



## Fact Sheet

### TRUE MERIT

*Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access  
to Our Best Colleges and Universities*

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As the provider of the nation's largest scholarships for low-income, high-achieving students, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation is keenly aware of the challenges facing economically disadvantaged students in selective college and university admissions. To raise awareness of the barriers these students confront when seeking a postsecondary education at an elite institution, the Cooke Foundation has released a groundbreaking new report that examines ways the admissions process at selective colleges and universities *disadvantages* low-income applicants.

The report, titled "True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities," provides conclusive evidence that admission to selective higher education institutions is actually *harder* for the high-achieving, low-income student than for others. It concludes that the advent of "need blind" admissions policies notwithstanding, the system constitutes an *"unjustified bias against poor and minority applicants – however inadvertent – masquerading as fairness."*

To remedy the problem, the Cooke Foundation recommends selective higher education institutions institute a *"poverty preference"* akin to existing legacy and athletic preferences.

Overcoming the burdens of poverty to nevertheless perform at a high level is itself an indicator of ability and perseverance; true merit, properly understood, recognizes both scholastic achievement and the importance of the distance traveled from a low-income high school to an elite college or university.

A preference for the low-income student would recalibrate the balance so that admission to the best colleges and universities is not a function of wealth and station but of true academic merit.

#### KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

- **High-achieving, low-income students are seriously underrepresented at the nation's most selective postsecondary institutions.** Students from families in the bottom economic quartile comprise only *three percent* of enrollment in the most competitive schools, while those from the top economic quartile comprise *72 percent*. Yet many students who are poor and clearly qualified for admission are either deterred from applying because they misunderstand how financial aid works or rejected because of unfair admissions rules.
- **"Under-matching" is a major problem.** Only *23 percent* of high-achieving, low-income students even apply to a selective school, compared with *48 percent* of high-achieving, high-income students.
- **Preferential treatment abounds.** More than *80 percent* of the nation's most selective institutions give a preference to children of alumni, who are typically wealthy. Recruited athletes are as much as *four times* as likely to be admitted as other similarly qualified students but, once admitted, *dramatically underperform* compared to others with similar academic credentials.
- **Overreliance on ACT/ SAT scores puts low-income students at a disadvantage.** High-achieving, low-income students are *half as likely* as wealthier students to take ACT/ SAT prep courses, even though it is clearly documented that they raise scores.
- **Yet high-achieving, low-income students are successful in selective institutions.** Underscoring the magnitude of the report's findings is the fact that *92 percent* of high-ability, low-income students who managed to enroll at selective colleges and universities graduated and did well academically.

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