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PRINCETON, OTHERS AIM TO ACCEPT MORE LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

Program backed by Bloomberg Philanthropies wants to add 50,000 low- and moderate-income students to elite schools

By Melissa Korn
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Princeton University in the fall will begin taking transfer students from community colleges for the first time.

Several hundreds miles south, Davidson College recently began keeping dining halls open during fall break, Thanksgiving and Easter, an acknowledgment that not all students could afford the trip home from North Carolina.

They're small steps. But the institutions hope that if enough peers make similar moves, the nation's highest ranked campuses could seem within reach for thousands of financially strapped students.

Just over a year ago, 30 elite colleges banded together with a goal of enrolling an additional 50,000 low- and moderate-income students at top institutions by 2025.

With nearly \$3.9 million in backing to date from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the American Talent Initiative now has 97 member schools taking steps toward socioeconomic diversity. The Bloomberg money largely covers organizational costs to run the coalition, but schools are on the hook to raise money for scholarships and other programs once students make it to campus.

Some of the member schools already are need-blind, meaning they admit qualified candidates no matter their ability to pay. Although published tuition, fees, room and board at elite private schools now top \$65,000 a year, few students actually pay sticker price, due to a mix of need- and merit-based awards.

As more needy students enroll, the institutions are increasing financial-aid budgets and making accommodations for additional costs beyond tuition, such as those for art supplies or meal plans. Coalition members can expect to spend millions or even tens of millions of dollars a year more, depending on their size.

Among the more recent additions to the American Talent Initiative are Middlebury College, Indiana University and the University of Chicago.

In addition to offering more financial support, some campuses are also working to close graduation gaps for minority and low-income students, improve academic advising for first-generation students or build out their pipelines by sending fresh graduates to work as college advisers in poor and rural areas.

Roughly one-third of students at four-year colleges are eligible for Pell grants, which mainly go to those whose families earn less than \$30,000. At schools eligible to join the American Talent Initiative – those with consistent six-year graduation rates above 70 percent – that share is around 20 percent. Twenty-two percent of this year’s freshman class at Princeton is eligible for Pell grants, up from 18 percent four years earlier.

The schools use Pell-grant eligibility as a proxy for measuring how many of their students are low-income. The initiative focuses on those students, as well as some whose families earn slightly more.

“The future of our country requires that we have strategies to prepare those young people to live full lives and contribute to the economy,” said Daniel Porterfield, president of Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa., ahead of a gathering last week of about 40 of the colleges.

With logistical help from the Aspen Institute and Ithaca S+R, nonprofits that support higher education innovation, the schools swap success stories and advise one another on challenges along the path to socioeconomic diversity. Small groups discuss fundraising, the pros and cons of deferring maintenance projects in favor of expanding student aid and refinancing debt to lower costs.

Still, opening the door to needy students is a tough sell for some trustees and full-paying students.

“We’re not scraping the bottom of the barrel to get kids who are Pell-eligible,” University of Dayton President Eric Spina said he had to explain to trustees. “These are talented kids who go toe-to-toe.”

Beginning in the fall, Princeton, which has an undergraduate enrollment of about 5,200, will accept 10 to 12 transfer students, mainly from community colleges. The school will expand its undergraduate student body by about 10 percent in coming years to make room for those and other new students from diverse backgrounds.

Meanwhile, Ohio State is focused on pushing students through in four years, rather than in five or six, to free up space for more first-year students.

In October, admissions officers from Lehigh University, Lawrence University, Claremont McKenna College, Bates College, and Franklin & Marshall – liberal arts school that often compete for students – joined forces to visit high schools and talk about their interest in talented students from low-income backgrounds.

Presidents warn that middle-income students, for whom tuition is still a burden, can grow resentful if they see their own payments covering costs for their classmates, so they’re trying to expand financial support for those beyond the lowest income brackets.

Ohio State President Michael Drake said there isn’t outright opposition to the diversity efforts on campus, but there can be “passive resistance” among administrators because schools could easily focus on expanding research or athletics rather than social mobility.

“The status quo is massive and has great gravitational weight,” he said.