



At Smith College, a Mission to Serve the Underserved. Anne K. Walters. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.36 (May 12, 2006)(1494 words) From *General Reference Center Gold*.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2006 Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc.

Byline: ANNE K. WALTERS

Northampton, Mass. -- If wealthy, prestigious colleges are increasingly serving the nation's privileged elite, then Allison Bellew is not the type of student you would expect to find on the campus of one of those institutions.

She spent most of her childhood in foster care in Southern California and attended a public school in Los Angeles where more than two-thirds of the students qualified for the federal school-lunch program.

But like many students looking at colleges far from home, Ms. Bellew wanted a place totally different from where she grew up. That search led her here, to the hills of western Massachusetts, to what has become in some ways a haven for financially needy students like her: Smith College.

Although the women's college has a sticker price north of \$40,000 a year, and many of its students are well-off, it is among the most generous when it comes to serving low-income students. Among private institutions with endowments of \$500-million or more, the college had the second-highest proportion of students receiving Pell Grants in 2004-5, according to an analysis by *The Chronicle*. Nearly a quarter of Smith's 2,900 undergraduates this year received the federal grants for students from families earning less than \$40,000 a year. Among private colleges with large endowments, only Berea College, a Kentucky institution with a mission to serve low-income students in Appalachia, educates a larger percentage of Pell Grant recipients.

Smith's efforts to serve needy students are nothing new, and in fact, have been overshadowed in recent years by fanfare surrounding the announcements by selective colleges, like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Princeton University, of new financial-aid programs designed to enroll more low-income students.

Audrey Y. Smith, the college's dean of enrollment, says serving low-income students fits neatly into the institution's historical mission to educate groups that lacked easy access to educational opportunities, particularly women. But she says Smith has not made a concerted effort to reach out to needy students. Rather, as women have increasingly chosen to attend elite colleges once reserved for men, Smith has broadened its recruiting in order to maintain its enrollment.

"In expanding our applicant pool," Ms. Smith says, "we were required to be more thoughtful and aggressive and creative in terms of our marketing."

Help From the Endowment

Smith tells prospective students that it is committed to meeting the full financial need of each admitted student. The college's ability to enroll so many

low-income students is surprising given that it considers a student's financial need in admissions decisions.

Of the students who applied for financial aid in 2004-5, 82 percent received some sort of need-based grant, either a Pell Grant or an award from Smith. Among students whose families earned less than \$30,000, 92 percent received grants ranging from \$2,708 to \$35,846.

This year Smith spent \$36.7-million from its billion-dollar endowment on student aid. About half of those aid dollars came from endowment funds set aside to help students pay for college.

Smith also reaches a sizable number of low-income students through its Ada Comstock Scholars Program. Designed for women over 24 who have earned college credit at a community college or another institution, the program is open to students of all income levels, but a high percentage also receive Pell Grants.

Because of that, the Comstock program has the effect of slightly inflating the number of Pell Grant recipients at Smith. But even excluding the 153 Comstock scholars who receive the federal grants, the college would rank among the top five private institutions in serving low-income students.

To help needy students navigate the complicated financial-aid system and obtain the money they need, a group of low-income students at the college formed the Smith Association for Class Awareness this year. The club also tries to make college officials and fellow students more conscious of class issues on the campus and in society.

Advice from that club and from administrators alerted Ms. Bellew, a computer-science major, to a series of grants available to low-income students at the college. One such grant helped her pay for health insurance. "I don't think I would have an easier time anywhere else," she says.

That support network was one of the selling points of Smith for Ms. Bellew. When she applied to Smith, she worried that her aid package -- which covers all her costs with grants -- could be reduced, or cover less of her tuition, after her freshman year. Officials in the college's financial-aid office promised her that they would work closely with her to cover her financial needs at Smith in subsequent years, an assurance she did not get from officials at Cornell University, where she also applied.

Smith, she says, "made me feel they'd take care of me."

College officials acknowledge, though, that their emphasis on reaching a broad spectrum of students has very likely lowered Smith's U.S. News & World Report ranking. The institution ranks 19th among the nation's top liberal-arts colleges. While Smith is comparable to colleges that rank above it on most measures, its students' SAT scores are lower. (A college's ability to serve needy students is not factored into the magazine's ranking system.)

Low-income students typically have lower SAT scores than test takers from wealthier families. In the latest U.S. News rankings, the middle 50 percent of Smith's entering-class scores range from 1160 to 1370. Institutions ranked higher have SAT ranges that begin in the upper 1200s or 1300s.

But Ms. Smith, the enrollment dean, says the institution is not overly

concerned with the rankings. "Smith has never been wedded to SAT scores," she says.

Fitting In

While financially needy students like Ms. Bellew found the money to pay for Smith, fitting in on a campus where some students walk around with Versace sunglasses and Louis Vuitton handbags is much more daunting.

Ms. Bellew spent the first few months of her freshman year looking to transfer. Because she came from a predominantly Hispanic high school, the relative lack of racial diversity at Smith, where 54 percent of students are white, bothered her. "I wasn't used to so many white girls," says Ms. Bellew, who herself is white.

Among some students, the college has a reputation for being a place of privilege. "When I got in [to Smith], my mom bought me fake pearls to wear because that's what they wear," says Crisi Clementi, a senior who receives grants from Smith and is active in the low-income student association.

Carina L. Hatch, a senior neuroscience major who receives financial aid, says the college tries hard to minimize the differences between students by requiring all students to be on a meal plan and by charging the same rate for single dormitory rooms as for double rooms.

Still, tales of classmates who didn't know how to make their beds because maids had always done it for them, or who talk about renting hotel rooms for a week to get away from the campus to study make "you realize that there's a reality that's completely different than your own," Ms. Hatch says.

Cara Sharpes, leader of the Smith Association for Class Awareness, says the issue of privilege is talked about in hushed tones at Smith, even though the college has a large percentage of low-income students. "There's a lot more inequality than people like to talk about," she says. Although about a quarter of students receive Pell Grants, and 60 percent receive some sort of need-based financial aid, most of the remaining students pay out of pocket.

The organization worked with the student government last fall to hold a forum on "class and privilege awareness." But many students simply expressed guilt about coming from wealthy families and never explored the issue in depth, Ms. Sharpes says. She says she would like to see the college place as much emphasis on class as it has on race in the past, including devoting a staff member to the issue.

As a freshman, Ms. Bellew worried that it would be clear to her classmates that she had to pay her own way for things.

She didn't own a winter coat before she came here, for instance, and was afraid her choice would announce to her classmates that she was not wealthy and that she was from California. At the time, she knew she needed good winter gear, but didn't have anyone to ask to help her pick the "right" things.

"There are girls walking around in Burberry coats," she says and recalls thinking, "clearly, I'm not getting that."

She wondered if it mattered, or if anyone else noticed, and in the end decided that she didn't care.

"People might dress really nice or they might not. Or they might be driving a Mercedes or they might be driving a VW that looks like it's about to fall apart, and for the most part it doesn't matter," she says. "What I came to realize was, it doesn't matter in the end anyway."

Source Citation:Walters, Anne K. "At Smith College, a Mission to Serve the Underserved." The Chronicle of Higher Education 52.36 (May 12, 2006): NA. General Reference Center Gold. Gale. Woodland Public Library. 10 Nov. 2007
<<http://find.galegroup.com/ips/start.do?prodId=IPS>>.

Gale Document Number:A147062291

© 2007 Gale, a part of The Thomson Corporation.
Thomson and Star Logo are trademarks and are registered trademarks used herein under license