



Well-Heeled U. of Virginia Tries to Balance Access With Prestige.(University of Virginia).Karin Fischer. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.36 (May 12, 2006)(1491 words) From *General Reference Center Gold*.

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Charlottesville, Va. -- Last month the University of Virginia's leafy, red-brick campus swelled with high-school seniors, many with anxious parents and unenthusiastic siblings in tow, visiting one last time before deciding where to go to college.

In the end, about 3,100 will start full time at Virginia this fall.

Of that number, only a handful are likely to be from low-income families. Just 7.6 percent of Virginia undergraduates, 1,067 out of 14,129 students, received a Pell Grant in 2004-5, according to a Chronicle analysis of the nation's wealthiest colleges.

No other public college in that select group, and just three private institutions, enrolled a smaller percentage of Pell Grant recipients -- students whose family income is typically below \$40,000 -- than the University of Virginia.

That is a statistic Virginia officials are trying to shake. Two years ago, the university's Board of Visitors started AccessUVa, an ambitious financial-aid program designed to attract, admit, and ultimately enroll more students from the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

"We looked behind us, and didn't like where we were coming from," says Yvonne B. Hubbard, director of the university's Office of Student Financial Services and an architect of AccessUVa.

Under AccessUVa, which costs the university about \$20-million annually, the university pledged to cover the full cost of tuition, room and board, books, and fees for four years for students whose family income is equal to or less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$28,275 for a family of four. To help more needy students, the university recently increased the guarantee to include families with incomes at 200 percent of the poverty line, or \$40,000.

Those needy students are not required to take out loans, nor do they have to work. Even money for extra expenses comes from the university. (In addition, AccessUVa caps the amount of money a middle-income student must borrow.)

But some advocates for needy students question whether the program, which provided full scholarships to 6.5 percent of the class entering in 2005-6, or 201 students, is aggressive enough. They worry that UVa -- which, with its stately columns and manicured lawns, already appears more Ivy League than public flagship -- could still end up shutting out a wide swath of the state's college-age population, which is expected to grow nearly 20 percent by 2012.

Concerns about access are especially acute because last year Virginia

lawmakers granted greater autonomy to the university and other public colleges, a trade-off for years of declining taxpayer support for higher education.

That greater autonomy has left some observers worried that the university feels less obligated to serve all students. "The elite publics should not be allowed to run away from their public status," says Anthony P. Carnevale, a senior fellow at the National Center on Education and the Economy, a nonprofit research organization.

Jefferson's Legacy

When Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia in 1819, he envisioned a "system of higher education, which shall reach every description of our citizens from the richest to the poorest."

But the young people who study under Jefferson's statue are increasingly concentrated in the upper-income brackets. In 2005-6, more than 60 percent of Virginia freshmen came from families with incomes of \$100,000 or more, according to a university survey, up from about 40 percent 10 years earlier. Less than a quarter of the university's students qualified for need-based financial aid.

"Burberry, Coach, Polo, Gucci," says Mallory B. Dunn, an animated 18-year-old from Lynchburg, Va., ticking off the popular clothing labels on the campus. "These stereotypes do exist, and some people perpetuate them."

Ms. Dunn, who is attending Virginia on a full scholarship, shrugs. "I even own a Polo," she says, referring to the popular designer brand of preppy shirt. "Of course, mine cost \$10 at the consignment shop."

Virginia's reputation as a privileged institution can scare off some students, university officials acknowledge.

Stephanie E. McGuire grew up just a 30-minute drive from the campus. But she says she did not seriously consider applying to the university and instead worked for several years to save up the money to attend a local community college.

"I would think, 'Can they tell I'm not a student?'" Ms. McGuire, 23, recalls of early campus visits. "When you think of someplace as prestigious, you worry, 'Everyone is going to be snobby because I'm low-income. They're not going to want me.'"

But AccessUVa gave Ms. McGuire, who estimates her family income to be less than \$20,000 annually, the hope of attending Virginia. Last fall Ms. McGuire and her younger brother, James, transferred to the university after completing associate degrees. The siblings, who are now finishing their junior year, have had all their costs covered by AccessUVa.

"When I got here, they were just shoving opportunity at me," Ms. McGuire says.

Overcoming Expectations

But for every Stephanie and James McGuire, UVa officials fear that there are hundreds more high-achieving, low-income students who could qualify but fail to enroll at the state's top university.

John A. Blackburn, dean of undergraduate admissions, points to two maps of Virginia. One breaks out the state's median household income by county; the other shows the percentage of high-school graduates from each county attending the University of Virginia. The two reveal a startlingly similar pattern.

Students in the poorest counties, concentrated in southern Virginia, are not even applying to the university, Mr. Blackburn says.

As part of AccessUVa, the university has sent out informational mailings to high-school seniors and community-college students, broadcast television and radio spots, and increased visits to public schools with no history of sending students to Virginia. The university also received a \$623,000 grant last year from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, a Virginia-based philanthropy, to place 14 recent UVa graduates in underserved high schools across the state to act as college counselors, assisting students with course selection, standardized-test preparation, and college and financial-aid applications.

Officials hope such outreach efforts will convince more low-income students that a college education, at the University of Virginia or elsewhere, is attainable.

"It's about overcoming a culture -- theirs and ours," Mr. Blackburn says.

A Collision Course?

So far the effect of AccessUVa has been incremental. In the 2005-6 academic year, the university enrolled 32 transfer students and 201 freshmen, about 6 percent of the entering class, who qualified for full aid under the plan. The previous year 70 students qualified for full rides under the guideline used that year -- incomes at or below 150 percent of the poverty level. Virginia officials say they expect the growth in the number of students admitted through AccessUVa to settle at one-half of 1 percent, or about 15 more students, per year.

To try to identify more low-income students early in the application process, the university has lowered the "fire wall" between the admissions and financial-aid offices that is used to guarantee need-blind admissions, Mr. Blackburn says. Admissions officers are using indicators from applications and essays, such as parental occupation or whether the student is from a single-parent household, to try to flag financially needy prospects, who are confirmed with the financial-aid office.

Financial hardship counts as a "plus factor" in admissions, but it does not offset low test scores or a middling high-school transcript, Mr. Blackburn says.

"It's not fair to bring in students who are not competitive," he says. "We want our students to succeed."

Houston G. Wood, an engineering professor and chairman of the Faculty Senate's executive council, says he has not noticed any difference in the classroom.

"It's not like they put a big 'A' on their forehead for AccessUVa," Mr. Wood says. "They can all do the work."

In its first two years, AccessUVa has not changed the university's academic profile. Eighty-six percent of the freshmen enrolling last fall graduated in the

top 10 percent of their high-school classes. Their average combined SAT score was 1320, 70 points higher than when Mr. Wood joined the faculty, in 1981.

Even so, Mr. Blackburn says, he expects that as more low-income students enroll at the university, test scores and other indicators of selectivity could drop slightly.

"It probably will lower our profile in the eyes of the editors of U.S. News & World Report," Mr. Blackburn says, referring to the annual college ranking.

That could put Virginia's effort to be more inclusive on a collision course with its "public Ivy" aspirations. Just last month, the university's Board of Visitors announced a plan to raise Virginia's standing in the U.S. News ranking -- which does not take socio-economic diversity into account -- from No. 23 to No. 15 among national universities.

John T. Casteen III, the university's president, pledges that the two goals will not conflict.

"The Board believes in the concept of the level playing field, as I do," says Mr. Casteen, who attended college on a scholarship. "Elitism on the grounds of family affluence or genetic luck is, in the end, the enemy of personal freedom."

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