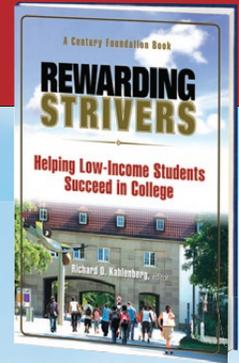


# Highlights from *Rewarding Strivers* *Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*

Richard D. Kahlenberg, editor  
The Century Foundation Press, June 2010



In 2004, The Century Foundation released a study, *America's Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education*, finding 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. Now, The Century Foundation is releasing *Rewarding Strivers*, a new volume that examines two strategies to increase socioeconomic diversity: better financial aid programs and admissions policies to provide a leg up to economically disadvantaged students of all races.

## Included in the Volume

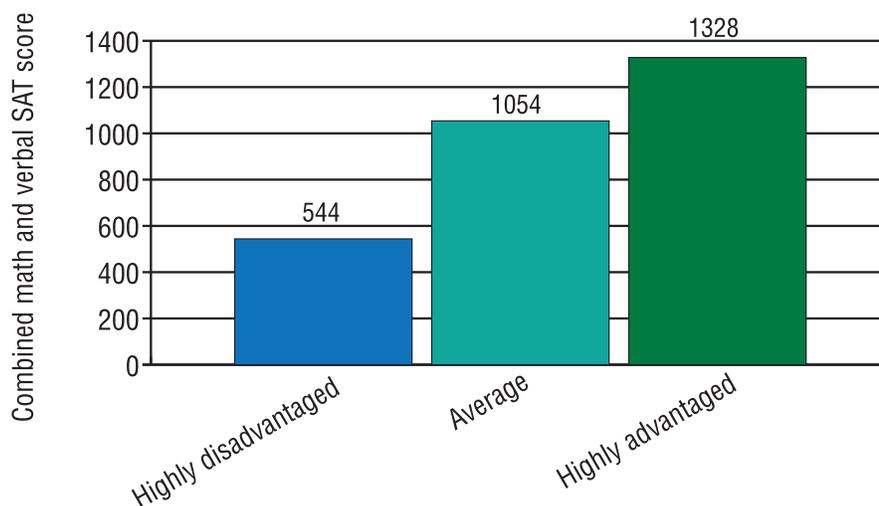
- \* “How Increasing College Access Is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do about It,” by Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl of Georgetown University. This research updates and expands Carnevale’s controversial “strivers” research from his stint at the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the late 1990s. The research seeks to identify promising disadvantaged students who beat the odds and score higher than expected on the SAT. This chapter comes as the courts are once again reviewing the legality of affirmative action at the University of Texas in the case of *Fisher v. Texas*.
- \* “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.
- \* “Introduction,” by Richard D. Kahlenberg, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation. Provides an overview of the book, including highlights of new research findings.

## Significant Findings

### \* Disadvantaged students start the SAT’s “100-yard dash” 65 yards behind.

According to Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl’s chapter, the highly disadvantaged applicant (low-income, black, parents are high school dropouts, attends high-poverty public school, and so on) is expected to score 784 SAT points lower than the highly advantaged student (wealthy, white, highly educated parents, attends private school, and so on). While the average student is expected to score 1054 on the combined math and verbal sections of the SAT, the highly disadvantaged is expected to score 544 and the highly advantaged 1328. (See Figure 1.) 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.

**Figure 1. Predicted Combined Math and Verbal SAT Score, by Type of Student, on a 400-1600 Point Scale**



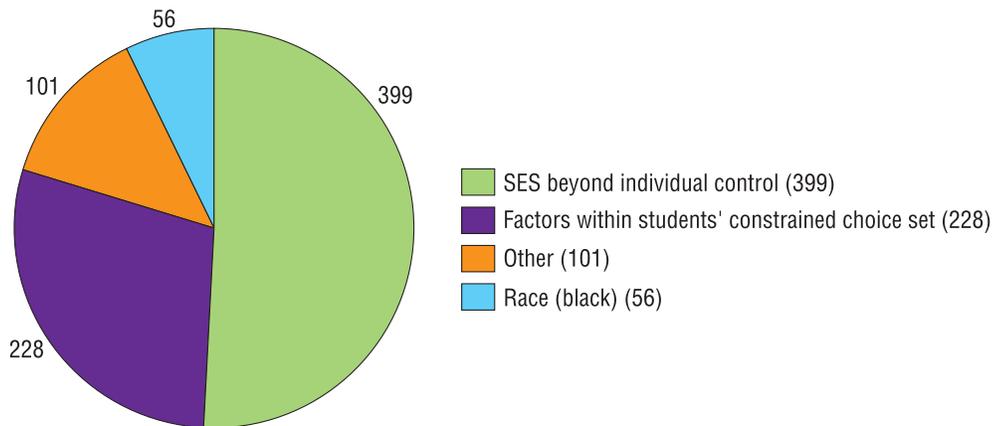
Source: Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, “How Increasing College Access Is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do about It,” in *Rewarding Strivers*, ed. Richard D. Kahlenberg (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2010), 173.

Carnevale and Strohl do not advocate mechanically adding SAT points to the raw scores of disadvantaged applicants. They draw a distinction between “deservedness” and “readiness” and point out that the highly disadvantaged student who scores 700 on the combined SAT will not perform at the level of the highly advantaged student who scores 784 points higher, and the disadvantaged student likely would fail at a selective college. But the authors do suggest that universities consider how far a student has come as well as what her raw scores are. The evidence suggests that far more strivers could be admitted to selective institutions than currently are. Earlier research for The Century Foundation by Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose found that, under a pure meritocratic system that also considers economic disadvantage in admissions, the bottom half of the socioeconomic distribution could increase its representation at selective institutions from 10 percent to 38 percent, and universities would have the same graduation rates as they currently do.

**\* 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). (See Figure 2.) By contrast, 399 points of the gap are from factors that are socioeconomic in nature—such as having a father who is a laborer as opposed to a physician (48 points), attending a school where 90 percent of classmates are low-income compared to one where no peers receive subsidized lunch (38 points), and having a parent who is a high school dropout as opposed to highly educated (43 points). Another 228 points are associated with factors that are sometimes matters of choice but are constrained by socioeconomic status—items such as working at a job during high school (13 points) and not taking any AP courses (81 points), which some low-income schools fail to make available.

**Figure 2. The Cost of Disadvantage (in SAT Points), by Category of Disadvantage**



Source: Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, "How Increasing College Access Is Increasing Inequality, and What to Do about It," in *Rewarding Strivers*, ed. Richard D. Kahlenberg (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2010), Table 3.7 on 170.

These findings suggest that a meritocratic system would provide a lot of affirmative action to economically disadvantaged students who beat the odds, and a little bit of 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. According to William Bowen and colleagues, at highly selective institutions, for students within a given SAT range, being an underrepresented minority increases one's chances of admission by 28 percentage points. (That is, a white student with a given record might have a 30 percent chance of admission, but an African-American or Latino student with a similar record would have a 58 percent chance of admission.) By contrast, Bowen found, students from poor families receive "essentially no break in the admissions process; they fare neither better nor worse than other applicants."

Significantly, the relatively small role of race in the findings should not be read to suggest that racism and discrimination are a thing of the past, but rather that economic criteria can often capture ongoing discrimination. Racial discrimination in the employment sector is reflected in lower earnings for black families. Likewise, ongoing discrimination in the housing market is reflected in the fact that black and Latino students are much more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty than whites of similar income.

The Carnevale and Strohl study could have important ramifications for the future shape of affirmative action, a policy which is under legal attack at the University of Texas. For more information on the implications of the Carnevale and Strohl study for the future of affirmative action policies, see Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Toward a New Affirmative action," *Chronicle of Higher Education Review*, May 30, 2010, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Toward-a-New-Affirmative/65675/>.

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

Evidence suggests that financial aid is necessary, but not sufficient to changing the economic profile of universities. 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. Traditionally, low-income and working-class students drop out at much higher rates than students from more-affluent families, as financial worries and the need to work jobs with long hours distract from studies. Fiske found that the

Carolina Covenant, which provides financial aid and support to students earning below 200 percent of the poverty line, boosted graduation rates of low-income students by almost 10 percent.

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.**

Going to a selective, wealthy institution of higher education may indeed be worth the investment (and not just for getting appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court). Colleges with low selectivity spend about \$12,000 per student, compared with \$92,000 per student at the most selective institutions. Moreover, in the wealthiest 10 percent of institutions, students pay just 20 cents for every dollar spent on them, compared with the poorest 10 percent of institutions, where students pay 78 cents of every dollar spent on them. 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.

**Endorsements**

The Century Foundation continues its trailblazing mission to prevent the tragic waste of human talent that threatens America's future. *Rewarding Strivers* presents provocative research and analysis that provides a blueprint for the way forward.

—William R. Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions, Harvard University

The terrible "secret" of higher education in America is that too few students from poorer families have access to it, mobility based on talent is sorely incomplete, and that institutions and society suffer from a resulting lack of talent. Kahlenberg again gathers the best thinkers on how to challenge this status quo; what to do, what works and what does not.

—Anthony Marx, President, Amherst College

**Early Press Attention**

Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Five Myths about College Admissions," Outlook Section, *Washington Post*, May 23, 2010, p. B3, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/21/AR2010052101847.html>.

Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Toward a New Affirmative Action," *Chronicle of Higher Education Review*, May 30, 2010, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Toward-a-New-Affirmative/65675/>.

Caralee Adams, "Helping Low-Income Students onto Campus," *Education Week Blog*, May 24, 2010, available at [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/college\\_bound/2010/05/low-income\\_students\\_face\\_struggle\\_to\\_get\\_into\\_college.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/college_bound/2010/05/low-income_students_face_struggle_to_get_into_college.html).