

## Vassar: A Model for Creating Equal Educational Opportunity

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Vassar College has always been a pioneer in expanding equal educational opportunity—first to women when it opened in 1865 and more recently to low-income students, thanks to a generous financial aid program expanded under the leadership of President Catharine “Cappy” Hill.

At a time when many elite colleges and universities refused to admit women, Vassar founder Matthew Vassar recognized that it made no sense to ignore the talents of half the population. More than a century later, Cappy Hill recognized that it is equally senseless for our nation to fail to open college doors to outstanding students with great potential

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simply because they are poor.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, where I serve as executive director, awarded Vassar the first Cooke Prize for Equity

in Educational Excellence in 2015 in recognition of the college’s success in enrolling and supporting academically qualified low-income students. At \$1 million, the prize is the largest award in the nation given to elite colleges to lower financial barriers to admission.

Cappy Hill and Vassar’s Board of Trustees led the college’s transformation to become an economically diverse college by making

need-based student financial aid a top priority. As a result, the percentage of low-income students (those eligible for federal Pell Grants) at Vassar has more than tripled, rising from 7 percent in the 2006-7 academic year when she became president to 22 percent in 2015-16.

More colleges and universities should follow Vassar’s example.

A Cooke Foundation study issued at the beginning of this year found that at America’s top colleges, a mere 3 percent of students come from the 25 percent of families with the lowest incomes. In sharp contrast, 72 percent of students at these elite schools come from the 25 percent of families with the highest incomes. This makes a mockery of the notion that America is the land of opportunity.

In addition, a 2014 White House report titled “Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students” gives this disturbing statistic: “While half of all people from high-income families have a bachelor’s degree by age 25, just 1 in 10 people from low-income families do.” In other words, if you are lucky enough to be born into a family with lots of money, you are five times more likely to get a college degree than a child born into poverty.



This opportunity gap that makes it far less likely for low-income students to graduate from college has enormous consequences, because a college diploma today has become what a high school diploma was for generations past—a requirement for many good jobs and the gateway to financial security.

Illustrating this, the U.S. Education Department reported in 2015 that people with a four-year college degree typically earn 66 percent more than those with only a high school diploma. The department found that the average worker with a bachelor’s degree

will earn about \$1 million more over the course of a lifetime than a worker without a postsecondary education.

Vassar’s success in boosting the enrollment and graduation rate of low-income students refutes the contention by some that such students are better off going to community colleges or less-rigorous four-year schools.

Cooke Foundation research from the report cited above shows definitively that highly accomplished students graduate at a higher rate when they attend very selective colleges and universities.



This is because elite schools have the programs and resources to help students succeed, to counsel them when they begin to doubt their own abilities, and to encourage them when they are on track to excel. In addition, research shows that students at top schools receive a higher-quality education, earn larger lifetime incomes, and are more likely to pursue graduate degrees.

Another benefit of attending a very selective college or university is that top employers typically recruit from such schools. The 2014 book *Who's Running America? The Obama Reign*, by Thomas R. Dye, found that just 12 colleges and universities graduate about half of the nation's corporate and government leaders.

Vassar is one of a relatively small number of selective higher education institutions that have proven that income-driven educational inequality does not have to stay with us. The success of these schools in promoting equal educational opportunity can and must be replicated by others.

Colleges can do many things to enroll more high-achieving students from low-income families, including: reaching out to encourage more such students to apply; curtailing numerous admissions practices that work against such students (like giving an admissions preference to the children of alumnae/i); increasing and prioritizing need-based financial aid rather than so-called "merit aid" that often goes to more affluent students; and helping low-income students acclimate and succeed on campus.

Women have gone from being a tiny minority of college graduates when Vassar opened its doors to becoming the majority of college graduates today. Imagine how much worse off our nation would be if the old barriers that kept so many women from getting a higher education had not been torn down. We would never have benefited from the talents of millions of women who have filled the ranks of many professions with distinction.

In the same way, imagine how much better off we would be if millions more low-income young people could go to college to join the next generations of professionals in every field, working to build a better future for all of us and our children and grandchildren. What cures for diseases would they discover? What world-changing inventions would they create? What great companies employing thousands of people would they build? How many young lives would they change by becoming inspiring teachers?

Cappy Hill summed up the case for expanding equal educational opportunity when she accepted the Cooke Prize last year.

"Currently in the U.S., the likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree depends to a large extent on a person's family income and race," she said. "This must change for our country to live up to its principles of social advancement for all. Selective colleges and universities with large endowments must do their part by committing significantly more resources to need-based financial aid. Government incentives to do so would help, but we don't need to wait for government policy changes."

Finally, on a personal note: I have known Cappy Hill since we were both graduate students at Oxford. Even then, she was concerned with those who were underprivileged and attempting to find their place in the world. Her research while at Williams College reaffirmed her particular commitment to low-income and minority students. As a result, it was no surprise to me that she led Vassar in the direction of being the premier institution in the country to expand educational opportunities for low-income students. She is an inspiration to all who are concerned with this issue.

**HAROLD O. LEVY**, former New York City Schools Chancellor, is Executive Director of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which has awarded over \$152 million in scholarships to nearly 2,200 high-achieving students from low-income families and over \$90 million in grants to organizations that serve such students.

