

'Need-blind' admissions may be reconsidered by colleges

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By Anya Sostek / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It sounds wonderfully egalitarian: all students, no matter what their financial circumstances, should get the same consideration for college admission.

But with skyrocketing student debt and limited college endowments, some colleges are reconsidering whether a "need-blind" admissions policy is the best use of resources, both for the school and the student.

Wesleyan University in Connecticut announced in October that it would no longer be completely need blind in its admissions. Grinnell College in Iowa embarked on a public examination of the topic. And Albright College, in Reading, Berks County, has shifted its priority from admitting students need blind to meeting 100 percent of their need.

Like many other schools, Albright was financially able to admit students without considering need but was not financially able to then provide enough financial aid to meet that need -- leaving a gap between the student's expected contribution and how much aid the school was providing.

That practice is known as "gapping" or "unmet need."

According to a 2008 study from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, 93 percent of public institutions consider themselves need blind but only 32 percent meet full need. For private institutions, 81 percent call themselves need blind, but only 18 percent meet full need.

That gap, Albright administrators noticed, was being increasingly filled by student loans.

"What we saw, quite honestly, was an increase in the students who were struggling financially but still wanting to be members of the community," said Chris Hanlon, director of financial aid at Albright. "We had students who were using these debt load programs to meet cost and clearly struggling with the idea of being in debt \$50,000 or \$60,000 or \$70,000 at graduation."

Because the amount that undergraduate students can borrow via government loans is limited, Albright students who needed to fill a gap were taking out private loans on the secondary loan market, which concerned administrators because those loans offer fewer protections for students.

By expanding the size of its student body from about 525 students per class to closer to 600 students per class, Albright is hoping to be able to raise the money to meet the need for all of the students it admits -- estimated to be somewhere around \$3.5 million.

The trade-off is that the school might have to consider need in admissions for some students -- though it has pledged to remain need blind for students who submit applications before a March 1 deadline.

"What we're doing is taking more of our resources from students who are coming in and trying to serve a diverse student population," said Mr. Hanlon. "We knew it was the right thing to do -- at the end of the day, that's what drove the decision."

Giving up need-blind admissions for some portion of the applicant pool is not unusual. Even though most colleges consider themselves need blind to some degree, only a handful of schools are need blind for international students, and many consider need for transfer students or students admitted from their wait lists.

"Even the colleges that are need blind aren't necessarily entirely need blind," said Mark Kantrowitz, publisher of the Cranberry-based websites FinAid.org and FastWeb.com.

Carnegie Mellon University, for example, is need blind for transfer students and early and regular decision students, but considers need for international students and wait-listed students.

Carnegie Mellon is not able to meet full need for all of its students, though the school is able to meet "a fair amount," said Mike Steidel, director of admissions. A student with an aid gap of \$1,000 might get full need met, for example, but a student with a \$20,000 aid gap might not.

The school also will sometimes give more financial aid to students with the strongest applications.

The school is not considering moving to a model like Albright's, he said, where full need is met.

Other schools that have also discussed pulling back on need blind admissions in recent years have done so for different reasons.

Wesleyan University referenced its relatively small endowment in announcing that it would consider need for some percentage of its applicants in an effort toward making financing more sustainable. The university estimated that it will consider need for about 10 percent of the students that it admits for the 2013-14 school year.

Much like at Albright administrators, Wesleyan president Michael Roth has expressed concern about admitting students who have to take on a large loan burden in order to graduate.

It's a sentiment shared by Mr. Kantrowitz. He doesn't know of any college that tracks the percentage of its graduates who graduate with excessive debt, he said, or share with the debt burden of graduates with its students.

He believes that this information is vital for students to know.

"No college goes to the extent of saying, 'You can't afford this school -- go somewhere else,'" he said. "The reality is that it does neither the student or the school any good to have a student who can't afford the college and drops out, or worse, graduates and defaults on the loan."

Mr. Kantrowitz also makes the point that schools with true need-blind admissions can't look at financial aid applications with an eye toward giving preference for admission to needier students. He believes that students who have dealt with difficult financial circumstances in their upbringing might deserve a preference for that.

A more critical eye toward need-blind admissions -- and more consideration to meeting full need and reducing loan burden -- is something that he's starting to see more college administrators discussing.

"At financial aid conferences I hear more colleges looking at the pros and cons," he said. "It boils down to financial strength, and gapping students is an easy way out."

Administrators at Albright are also seeing increased interest from other colleges.

"I wouldn't say that people are jumping on the bandwagon," said Mr. Hanlon, "but there is a lot of curiosity out there about how we're making this work."

Anya Sostek: asostek@post-gazette.com