

# The College Decision-Making Process: A Survey of Parents of 5<sup>th</sup>- Through 12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Students

A STUDY BY *INSIDE HIGHER ED* AND GALLUP

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# THE COLLEGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS: A SURVEY OF PARENTS OF 5TH- THROUGH 12TH-GRADE STUDENTS

A study by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup

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## FOREWORD

Attending a college or university requires a serious commitment of time, money and effort. Some of the important factors students and parents may consider in deciding which college or university to attend include price, academic quality, range of academic programs, location, extracurricular programs, and institution size. Choosing a college that is a good fit for a student is a crucial step toward many life goals.

This study addresses a few important questions about the decision-making process that many parents go through to determine or influence where their children will attend college.

Following are the questions addressed in the study:

- In your opinion, what is the most important reason why your child will get additional education beyond high school?
- Are there pathways other than going to college that could lead your child to a good job?
- Are you confident that a liberal arts education could lead your child to a good job?



- What about a vocational, professional, or technical certificate or degree program?
- How likely are you to restrict the colleges to which your child applies for admission because of the tuition and fees needed to attend that institution?
- Thinking of your oldest child in grades 5 through 12 who is living in this household, what amount of loan debt are you willing to accumulate for this child over a four year period as an undergraduate college student?
- Do you believe your child's chances for admission to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies?

## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

- About one-third (34 percent) of parents said they were very likely to restrict the colleges to which their child applies for admission because of what the institutions charged in tuition and fees; another 34 percent said they were somewhat likely to do so.

- One in five parents (20 percent) said that they were unwilling to accumulate any loan debt for their child's undergraduate education. But on the other end of the spectrum, another fifth (21 percent) said they would be willing to accumulate \$50,000 or more in college loan debt for their child. By contrast, only 1 percent of college admissions directors told *Inside Higher Ed* last fall that \$50,000 in undergraduate loan debt was reasonable for a student to accumulate.

- Nearly four in 10 parents (38 percent) said getting a good job is the reason why their child will get education beyond high school.



- Three in 10 (31 percent) strongly agreed that there are ways other than going to college that could lead their child to a good job.

- Four in 10 (43 percent) strongly agreed that a vocational, professional or technical certificate or degree program could lead their child to a good job.

- Less than 3 in 10 (28 percent) strongly agreed they

were confident that a liberal arts education could lead their child to a good job.

- More parents strongly disagreed (27 percent) than strongly agreed (20 percent) that their child's chances for admission to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies; parents of black students are far likelier (53 percent) than are parents of white (23 percent) and Hispanic (26 percent) students to strongly disagree that their child's chances for admission to college could be hurt.

## METHODOLOGY

The following report presents findings from a quantitative survey research study that Gallup conducted on behalf of *Inside Higher Ed*. The overall objective of the study was to learn more about the college admission decision-making process of parents in the years before sending their children to college.

To achieve these objectives, Gallup interviewed a random sample of Americans with children in 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade about their college admissions decision-making process. Results are based on telephone interviews conducted as part of Gallup Daily tracking Sept. 18-Oct. 10, 2012, with a random sample of 3,269 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2$  percentage points. For subgroups within this population (e.g., education level, gender, and income), the margin of error would be greater. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The following paper presents key findings of the survey. Reported frequencies may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding or the exclusion of “don’t know” and refused results in some cases.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on

landline telephones and cellular phones, with interviews conducted in Spanish for respondents who are primarily Spanish-speaking. Each sample includes a minimum quota of 400 cellphone respondents and 600 landline respondents per 1,000 national adults, with additional minimum quotas among landline respondents by region. Landline telephone numbers are chosen at random among listed telephone numbers. Cellphone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household on the basis of which member had the most recent birthday.

Samples are weighted by gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, adults in the household, population density, and telephone status (cellphone only/landline only/both, cellphone mostly, and having an unlisted landline number).

Demographic weighting targets are based on the March 2011 Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older U.S. population. All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting.



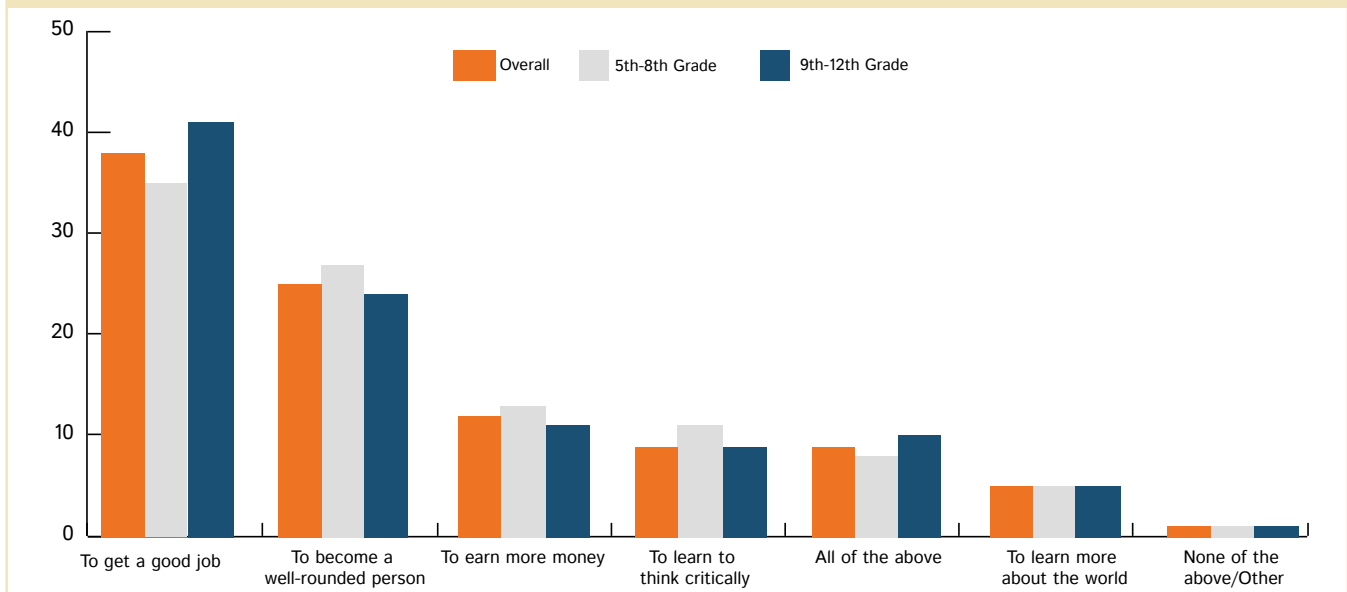
## DETAILED FINDINGS

### IMPORTANT REASONS TO GET AN EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL

Parents want to ensure their children get the best possible college education, which makes selecting a college or university an important decision. When asked to name the most important reason for their child to get education beyond high school, 38 percent of parents over all said to get a good job. Thirty-five percent of parents with children in 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade said this, compared with 41 percent of parents of children in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

The second most important reason parents gave for why their child will get an education beyond high school is to become a well-rounded person. Over all, 25 percent said this, including 27 percent of parents of children in 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 24 percent of parents of children in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

**In your opinion, which ONE of the following is the most important reason why your child will get education beyond high school?**



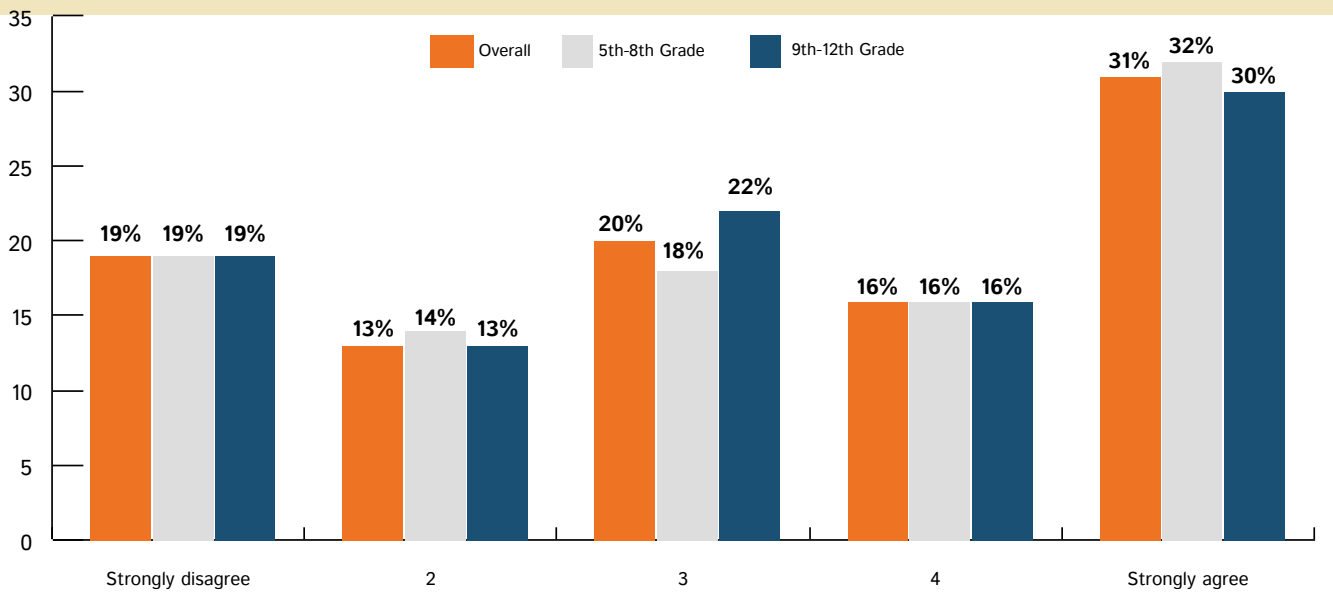
## DETAILED FINDINGS

### CAN A COLLEGE DEGREE LEAD TO A BETTER JOB?

One of the main reasons students attend college is to increase the chance of getting a good job, but many parents are weighing the price versus the benefit of attaining a college degree. Only 31 percent of parents

over all strongly agreed when asked if they were confident there are ways other than going to college that could lead their child to a good job. In contrast, 19 percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

**(Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.) I am confident there are ways other than going to college that could lead my child to a good job.**



### TUITION AND FEES

The price of higher education tuition and fees is influencing parents' decisions on whether their children should apply to certain colleges. When parents were asked how likely they are to restrict the colleges to which their child applies for admission because of the tuition and fees needed to attend, 34 percent said they

are very likely to do so and another 34 percent said they are somewhat likely.

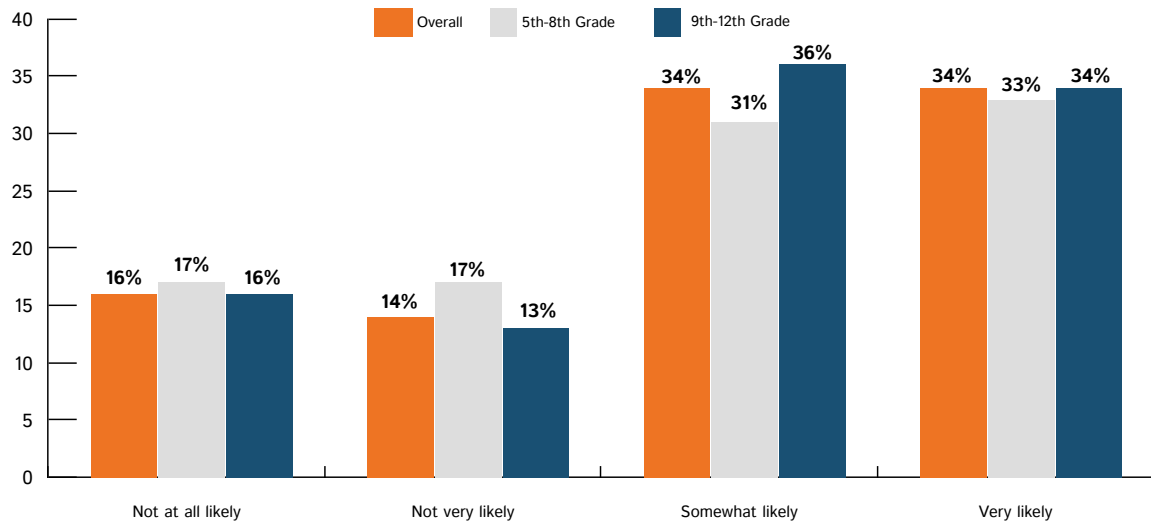
Only 16 percent said they are not at all likely to restrict the colleges to which their child applies for admission because of the tuition and fees needed to attend that institution.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

Significantly more parents (36 percent) of children in grades 9 through 12 said that they are somewhat likely to restrict the institutions to which their child applies, compared with 31 percent of parents of 5th through 8th graders who said that. Seventeen percent of parents of children in grades 5 through 8 said they are not very likely to restrict the institutions to which their child applies, compared with 13 percent of parents of 9th through 12th graders.

There were also differences by parents' income level. Parents who earned at least \$7,500 a month (\$90,000 a year) were significantly less likely (29 percent) to say they were very likely to restrict the colleges to which their children applied, compared to 36 percent of parents who earned less than \$3,000 a month and 36 percent of those who earned between \$3,000 and \$7,499 a month.

### How likely are you to restrict the colleges to which your child applies for admission because of the tuition and fees needed to attend that institution?





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**POLICY — AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

The Supreme Court is considering a case that could scale back the right of colleges and universities to consider race and ethnicity in admissions decisions. Institutions will need to navigate how to respond should the change take effect.

In an *Inside Higher Ed* research study conducted in collaboration with Gallup, when admissions directors were asked how their institution would respond should the Supreme Court decide to change race/ethnicity

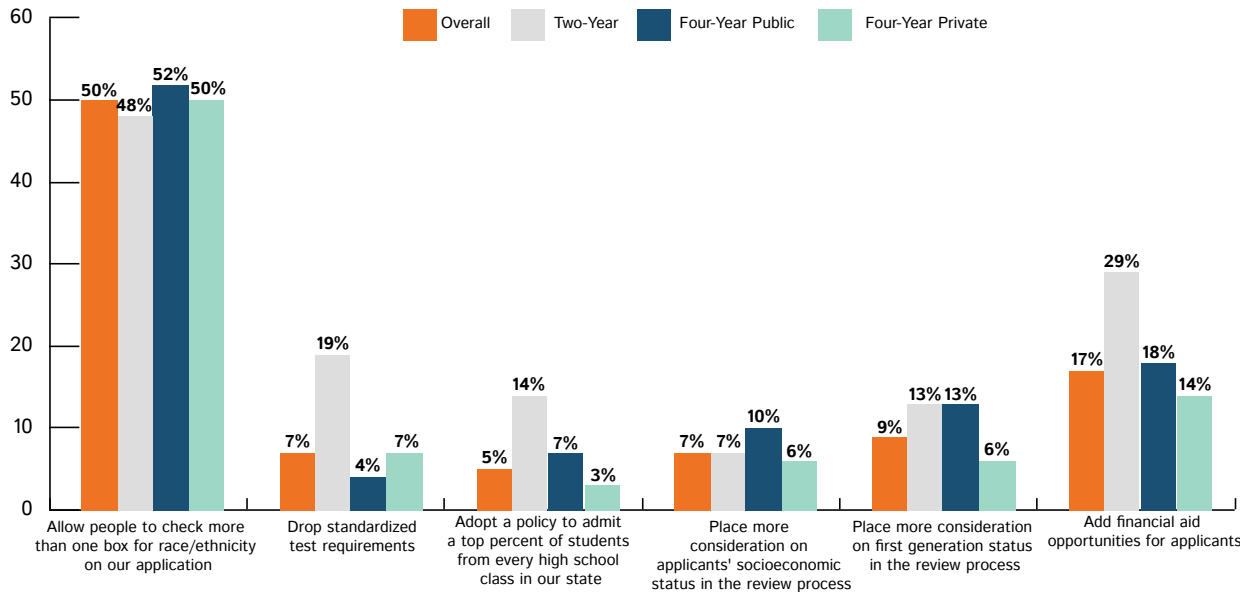
considerations, one-half (50 percent) strongly agreed their institutions would allow applicants to check more than one box for race/ethnicity.

Some two-year institutions (29 percent) strongly agreed that they would add financial aid opportunities for applicants, compared with 18 percent of four-year public institutions.

Nineteen percent of two-year institutions strongly agreed that they would drop a requirement for standardized test scores (2012 Survey of College and

**As you know, the Supreme Court is currently considering a case which could scale back the right of colleges and universities to consider race and ethnicity in admissions decisions. Thinking about this case, using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following items. If the right of colleges and universities to consider race and ethnicity in admissions decisions is scaled back, our institution will:**

(2012 Survey of College and University Admissions Directors)





## DETAILED FINDINGS

University Admissions Directors, p.18, 2012).

When Gallup asked parents if they were confident that their child's chances for admission to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies, 20 percent strongly agreed. However, more parents strongly disagreed (27 percent) with the statement.

Significant differences occur by race, however.

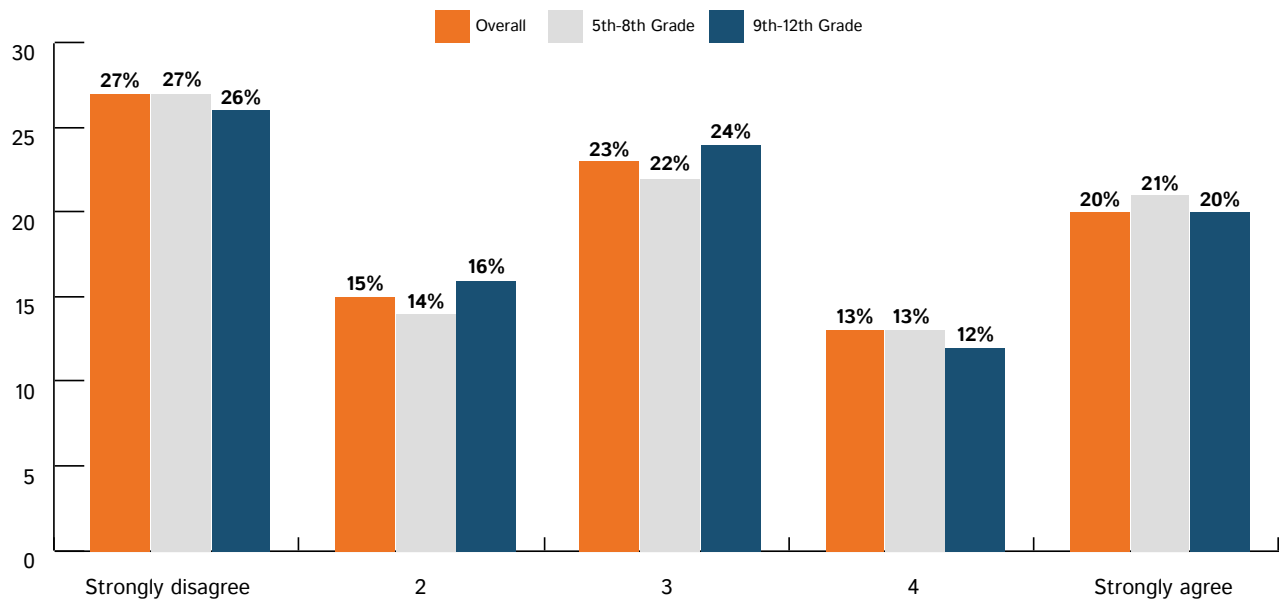
Parents of black students were far likelier (53 percent) than were parents of white (23 percent) and Hispanic

(26 percent) students to strongly disagree that they were confident that their child's chances of admissions to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies.

Parents of white students (23 percent) are likelier than those of black (16 percent) or Hispanic students (18 percent) to strongly agree with that statement.

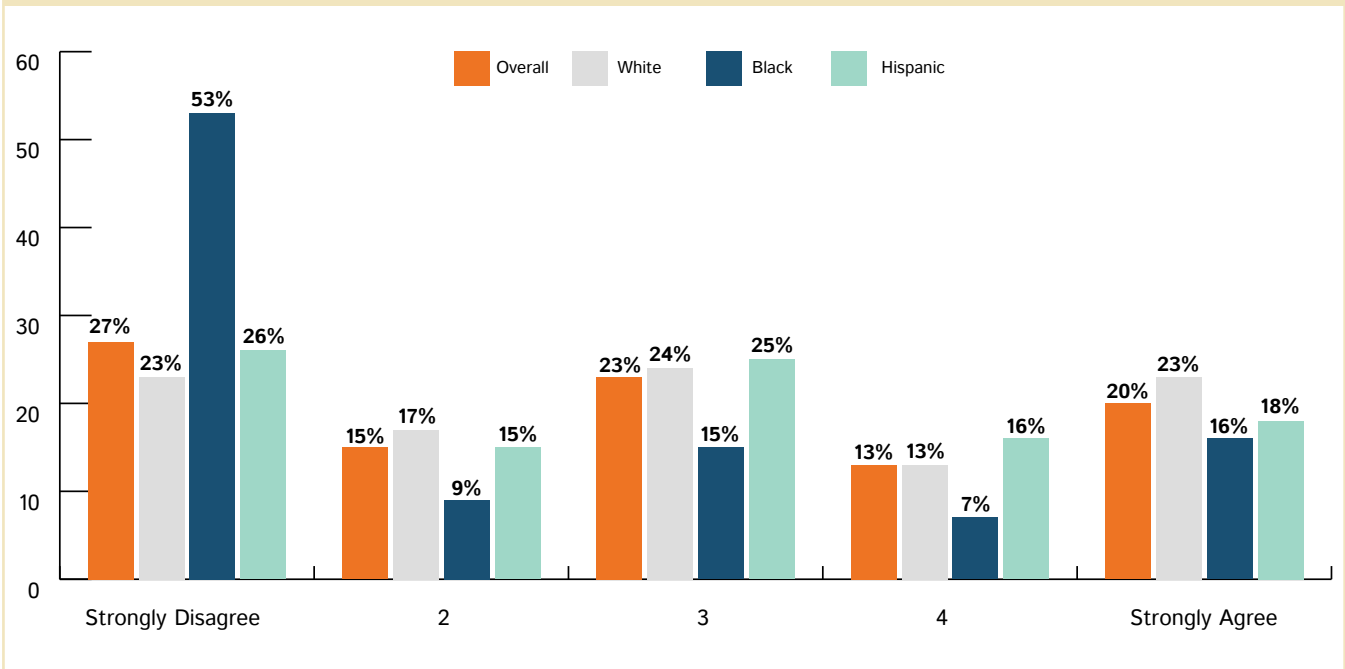
There were insufficient numbers of Asian-American respondents to produce statistically significant responses.

**(Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.) I am confident that my child's chances for admission to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies.**



## DETAILED FINDINGS

(Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.) I am confident that my child's chances for admission to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies.



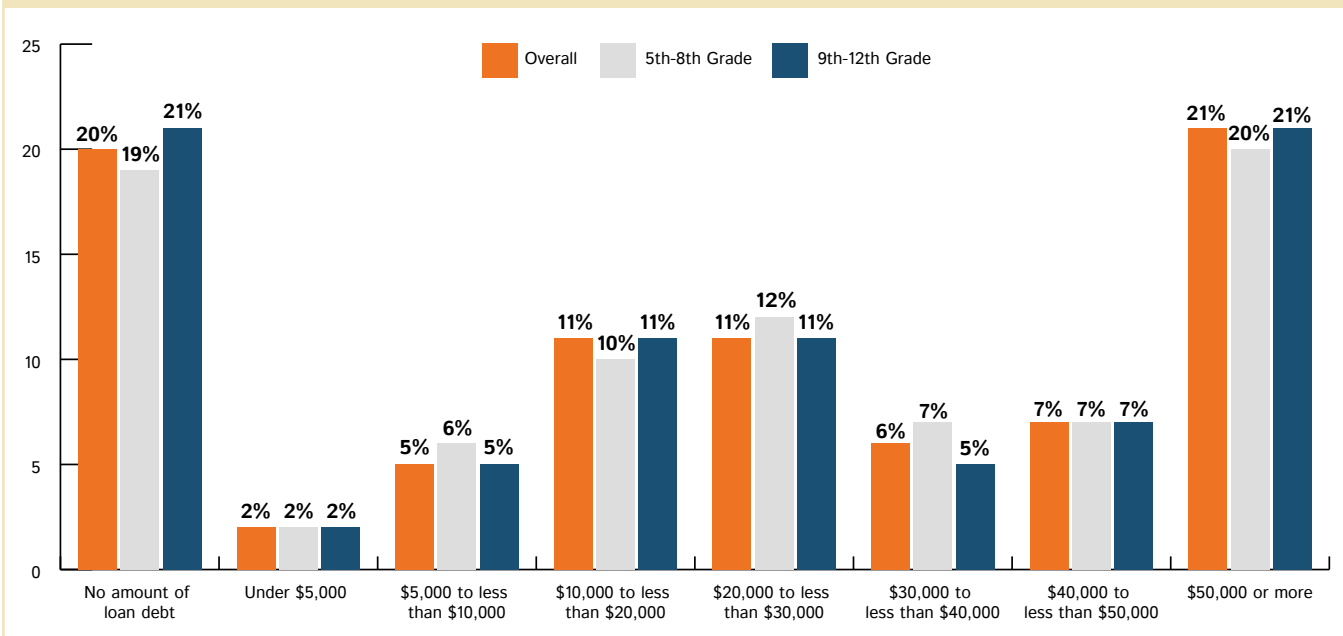
**“Parents of black students were far likelier than their white and Hispanic peers to simply disagree that their child’s chances of admission to college could be hurt by affirmative action policies.”**

## LOANS AND VALUE

When Gallup asked parents what amount of loan debt they are willing to accumulate for their child over a four-year period as an undergraduate student, 20 percent said no amount of loan debt, 21 percent said \$50,000

or more, and 14 percent said they don't know. The question did not clearly differentiate between types of loan debt, or whether it was the student or the parents who would accumulate it.

**Thinking of your oldest child in grades 5 through 12 who is living in this household, what amount of loan debt are you willing to accumulate for this child over a four-year period as an undergraduate college student?**

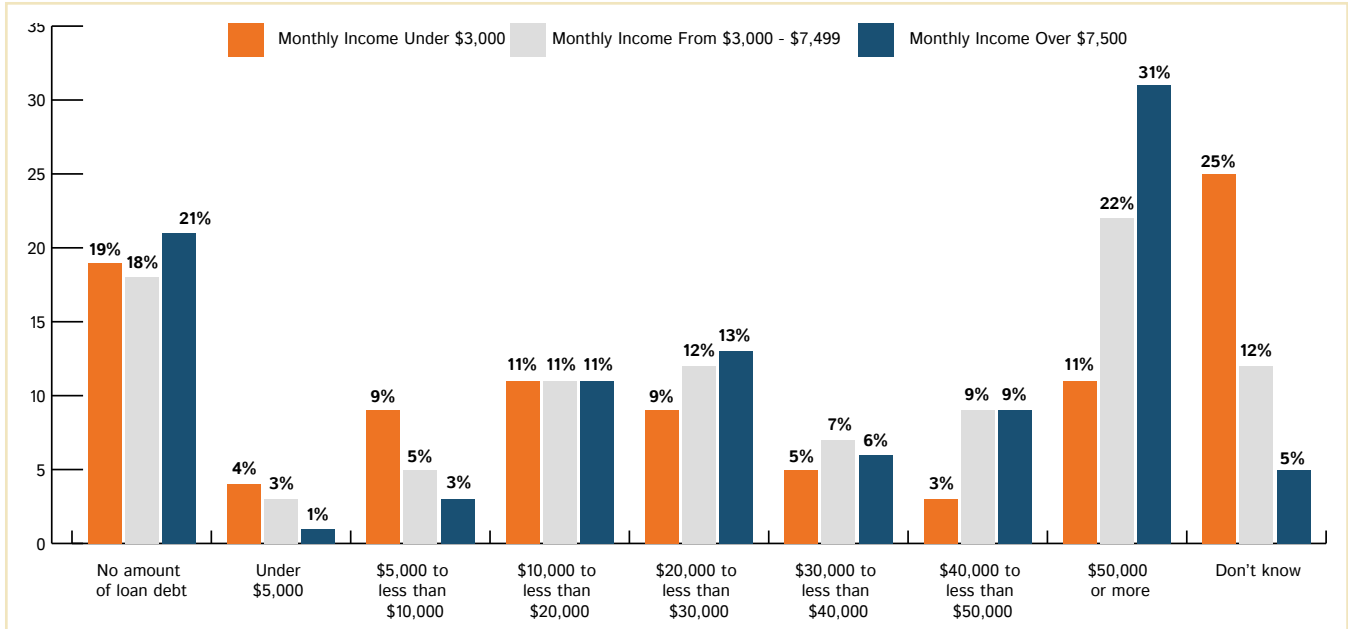


As seen in the table on the following page, parents with different income levels clustered closely in most of their answers – with one major exception. Parents who earned at least \$7,500 a month (\$90,000 a year) were nearly three times as likely as those who earned under \$3,000 a month to say that they were willing to

accumulate more than \$50,000 in undergraduate debt for their child.

Those who earned between \$3,000 and \$7,499 a month, meanwhile, were twice as likely to say so than were those who earned under \$3,000 a month.

## DETAILED FINDINGS



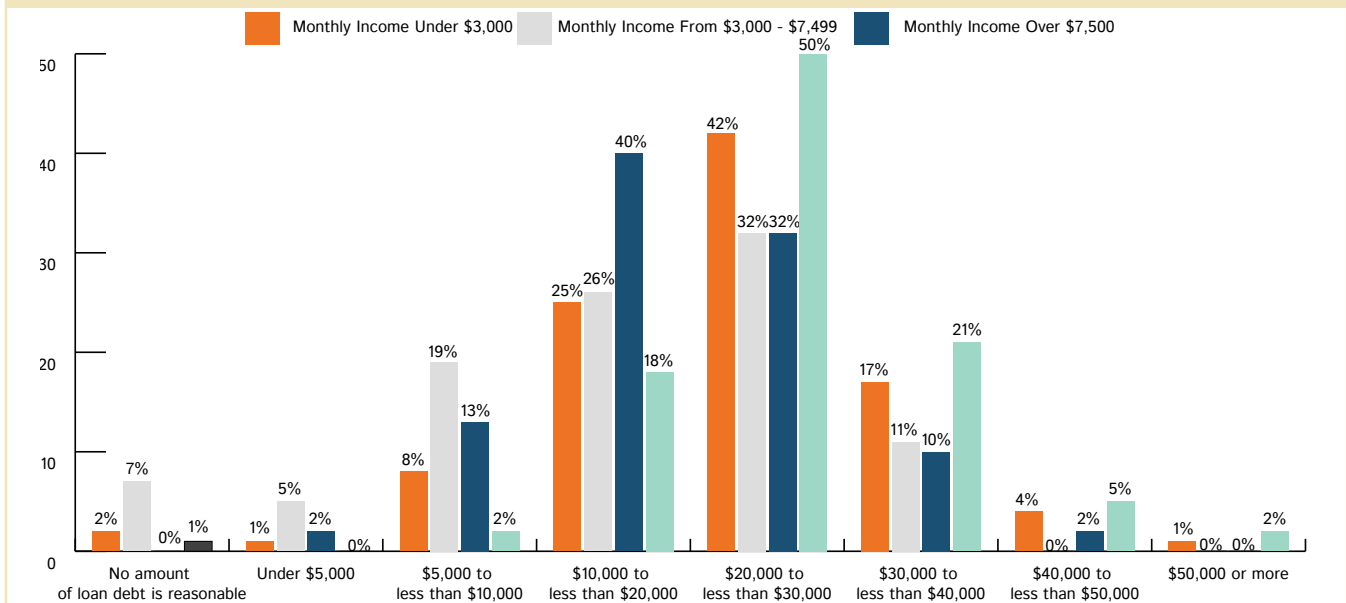
In an *Inside Higher Ed* research study conducted in collaboration with Gallup, admissions directors were asked a related but different question. As seen on the next page, only 2 percent of admissions directors said that no amount of loan debt is reasonable for an undergraduate student himself or herself to accumulate over a four-year period, compared with the 20 percent

of parents who said they are willing to accumulate no amount of loan debt in Gallup's survey of parents. Furthermore, while 21 percent of parents said they are willing to accumulate \$50,000 or more worth of debt for their child, only 1 percent of admissions directors said they thought this is a reasonable amount for an undergraduate student to accumulate.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### In your opinion, what is a reasonable amount of loan debt for an undergraduate student to accumulate over a four-year period?

(2012 Survey of College and University Admissions Directors)



More than four in 10 (42 percent) admissions directors said that \$20,000 to less than \$30,000 is a reasonable amount of loan debt for an undergraduate student to

accumulate over a four-year period, while 11 percent of parents said that they are willing to accumulate that amount of debt on behalf of their child.

## THE VALUE OF DEGREES

Parents see strong value in their children getting vocational, professional or technical certificates to find a good job. When Gallup asked parents if they are confident that a vocational, professional or technical certificate or degree program could lead their child to a

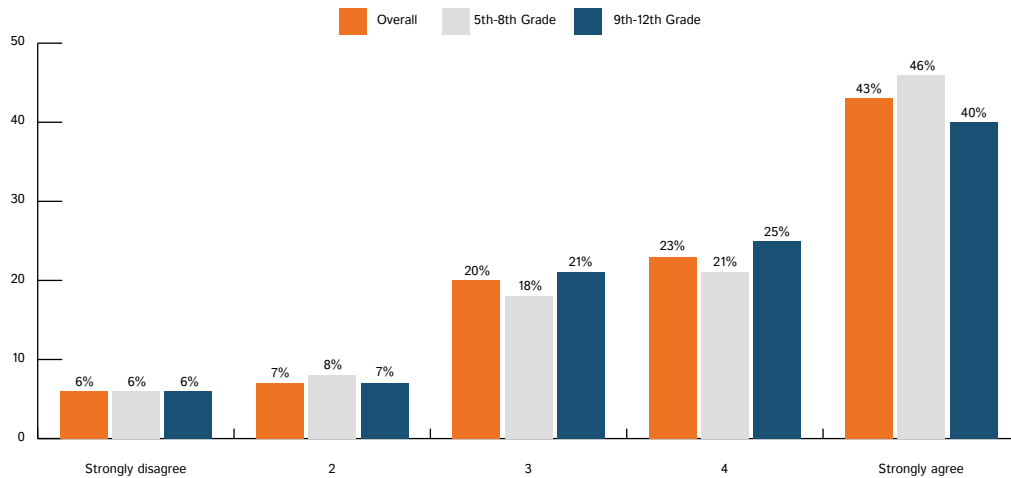
good job, 43 percent strongly agreed and only 6 percent strongly disagreed, as seen on the following page.

Significantly more parents of 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders (46 percent) strongly agreed compared with 40 percent of parents of 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders.



## DETAILED FINDINGS

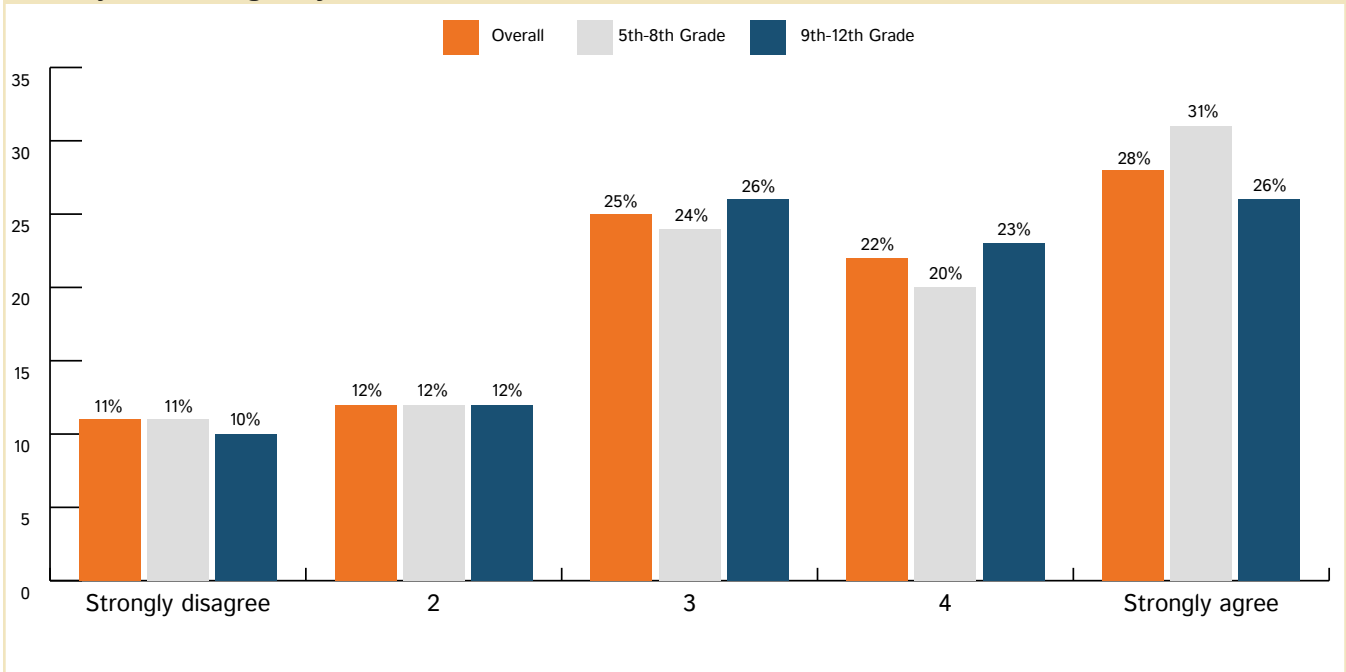
(Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.) I am confident that a vocational, professional or technical certificate or degree program could lead my child to a good job.



Parents were also asked if they were confident that a liberal arts degree could lead to their child getting a good job. As seen on the following page, nearly three in 10 (28 percent) strongly agreed with this statement, while 11 percent strongly disagreed.

There is a significant difference between the parents of 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders who strongly agreed (31 percent) that a liberal arts education can lead their child to a good job versus 26 percent of parents of 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders who said the same.

(Using a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.) I am confident that a liberal arts education could lead my child to a good job.



## REFERENCES

Jaschik, S. & Lederman, D. (eds.) (2012). The 2012 *Inside Higher Ed* Survey of College & University Admissions Directors: A Study by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup, pp. 15 & 18.

## SELECTED *INSIDE HIGHER ED* ARTICLES

### NEED AND WANT

OCTOBER 30, 2012

BY KEVIN KILEY

*Facing financial constraints and public pressure over students' debt, some colleges move away from need-blind admissions -- which are often costly to the institution and students -- in favor of reducing "gap" funding.*

Administrators in higher education finance know that values are expensive, and in these times of austerity, many administrators are coming to realize that upholding some values might come at the cost of others.

In recent months, several colleges and universities have moved away from, or discussed moving away from, need-blind admissions (in which a student's financial need isn't considered in the admissions process) in favor of shoring up institutional finances, meeting students' full demonstrated need, or limiting the debt load of graduates. The group includes wealthy institutions like Grinnell College and not-so-wealthy institutions like Albright College, in Pennsylvania. For the wealthier institutions, it has been a given that they would meet the full need of students they accept, but for institutions like Albright, the shift is partly a way to invest more in aid to make sure that admitted students aren't "gapped" (given aid packages that aren't enough for them to enroll) in the process.

Though the number of colleges that have publicly discussed such a policy change is small, many administrators in the sector say that such concerns are on the minds of more and more administrators, particularly as colleges face market and political pressure on the rate of tuition growth, as endowment

returns fail to reach pre-recession levels, and as an unpredictable stock market makes donors uneasy.

A broader shift away from need-blind admissions across the sector could potentially prove problematic for the private nonprofit college sector, some higher education observers said. While such colleges would likely meet full need for the needy students they admit, broad shifts could undercut the meritocratic ideals that many colleges embrace and drive lower-income students into the public sector at higher rates.

"In that case, one has to ask the question about exactly what non-profit college are getting their non-profit status for," said Mark Kantrowitz, a financial aid analyst. "If it's not part of their mission to enable low-income students to pursue a college degree, then they're just serving elite students."

It is expensive for institutions to be need-blind in admissions and also pledge to meet the full demonstrated need of students in a way that does not result in huge loan burdens upon graduation. Even some of the country's most prominent and wealthiest institutions, such as New York University, can't afford to do so.

What's emerged in the past few months is a trade-off between the two.

### COMPLICATED COSTS

Both meeting full need and being need-blind in admissions are nebulous concepts that mean different things to different institutions, making broad comparisons of policies across institutions difficult.

Meeting full need simply means the institution completely fills the gap between the sticker price of the institutions and the “expected family contribution,” what federal calculations determine the family is able to pay. Some institutions make their own calculations about what a student owes. Need can be met through any combination of financial aid, including scholarships, grants, and discounted tuition, but also loans and work-study, which still place a burden on students. Some public universities meet full need for in-state students but not for out-of-state students.

Many institutions that meet full need still have students graduating with high debt loads. Fewer than 20 institutions, most with sizeable endowments or significant annual fund-raising, agree to meet students’ full need without loans.

Need-blind admissions policies also come in a variety of forms. Few are fully need-blind, while many consider financial status for international students, students who apply after a deadline, or when pulling students off of a wait list.

### INSTITUTIONAL FINANCES

Because both policies can be expensive, several of the institutions considering a move away from being need-blind are doing so in favor of meeting full demonstrated need.

In announcing that Wesleyan University would consider financial need if it did not have the resources to meet all students’ need, the university’s president,

Michael Roth, said the existing admission policy was costing the institution too much. He also noted that the shift is designed to give the students they decide to admit the best chance of graduating, and that sometimes means more financial aid.

Roth also framed the decision as a moral issue, saying it was wrong to sacrifice the quality of the education it offered and burden some needy students with large debt burdens to maintain the admissions policy.

Administrators at Grinnell College, when they announced that the college would be examining admissions policies and accompanying tuition revenue earlier this month, said they were concerned about the institution’s financial viability in the long term. Endowment revenue, which has been shaky in recent years, makes up about 50 percent of the institution’s overall budget, and administrators are interested in deriving a larger share through tuition, fund-raising, and other sources.

Raynard Kington, the college’s president, said it is highly unlikely that Grinnell will actually move away from being need-blind, but he wanted the university community to be aware of the cost of the policy and the options on the table and to make an informed decision. Other institutions have backed away from other costly access policies in favor of maintaining their need-blind policies. Several institutions, including Cornell University, Dartmouth College, and Williams College, also backed off the extent of their “no-loan” pledges made in 2007 and 2008, because of the strain they were putting on their budgets in the wake of the recession.

### ALBRIGHT

Albright College in Pennsylvania is in a slightly different position than Grinnell, Wesleyan, Williams,

Dartmouth, and Cornell. It does not have the same kind of national profile as those institutions and it is not as selective. As of June, 2011, Albright's endowment was valued at only \$52 million.

Wesleyan's endowment was more than 10 times that, and the other institutions discussed in this article all have endowments of more than \$1 billion. The relatively small endowment at Albright means the institution funds a majority of its financial aid through discounted tuition, rather than through endowment funding like the other institutions.

But the college is still wrestling with some of the same considerations.

Albright has not typically met the full need of students who are admitted, with an average gap of about \$4,000 between financial aid offered (plus the expected family contribution) and the sticker price. Gapping is standard practice at colleges like Albright.

In a recent survey of admissions directors conducted by *Inside Higher Ed*, 68 percent of respondents from private, four-year institutions said that gapping was necessary for institutions like theirs, and 64 percent said they did so. Administrators at institutions that gap say that it is better to give students the option of enrolling than to make the decision based on their financial need.

Last week Albright administrators announced that, starting with the class that enters in fall 2013, the college will strive to meet full demonstrated need. The college will do so through a combination of institutional, federal and state aid programs, including grants, federal student loans and work-study jobs.

But in order to do that, the college will have to back

off of its unconditional need-blind admissions policy.

Albright administrators said the decision to move away from being need-blind in admissions and toward meeting full need grew out of budget modeling. The college found that students for whom full need is met are more likely to persist from one year to the next, generating a higher return on investment.

"But it's not just a budget thing," said Gregory E. Eichhorn, the college's vice president for enrollment management and dean of admissions. "It's a mission thing. You also get something you can market."

The college will continue to be need-blind in admissions for students who meet application and financial aid deadlines, but for students who apply late or who are in the university's conditional acceptance program, financial need will be a factor in the admissions decision. In recent years, about 85 percent of applicants have submitted their applications by the March 1 deadline. Slightly fewer have also filed their financial aid forms by that date. Eichhorn said he hopes the new policy will drive more people to meet the deadline.

Meeting full need will likely increase the college's discount rate -- the amount of financial aid as a percentage of overall tuition revenue -- and therefore decrease the amount of tuition revenue it brings in per student after aid, but Eichhorn said the college will recover some of that through increased persistence and by growing the size of the incoming class.

Albright administrators said they do not expect the policy change to affect access for low-income students. Eichhorn said that the college's socioeconomic diversity should actually increase as a result of pledging to meet full need.



## WHAT WILL \$10,000 GET ME?

MAY 9, 2012

BY KEVIN KILEY

*As Texas universities set up programs to meet the governor's \$10,000-degree challenge, experts question whether the programs are subsidized by fellow students who pay more and whether these programs can ever have a broad impact.*

\$10,000 may not be able to buy as much as it used to, but Texas politicians and higher education administrators think that with a little experimentation it can buy a pretty good bachelor's degree.

That was the challenge issued by Texas Governor Rick Perry in his February 2011 State of the State address, when he called on the state's public universities to provide a bachelor's degree for \$10,000 or less (for a full four-year degree, books included), a challenge that was met with both criticism and praise from inside and outside the state. Since his announcement, however, a number of Texas universities have responded to the call, offering a range of \$10,000-degree programs and receiving significant public attention in the process.

But while the governor's call led to experimentation, particularly with the pathway to a degree, the result has been mostly niche programs that don't address the costs of educating students and can't be broadly replicated. Most of the proposed inexpensive degree programs take advantage of community college and dual-enrollment high school credit – which are cheaper to students than university credit – and are not available to students in most disciplines. This leaves experts questioning whether the much-heralded \$10,000-degree programs are really all they are touted to be.

The problem, economists say, is that providing a quality

college education is expensive. Until universities start to address cost drivers in higher education – including a highly trained, expensive labor force; a student body that expects certain services; and employers who expect graduates to be trained in specialized technologies – then the chances are minimal that universities can offer quality degrees for most academic disciplines for a cost anywhere close to \$10,000.

“If you say can you provide a quality education for a price to the student of \$10,000, that's one thing,” said David H. Feldman, an economist at the College of William & Mary and co-author of *Why Does College Cost So Much?*, noting that various forms of subsidies can drive down the price of a degree. “But if you're talking about getting costs down to \$10,000, I just don't see how you can do that.”

### PRICING AT THE MARGINS

When Perry issued his challenge in 2011, he wanted the state's universities to “leverage Web-based instruction, innovative teaching techniques and aggressive efficiency measures” to drive down the cost of a degree. But so far the proposals simply tinker with the way universities price the degree, not the costs.

The most recent university to announce a \$10,000 degree was the University of Texas of the Permian Basin. Last week the college's administrators announced the

Texas Science Scholars program, which will provide a \$10,000 degree to a select group of students who come into college prepared for college-level mathematics and science; wish to study chemistry, computer science, geology, information systems, or mathematics; and agree to complete college within four years. Tuition for those students will be capped at \$2,500 a year, compared to an average of \$6,300 for most students.

Permian Basin can offer the less-expensive degree because it has excess capacity, said William R. Fannin, the university's provost and vice president for academic affairs. The university just completed construction on a new science building and does not fill its existing classes. The college can add students without much added cost, since it will not have to increase the number of faculty members or add extra buildings to accommodate more students. As a result, the average cost of educating a student drops, and those savings get passed on to the students in the \$10,000-degree program.

Fannin said part of the reason for offering the inexpensive degree is to attract qualified students from across the state who might not otherwise look at the university, which is located in West Texas quite far from the state's major metropolitan areas. In that respect, it is similar to a merit scholarship program. "It is a unique situation where we've built the buildings to handle 5,000 to 6,000 students, and the Legislature wants students in these particular areas," Fannin said. "We could naturally grow, or we could use that capacity by having degrees that might attract students from across the state."

But while the Science Scholars program is a good deal for those students, who end up paying less than

the average cost of educating a student, the rest of the student population -- including students in those exact same majors -- ends up paying more and subsidizing students in the program. While those students would be paying the same if the extra students weren't added, they don't get to share in the benefit of a lower average cost.

Feldman said funneling the benefit of expansion to a subset of academically qualified students, in a method similar to merit scholarship programs, will tend to benefit students who don't necessarily need the tuition reduction at the expense of other students. "If I was one of the other students, I would not be happy," he said.

Fannin said he understands that objection but said he views the pricing structure as similar to the current set of pricing discrepancies found in higher education. After merit scholarships and federal and state aid, the chances that two students sitting next to each other in class pay the same amount in tuition is minimal, Fannin said. He also understands that the program is not sustainable. At a certain point, if the university keeps growing, it will have to add more space or more faculty members, and the cost of adding more students will go up. He said the college might at that point choose to continue the program by limiting spaces and increasing the qualifications for incoming students. The program also can't be replicated easily at other campuses, which may not have extra space or faculty members.

#### **SAME PRICE, NEW PATHS**

Permian Basin isn't the only institution following through on the governor's call. The Texas A&M University system is working on several options, most

of which rely on transfer partnerships with community colleges where tuition is significantly less expensive.

Texas A&M University-San Antonio set up a degree program in cooperation with Alamo Colleges in which students can receive a bachelor of applied arts and science for \$10,000. Through the program, qualified high school juniors can enroll in a dual credit program, through which they can receive up to 60 hours of college credit – half a bachelor’s degree – for free while still in high school. Those students can then enroll in Alamo College for 27 credit hours for \$1,782 and finish their degree with 36 credit hours at Texas A&M-San Antonio for \$7,722.

Partnerships and transfer agreements between universities and community colleges are nothing new, but few are designed with the goal of keeping the price of a degree under a certain dollar figure.

But like the Permian Basin program, the Texas A&M-San Antonio program is limited to a specific academic discipline. It is also highly limited in the number of students it can attract. Students must be ready for college-level work as juniors in high school and must be interested in pursuing a degree with a focus in information technology.

Texas A&M University-Commerce has also announced a program that would keep tuition under \$10,000 if students complete 60 hours of credit at a community college before transferring into the university.

Because they rely on specific partnerships with local community colleges, the A&M programs, like the Permian Basin program, cannot be easily replicated at other institutions. Thomas Lindsay, director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation’s Center for Higher Education,

a think tank with significant ties to Perry, said the lack of transferability is not necessarily a problem, since the idea of experimentation and partnerships is what is going to be replicated at other institutions. “Replicability is going to depend on the mission of each place,” Lindsay said. “Different schools have different missions, and strengths, and partnerships. Not everybody is going to do what San Antonio can do, but the kinds of partnerships San Antonio represents are what is replicable.”

### COSTS OF EDUCATING

Feldman and his co-author Robert Archibald, also an economist at William and Mary, said Texas’ public universities could offer degrees for \$10,000 or less if they had sufficient subsidies.

In 2009, the University of Texas system spent an average of \$21,247 per student per year, and the Texas A&M system spent an average of \$25,092, according to the Delta Cost Project. Even those institutions that focus primarily on undergraduate teaching and did not spend much on research and public service, such as Permian Basin, still spent more than \$15,000 per student per year.

If a university such as Permian Basin wanted to offer bachelor’s degree programs for a total of \$10,000 or less without significant change to the cost of educating students, almost 85 percent of the degree would have to be subsidized in some form. At Permian Basin, the UT campus that had the largest percentage of its budget come from state appropriations in 2009, state appropriations still only made up about 60 percent of total revenue in 2009. And state funding has dropped since then.

State funding isn't the only way to subsidize a degree. Many state universities rely on internal subsidies to keep down costs for some students, using the tuition revenue of full-paying students to help cover the costs of those students who cannot pay. Because of financial aid programs, low-income students in particular can already obtain degrees for less than \$10,000 out of their own pockets. At the University of Texas at Austin, which spends the most per student of any university in the University of Texas system, a quarter of students were paying less than \$2,500 a year in tuition after financial aid. But even those subsidies have come under fire in some states.

Economists say that if a Texas university is going to offer a \$10,000 degree without significant subsidies – either by the state, corporations, or other students – it is going to have to significantly change the traditional model of higher education.

A handful of Texas institutions have started to fundamentally rethink the costs of educating students, with the most high-profile example being the University of North Texas at Dallas, which is working with a team of consultants from Bain and Company, a management consulting firm known primarily for working with Fortune 500 companies, to create a campus with dramatically lower instruction costs. “The one thing at the forefront of everything we do is what can we do to drive down the cost of instruction and the time that it takes to complete a four-year degree while maintaining quality,” said John Ellis Price, the university’s president and CEO, in an interview with *Inside Higher Ed* in October.

Western Governors University, a regionally accredited nonprofit university that uses a competency-based

model that is less expensive than traditional teaching, expanded into Texas in 2011. While this is significantly less expensive than traditional models, the average Western Governors graduate still spends between \$14,735 and \$21,890 on a bachelor’s degree.

While those models might inform other efforts to maintain costs, they have not been embraced by the state’s major public universities. But the University of Texas and Texas A&M University systems have recently begun to explore new ways of measuring faculty and university productivity and efficiency in an effort to control expenses.

Lindsay, whose foundation has praised the various efforts to create \$10,000 degree programs, recognizes that widespread change in the pricing of college degrees is still years off. “Until universities really reach the breaking point, we’re not going to see the kind of fundamental change that’s required,” he said. “It’s not in their DNA, especially given the role of faculty members in the system of governance. They might nip along the edges, or do symbolic things, but there’s not going to be fundamental change.”

#### QUALITY CONTROL

The idea of lowering the cost of educating students raises quality concerns for many in higher education, particularly faculty members at Texas universities. Costs are typically reduced by bringing in adjunct faculty members, increasing class sizes, reducing student support services, and adopting online programs, all of which could reduce the quality of the education offered, they say.

“I am not sure that it is mathematically possible to get a \$10,000 degree anywhere without shortcuts like

dual-credit courses or discounted online courses,” said Cary D. Wintz, a history professor at Texas Southern University and a member of the executive committee of the Texas Faculty Association. “I wonder what education a student will attain with that \$10,000 degree.”

Wintz also said he was concerned about access to the \$10,000 degree, since many of the proposed programs require students to test out of developmental education programs. “Students without college-level reading, writing, and mathematical skills will not be able to get a degree for \$10,000 -- unless we decide to create courses that do not require such skills,” he said.

Feldman said he worries about the push to reclassify

high school credit as “dual enrollment,” since there are already concerns about the quality of education at many high schools. While he said what students learn in college is important, completing a four-year degree signals something else about an individual that can’t necessarily be taught in a classroom. Making a degree too easy to obtain might diminish that signal.

Feldman also said a negative reputation could also affect similar universities that might not be offering an “easy” degree but perceived to be of similar quality. “There is a substantial fraction of the ‘state university ats’ whose signal could be eroded as the result of a couple institutions,” he said.

## **THE LIBERAL ARTS AND CAREERS**

APRIL 12, 2012

BY SCOTT JASCHIK

*Can institutions focused on a broad definition of learning also embrace the idea of training students for the job market?*

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. -- For Wake Forest University students in the “Options in the World of Work” course on Wednesday, the topic was location. Heidi Robinson, the instructor, walked students through exercises in which they discussed how to evaluate job opportunities in different localities. The students were divided into small groups, each with an iPad with material designed to compare a specific job here (in a relatively small, affordable city) and a larger city such as Boston or Los Angeles. Salaries are provided for the jobs, and students are given websites to find out how much they would spend on groceries in a week, the cost of an apartment, and so forth.

Before they do the analysis, Robinson leads the class in a discussion of a range of issues to consider when deciding where to pursue jobs -- the possibility for advancement (or moving to different companies in the same city), the quality of these jobs, opportunities for a social life. Then she listens in on the small groups, firing questions at the students. When someone boasts of finding an affordable apartment in Los Angeles, Robinson asks if she can see photos of the apartment and figure out whether the neighborhood is one she would want to live in. When a student jokes about being able to afford living in Boston if she could just skip buying any groceries, Robinson gently reminds the



group that groceries aren't optional for post-college life. As she moves around the room engaging with students, it's clear she knows each student's major, internship history and home town.

The students' homework assignment will be to do a comparison of salary and expense prospects in two cities they select, for a career they want to pursue. And the assignment after that will be to factor in the costs and benefits of an appropriate graduate degree for the career they have selected.

The course is one of four new offerings at Wake Forest -- each one a half semester, and each one worth 1.5 credits. The other courses are Personal Framework for Career Exploration, Strategic Job Search Processes, and Professional and Life Skills. The students in this course are a mix of undergraduates (from freshmen to seniors), and from a range of majors (liberal arts fields and business). The seniors appear to be learning for the first time about websites that allow one to make good comparisons of cost of living.

The courses are part of Wake Forest's answer to the questions posed by a national conference that started shortly after Robinson's course Wednesday, *Rethinking Success: From Liberal Arts to Careers in the 21st Century*. As the meeting kicked off, educators from around the country -- a mix of college leaders, academic advisors, career center directors and business leaders -- considered how much the liberal arts tradition should change (if at all) to deal with a generation of students and parents terrified about career prospects. And their discussions come amid a series of summits on the future of liberal arts education. While much of the focus of those other meetings is on the economic

model of liberal arts education, the organizers of this conference see a definite relationship between career connections for the liberal arts and the ability of liberal arts programs to attract students.

#### RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Prospective students and parents want to know what their education will get them, and liberal arts supporters shouldn't fear those discussions, said Andy Chan, vice president for personal and career development at Wake Forest. That title isn't in every college president's cabinet, but Chan said in an interview that high-level attention to career issues can help liberal arts educators.

Right now, he said, much of the discussion about the liberal arts is about their high cost (in tuition paid to colleges and the salaries paid by colleges to maintain low student-faculty ratios). Talking about careers is "talking about the value of the liberal arts," Chan said, something that is getting lost in the focus on costs.

"When you think about your primary constituents, students and their families who are paying the bill, they are interested in making sure I am getting the appropriate value, and that includes preparation for life and work."

That doesn't just mean finding a job, he said, although that's part of it. Chan said that this movement is about promoting "clarity of direction," and helping students think about their futures and plan for them, including the kinds of questions about deep values that are associated with liberal arts education.

When making presentations to prospective students and parents, Chan said that the parents are "ecstatic" about the idea of seeing their children at an institution that takes these issues seriously. How ecstatic? Chan

has raised \$8.5 million in the last two years to support career-related activities at Wake Forest, and almost all the money has been raised from parents of current students or alumni.

Chan acknowledged that some academics question why credit should be awarded in these areas. (Several career directors here from other institutions said that they would love to start similar programs at their campuses, but couldn't get professors to approve.) Chan noted that many of those institutions give credit for physical education. "These credits are the equivalent of the credit students are getting to play golf. Why is your career health not the equivalent?" And he added that "it takes credit for students to take it seriously."

Some of the discussion in sessions here focused on whether liberal arts education (or higher education in general) is at a point of crisis in which it must demonstrate more job-related capability. Several speakers pointed to the steady stream of complaints about colleges, and suggested that this is a new era, with more pressure on colleges.

#### THE SAME COMPLAINTS

Debra Humphreys, vice president for communications and public affairs of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, suggested that some of the discussion is cyclical, and not out of the ordinary. She started her talk by showing a 1976 cover from *Newsweek* showing two people in caps and gowns working on a construction site. The headline: "Who Needs College?" She noted that the complaints about college in that article are nearly identical to those being made today, with regard to failing to assure graduates an easy path to a career.

But Humphreys did not dismiss the concerns. She cited studies by AAC&U noting that employers want critical thinking skills, understanding of diverse cultures and many other qualities associated with a liberal arts education. She said that part of what may be needed now is more involvement in linking a liberal arts education to long-term career goals -- more a matter of students thinking about these issues and planning accordingly than about them dropping one set of courses for another.

"I never set foot in the career center until my senior year," said Humphreys, and then she didn't find much of value. "No faculty member ever talked to me about these issues. Getting students to talk about their educational journey earlier, with academic advising and career advising, may be needed," she said.

Some of the ideas discussed here might, if adopted, push the assessment movement further in the direction of testing and certification. Mark Zandi, chief economist for Moody's Analytics, said that he finds it frustrating to try to evaluate the skills of new liberal arts graduates.

"It would be useful if there was some kind of certification process," he said, "to evaluate skills, in a very rapid way." He added, "When I interview someone with an engineering degree, you know they have a certain level of educational attainment. I don't know that with someone with a liberal arts degree. I'd like something I can get my hands around."

#### NEXT GENERATION RECRUITING

Philip D. Gardner, director of research at the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, regularly surveys employers about what they are looking for. He offered some comfort to the liberal

arts educators here -- but also plenty to worry about.

Starting with the good news, Gardner told them that the most recent surveys of employers show that 40 percent do not care at all about undergraduate major. "They want the best person. They want all majors," he said. Further, he said that asked about a choice between a liberal arts background and technical training, a majority of employers want a balance. There are really "only two choices" for graduates who want a lot of options, he said, "to be a technically savvy liberal arts graduate or a liberally educated technical graduate."

What Gardner went on to say, however, was much more challenging to the liberal arts educators. Gardner noted the strong push in recent years to encourage students to have "high impact experiences" that would enhance their education and make them better job candidates. New research by his institute, however, suggests that some of these experiences have much more value than others.

The top three things employers want to see in candidates are internships, leadership of professional organizations, and faculty supervised consulting with

a company. Experiences like study abroad and civic engagement activities mean very little to employers, he said. "We value them and they are important, but employers don't value them," he said. Employers are focused on real experience in real businesses.

"All the engagement stuff is great, but students need to show it in internships, not by itself," he said. "The dynamics have changed, and students have done a very poor job of understanding what they are getting out of their experiences."

Looking to the future, Gardner said he is hearing more interest from major employers in using behavior analysis and patterns to identify those college students on whom to focus. He predicted that some employers will start to go to colleges, tell them the 200 freshmen they see as potential hires (based on their high school records and high school attendance) and tell the colleges that this is the group they want considered for internships and, eventually, for jobs. The college's job would be to prepare that pre-selected group.

"I think you are going to see completely different models," he said.

## **COLLEGE FOR ALL?**

**JUNE 29, 2012**

**BY PAUL FAIN**

*Thanks to the recession and the presidential election, the idea that many more Americans need education beyond high school faces a growing backlash.*

The backlash to college tends to be cyclical. But this latest iteration, in which pundits and politicians have questioned a supposed crusade for "college for all," has been bolstered by the double whammy of a prolonged recession and a presidential election.

Many in higher education say the argument merely knocks down a straw man, because neither President Obama nor the powerful foundations leading the "completion agenda" have said that everyone should go to college; instead, they argue that everyone needs

some postsecondary training, and that those who do go on to college should graduate at higher rates.

Also, often lost in the debate is the distinction of what, exactly constitutes “college.” Critics of “college for all” often focus entirely on degrees, particularly the bachelor’s degree, and neglect to account for other credentials, like certificates, which Obama and co. have been careful to include in their completion push. To listen to some, one might think Obama and foundations want every American to attend a liberal arts college, a far-fetched idea nobody has proposed.

“College for all is a false premise. It’s not an argument anyone is making,” says Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation. “Taking time to defend against a false premise is not a good use of time.”

But while the discussion may seem frivolous, there are powerful societal pressures at play. The backlash has bipartisan and populist underpinnings, mostly due to rising anger about the cost of college. For example, The *New York Times* hit a nerve with a series on student debt levels, a hot issue for the Occupy movement. (Two-thirds of four-year degree holders take on some debt, with an average debt of roughly \$25,000)

And skepticism about the value of college, even when supported by specious claims, can have real consequences, particularly if state lawmakers start agreeing that too many people are being prodded toward higher education. After all, questioning the value of college helps justify budget cuts.

For example, the backlash has gotten the attention of some politicians in Tennessee, says Claude Pressnell, president of the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association.

In particular, he says there has been an uptick in higher education being described as elitist, by both state legislators and business leaders. And that makes it easier for the state to reduce public funding, such as for state financial aid programs. It’s also an unfair critique in Tennessee, where even the private colleges Pressnell’s group represents enroll a broad socioeconomic spectrum. About 48 percent of students at private colleges in the state are eligible to receive Pell Grants.

The national discourse has set the state back, Pressnell says, which is a shame given that Tennessee has been moving in what he calls the right direction in prioritizing higher education. The state is also poised at an important moment, as Gov. Bill Haslam, so far a big supporter of college completion, has flagged higher education reform as a top priority in coming months, with a focus on tuition costs.

“I don’t believe the overall conversation about moving away from encouraging access and completion is a healthy one,” he says.

#### **SIEGE OF THE IVORY TOWER**

Rick Santorum got the ball rolling during his brief moment as a viable contender for the Republican presidential nomination.

“President Obama once said he wants everybody in America to go to college. What a snob,” Santorum said in February. “There are good, decent men and women who go out and work hard every day and put their skills to tests that aren’t taught by some liberal college professor.”

Several political fact-checking services said Santorum was wrong with his paraphrase of Obama. The president

soon fired back, a rare move for an incumbent that early in a campaign, saying: “When I speak about higher education, we are not just talking about a four-year degree.”

That back-and-forth has continued to play out in the news media. The most notable salvo came from Robert J. Samuelson, a pundit, who wrote in a May 27 column for *The Washington Post* that it is time to ditch the “college-for-all crusade,” which “looms as the largest mistake in educational policy since World War II.”

College has been “dumbed down,” Samuelson said, citing the influential book *Academically Adrift*. Meanwhile, apprenticeships and a vocational approach to education have been de-emphasized, said Samuelson, who mentions only bachelor’s and associate degrees in his column. *Academically Adrift*, for the record, is about traditional-aged students at four-year institutions, and does not address the bulk of students Obama has targeted with his completion push.

Other similar opinion pieces followed Samuelson’s, including writing by Richard Vedder, an economist at Ohio University, who often argues that too many Americans are going to college only to land in jobs that don’t require degrees, like gigs as bartenders or taxicab drivers.

“I do think Santorum raised an issue,” says Vedder. “He got people riled up.”

But Vedder says Santorum merely tapped into what has become a high-profile public concern. “I don’t recall that the college issue has ever gotten so much attention.”

Some within higher education have tried to answer Samuelson and Santorum, including William E. Kirwan,

chancellor of the University System of Maryland, in a *Washington Post* op-ed (Samuelson later rebutted Kirwan’s rebuttal). And Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester College, didn’t pull his punches when taking on Santorum. However, critics of “college for all” seem to get more play, perhaps because it’s always easier to sell a counternarrative to the news media.

The backlash flouts conventional wisdom, says Terry Hartle, senior vice president of government and public affairs at the American Council on Education, which currently holds that “higher education is essential and has an extraordinary payoff.”

On the more extreme side is an op-ed by Walter E. Williams, a syndicated columnist and professor of economics at George Mason University.

“Let’s face it: only a modest proportion of our population has the cognitive skills, work discipline, drive, maturity and integrity to master truly higher education,” Williams writes in *The Charlotte Observer*, under the headline “How many college-educated janitors do we need?”

Obviously, there’s a big gulf between Williams and the completion agenda goal of roughly 60 percent of Americans earning a meaningful credential in the next decade or so. But how many people buy into his argument about the “modest proportion” of college-worthy students? That may be a key question for colleges in what looks like a prolonged era of strained government funding.

#### ‘FAMILY OF CREDENTIALS’

Samuelson got it wrong, says his friend, Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, and an economics

professor.

“He screwed it up a little bit” by focusing only on degrees, Carnevale says. The completion push is really about “postsecondary education and training for all,” he says. But “that doesn’t fit on anybody’s bumper sticker.”

In a recent report, Carnevale and his colleagues detailed the value of certificates in various fields, many of which perform well. Over all, certificate-holders earn 20 percent more than workers who hold only a high school diploma.

Obama’s specific challenge is for one year of college, which suggests that his administration is focused on certificates rather than degrees, at least in setting a baseline goal on college attendance.

Vocational and technical education often gets short shrift during debates on college completion, says Mark Milliron, president of Western Governors University Texas, and a former official with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Instead of focusing on a “family of credentials that provide that earning and learning potential,” like certificate programs that cater to working adults, Milliron says the discussion gravitates toward bachelor’s degrees. And that conflation is a problem, because “it plays into anti-elitism.”

Samuelson is hardly the only commentator to fixate primarily on four-year degrees. Part of the reason might be that most media types themselves went to four-year colleges, often selective ones.

Even so, there is a strong allure to the story of a college dropout making millions, or billions in the case of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, despite the fact that both tech titans have been staunch defenders of the value of

college.

The self-made man (or woman, at least lately) is a distinctly American story, Hartle says, grounded in a belief that “thrif, hard work and sobriety” are all one needs to get ahead, despite the preponderance of evidence that attending college, even for a single year, is typically a good investment.

Vedder, however, cautions that perhaps we as a society are nearing the point where we have maxed out on the number of college credential-holders who can reap much value from higher education.

“The law of diminishing returns is starting to rear its ugly head,” Vedder says, and Americans “may get to the point where we’ve outrun the labor market.”

In previous decades that has decidedly not been the case, as degrees have continued to pay off, big time, according to a preponderance of data. And that didn’t stop earlier backlashes. Hartle keeps a *Newsweek* cover from 1976 in his Washington office, which bleats in a red, block-letter headline, “Who Needs College?”

The argument has obviously been around for a long time, and generally heats up around economic downturns, such as when the tech bubble burst over a decade ago. Last year’s backlash icon was Peter Thiel, a techie billionaire who offers scholarships to top students who agree to drop out of college. This spring Thiel taught a course at Stanford University, his alma mater.

Hartle says the safe money is that skepticism about the value of college will persist, despite periods of dormancy. And in most cases, its proponents will continue to hold degrees themselves and be “talking about somebody else’s kids.”

## ASIANS AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

MAY 30, 2012

BY SCOTT JASCHIK

*Advocacy groups urge Supreme Court to bar race-conscious admissions, renewing debate over the impact of such policies.*

WASHINGTON -- A brief filed Tuesday with the U.S. Supreme Court seeks to shake up the legal and political calculus of a case that could determine the constitutionality of programs in which colleges consider the race or ethnicity of applicants. In the brief, four Asian-American organizations call on the justices to bar all race-conscious admissions decisions, arguing that race-neutral policies are the only way for Asian-American applicants to get a fair shake.

Much of the discussion of the case has focused on policies that help black and Latino applicants. And the suit that has reached the U.S. Supreme Court was filed on behalf of a white woman, Abigail Fisher, who was rejected by the University of Texas at Austin.

But the new brief, along with one recently filed on behalf of Fisher, say that the policy at Texas and similar policies elsewhere hurt Asian-American applicants, not just white applicants. This view runs counter to the opinion of many Asian-American groups that have consistently backed affirmative action programs such as those in place at Texas.

It is impossible to know how much weight the Asian-American issue will have with the justices. But the briefs have renewed a debate about who benefits -- and who loses -- from race-conscious admissions. While the briefs portray Asian Americans as victims of affirmative action, other Asian-American groups are planning a brief

backing affirmative action, and some experts on Asian-American educational trends caution that the new briefs have oversimplified a complicated issue, identifying the wrong culprit and ignoring the benefits some Asian Americans receive from affirmative action. Generally, those Asian-American leaders backing affirmative action stress the significant diversity among Asian-American students in the United States -- including many recent immigrants who are not achieving instant academic success.

The case before the Supreme Court challenges the right of UT-Austin to consider race and ethnicity when it has been able to achieve some levels of diversity in the student body through a race-neutral means: the "10 percent" law that has assured all graduates in the top 10 percent of high schools in the state admission into any public university in the state. The university maintains that it should have the right to use other measures as well, and two lower courts have backed that position. Fisher's lawyers disagree.

One test the Supreme Court has set for race-conscious decisions by public entities is that such efforts must be "narrowly tailored," and the briefs focused on Asian-American applicants appear to suggest that the Texas program cannot meet that test in part because the programs are (in the plaintiff's view) hurting some minority students to help others.

The brief filed Tuesday on behalf of Asian-American groups Tuesday focused less on the Texas admissions policy than on the consideration of race generally in college admissions. “Admission to the nation’s top universities and colleges is a zero-sum proposition. As aspiring applicants capable of graduating from these institutions outnumber available seats, the utilization of race as a ‘plus factor’ for some inexorably applies race as a ‘minus factor’ against those on the other side of the equation. Particularly hard-hit are Asian-American students, who demonstrate academic excellence at disproportionately high rates but often find the value of their work discounted on account of either their race, or nebulous criteria alluding to it,” says the brief.

It was filed on behalf of the 80-20 National Asian-American Educational Foundation, the National Federation of Indian American Associations, the Indian American Forum for Political Education, the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin and the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law. (The latter group focuses on discrimination against Jewish Americans, and the brief argues that today’s admissions policies have the same impact on Asian-American applicants as previous generations’ policies had on Jewish applicants.)

The brief focuses heavily on research studies such as the work that produced the 2009 book, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life* (Princeton University Press), which argued that -- when controlling for various factors -- one could find the relative “advantage” in admissions of members of different ethnic and racial groups.

The book suggested that private institutions

essentially admit black students with SAT scores 310 points below those of comparable white students. And the book argued that Asian-American applicants need SAT scores 140 points higher than those of white students to stand the same chances of admission. The brief also quotes from accounts of guidance counselors and others (including this account in *Inside Higher Ed*) talking about widely held beliefs in high schools with many Asian-American students that they must have higher academic credentials than all others to gain admission to elite institutions.

The brief filed on behalf of Fisher does focus on Texas policies -- and specifically their impact on Asian-American applicants. Texas has stated that it considers black and Latino students “under-represented” at the university, based in part on their proportions in the state population. And the Fisher brief considers that illegal.

“UT’s differing treatment of Asian Americans and other minorities based on each group’s proportion of Texas’s population illustrates why demographic balancing is constitutionally illegitimate.... UT gives no admissions preference to Asian Americans even though ‘the gross number of Hispanic students attending UT exceeds the gross number of Asian-American students attending UT.’ This differing treatment of racial minorities based solely on demographics provides clear evidence that UT’s conception of critical mass is not tethered to the ‘educational benefits of a diverse student body.’ UT has not (and indeed cannot) offer any coherent explanation for why fewer Asian Americans than Hispanics are needed to achieve the educational benefits of diversity.”

A footnote in the brief seeks to drive home the point:



“Recognizing representational diversity as a compelling state interest might allow universities in racially homogenous states to employ race to the detriment of qualified minority applicants in order to maintain a student body that mirrors the state population. Indeed, that is precisely the problem facing Asian-American students in Texas, as they are ‘over-represented’ demographically but highly qualified academically.”

University of Texas officials are not giving interviews on the briefs. But an affidavit in the case from Kedra Ishop, currently director of admissions at UT-Austin and, at the time she gave the statement, associate director there, suggests that Texas may contest the idea that Asian-American applicants could not benefit from affirmative action at the university.

In the statement, Ishop outlines factors that could be considered in admissions, listing them this way: “the socioeconomic status of the applicant’s family and school, whether the applicant is from a single-parent home, whether languages other than English are spoken at the applicant’s home, the applicant’s family responsibilities and (starting with the fall class of 2005) the applicant’s race.” These criteria suggest that some Asian-American applicants could in fact receive some assistance on the university’s approach to admissions.

#### **DEBATING THE ASIAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

Much of the reaction to the new brief focused on the wisdom of Asian-American groups taking a stand against the consideration of race.

S.B. Woo, a retired professor of physics at the University of Delaware, and president of the 80-20 group, said he knew that Tuesday’s action was a significant step. Nine years ago, when the U.S. Supreme

Court last considered the issue of race in admissions, the group considered filing a brief, but opted not to do so. “We didn’t know enough then to take a clear stand, but now we do,” he said.

In the years since, he said, it has become clear that consideration of race in admissions is not solving the nation’s educational problems and “we now realize how much we have been discriminated against.”

Four other Asian-American groups -- the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, the Asian American Justice Center, Asian American Institute and Asian Law Caucus -- filed a joint brief backing the University of Texas when the case was considered by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. And these groups are planning to file another brief with the U.S. Supreme Court.

Woo said he realized that those groups had been speaking for Asian Americans generally in the affirmative action debate, but he said that students and families don’t agree with them. He said he wasn’t bothered that other Asian-American groups would be challenging his positions. “They will be, as we will be, accountable. Let’s see how it will play out,” he said.

Several experts on Asian Americans in higher education agreed with Woo that many parents and families are frustrated by the college admissions process, and perceive it as hostile. But they questioned whether affirmative action programs really are responsible.

Mitchell J. Chang, professor of higher education, organizational change and Asian-American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, said that it is true that many Asian Americans “seem to be the ones who have the lowest chances, all things being equal, of getting into the most selective institutions.” Chang

said that part of the problems is the “hypercompetitive” environment in selective college admissions.

But to the extent that Asian-American applicants are being held to a higher standard, Chang said, that is primarily compared to white students, who aren’t benefiting from affirmative action. “There is an issue we have to deal with: Why aren’t Asian Americans with the same qualifications getting into the institutions at the same rate as white students? That’s the question we have to address.” He said briefs like those filed Tuesday will reinforce the sense that it is other minority students taking slots from Asian Americans, something Chang does not believe to be true. “But that sentiment is out there, and that’s where [the brief filed Tuesday] is going to have a real impact.”

Robert Teranishi, associate professor of higher education at New York University and author of *Asians in the Ivory Tower: Dilemmas of Racial Inequality in American Higher Education* (Teachers College Press), said he believed Tuesday’s brief was based on “a couple of false assumptions,” one of them being that programs for black and Latino students should be a target. Teranishi asked, for example, why those concerned about the admission of Asian Americans to elite colleges -- especially private institutions -- were not focused more on preferences for alumni children. While so called “legacy admits” do include non-white applicants, such preferences overwhelmingly favor

white people.

Teranishi also said he was worried by a narrative that diversity efforts help only black and Latino students, and that discussions of diversity should focus on elite institutions. He said that many non-elite institutions do quite a bit to recruit, admit and graduate Asian-American students who come from recent immigrant groups to the United States and who typically do not fare well in traditional admissions.

Those programs are vital, he said, but could disappear if Texas loses at the Supreme Court. “I fear we are seeing Asian Americans used as a wedge group, which is really problematic, based on narrow interpretations of what affirmative action is.”

Further, he said that he worries that the current focus will distract Asian-American leaders from emerging threats in higher education. For instance, he said that he worried that the current emphasis of many colleges to recruit many more international undergraduates (many of whom are from Asia) was creating a false sense that higher education has “too many Asians.” While Teranishi said he was in no way opposed to international recruitment, he said he wanted to know how this emphasis on foreign students (who can pay their own way) was affecting other diversity efforts.

Over all, he said, Asian Americans benefit not from attacking affirmative action, but from “broader inclusion.”

## HOW THEY REALLY GET IN

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BY SCOTT JASCHIK

*Study of the most competitive colleges finds that “holistic” admissions policies look very different at different colleges -- and that some kinds of applicants may compete only against each other.*

Most elite colleges and universities describe their admissions policies as “holistic,” suggesting that they look at the totality of an applicant -- grades, test scores, essays, recommendations, activities and so forth.

But a new survey of admissions officials at the 75 most competitive colleges and universities (defined as those with the lowest admit rates) finds that there are distinct patterns, typically not known by applicants, that differentiate some holistic colleges from others. Most colleges focus entirely on academic qualifications first, and then consider other factors. But a minority of institutions focuses first on issues of “fit” between a college’s needs and an applicant’s needs.

This approach -- most common among liberal arts colleges and some of the most competitive private universities -- results in a focus on non-academic qualities of applicants, and tends to favor those who are members of minority groups underrepresented on campus and those who can afford to pay all costs of attending.

The research is by Rachel B. Rubin, a doctoral student in education at Harvard University. Her findings will be presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, which starts later this week.

Many studies of admissions decisions ask colleges and universities what qualities they value (almost always, grades in college preparatory courses rank first), and

which they value the most. For colleges that admit large percentages of their students, or colleges that have precise formulas (promising admission to those with certain grades or test scores or class ranks), these questions reveal a great deal. But Rubin’s focus is on the elite colleges that admit small percentages of their applicants and that generally say the vast majority of applicants are capable of succeeding academically.

So in a survey (answered by 63 of the 75 most competitive colleges, mostly private, with just a few public flagships) and in follow-up interviews, she focused on the winnowing process: How do colleges decide who gets further consideration for the coveted slots and who doesn’t? To encourage frank answers, colleges were given anonymity.

Rubin found that all of these colleges that publicly describe their admissions systems in similar ways, stressing holistic review, actually aren’t all the same after all. “Contrary to public opinion, selective institutions are highly systematic with regard to their admissions processes and practices within individual institutions,” she writes. “However, there is a great deal of inconsistency across institutions, potentially creating the illusion that student selection is arbitrary.”

Almost all of the colleges that provided information first do a winnowing of one of two sorts that yields the group that gets a more thorough review. The most common winnowing process (used by 76 percent of

the colleges that answered Rubin) is some measure of academic merit. This may be based on grades, rigor of high school courses, test scores and so forth. While there is some difference in the relative weight given to various factors, there is a straightforward value on doing better than others in whatever formula the college uses.

A minority of elite colleges and universities (21 percent) starts off on measures of “institutional fit.” These colleges do the initial cut based on student essays, recommendations and specific questions of whether particular students will thrive at and contribute to the college in various ways. In an interview, Rubin said she believed that these colleges also valued academic merit, but that the vast majority of applicants had an appropriate level of academic merit, so that could be weighed later, while other parts of “creating a class” needed to dominate at the point of first cut.

For those colleges that look at institutional fit first, the two most favored factors are underrepresented minority status and “exceptional talent” (which she said could mean many things: “lacrosse recruits, flautists, etc.”).

**MOST IMPORTANT VARIABLES IN DETERMINING COLLEGE FIT  
(FOR THOSE WHO START WITH FOCUS ON FIT)**

Factor	% Viewing as Most Important
Underrepresented race/ethnicity	42%
Exceptional talent	42%
Recruited athlete status	7%
Likelihood of enrolling	7%
Fund-raising potential	2%

Rubin’s paper says that whether the first cut is done through academics or fit, most colleges then report a

more formal system in which two readers review the application portfolio, with a third reader or an entire team involved in difficult calls. At this stage, academic issues are discussed at institutions that started with “fit” issues, and “fit” is discussed at places that started with academics.

One of her findings here could be controversial in light of the Supreme Court discussion of affirmative action in higher education. Rubin writes the following, based on her interviews and surveys:

“When an applicant has an exceptional talent (e.g. music, athletics) or is part of a severely underrepresented group at the institution, the applicant may not compete for admission against the larger applicant pool. Instead, he/she may compete only among those with the same talent or within the same group. In these circumstances, sets of applications are considered separately based on a university’s institutional needs. As a result, disparities may arise between the levels of academic merit of certain subgroups of students. One private university dean noted, ‘The hardest part is that everyone [in the school community] wants more of something and it’s a balancing act -- it’s a zero sum game. Size [of the school] is fixed, but faculty, trustees, etc., want more students of color, more athletes, more great pianists.... But who will you cut out to have more of those people? We get so many of those really strong kids who don’t have that extra something.... It’s starting to make the world angry with us.’”

That finding is potentially significant because it appears to contradict (when it involves racial/ethnic status) the Supreme Court’s directives on how minority status may be considered.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's 2003 opinion in the Supreme Court case upholding the consideration of race in the admissions process at the University of Michigan law school cites limits set out by the 1978 decision in the Bakke case: "To be narrowly tailored, a race-conscious admissions program cannot use a quota system – it cannot 'insulat[e] each category of applicants with certain desired qualifications from competition with all other applicants.' Bakke, supra, at 315 (opinion of Powell, J.). Instead, a university may consider race or ethnicity only as a 'plus in a particular applicant's file,' without 'insulat[ing] the individual from comparison with all other candidates for the available seats.' Id., at 317.

In other words, an admissions program must be 'flexible enough to consider all pertinent elements of diversity in light of the particular qualifications of each applicant, and to place them on the same footing for consideration, although not necessarily according them the same weight.'"

Asked if she thinks her research suggests a legal vulnerability for some colleges on how they admit some minority students, Rubin said, "I think there is." She added that "regardless of any Supreme Court decision, there's obviously a huge need in the country to make sure there are higher numbers of minority students and first-generation students" at elite colleges and universities, and those institutions are criticized "if they don't get higher numbers."

The system she found in use was that "if we see that

we have only 3 percent black students" (using regular reviews), the officials say "let's look at all the black students again and see what we can come up with, where can we find merit in these applications."

While this practice may raise legal questions when used to consider minority students' race and ethnicity, it is identical to the approach used for many other groups, Rubin said. Nonminority students may be the biggest beneficiary of this approach, she said, especially at colleges that don't have enough aid money to admit all students without regard for financial need.

"I think that happens most often not for minority students but for students who can pay full tuition," Rubin said. After a college has used its allocated aid budget, it compares the merits of students who can afford to pay all expenses, and they are not competing against the full pool. "That's what's happening," she said.

Rubin's finding is consistent with the results of last year's *Inside Higher Ed* survey of admissions directors, which found intense interest in adopting a variety of policies to admit more applicants who don't need financial aid.

Asked if she thought elite colleges should be more clear to applicants on the way holistic admissions actually plays out at their institutions, Rubin said she was of two views. "I always think more information is better and transparency is better, but I worry applicants might tailor their applications too much" if they knew more, she said.

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