Quality higher education: members of the working class need not apply?

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Recently published articles in the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* announce what students and educators have known for some time: sons and daughters of the upper-middle and upper classes—those earning $100,000 and more per year—are disproportionately represented on the better college campuses, while fewer children of the middle and working classes can afford to attend the more selective colleges at all.

Furthermore, the same articles admit that this increasing educational gap between the wealthy and the majority of the US population undermines the notion that affirmative action has created a level playing field.

Finally, many of those students who cannot afford to attend the better four-year colleges are going to community colleges, a decision that is in turn creating a number of problems for the nation's two-year institutions. Although college administrators generally recognize the severity of the problem, their proposed solutions to the problem signal the inability of liberal academia to understand the class warfare being fought on college campuses.

The facts are indisputable. In an April 22, 2004, *New York Times* article entitled "As Wealthy Fill Top Colleges, Concerns Grow Over Fairness," David Leonhardt reports that "more members of this year's freshman class at the University of Michigan have parents making at least $200,000 a year than have parents making less than the national median of about $53,000. Nationally, "at the 42 most selective state universities," 40 percent of this year's freshmen come from families earning more than $100,000, an increase of 8 percent over the 1999 figure.

When the nation's 250 most selective colleges are considered, the figures are equally disturbing: in 1985, 46 percent of the freshmen came from the highest-earning fourth of the families; in 2000, the same top fourth produced approximately 55 percent of the freshmen. At the same time, the number of freshmen from families at the bottom fourth of the economic ladder decreased slightly, while the number of those from the middle 50 percent fell markedly. As one might expect, many of the freshmen from lower- and middle-income families wound up attending less selective schools.

High school graduates from wealthy families have several advantages. Among the more obvious is that sons and daughters of the wealthy tend to go to the better K-12 systems, and once they graduate, their parents are better able to afford the skyrocketing tuition rates at the more selective institutions. Less obvious are the test preparation courses, college admission summer camps and "dress for success" counseling that wealthy parents can afford for their children, making much higher their chances of admittance to better schools ("And the Rich Get Smarter," *New York Times*, April 30, 2004).

Finally, the better schools are considered "better" because they're more selective in their admissions than other colleges; for this reason, "colleges," according to David Kirp in the same article, "favor early decision [by the applicants] because those accepted are expected to enroll." Early applicants have as much as a 50 percent better chance of acceptance than their less-well-off, late-application competitors, but one of the main reasons for the latter's tardiness is the amount of time they must spend looking for the best financial-aid package, which is not a concern for their wealthier counterparts. As Kirp notes, rewarding early applicants is a "version of affirmative action" ("And the Rich get Smarter," *New York Times*, April 30).

The advantages enjoyed by the wealthy students refute the argument that the better-known, race-based form of affirmative action is helping less privileged students; in fact, according to several educators, affirmative action may be hiding the real, class-based source of this increasingly severe problem. Alexander W. Astin, professor of higher education at UCLA, admits that though the last few decades have witnessed "a whole slew of efforts to level the playing field for college admissions," the most prominent being affirmative action, "access for poor kids of less well-educated parents has not improved"; in some cases, he adds, access has "actually declined" ("As Wealthy Fill Top Colleges, Concerns Grow Over Fairness," *New York Times*, April 22).

The same article finds that the increasing tilt toward wealthier students has also been obscured by the more selective schools drawing from a larger geographic range (i.e., out-of-state applicants). In an interview with this reporter, a manager in the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program at the University of Michigan states that the school is "actively pursuing out-of-state applicants."

Though the interviewee spoke under condition of anonymity and did not specify why the University of Michigan is instituting this policy, the rationale, given the increasingly severe cutbacks in federal and state funding, is not hard to guess: out-of-state students pay higher rates of tuition. A full-time, non-resident student will pay more than $12,000 per year to attend the university's School of Art and Design, while a full-time Michigan resident will pay less than $4,000 to attend the same School for a year

(http://www.umich.edu/).

Moreover, because more colleges are following a market-driven, profit-making model that is designed "to increase revenues by shrinking scholarships," admission offices (or, as they are sometimes called by college officials, "profit centers") are courting full-paying, out-of-state students ("And the Rich Get Smarter," *New York Times*, April 30).

As one might expect, many working-class students who come from less well-funded K-12 systems and who haven't attended college admissions summer camps are looking to community colleges for their first two years of higher education. However, because of state funding cuts and decreased property tax revenues, some community colleges are already being forced to turn away students. Last year, for instance, North Carolina community colleges could not accept some 56,000 students, while this year, California community colleges predict that they will be forced to turn away approximately 175,000 students ("Community Colleges at a Crossroads," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 30, 2004).

Other factors undermining two-year institutions' mission of providing higher education for all include (1) an increasing number of better-prepared high-school graduates who, due to rising tuition rates at four-year schools, are applying to community colleges, (2) displaced, older workers who are attending community colleges for retraining, and (3) an increasing number of high school students taking advantage of dual-enrollment programs (programs that allow high school students to take college courses for credit at community college campuses).

With so many different populations requiring the services of two-year institutions, it's little wonder that many college officials see the present crisis worsening. Some states, such as California, Florida and Virginia, are predicting a 50 percent increase in enrollment over the next decade ("Community Colleges at a Crossroads," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 30). As a result, these same officials predict that because the neediest working-class students are often deficient when it comes to "negotiating the higher-education bureaucracy," the present "first-come, first-served" admissions model will lead to even more sons and daughters of the working class being denied access to a higher education ("Community Colleges at a Crossroads," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 30).

Proposed solutions to this problem are varied, but all share an inability or unwillingness to recognize the underlying economic crisis. In his "And the Rich Get Smarter" article, David Kirp argues that "[a]n infusion of need-based aid is critical for public universities." In addition, he says, colleges should spend more time "recruiting at working-class and inner city schools," and make "need, not market savvy, the basis for financial aid."

These are laudable demands, but how are colleges and universities to meet these demands when their funds have been slashed, requiring them to look elsewhere for their monies and diminish their services when adequate funds can't be raised privately? Kirp also seems to be forgetting that a good college education depends on a good K-12 education. Recruiting from the working class and the inner city will do little good if the schools from which the recruits come continue to be underfunded and understaffed.

Other proposed solutions combine the worst features of the market and elitism. Community colleges across the country are replacing retiring, academically oriented presidents with presidents who are either from outside the university altogether or who have received PhDs in college administration and management instead of obtaining traditional academic degrees and rising through the instructional ranks. Such leaders are hired to cut costs and raise revenues from non-traditional sources, and true to their mandates, these presidents are cutting staff and library hours and spending an inordinate amount of time engaged in private fund raising. There's even talk of instituting entrance exams to decrease the number of students entering community colleges.

Even if these proposals allow at least most of the community colleges to survive financially, the nation's two-year institution system will be profoundly and irrevocably changed. Reducing faculty and staff numbers and trimming back library hours will drastically lessen the quality of the education offered; and if testing and other selective tools are implemented, community colleges will become yet one more step toward the institutionalization of social inequality.

The points highlighted in this article—the increasing educational gap between the wealthy and the majority of the US population, the failure of affirmative action to narrow this gap, and the inadequacy of the proposed solutions—underscore the bankruptcy of any notion that higher education's crisis can somehow be resolved by either bringing the "business model" to the campus or replacing this model with one based on need without also overthrowing the capitalist system.

These points also underscore the significance of the Socialist Equality Party's position on improving higher education. The SEP rejects all forms of chauvinism, including affirmative action, on the grounds that they divide the working class. As the party's election statement explains, "We call as well for a massive investment to ensure high-quality public education and access to free higher education for all." ("Statement by the Socialist Equality Party," January 27, 2004).