeks to identify promising disadvantaged students who beat the odds and score higher than expected on the SAT.

***“The Carolina Covenant,”** by Edward B. Fiske, former education editor at the *New York Times*. This is the first major analysis of one of the nation’s leading financial aid and support programs. In recent years, some one hundred institutions have adopted new, more generous financial aid programs. This chapter examines how well this closely watched program is working.

Significant findings of the two studies include the following:

***Disadvantaged students start the SAT's "100-yard dash" 65 yards behind.**

The highly disadvantaged applicant (low-income, black, parents are high school dropouts, attends high-poverty public school, etc.) is expected to score 784 SAT points lower than the highly advantaged student (wealthy, white, highly educated parents, attends private school, etc.). This 784-point gap accounts for 65.3 percent of the 1200-point possible score range on the math and verbal SAT (400–1600 points.) If the SAT were a 100-yard dash, advantaged kids start off 65 yards ahead of disadvantaged kids as the race begins. Carnevale and Strohl suggest that universities consider how far a student has come as well as what his or her raw scores are.

*** Obstacles are more closely associated with class than race, suggesting affirmative action should be primarily about socioeconomic status.**

Racial discrimination continues to play a role in education, but its influence is dwarfed by the role of socioeconomic status. Of the 784-point SAT gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, Carnevale and Strohl found that just 56 points are solely attributable to race per se (being black as opposed to white). By contrast, 399 points of the gap are from factors that are socioeconomic in nature. These findings suggest that colleges and universities should provide a lot of affirmative action to economically disadvantaged students who beat the odds, and some affirmative action based on race. Yet today's colleges and universities do the opposite: providing substantial preferences based on race and virtually no preference based on class.

*** Financial aid can help increase graduation rates, but by itself will not necessarily increase socioeconomic diversity.**

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, according to Edward B. Fiske's chapter, a generous financial aid program, instituted in 2004, has been successful in boosting the graduation rate among low-income students. At the same time, however, the proportion of low-income students (defined as those eligible for Pell Grants) has remained flat, as Carolina has insisted that low-income students should not be given any break in admissions. The lesson: to increase access, universities must address both financial aids and admissions policies.

*** Stratification is increasing in higher education.**

The good news is that more students are going to college than ever before; but the bad news, according to Carnevale and Strohl's research, is that stratification is increasing within higher education. Just as public elementary and secondary schools saw affluent white flight to suburban schools in the 1970s and 1980s, so higher education is seeing the same flight by affluent white students to selective institutions. Between 1994 and 2006, Carnevale and Strohl find white student representation declined from 79 percent to 58 percent at less-selective and noncompetitive institutions, while black student representation soared from 11 percent to 28 percent, twice their share of the high school class. American higher education is in danger of quickly becoming both separate and unequal.

*** Attending a selective college is likely to be worth the investment.**

Colleges with low selectivity spend about \$12,000 per student, compared with \$92,000 per student at the most selective institutions. Selective institutions are much more likely to graduate equally qualified students than less-selective colleges and universities. Earnings are 45 percent higher for students who graduated from more-selective institutions, particularly low-income students. And according to research by Thomas Dye, 54 percent of America's corporate leaders and 42 percent of government leaders are graduates of just twelve institutions.

A summary of *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*, is [available here](#) on The Century Foundation web site (www.tcf.org), where you can also find ordering information. Richard Kahlenberg and the report authors are available for media interviews. To schedule an interview or receive a media copy of the book, please contact Christy Hicks at hicks@tcf.org or (917) 544-2949.

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Richard D. Kahlenberg, editor

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