Institutional support for low income students at highly selective colleges

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INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS
AT HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGES

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Institutional Support for Low-Income Students at Highly Selective Colleges

Abstract

This article compares efforts by three highly selective colleges, Harvard, Wellesley, and MIT, to support low-income students. The article is based on interviews with administrators and an analysis of secondary sources, program documents, and journalistic accounts. Differences in college cultures contribute to the development of different approaches, with Harvard providing supplemental financial resources and advising while Wellesley and MIT offer programs to help new students adjust academically and socially. However, common lessons can be identified across these varied approaches: these include the importance of developing supplementary rather than remedial academic programs, initiating conversations about class as well as race, enlisting peers to provide leadership and mentoring for low-income students, developing programs that will reach all students but will particularly benefit under-resourced students, and creating a campus culture in which every student feels valued.
Introduction

Over the past five years, highly selective colleges and universities have significantly improved their efforts to admit and support low-income students. Following reports indicating a significant income gap in college attendance (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005), a number of colleges developed programs to reduce the financial burden on low-income students (Pallais & Turner, 2007). One of the first major efforts was Harvard’s Financial Aid Initiative (HFAI), announced in 2004. Harvard eliminated the parental contribution for students whose families earned less than $40,000 ($60,000, starting in 2006), and significantly increased recruiting efforts aimed at low-income students. Speaking before the American Council on Education, Harvard President Lawrence Summers stated, “We want to send the strongest possible message that Harvard is open to talented students from all economic backgrounds” (Summers, 2004). Harvard’s initiative has led to a significant increase in the number of low-income students attending the college: by 2007, the number of students coming from families earning $60,000 or less had increased 33% (Rimer & Finder, 2007) and 25% of the entering class came from families earning $80,000 or less (Harvard Gazette, 2007).

As of this writing, Harvard’s class of 2009, the first class to benefit from the financial aid initiative, has just graduated. It is thus an appropriate time to evaluate the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative and similar initiatives aimed at increasing the number of low-income students attending highly selective colleges and universities. While little data has been released about how these students perform relative to their peers, it is
possible to examine the support that low-income students receive from the schools they attend. This article compares the approach to supporting low-income students at Harvard with approaches taken at two other highly selective Boston area colleges, Wellesley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The article is based on interviews with administrators at all three schools, a group interview with resident deans at Harvard, observation of a training meeting on financial aid for the resident deans given by a Harvard financial aid officer, and an examination of a variety of textual sources on the experience of low-income students at all three colleges, including journalistic accounts, a recent senior thesis on race and first generation status at Harvard, and pamphlets and letters describing the programs and resources available at each school.

This article compares Harvard’s approach of providing supplemental financial support and advising resources to low-income students with programs at Wellesley and MIT that mix academic and social support. These different approaches reflect individual school cultures and differences in the way that administrators perceive the needs of low-income students. Together, the approaches taken at these three schools provide insights about how best to support low-income and under-resourced students that may be valuable to administrators from a variety of highly selective colleges and universities and to scholars trying to understand the experience of low-income students on highly selective college campuses. Some common lessons include the importance of creating supplementary rather than remedial programs, initiating conversations about class as well as race, enlisting peers to provide leadership and mentoring, developing programs that will reach all students but will particularly benefit under-resourced students, and creating a campus culture in which every student feels valued. I advocate for an evaluation of the
programs I describe as well as a long-term qualitative study of how students experience social class on highly selective college campuses.

One challenge to studying low-income students at highly selective colleges and universities is the relative dearth of information about them, in part because until recently there were so few of them. However, as many low-income students are also members of under-represented minority groups (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005: p. 107), studies of the minority student experience at highly selective colleges and universities (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003; Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009b) can offer insights into the experience of low-income students as well. In addition, I draw on research on the experience of low-income students at colleges and universities generally (Thayer, 2000; Kahlenberg, 2004; Muraskin & Lee, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008) and on research on the experience of first-generation college students. This research shows that low-income, first generation students are significantly less likely to graduate from four-year institutions than their higher-income peers, as they are more likely to struggle financially, are less likely to be academically prepared for college, and particularly if they are the first in their families to attend college, are less adept at navigating college culture (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Collier, Morgan, and Fellows, 2007; Dumais, 2007).

However, applying the above literature to low-income students at highly selective colleges is difficult, as unlike low-income students attending most colleges in the United States, they frequently come from top preparatory or magnet high schools which prepare them academically and socially for college. The Director of the Harvard Financial Aid
Initiative, Melanie Brennand Mueller, explained, “our students from … HFAI … are just as diverse as any other group. There are students who have come out of Prep for Prep [a program that takes students from low-income areas and provides them with intensive preparation for prep schools] or they’ve gone to Dalton or Chapin, and they’re fabulously prepared. They just happen to come from a family that makes less than $60,000. That’s a very different case than somebody coming from East L.A. and a public school” (M. Brennand Mueller, personal interview, July 10, 2008).

Thus while highly selective colleges and universities devote attention to the financial situation faced by all of their low-income students, they typically focus their academic and social efforts on students who come from “under-resourced families” and “under-resourced high schools.”iii The definition of under-resourced can vary, but it typically refers to students who are the first in their family to go to college or who come from families that are under significant stress, and it typically refers to high schools which do not offer advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, or other curricula that prepare students for highly selective college educations.

This article considers the experience of low-income students at highly selective colleges and universities because more of them are on campus as a result of financial aid initiatives. However, efforts to support low-income students are necessarily intertwined with efforts to support under-represented minorities. The literature review below will describe how social class became prominent in discussions of admissions at highly selective colleges and will analyze existing studies that offer ideas about how class may matter to student experiences at highly selective colleges and universities.
Race, Class, and the College Experience

Until the mid-2000s, most discussions of diversity on college campuses focused on debates over race-based affirmative action (see Bowen & Bok, 1998). A shift towards social class came in 2003, when Massey and his colleagues reported the results of a study of students who entered 28 selective colleges in 1999. The study showed that a significant amount of minority under-achievement can be attributed to socio-economic status, as black and Latino students have fewer economic resources, are more likely to be the first in their family to attend college, and are less likely have attended a high school that prepared them well for college (Massey et. al., 2003). By providing evidence that minority underperformance is associated with the lack of cultural and economic resources that is in turn associated with differences in social class, Massey and his colleagues laid groundwork for thinking about how socio-economic resources as well as race are important in understanding the undergraduate experience at highly selective colleges and universities.

In addition to differences in the resources available to them, Massey and his colleagues found that students from different racial and class backgrounds reported differences in how they had been raised. White and Asian students were more likely to have come from wealthier, better educated families and to have “experienced a supportive, companionate style of child rearing. … [In contrast,] black parents were less directly involved in cultivating human or cultural capital, or in monitoring their children’s social relationships” (Massey et. al., 2003, p. 204). Massey’s finding echoes that of Lareau, who, in a study of 88 families across both racial and class lines, found
significant differences between middle class patterns of “concerted cultivation,” in which parents “actively fostered and assessed their children’s talents, opinions, and skills” and lower-class patterns of “natural growth,” in which parents were less directly involved in their children’s lives, leaving them to organize both their school work and their play (Massey et. al., 2003, p. 238-239). Following the work of Bourdieu, Lareau argued that these patterns impact the amount of “cultural capital” available to children: the “cultural skills, social connections, educational practices, and other cultural resources” that can be called upon “as [they] move out into the world” (Lareau, 2003, p. 276).

Cultural capital affects not only a student’s ability to navigate the college application process (Lareau & Weininger, 2008, Sabur 2009), but also what a student brings to college, ranging from familiarity with college culture to knowledge about how to study, to manage one’s time, and how to communicate with faculty members and administrators (Pascarella et. al., 2004; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Collier et. al., 2007; Dumais, 2007). It also affects the degree to which students can turn to their parents for support, as parents who have not attended college will be less likely to know how to coach their children to navigate the college culture (Pike and Kuh, 2005; Collier et. al., 2007). In a group interview, one of the Harvard resident deans described the effect of cultural capital on her students: “I think it’s a sense of belonging, a sense of fitting in, integrating their academic with their social [world]. You can feel very isolated and outside if you didn’t grow up in this type of environment” (Resident Deans of Freshmen and Harvard Houses, group interview, October 10, 2008). Another resident dean described a difference between first generation college students and their peers whose parents have attended college: “when all else fails, the students can turn to [the parents who have attended
college] as the at-home advisor. … The students [whose parents did not attend college] don’t have the opportunity to turn to their parents” (Resident Deans, 2008).

In a 2007 article, Massey and his colleagues suggested that variation in cultural capital among minority freshmen at the 28 colleges they studied could provide another explanation for why some minority students exceed their predicted college achievement (based on high school grades and test scores) while others do not. Massey and his colleagues found that a significant number of black and Latino freshmen were first or second generation immigrants. Although they were similar on other measures of socioeconomic status to their non-immigrant classmates, immigrant black freshmen had more highly educated fathers, suggesting, “the fathers of foreign-origin blacks possessed considerably more human capital than the fathers of black students of native origin” (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007, p. 256).

Finally, Massey and his colleagues found evidence that minority underachievement can be partly explained by stereotype threat. As described by Steele and Aronson (1995), stereotype threat is the “suspicion” by African-Americans that their intellectual ability is judged negatively by others. Steele and Aronson created an experiment in which black and white students were given items from the GRE. Black students who were told that the test measured their intellectual ability did worse on the test than whites, controlling for SAT scores, but that when they were told that the test measured other factors, their performance improved. Blacks also did worse than whites when they were “primed” to think about an association between race and intellectual ability prior to taking the test, even when the test was not presented as a measure of their
ability. Massey and his colleagues found that in addition to financial stress and gaps in preparation, minority underperformance could be explained by stereotype threat. Students who “expressed reservations about their academic abilities and were unusually self-conscious of teachers would be at elevated risk of stereotype threat” and students who expressed doubts about their group’s ability while adhering to a mainstream ‘American’ identity” were more likely to have failed a course (Charles et. al, 2009b, p. 195). While the effect was small, and the researchers found that stereotype threat affected relatively few students, it was statistically significant.

While Steele’s research suggests that stereotype threat affects people of “low caste” across the world (Steele, 1997, p. 623), very little research has been done on the question of whether it affects people of low socioeconomic status specifically. However, in a French study designed to test stereotype threat when socioeconomic status is made salient, Croizet and Claire (1998) found that when low-SES participants were asked to provide their parents’ income and education just prior to taking a verbal skills test which was presented as a measure of their intellectual ability, they did worse than high-SES participants. Low-SES participants in a control group did just as well as their high-SES counterparts. Croizet and Claire argue that “the difference between the performance of these two groups suggest that stereotype threat should not be neglected as an explanation of the underachievement of low-SES students” (Croizet and Claire, 1998, p. 594).

These works provide a framework for understanding how social class as well as race impacts students’ college experiences. Financial and cultural resources affect how students transition to college and whether they succeed there. Identity-based anxiety (measured as stereotype threat) matters as well, for some students. While most of the
studies above were aimed at explaining the experience of minority students at highly selective colleges and universities, we can surmise that the lack of financial resources will impact all low-income students regardless of race, that those low-income students who have less academic preparation and cultural capital may experience difficulties not felt by their better prepared and more culturally savvy counterparts, and that to the extent that low-income students feel stigmatized, this may affect their experience as well.

Social Class and the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative

Karabel describes modern attention to social class in Harvard admissions as being driven in part by the concerns of the Dean of Admissions, William Fitszimmons, “himself a graduate of a parochial school in a working-class suburb of Boston.” Karabel quotes from a 1982 report which described an “alarming decline in the number of applicants from families in which parents had not attended college” (Office of Admissions and Financial Aid, quoted in Karabel 2005, p. 511-512); he notes that Fitzsimmons’ concerns were echoed in reports issued in 1987 and 1992. Fitzsimmons was undoubtedly bolstered in his efforts to increase applications from working class and poor students by the previously cited studies by Ellwood and Kane (2000), Carnevale and Rose (2004), and especially by the work of Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin. Bowen and his colleagues describe an “admissions advantage” (Bowen et. al., 2005, p. 166) afforded to minority students, legacies, and recruited athletes, and noted that highly selective colleges essentially give no special weight to students from lower social classes. Noting that students from families in the bottom income quartile make up a tiny (6%) percentage of
students at highly selective colleges, Bowen and his colleagues argued in favor of providing a “thumb on the scale” for these students, arguing that they, too, had overcome significant obstacles and that enrolling more of them would enhance social mobility in the United States (Bowen, et. al. 2005, p. 178). They argued, however, that special consideration for students from low socio-economic backgrounds should not substitute for special consideration for minority students.

Under the leadership of Fitzsimmons and Harvard President Lawrence Summers, Harvard took Bowen’s recommendations to heart: the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative has led to an increased number of low-income students attending Harvard, but the percentage of minority students admitted has held steady between the classes of 2008 and 2013 (Grynbaum 2004; Li 2007; Kirshner 2008). In an analysis of the effect of the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative on admissions for the Harvard classes of 2008 and 2009, Avery, Hoxby, Jackson, Burek, Pope, and Ranan (2006) found Harvard had succeeded in increasing the pool of low-income applicants, particularly from high schools that did not have a tradition of sending students to Harvard. Their analysis showed that the increase in low-income students in the class of 2009 could be almost entirely attributed to improved recruiting rather than Harvard having lowered its standards. The authors noted that the pool of low-income students who have the academic background needed to attend Harvard is exceptionally small (approximately 2.5% of the total pool), and argued that of Harvard’s success in recruiting these students will depend on the continued publicizing of the financial aid initiative, which in turn may increase the expectations of low-income students that they can attend highly selective colleges and increase the chances that they will prepare to apply (Avery et. al., 2006; see also a discussion of the
comparative under-preparation for college by low-income students in Carnevale and Rose, 2004).

Leveling the Financial Playing Field at Harvard

As Harvard has increased the number of low-income students attending the college, it has focused on providing these students with a range of financial support. Harvard’s programming reflects an understanding that tuition is not the only financial barrier faced by low-income students, who also need to buy books and a computer and who may face costs ranging from the need to replace broken eye-glasses to the need to obtain long-deferred dental care. Finally, the ability of low-income students to feel comfortable on campus will depend on their being able to fully participate in campus events.

Harvard provides Financial Aid Initiative students with access to a variety of financial resources, designed to ease their transition to college and to decrease the distance between them and their well-off classmates with as much privacy as possible. This support includes a fund to purchase a winter coat, loans to cover incidental costs, and free tickets to student events (Brennand Mueller, 2008). These benefits are structured so that students can access them anonymously; for example, no one standing in line behind a student at the Harvard ticket office knows that the student who has just presented his identification card is receiving a free ticket. Harvard Financial Aid Initiative recipients also receive a handbook called “The Shoestring Guide to Life at Harvard” and a monthly newsletter, reminding them about financial support and
providing them with notices about employment, events, and tips on living inexpensively in the Boston area.

Harvard Dean of Freshmen Tom Dingman noted that freshman programming at Harvard is designed to alleviate the differences between high and low-income students. The Freshman Dean’s Office sponsors free events ranging from movie nights to ping-pong tournaments and provides funding to students who want to organize group outings such as ice skating that cost money (T. Dingman, personal interview, July 11, 2008). In addition, proctors (residential advisers for first year students at Harvard) are trained to be sensitive to the range of student financial situations, so that they are “not, for instance, inclined to [have] everybody chip in and have a donuts fund” (Dingman, 2008). Proctors and resident deans are provided with information about the resources available to low-income students, so that they can confidentially steer them towards these resources. In a presentation to Harvard resident deans in August of 2008, a financial aid officer noted that for low-income students, many issues “become financial aid issues.” He described a variety of scenarios that could affect low-income students disproportionately before asking resident deans to refer students facing these issues to the financial aid (personal observation, August 2008).

Finally, resident deans at Harvard are trained to think about the larger context for student financial and social struggles. In the group interview, one resident dean noted the emphasis on understanding how students from low-income backgrounds may feel a greater need to “be involved back home” because their parents are struggling financially (Resident Deans, group interview October 10, 2008). But a number of resident deans expressed frustration about some of the more subtle class tensions that they see in their
work, ranging from students feeling uncomfortable about not being able to fund spring break trips to the pressures students feel to join social clubs with high dues (Resident Deans, 2008). viii

Brennand Mueller explained that initially, the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative was going to include an individualized peer-mentoring program, but very few students admitted under the initiative indicated that they wanted a peer mentor. She and other administrators agreed that Harvard Financial Aid Initiative Students do not want to be identified and are very conscious of the potential of stigma associated with support from the college. Brennand Mueller stated that “that adds an extra challenge for us, to make sure that students aren’t falling through the cracks in any way” (Brennand Mueller, 2008). Assistant Dean Inge-Lise Ameer elaborated:

They’re at Harvard, and everybody is watching, and they have competed against thousands of other people. And then [to] be told right from the very beginning that ‘We want to help you because of your academic record from high school, or the high school you went to indicates that you might need a little extra help,’ I think that would put a lot of them off, unfortunately (I. Ameer, personal interview, 23 June 2009).

Administrators at Harvard are still discussing the question of how best to provide academic support for students who are not appropriately prepared for college. While Harvard once ran a summer program, “we learned from admissions that people felt stigmatized, and the connections to term time were somewhat tenuous” (Dingman, 2008). The Admissions office ended the program. Nearly all of the administrators interviewed expressed an interest in offering more comprehensive academic and social support, as long as it could be provided without students perceiving a stigma. Jay Ellison, an Associate Dean of Harvard College, suggested a mandatory study skills course for all
students, with the understanding that some students would disproportionately benefit (J. Ellison, personal interview July 18, 2008). He explained:

I don’t want to start off with [a student] on the wrong foot with me saying, “I know that because of where you are from and who you are you’re incapable.” I’d rather say to everybody that this is what we’re doing for every single person. “If you already know this stuff, wonderful. But you don’t know it at Harvard. We’re different from your high school. Even the top high school in the world, we’re different from them. … These are the resources we have, which are vast, and therefore you need to understand it the way we understand it, so you can be part of this community (Ellison, 2008).

Other administrators echoed Ellison’s approach of “targeting within universalism.” One of the Resident Deans suggested a pre-orientation program designed so that students could “experience the college system a little bit ahead of time, instead of having to come into it blind and be expected to be thriving” (Resident Deans, 2008). This would be available to everyone, but would most benefit students with little familiarity with highly selective college culture. Another approach, described by Assistant Dean Inge Ameer, would be to only target students once they struggle. Ameer noted that the Harvard calendar is changing in 2009-10 to allow for a January break, and she stated that plans for the break had at one point included a proposal for a “Harvard in Progress” program that would provide students who struggled in the first semester with academic support in writing, math, science, and languages, as well as study skills and academic support (Ameer, 2009).

At present, however, Harvard administrators face a dilemma. They are proud of the financial support and the advising resources available to low-income students, which appear to be significant in leveling the playing field. But administrators also recognize that many, although not all, low-income students face academic and social difficulties as
well, and they are unsure of how to best support them. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many low-income students tell the Harvard administration that they do not want to be singled out.

WellesleyPlus: Term-Time Academic and Social Support

Like Harvard, Wellesley also used to run a summer program for incoming students who were thought to need additional preparation before starting college. This program, “Pathways,” was eliminated in 2007 after administrators concluded that students would be served better by a term-time program (John O’Keefe, personal communication, August 16th, 2009). To replace it, administrators at Wellesley decided to initiate a program called “WellesleyPlus” which would run during the students’ first year and which would be focused on both academic and social support. As described by Director of Advising and Academic Support Services John O’Keefe (personal interview, June 12, 2009), and in a letter inviting students to participate, WellesleyPlus students participate in the same activities as other first-year students, but with special features. All Wellesley students take a required writing course, Writing 125, in their first year; WellesleyPlus students enroll in one of two specific sections of Writing 125 and take an additional “lab” course that teaches “advanced research, computing, and presentation skills” (“Welcome to Wellesley, and WellesleyPlus, letter to invited students, 2008). All Wellesley students are part of a first-year mentoring group; the WellesleyPlus students are placed into a mentoring group together. Dean of First-Year students Lori Tenser stated that the program provides a “set of supports [that] on the surface seems to be
equivalent to what other students also have. But it is a little different, and it’s that the peer mentors and the advisors and the deans are all working together in a more intentional way” (Tenser, 2009).

Approximately 10% of the incoming class of the incoming class of 600 is invited to participate in WellesleyPlus. The program has room for about half of the invited students, who are admitted on a first-come, first served basis. Invitees are selected by the admissions office, and primarily come from two groups: those who are the first in their families to go to college and those who went to “under-resourced high schools.”

However, not all students fall into those two categories. Lori Tenser explained:

Sometimes [students selected are] people who just have really complicated, unusual stories, and we know that what was going on in their family interfered with their kind of taking full advantage of what they could have been doing during high school, or they had support which was sort of suddenly yanked out from under them for some reason. So we know that when they arrive at Wellesley, they will lack a support system which other students may have (Tenser, 2009).

The administrators of WellesleyPlus are aware of the literature on stereotype threat (Tenser, 2009), and the invitation to participate in WellesleyPlus reflects that. The program is described as “designed to enhance the excellent experience we offer all Wellesley students” and the letter states, “you will engage in projects designed to enhance your expertise in critical analysis, research, writing, and computer technology” (“Welcome to Wellesley, and WellesleyPlus,” 2008). However, both O’Keefe and Tenser acknowledged the challenges involved in recruiting students who, “as a practical matter … tend to be students of color …[and] tend to be from low-income families.” They argued that the best strategy to mediate any stigma associated with an invitation to participate in WellesleyPlus is to be “frank” about the composition of the group (J.
O’Keefe, personal interview, July 14, 2008) and to emphasize that the criteria used to select students is the high school and family experience, rather than race and class per se. Both O’Keefe and Tenser felt that Wellesley’s culture of openness around diversity issues helped them enormously. O’Keefe stated, “I think the students are very ready to talk about the ways in which they are different. And they talk about that in a positive way. So it’s kind of celebrated” (O’Keefe, 2009). Lori Tenser added that students questions about why most participants are members of minority groups led to a discussion of “what it is in our society that may suggest reasons for … that” and stated, “I think on this campus, if people are curious and you give them a direct answer, that’s pretty acceptable” (Tenser, 2009).

An important component of WellesleyPlus is the use of peers (two mentors and an academic peer tutor) who typically share some characteristics with WellesleyPlus students. In addition to providing leadership, these students serve as role models. Lori Tenser explained that a mentor who is also a first-generation student can communicate that “I know what that’s like. So let’s talk about the resources you’re [a first year student] going to need here to be successful” (Tenser, 2009) Describing one of the 2007-08 mentors, John O’Keefe said “she was an excellent student [and] … she was a first-generation student. … And she came across … as ‘This is who I want to be’” (O’Keefe, 2008). WellesleyPlus students are also assigned to faculty advisers who are “particularly sensitive” to WellesleyPlus students, and “who we know are good advisors” (Tenser, 2009).
WellesleyPlus students continue to gather as a group throughout the year; they attend a fall retreat, attend outings together, and have the opportunity to participate together in a service project during the January break. Discussing the program in the spring of 2009, after it had run for a second time, John O’Keefe stated, “students, again, in the second year have valued deeply the connections they made with each other, and especially with the peer mentors who have been so instrumental in their program’s success. And we continue to feel like that’s a very important component of their success, that they understand themselves as part of a group of learners that are deeply connected, socially and academically” (O’Keefe, 2009).

MIT’s Interphase Program: Summer Academic and Social Support

While it is run during the academic year, WellesleyPlus has a great deal in common with MIT’s summer program, “Interphase.” Interphase is organized by the Office of Minority Education (OME) and was started in the late 1960s as a part of an effort to support minority students on campus. Like Wellesley Plus, Interphase largely serves minority students who are drawn from all races and income levels; they are typically chosen because they attended under-resourced high schools or come from under-resourced families.

The Interphase program runs for seven and a half weeks every summer. Students take courses in calculus, physics, chemistry, and a writing course on cultural identity. They live together in a dormitory setting, are given lectures and seminars on the resources available at MIT, and take trips as a group around Cambridge and Boston.
Students are grouped according to their prior experience in math and science classes, with the aim of bringing all entering students up to the level that will be expected of them when they formally start MIT in the fall (T. Stevens, personal interview, July 2, 2009).

The process by which students are invited to Interphase at MIT is very similar to the process by which students are invited to participate in WellesleyPlus. Each spring, Director of Interphase Tammy Stevens goes through student files with the admissions office, highlighting students who did not take advanced science courses in high school, and students who are the first in their high school to attend MIT. Finally, students who are first-generation college students are typically invited, as are students whose families have gone through a significant degree of stress (a divorce or death in the family). Two years ago, Interphase was rebranded to eliminate the perception that it was a remedial program. This included updating the materials sent out to students. According to the invitation letter, the program “challenges participants to enhance their mastery of calculus, physics, chemistry, and college level writing.” The letter quotes a former Interphase student stating, “I was honored to have been invited” (“Interphase Invitation to Student,” letter to invited students, 2009).

Since its rebranding, Interphase has seen a marked increase in the number of students applying to the program (students are invited to apply, but must submit their paperwork by a deadline, and the program accepts them first come, first serve, just like
WellesleyPlus). Stevens attributed the attractiveness of the program to the strength of its teaching staff, many of whom attended Interphase or have taught in the program for years. She cited the enthusiasm of upper-class alumni who serve on a panel on Interphase at the spring Campus Preview Weekend and who encourage pre-frosh to attend. She noted that Interphase has had a wait-list for the past two years, and that more students who have not been invited are now expressing interest in attending. She stated: “It’s no longer perceived as a stigma to be part of the program. It’s really like, ‘this is kind of cool’” (Stevens, 2009).

Stevens also attributed the success of Interphase to MIT’s intense academic culture. She noted that entering students are aware of how difficult the first year will be for everyone, and are eager to get a head start. She argued that this has a leveling effect: “because everybody’s working so hard on academics … everybody is pretty much the same” (Stevens, 2009).

Stevens’ observation that Interphase succeeds in part because it fits with MIT’s culture is reminiscent of John O’Keefe’s and Lori Tenser’s comments about their ability to use Wellesley’s culture of openness to difference as a way to reduce any stigma associated with being invited to participate in WellesleyPlus. Administrators need to be aware of how subtle differences in college culture may affect receptivity to programs like those run at Wellesley and MIT, and need to design programs with their campus cultures in mind.

Designing Programs to Support Low-Income Students at Highly selective Colleges and Universities

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The one thing that low-income students at highly selective universities have in common is the fact that they are low-income. For many of them, this means that they face significant financial obstacles, far beyond the need to pay tuition and fees to attend college. Highly selective colleges and universities recruiting low-income students need to understand these potential obstacles and need understand the degree to which college success is associated with having financial needs met (see Conley, 2001). At a time when many universities and colleges are operating under severe budget restrictions, fully committing to low-income students is not an easy choice, and Harvard’s program of providing resources for low-income students is a worthy model.

However, it is also clear that many (but not all) low-income students attending highly selective colleges and universities face academic and social barriers. Highly selective colleges and universities are understandably hesitant to address these barriers, as they risk doing more harm than good by communicating to students who already may have less confidence that they are at risk and starting a cycle where the student is set up for failure. However, the experiences of Harvard, Wellesley, and MIT offer a number of lessons that could be applied by other highly selective colleges and universities confronting the dilemma of academic and social support.

1. **Design academic programs that can be described as supplemental, not remedial, and select participants carefully.** Claude Steele’s work on stereotype threat clearly shows that remedial programs stigmatize students and may do more harm than good (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). Concerns about stigma may especially apply to students
attending highly selective colleges and universities, as those students may be unusually self-conscious. The ability of Wellesley and MIT to market their programs as providing additional support and community is crucial to their success. In addition, the two programs do not use race or social class as selection criteria, but rely on the more neutral characteristics of academic preparation, parental college experience, and family stress. This makes it easier to explain to students why they have been invited to participate, and it decreases any stigma.

2. **Initiate conversations about class as well as race.** Despite the use of neutral criteria, most students selected for WellesleyPlus and Interphase come from low-income families and are members of minority groups. The administrators for both programs agreed that it was essential to acknowledge that, and at Wellesley, it is seen as an opportunity to start a discussion about American society. This leads to a broader recommendation that highly selective colleges and universities do more to encourage campus-wide discussions of social class, just as the increased presence of minority students on college campuses starting in the 1960s led to more discussions about race. One model for these discussions is the Economic Equity Initiative at Dartmouth College, which is run by the college’s office of Institutional Diversity and Equity. As described on the initiative’s webpage (EEI Mainpage, [www.dartmouth.edu/~ide/programs/eei/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~ide/programs/eei/), retrieved July 8, 2009), the initiative seeks to increase awareness and communication around social class on the Dartmouth campus and has included workshops, lectures, and student events including compiling student reflections on the relationship between social class and their Dartmouth experience, supporting student arts projects relating to social class, and the
establishment of a student group called “the Alliance of Socio-Economic Awareness” (EEI Mainpage, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate this project, but it appears to reflect the perspective that along with race, social class should be a topic of conversation on highly selective college campuses.

As noted above, administrators report mixed sentiments about discussing social class among low-income and first-generation students at highly selective colleges, and any initiative to discuss social class needs to be carefully designed so as not to stigmatize students or make them feel that they are being asked to “educate” others about themselves. Harvard is initiating a faculty-student discussion about social class during freshman orientation in the fall of 2009.

3. **Enlist peers.** Administrators at Harvard have found little interest in a peer mentoring program for students in the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative. However, administrators at Wellesley and MIT attribute some of their success to the fact that older students are involved in leading their programs, providing input, enthusiasm, and serving as role models for the younger students, and a recent senior thesis on race and first generation status at Harvard recommended creating a support group for first-generation as well as minority students (Sabur, 2009). It is possible that the lack of interest in peer-mentoring at Harvard could be due to the timing of the offer (during the summer before freshman year, before students have had the opportunity to experience life on campus), or it might be due to the individualized nature of the offer. One possibility is to adapt an already existing program, the Peer Advising Fellows, which assigns upper-class students to
mentor a group of freshmen. Peer Advising Fellows are paid for their work in part to ensure that low-income students can serve, and Harvard Financial Aid Initiative students are well-represented among their ranks (M. Rinere, personal interview October 21, 2008; Ameer, 2009). Peer Advising Fellows are already trained to recognize social class issues; they could be provided with further training and encouraged to discuss social class and teach strategies for living on a tight budget and acculturating to college to all of their students, knowing that under-resourced students would likely benefit the most from these discussions.

4. **Target within universalism.** Provide services and support to all students that will disproportionately benefit under-resourced students. This includes good advising, especially in the freshman year, when the cultural gap between low-income and first generation students and their higher-income counterparts may be the greatest.³ Research on college outcomes has produced a consensus on a number of factors that are associated with student success and satisfaction in college. These include making connections with faculty, taking small classes, getting involved (but not too involved) in extracurricular activities, and studying in groups (Astin, 1993; Light, 2001). Students who have attended competitive high schools and come from families with college experience may already know these lessons, but students who are the first in their families to attend college may not, and some of these factors may be especially important for these students. Having an adviser who knows to reinforce these behaviors will be valuable for any student, but it may be crucial to a student from an under-resourced background. Similarly, having an adviser who is knowledgeable about and sensitive to a student’s background (without
making assumptions about that background) can be important. Administrators at both Wellesley and Harvard report making a special effort to assign under-resourced students to supportive advisers, and Interim Director of the Advising Programs Office at Harvard Inge-Lise Ameer noted that she would like to create special trainings for those advisers (Ameer, 2009).

5. **Show students that they matter on an individual level.** The final recommendation applies not only to academic advisers but to all who come in contact with under-resourced students at highly selective colleges and universities. Claude Steele’s “Wise Schooling” program emphasizes that teachers should convey “optimism” about their student’s potential and that they should “affirm,” that the student belongs (1997: 624-625). The Wise Schooling approach is encouraged in an article on affirmative action by Charles, Fischer, Mooney, and Massey (2009a), who argue that “if minority students were welcomed and supported at selective institutions in the same way that star athletes and legacy students routinely are, the grade performance of black and Latino students might improve markedly.”

Lori Tenser of Wellesley reflected the perspective that the ideas behind Wise Schooling can be applied to any under-resourced student. She stated that the message she wanted WellesleyPlus students to hear is, “we are not only supporting you financially, but we want you to stay and be successful and have a good experience here” (Tenser, 2009). Tenser directed me to a 1989 article by Nancy Schlossberg, entitled “Marginality and Mattering: Key Issues in Building Community (Schlossberg, 1989). In the article,
Schlossberg writes that “people in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 6) and that when “adult learners felt they mattered to an adviser or to an institution … this feeling kept them engaged in their learning” (Schlossberg 1989, p. 11). Colleges and universities should convey to all new students that they matter, but they should especially convey this message to under-resourced students. This is, of course, another version of targeting within universalism, but it needs to happen on an individual basis. For highly selective colleges and universities, it involves creating a culture that emphasizes caring, attentive student advising.

**Conclusion**

This article relies on interviews with administrators who work with low-income students and who have designed programs to support them. To date, WellesleyPlus has not undergone a significant evaluation, and MIT’s Interphase program has not been evaluated since it was re-designed in 2007. While preliminary surveys and student enthusiasm suggests satisfaction with both programs (O’Keefe, 2009; Stevens, 2009), we don’t know how the program participants are doing academically and socially, compared to students who were invited but who signed up after all of the spaces were full or chose not to attend. Even this kind of a study would have its limits, as there might be a significant difference between the students who do and do not participate in the programs. However, over time it will be possible to assess at least whether WellesleyPlus and Interphase are associated with academic success and social satisfaction, and if so, to use this success to expand the programs and recruit more students to them.
Additional research on support for low-income students at highly selective colleges and universities also needs to include the voices of students. We know very little about how low-income students view their experience, and how perceptions of that experience vary according to their race, academic preparation, and social preparation. We don’t know enough about what kind of support different groups of low-income students would like to have, or would have liked to have retrospectively. The next step in this research trajectory is to conduct a study of low-income students over time, measuring their comfort with their institutions, their academic, financial, and social experiences, and their response to any programs developed by their schools. In addition, administrators considering developing any programs for low-income students need to appreciate their diversity and invite a wide variety of students to advise and participate in program design.

In a speech announcing the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative, former Harvard president Lawrence Summers cited Thomas Jefferson’s “view that virtue and talent [are] sown as liberally among the poor as the rich” (Summers, 2004) and noted the vast gap in representation between high and low-income students at highly selective colleges and universities. Summers argued that equal access to a highly selective education is essential on an individual level, as “the economic impact of going to college in general, and going to a more selective college in particular … has never been greater” and that it is essential for society, as “only by assuring access to everyone can we maximize the quality of our nation’s college graduates” (Summers, 2004). Summers’ speech provides a reminder of why it is crucial not only to recruit these students but also to provide support
to them. The United States will never be a true meritocracy unless students from all backgrounds not only have equal access to highly selective colleges and universities, but also have the tools they need, financially, academically, and socially, to succeed.

Endnotes
i Resident Deans live in each of the Harvard houses and provide both academic and social support for students. As such, they are often the first line of defense for students needing additional support.

ii Pike and Kuh (2005) also found that first-generation students do less well when they do not live on campus, but this typically does not apply to highly selective colleges and universities, which are fully residential.

iii This phrase was coined by John O’Keefe, Director of Advising and Academic Support Services at Wellesley College and George Levesque, Dean for Freshmen Advising at Yale University, at a conference of academic advisors from COFHE (Coalition on the Financing of Higher Education) schools, February 2008.

iv Massey’s research fits with research by Dalton Conley (2001) who showed a strong effect for parental wealth on college completion rates.

v In her thesis based on her own experience and on interviews with other Harvard undergraduates, Kareemah Sabur (2009, p. 80) notes that some first generation students “saw other Harvard students receiving help from their parents with major projects.”

vi According to the Harvard Crimson, the admitted class of 2008 was 10.3% black, while the class of 2012 is 11% black and the class of 2013 is 10.9% black.

vii Sabur (2009, p. 77) states that first generation students “have to work to maintain legitimacy in their home communities and attempt to balance difficult and demanding academic pressures.”


ix The phrase “targeting within universalism” describes social programs which gain broad public support because they are available to everyone, yet provide disproportionate benefits to a few. One example of this is Social Security, which benefits lower-income people at a higher level than upper-income people. See Skocpol (1995).

x Muraskin and Lee (2004, p. 35) report that colleges and universities that use “intrusive advising” consisting of 3 or more visits per semester retain low-income students at higher rates than those that do not.

xi Sabur (2009, p. 119), argues that Harvard should “maintain direct dialogue with underrepresented racial and SES minorities to discuss their experiences.

References


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