

The In Crowd

Lee Coffin

Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics and College Admissions, Robert K. Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004, \$24.95

Competition in college admissions always sparks a lively conversation these days. With *Leveling the Playing Field*, Robert K. Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg attempt to tackle the economic and social justice considerations that drive contemporary admissions strategies.

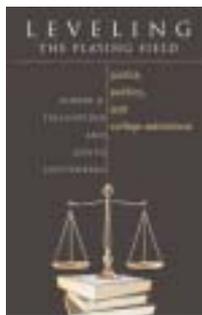
While promoting greater access to higher education for lower-income and minority students, the two University of Maryland, College Park, scholars maintain that colleges and universities—especially the “better” ones—should use merit to select a freshman class. Of course, academic merit is the defining attribute of a selective admissions process. But in practice, it is a more elastic concept than many appreciate. Admissions officers use judgment and discretion in weighing and comparing the various criteria in order to construct a balanced class.

For the vast majority of American college aspirants, notions of “selectivity” and access are moot. Nearly two-thirds of America’s college students attend public institutions, where admissions practices accommodate a wide array of academic and demographic backgrounds. And only 8 percent of American institutions of higher education accept fewer than half their applicants, according to studies by the College Board. In other words, the admissions practices of a handful of institutions generate outsized angst.

If access to higher education for under-represented groups is the issue, selective institutions are clearly on board. Affirmative action policies and other commitments to increase enrollment by under-represented constituencies are evident on nearly every campus. To further level the playing field, Fullinwider and Lichtenberg make an impassioned case against

legacy preferences, early decision programs and athletic admissions, calling these policies institutionally sanctioned barriers to lower-income and minority students. But they ignore a key fact: lower-income and minority students have great success in highly selective applicant pools ... if they apply.

The problem is the paucity of minority and lower-income candidates in highly competitive applicant pools, and this is largely a failure of college recruitment policies on top of dysfunctional public elementary and secondary schools.



Underfunded and understaffed schools simply lack the curricular depth and breadth to build a strong academic foundation for disadvantaged students. Similarly, the absence of well-informed college counselors in school guidance departments disconnects even the most qualified students from the transforming opportunities to be found at the most selective universities.

Indeed, if we are to achieve justice and equity in college admissions, the pool of candidates must be expanded. That means the focus for reform belongs on K-12 education, for the journey toward success in college admissions begins long before 12th grade. Fullinwider and Lichtenberg acknowledge this implicitly when they reference the work of educators William Bowen and Derek Bok. “The problem,” Bowen and Bok suggest, “is not that poor but qualified candidates go undiscovered (by admissions committees), but that there are simply very few of these candidates in the first place.” While a selective admissions process seeds a first-year class with students from disparate backgrounds, comparable levels of academic preparation and achievement are required. Colleges seek demographic, but not academic, heterogeneity.

The real question is twofold. First, can the qualifications of economically

disadvantaged candidates be raised to a point that allows elite institutions to recruit and enroll more students from this cohort? That goal requires an investment in teachers and curriculum in the lower and middle schools and a means of supporting these young students in their home environment, where parental support and oversight might be lacking. Secondly, can counseling resources be secured so that inner-city schools, in particular, can better identify qualified students and direct them to a transforming academic opportunity? Addressing the first priority without a corresponding commitment to the second will not improve the situation.

Too often, admissions officers face a brick wall of inaccessibility or indifference when trying to recruit students from under-represented backgrounds. School personnel are overwhelmed and resources are thin; the opportunity for a partnership is lost. In contrast, affluent public and private schools—with resources and parental support in place—seize the opportunity to forge ties with college admissions officers. Students in these environments—of all colors and socioeconomic backgrounds—benefit from the relationships these resources allow.

Sadly, for many lower-income and minority students, there is only vague awareness of college choice, scant support in identifying options and, assuming these conditions are met, little advice on submitting required materials. As a result, students file unformed applications that lack the substance to predict success in college. When an application is denied admission, it is not, as Fullinwider and Lichtenberg provocatively declare, a “moral indictment” of their worth as individuals. Rather, the outcome reflects a determination by an admissions committee that the level of preparedness is missing. Justice is not served if a student is offered admission, enrolls and fails.

The authors take great umbrage at the notion of legacy preferences in admissions. “Something rankles when a society that prides itself on its

mobility and its openness to talent and hard work retains vestiges of inherited privilege,” they declare. “Connections and old-boy networks surely violate the merit principle.” They have a point, but such “networks” are also essential resources for the academic enterprise insofar as they fuel the philanthropy that drives any university. Without endowment growth, the social justice goals that populate the mission statements of many universities would be unattainable.

When a university promotes the ideal of “justice,” the legacy factor indirectly ensures that goal. Philanthropy generates financial aid, research opportunities for faculty, new facilities and other such critical elements that distinguish institutions and make them

desirable. Without these resources, the enterprise collapses. Preferential admission for the sons and daughters of alumni reinforces—and often inspires—greater generosity. If such practices are “unjust” it is a necessary evil. Call it the Robin Hood effect.

“Other things being equal,” Fullinwider and Lichtenberg contend, “it is desirable to enhance educational opportunities for those whose opportunities have been significantly limited.” True enough, but the way to do that is to improve preparedness and guidance. The former requires commitment and energy. The latter requires resources.

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To WIT

Alan R. Earls

A Century of Honesty, Energy, Economy, System, Joseph P. Clifford, Wentworth Institute, 2003; \$32.95

Like so many institutions, Wentworth Institute began with a bequest. The gift, from Arioch Wentworth, the scion of a New Hampshire family that included three royal governors of the colony prior to the American Revolution, also came with terse instructions. Those instructions were embodied in a will written shortly before his death in 1903 that not only launched the school but also, according to Joseph P. Clifford, shaped its evolution and behavior over the century that followed. Indeed, the title of Clifford’s book, which is drawn from the Wentworth motto, derives from the watchwords Arioch Wentworth lived by and credited for much of his success.

Telling this tale more fully than it has ever been told before, Clifford, who works as an editor at Wentworth, provides us with the biography of one of the more unique educational establishments in New England.

Although Arioch Wentworth had become one of Boston’s wealthiest citizens thanks to his innovations in the

manufacture of soapstone products such as sinks, laundry tubs, stoves and hearths (and his shrewd real estate investments), he felt keenly that it had taken him too many years to learn his skills and master his craft—a fate he hoped to spare others. How much more sensible and desirable it would be, he reasoned, to equip gifted and enterprising tradesmen with at least some of the more advanced skills they might ordinarily acquire only through a long apprenticeship. His will, later successfully contested by his family, left the bulk of his \$5.4 million fortune for the establishment of school to “furnish education in the mechanical arts” to this sort of person.

In the end, half the money went to launch Wentworth Institute and the other half was awarded to his family. By the time Wentworth began admitting students in 1911, the endowment had grown under the wise stewardship of the trustees Arioch had selected and proved sufficient to purchase land in Boston and construct the central buildings of the familiar campus that still faces the Museum of Fine Arts across Huntington Avenue. Also thanks to the endowment, students were charged tuition of only \$18 per annum—a bargain even for those times.

The super trade school that Wentworth aimed to be—in part mod-

eled on New York’s Pratt Institute—proved a successful approach and one that carried the school along for decades as it honed its offerings, expanded its campus and built its reputation. Along the way the school adapted to the needs of the nation in two world wars. In the first, more than 800 graduates served and 28 lost their lives. During World War II, the campus shut its doors to regular students so it could function as a training center exclusively for the Navy.

The modern era at Wentworth might be said to have begun with the appointment of H. Russell Beatty, a Pratt veteran, as principal in 1953. One of his first actions was to ask the board to change his title to president. After winning the day on that matter, he began the slow process of making Wentworth into an institution that granted degrees—initially associate degrees only and, as his tenure ended in the early 1970s, a bachelor’s (spawning a short-lived slogan Wen-TWO-worth).

Although published by Wentworth itself and generally self-congratulatory in tone, *A Century of Honesty* does not shy away from the institution’s less flattering side. For instance, Beatty who put his imprint on Wentworth as president from 1953 to 1971 is revealed as both innovator and autocrat (a characterization I recall hearing during my father’s time on the faculty in the tumultuous 1960s). Determined to mold character no matter what happened in the world at large, Beatty brooked no disagreement and insisted that unscheduled student time be occupied with wholesome activities—a policy that was enforced through mandatory participation in groups such as a model railroad club and a glee club. His wife Alice, while regarded with warmth, also played her own role in watching over the students and ensuring they were occupied and fully prepared to sing the school’s anthem on call (she herself was often the choir-master at campus events, despite a tendency to sing off key).

Similarly, the book, which provides an unusually well-balanced and seamless blend of photographs, text, side-

bars, personal anecdotes and other illustrative material, includes mementos highlighting student discontents as well as a full treatment of the landmark faculty strike of the late 1970s.

Clifford brings the story to the present with his review of the administration of Edward T. Kirkpatrick, who enlarged upon Beatty's reforms. Curiously, the college recruited Kirkpatrick in large measure based on his experience as dean of Engineering at Rochester Institute of Technology, which he had helped relocate to an entirely new campus. This was the time when Boston's highway builders were about to launch the "Inner Belt," a short circumferential highway that would have cut between MIT and Harvard in Cambridge, through Boston University, and then directly through Wentworth property.

As it happened, the highway builders retreated in the face of growing political resistance and Wentworth's campus stayed right where it was. But the energetic Kirkpatrick, whose "hands-on" hobby was crafting homebuilt airplanes, stayed on until 1990, by which time he had long since made the school coeducational, introduced cooperative education and reintegrated the bachelor's program under the umbrella of a newly renamed organization, the Wentworth Institute of Technology.

Beyond his catalog of "official" Wentworth history, Clifford brings the institute alive with stories of graduates who achieved fame and fortune, among them: yacht builder Ted Hood, former Massachusetts Gov. John Volpe and U.S. Congressman Steven Lynch.

Today, as the institute enjoys its first full century of incorporation, the evolution continues under President John F. Van Domelen—particularly with a much expanded emphasis on four-year degrees. However, as Clifford tells us, the focus on highly pragmatic instruction and on personal mastery of subjects remains at the heart of Wentworth, keeping true, he assures us, to the vision of Arioeh Wentworth.

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- Growth in New Hampshire's population from 1982 to 1997: **23%**
- Growth in New Hampshire's developed land during that period: **55%**
- Growth in Maine's population from 1985 to 1997: **8%**
- Growth in Maine's "vehicle-miles of travel" during that period: **40%**
- Net migration of unmarried college graduates ages 25-39 to Western states from 1995-2000: **+114,700**
- Net migration of unmarried college graduates ages 25-39 to the Northeast: **-57,683**
- Number of New England states that added more single young college graduates than they lost during that period: **0**
- Percentage of graduates from UConn's Neag School of Education who remain in Connecticut to work: **90%**
- Percentage increase in public college tuition that would be required to offset a 1% decrease in state funding in Vermont: **1%**
- Percentage increase in public college tuition that would be required to offset a 1% decrease in state funding in California: **6%**
- Percentage of humanities majors who say politics is relevant in their life: **70%**
- Percentage of computer science majors who do: **36%**
- Percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds who think it is not right to illegally download software, music, movies or games: **23%**
- Percentage who worry about getting in trouble with the law doing so: **56%**
- Percentage who worry about downloading a computer virus when doing so: **70%**
- Percentage of U.S. students, ages 13-17, who say math is their favorite subject: **23%**
- Percentage who say English is their favorite subject: **13%**
- Children of immigrants as a percentage of U.S. high school seniors who were 2004 Intel Science Talent Search finalists: **60%**
- As a percentage of top 20 scorers in 2004 U.S. Math Olympiad for high school students: **65%**
- As a percentage of 2004 U.S. Physics Team members: **46%**
- Percentage of high-skilled employment visa applications denied by the U.S. government in 2001: **10%**
- Percentage denied in 2003: **18%**
- Change in average salaries of public school superintendents, 1993-2003, adjusted for inflation: **+12%**
- Change in average salaries of public school teachers during the same period: **-2%**

Sources: 1,2 University of New Hampshire and N.H. Office of State Planning; 3,4 Evan D. Richert, University of Southern Maine analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and Maine Department of Transportation data; 5,6,7 *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*; 8 Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis; 9,10 State Higher Education Executive Officers; 11,12 Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy; 13,14,15 Harris Interactive and Business Software Alliance; 16,17 Gallup Poll; 18,19,20,21,22 National Foundation for American Policy; 23,24 Educational Service Research