

It's Not (All) About the Money: Why and How Selective Schools Can Better Support Low-Income Students

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“Washington and Lee University provides a liberal arts education that develops students' capacity to think freely, critically, and humanely and to conduct themselves with honor, integrity, and civility. Graduates will be prepared for life-long learning, personal achievement, responsible leadership, service to others, and engaged citizenship in a global and diverse society.”

-Washington and Lee University Mission Statement

Introduction

Walking across Cadaver Bridge one night, I inadvertently caught up to a first-year who was also making the trek, bundled up in a jacket many sizes too large. I recognized her from a QuestBridge ice cream social a few months earlier, but I couldn't remember her name. Keeping up with the Speaking Tradition, I said hi and asked her how her year was going. She said, “Ehh. I'm hanging in there.” As a gust of wind blew straight at us, I said something about how cold it was. Her reply: “Yeah, it's so cold, and I don't even have a jacket. I'm borrowing my friend's.” Naturally, I asked her why she didn't have a jacket. “Because my mom didn't buy me one, because she doesn't have any money.” Knowing she was a QuestBridge Scholar, I asked her if she had money in her student account to buy her own jacket, to which she replied, no. She then explained that she was assigned a single room despite asking for a double and that her textbooks for science and math classes were more expensive than she thought they would be.

A few years earlier, for a weekend when we had some diverse accepted students and QuestBridge Scholars on campus, the QuestBridge chapter at Washington and Lee hosted one of its most successful dessert and discussion meetings, an evening program that saw about 30 students in attendance. The group was half prospective students and half QuestBridge Scholars. The topic of the

night: what it's actually like to be a low-income student at a prestigious school like Washington and Lee. Prospective students were curious: how could students like us fit in on a campus that exuded wealth in nearly every way? How did financial aid work? What were the challenges? How did we deal with them?

At selective colleges and universities, access is not the only discussion that needs to happen with regard to low-income students. Selective schools also need to focus on low-income student retention after enrollment, through to graduation. Beyond access and retention, schools must begin looking at student success in terms of social inclusion and equal opportunity for the full college experience. To address both of these concerns, selective schools like Washington and Lee can and should do more to support low-income students than just cover the cost of attendance.

Hey, What's Going On?: The Current Situation in Higher Education

Social mobility and inclusion are central tenets of the American Dream, and intricately linked with equal opportunity. As many people see it, higher education is the great equalizer. In January 2014, the Obama Administration released a call for commitments from universities, businesses, schools, and nonprofits "to expand college opportunity for everyone."¹ In October 2015, former First Lady Michelle Obama launched the public awareness campaign "Better Make Room"² that inspired students to reach higher and make better choices, while also challenging the rest of the world to make room for the next generation, college students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, despite increasing national rhetoric about college access for low-income students, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the college experiences of low-income students once they are enrolled.³

¹ "How Do We Make College a Reality for More Young Americans? Like This," White House Archives, Jan. 16, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/share/College-Opportunity?utm_expid=24505866-13.IJb-FI9LRwCTj-0dZegBEg.0-form.

² "Better Make Room," accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.bettermakeroom.org/>. The first video released was a general introductory PSA, released on October 18, 2015, titled "This is Just the Beginning."

³ MaryBeth Walpole, "Socioeconomic Status and College: How SES Affects College Experiences and Outcomes," *The Review of Higher Education* 27, no. 1 (2003): 45-73.

Many politicians are concerned with the rising student debt crisis and some are pushing for free community college, but there is relative silence about the colleges that America's elite families have long attended – the selective colleges and universities⁴ that are known to educate tomorrow's lawyers, bankers, politicians, consultants, and leaders. These schools were founded with liberal arts traditions and a general disdain for things that were vocationally or practically focused.⁵ Since the early 2000s, more concerted efforts have been made to open up these schools to high achieving low-income students, mostly through financial aid policies that guaranteed free tuition for families making under a certain income threshold. These policies attempt to expand access for low-income students at selective higher education institutions, where low-income students are still substantially underrepresented even as they now make up a majority of public schools.⁶

College Access and Retention

College access matters because ideally, all students would be prepared for college, apply to schools they match well with, and choose their college regardless of socioeconomic background. A high-school diploma is no longer sufficient to guarantee a good-paying job, so it is crucial for the well-being of individuals and our society that everyone can pursue some kind of higher education. The value of a college education is unquestioned by the majority of Americans, who believe it is a worthwhile investment in their futures.⁷ Each year since 2008, over 2.5 million students started out as first-time

⁴ Selective meaning that according to Barron's Profile of American Colleges, they fall into the most competitive schools category, admitting fewer than 33% of applicants. This was based on a fact sheet uploaded on St. Paul's Episcopal School website. "Guideline to College Categories by Admissions Selectivity," revised Jan. 2012, accessed March 30, 2017, www.stpaulsmobile.net/document.doc?id=1001. During 2015, the admissions rate for Washington and Lee was 24%.

⁵ Jon Marcus, "Old School: Four-Hundred Years of Resistance to Change," in *Reinventing Higher Education: The Promise of Innovation*, Cambridge: Harvard Press (2011): 46-62.

⁶ Here low-income was defined as being eligible for free or reduced lunch, which meant that the student's family earned no more than 185% of the federal poverty threshold. Steve Suitts, "A New Majority: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation's Public Schools," Southern Education Foundation Research Bulletin, January 2015, <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/4ac62e27-5260-47a5-9d02-14896ec3a531/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now.aspx>.

⁷ "How America Pays For College 2016," Sallie Mae and Ipsos Report, 2016, p. 8. http://news.salliemae.com/files/doc_library/file/HowAmericaPaysforCollege2016FNL.pdf

freshmen at America's post-secondary institutions.⁸ In nearly every pop-culture iteration, the mainstream American narrative involves going off to college⁹ – though looking more closely at who is going to college reveals a strong correlation with income. Of students who completed high school or a GED in 2014, about 80 percent from high-income backgrounds immediately enrolled in college – compared to only 52 percent from low-income backgrounds.¹⁰ Immediate enrollment is important because the more time a student takes off between high school and college, the fewer the outside scholarship opportunities available, and the slimmer the chance is that the student will actually earn a bachelor's degree.¹¹

Aside from college access, college retention and graduation matters because we should not just be concerned with getting students to college. We should also be concerned about getting students to finish, because access without full attainment might not be access after all. Some college, even without a degree, makes some of an economic difference for individuals by adding about \$100,000 to their lifelong earnings, but college completion is what really boosts opportunity.¹² Nationally, the college graduation rate is about 60%.¹³ However, when students from low-income backgrounds enroll in college, they graduate at a rate of 14 percentage points lower than their peers do.¹⁴ Only half of

⁸ William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2023*, (NCES 2015-073). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. p. 26-28.

⁹ Pauline J. Reynolds, *Representing "U": Popular Culture, Media, and Higher Education*, ASHE Higher Education Report 40, no. 4 (2014): 22-24.

¹⁰ "The Condition of Education – Undergraduate Enrollment," National Center for Education Statistics, May 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp.

¹¹ Erich Lauff, Steven J. Ingels, and Elise M. Christopher, "Education Longitudinal Study of 2002: A First Look at 2002 High School Sophomores 10 Years Later," National Center for Education Statistics, January 2014, p. 10.

¹² Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah, "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, (2011): 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Though this difference is lower on an institutional basis due to uneven enrollment patterns among different types of institutions. Andrew Howard Nichols, "The Pell Partnership: Ensuring a Shared Responsibility for Low-Income Student Success," The Education Trust, September 2015, 1. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ThePellPartnership_EdTrust_20152.pdf.

students receiving Pell Grants¹⁵ graduate with a bachelor's degree in six years, compared to almost 65 percent of their non-Pell recipient peers.¹⁶ Having a bachelor's degree is expected to translate to about 74 percent higher lifetime earnings than having only a high school diploma.¹⁷

It is problematic that national enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for low-income students are lower than those of their higher-income peers. Overall, the majority of low-income students are enrolling at schools that do not graduate enough low-income students. However, the good news is that lower college enrollment and attainment rates for low-income students do not have to be inevitable. For example, selective universities have much better graduation rates for low-income students.¹⁸ Perhaps this is due to the types of low-income students they accept, or to their smaller classes, better peer and alumni networks, higher expectations, or greater resources compared to those of less selective universities.¹⁹ Of course, a college's quality of education and opportunities are largely influenced by the size of an institution's endowment. About 3.5 percent of colleges and universities held 75 percent of endowment wealth in 2013, making up what the Education Trust deems the "\$500 Million Club," 138 institutions that each manage an endowment larger than \$500 million.²⁰

The major issue is that not all selective institutions, catering to 10 percent of America's freshman class annually, are enrolling enough low-income students. A 2014 *New York Times* op-ed still

¹⁵ Pell Grants are awarded to America's highest-need students, typically from families making less than \$50,000 per year. Reyna Gobel, "More People Eligible for Pell Grants than Expected," *Forbes*, Jan. 31, 2015.

¹⁶ Nichols, "Pell Partnership: Ensuring a Shared Responsibility," 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jennifer Giancola and Richard Kahlenberg, "True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best College and Universities," Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Report, January 2016, 10.

http://www.jkcf.org/assets/1/7/JKCF_True_Merit_Report.pdf.

¹⁹ Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose, "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions," in *America's Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education*, Century Foundation (2004): 103-109.

²⁰ Andrew Howard Nichols and Jose Luis Santos, "A Glimpse Inside the Coffers: Endowment Spending at Wealthy Colleges and Universities," The Education Trust, August 2016, 1. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/EndowmentsPaper.pdf?utm_source=Website&utm_medium=Text%20Link&utm_content=A%20Glimpse%20Inside%20the%20Coffers&utm_campaign=Endowments. Washington and Lee University is included in this group, boasting an endowment of \$1.477 billion as of June 30, 2016. "Endowment: Washington and Lee University," <https://www.wlu.edu/support/funding-priorities/endowment>.

resonates years later: “In spite of our collective belief that education is the engine for climbing the socioeconomic ladder – the heart of the ‘American dream’ myth – colleges now are more divided by wealth than ever.”²¹ The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that “students from families in the bottom economic quartile comprise only three percent of enrollment in the most competitive schools, while those from the top economic quartile comprise 72 percent.”²² This disparity is concerning because evidence shows there is not a lack of high-achieving, low-income students, according to economists Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery. They estimate that each year, between 25,000 and 35,000 students come from the bottom income quartile yet score in the top decile on the ACT or SAT.²³ These students often end up at schools that have lower expectations and qualifications, in a phenomenon called ‘undermatching.’ It’s not that there are not high-achieving, low-income students out there, and it’s also not that selective colleges are not willing to accept them – but still there remains a disconnect on the matter of enrollment. The bottleneck effect of selective schools having limited seats is an unavoidable part of the admissions and enrollment process, but because low-income students are so routinely and disproportionately left out of the equation, it should be cause for alarm.

After overcoming access issues at selective colleges, students attending these institutions will see significantly higher financial returns on their college education.²⁴ Despite previous beliefs that students who would economically benefit most from college would be those most likely to pursue it, recent research has found that this is not the case. Students who benefit most economically are actually coming from the backgrounds that make them least likely to go to college – such as low-income

²¹ Vicki Madden, “Why Poor Students Struggle,” *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 2014,

https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/opinion/why-poor-students-struggle.html?_r=0.

²² Analyzing US Department of Education statistics. Giancola and Kahlenberg, “True Merit,” 5.

²³ Caroline M. Hoxby and Christopher Avery, “The Missing “One-Offs”: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low Income Students,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 18586, 2012.

²⁴ Dominic J. Brewer, Eric R. Eide, and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, “Does It Pay to Attend an Elite Private College? Cross-Cohort Evidence on the Effects of College Type on Earnings,” *The Journal of Human Resources* 34, no. 1 (1999): 104-123.

students.²⁵ This might have to do with the notion that one dollar does not mean the same thing or represent the same utility to every person equally; on a related note, positive socioeconomic mobility might be harder to achieve for students coming from higher income backgrounds to begin with.

Reducing the benefits of a college education to its economic benefits is inappropriate by some perspectives.²⁶ To be sure, there are certainly benefits to having a college degree that are not reflected in one's income or likelihood of social mobility, but following the Great Recession, as half of Americans are still concerned about being financially secure,²⁷ it is hard to shift national conversations away from focusing on the practical and utilitarian ends of higher education. Higher education institutions must grapple with these concerns, and take care not to outright dismiss them, especially considering that they undoubtedly can play an instrumental role in enabling social mobility and higher incomes. Wanting to ensure that after graduation, one is able to live a decent life with all basic needs met is not really something that can be criticized, as it is probably a common goal shared by nearly everyone. Integrating rhetoric about both intrinsic and economic benefits of higher education would likely help colleges connect better with students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Colleges and universities are institutional agents that have the responsibility to promote students' development and capabilities. To some degree, the recognition of this responsibility is evidenced by longstanding commitments to providing liberal educations. This is also shown in

²⁵ Jenny E. Brand and Yu Xie, "Who Benefits Most from College? Evidence for Negative Selection in Heterogeneous Economic Returns to Higher Education," *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 2 (2010): 273-302.

²⁶ Former Yale professor William Deresiewicz views the conception of college education in terms of economic outcomes as a gross exploitation by "the practicality police" of what the whole point of college is supposed to be. See *Excellent Sheep*, p. 78-79. He does still argue for the expansion of college access however, in "Your Criticism of My Ivy League Takedown Further Proves My Point," *New Republic*, Aug. 16, 2014. In his opinion, preserving everyone's humanity is the impetus for why we must disrupt the current fallacy that we live in a functional meritocracy, "restore the promise of college as we once conceived it," and refuse to "reserve the benefits of a liberal education for the privileged few."

²⁷ Defined as "families have enough money to pay bills, a little left over for small extras or savings, and few worries about making ends meet." Based on a data from the Survey of American Family Finances from 2014, which included a representative sample of more than 7,000 households. Mark Wolff, "Americans' Financial Security: Perception and Reality," The Pew Charitable Trusts Brief, March 2015, 2-3.

http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/02/fsm-poll-results-issue-brief_artfinal_v3.pdf.

universities' support for "maintaining domestic order, providing social outlets, and ensuring students' overall well-being" through student affairs programs and staff.²⁸ Providing financial aid to cover the cost of attendance is one important step to equalizing opportunity for low-income students, but once on campus, without additional supports, these students may not continue to succeed or enjoy equal opportunity for the same kind of college experience that their higher-income peers have. In designing additional support structures, universities must thoughtfully apply policies that will not further stigmatize or corroborate deficit-based views of low-income students. They must also think through the various types of challenges low-income students face beyond paying for tuition, room, and board, such as academic, social/cultural, and personal challenges.

A Note on Terminology

For the purposes of this paper, I focus on low-income students. In conversations and literature related to college access and retention, the terms "low-income" and "first-generation" are in some cases used interchangeably. This might seem reasonable on the surface because of the close correlation between the two identities, but these terms are not the same and can reflect different capabilities, opportunities, and experiences. Both low-income and first-generation students may face cultural challenges upon arriving at a selective college, but low-income students may not have the financial resources to address these issues on their own while first-generation students with higher incomes might. There is also real confusion about what the term "first-generation" even means.²⁹ My sense is

²⁸ Mimi Benjamin and Florence A. Hamrick, "How Does the Perception that Learning Takes Place Exclusively in Classrooms Persist?: Expanding the Learning Environment," in *Contested Issues in Student Affairs: Diverse Perspectives and Respectful Dialogue*, Sterling: Stylus Publishing (2011): 27-33.

²⁹ Additional questions arise if students did not grow up with their parents, and if they had older siblings who navigated the college process first. Some issues might be resolved through specifying first-generation *traditional* student, but still there are a variety of factors that so far have not been taken into account. Robert K. Toutkoushian, Robert S. Stollberg, and Kelly A. Slaton, "Talking 'Bout My Generation: Defining 'First-Generation Students' in Higher Education Research," paper presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education, October 14, 2015, <https://airweb.org/GrantsAndScholarships/Documents/Grants2014/ToutkoushianScholarlyPaper.pdf>.

that, along with designating students who are the first in their family to earn a college degree, it has also become the politically correct way to suggest disadvantage and low-income status.

It is possible that school administrators and researchers sometimes overstate the dilemma that students face in identifying as low-income or not, and instead opt to focus on “first-generation” students. Using “first-generation” with an underlying connotation of “low-income” offends first-generation students who do not come from low-income backgrounds, and has likely contributed to the term’s stigmatization.³⁰ First-generation students are not always low-income students, and low-income students are not always first-generation students. The careful distinction between first-generation and low-income might not be a school’s top priority, and for efficiency’s sake, programs can be designed to address both target populations because both identities intersect so frequently. An initiative to enable social inclusion and equalize opportunity for first-generation students would probably also benefit low-income students, but labeling the program as for “first-generation students” would leave out working-class students whose parents might already have a degree, whether an associate’s or bachelor’s, from a commuter school, online, or another country. In the end, what is most important is that schools are reaching the students they need to, while preserving students’ opportunity to be able to identify however they choose.

Deficit- versus Asset-Based Views

When policymakers and higher education administrators talk about implementing programs for low-income students, there is often an implicit deficit-based view of these students. To be clear, acknowledging the existence of socioeconomic differences is not the problem – but presuming that coming from a low-income background creates only difficulties and disadvantage is. The deficit model is frequently used with diverse students and “emphasizes students’ inabilities rather than their abilities,

³⁰ See Melissa Scholes Young’s “The Cost of Being First,” published October 16, 2016 on *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/10/the-cost-of-being-first/504155/>.

and encourages policies and programs that view underserved students as less than their peers.”³¹ This contributes to the stigma of identifying as low-income, as students’ weaknesses are overstressed and the rhetoric centers around fixing these students and helping them overcome their beginnings. A deficit framework also signals a perspective of social inclusion and mobility that necessarily means assimilating low-income students completely into the prevailing cultural make-up of the rest of the academic institution. Scant attention is paid to recognizing that low-income students may be coming from distinct cultural backgrounds that foster different values, beliefs, and worldviews that may not be wrong, just different.³²

A necessary perspective adjustment would mean shifting from a deficit-based view to an asset-based view. If we recognize that all people are experts on their experiences and that all backgrounds are valid, then we should value students who are low-income for the strengths they bring to campus instead of reducing them to only their needs. Byron White, Cleveland State University’s Vice President for University Engagement, suggests a new term like “rising scholars” for students with the so-called “big three” deficiencies: being minority, low-income, or first-generation.³³ A new term, but more importantly a new perspective, would underscore the fact that low-income students bring resilience and creativity³⁴ and can add valuable input to classroom discussions. They raise awareness of the issues they face,³⁵ personalize those issues for people who do not experience them,³⁶ and can serve as supportive

³¹ Denise Green, “Historically Underserved Students: What we Know, What We Still Need to Know,” *new Directions for Community Colleges* 135 (2006): 24.

³² Shernaz B. Garcia and Patricia Guerra, “Deconstructing Deficit Thinking: Working with Educators to Create More Equitable Learning Environments,” *Education and Urban Society* 36, no. 2 (2004): 159-162.

³³ Byron P. White, “Beyond a Deficit View,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/04/19/importance-viewing-minority-low-income-and-first-generation-students-assets-essay>

³⁴ Dennis K. Orthner, Hinckley Jones-Sanpei, and Sabrina Williamson, “The Resilience and Strengths of Low-Income Families,” *Family Relations* 53, no. 2 (2004): 159-167.

³⁵ See Talia Kramer’s “Letter to the Editor: A Few Ideas to Help Low-Income Students Thrive,” published March 8, 2017 in *The Rice Thresher*, Rice University’s official undergraduate student newspaper. <http://www.ricethresher.org/article/2017/03/a-few-ideas-to-help-low-income-students-thrive>.

³⁶ See Virginia Kettles’ “When You Don’t Fit In with the One Percent,” published January 6, 2017 on *The Huffington Post* as an answer to “What is it like to be a poor student at a very rich university or high school?” Originally

encouragement for other students from similar backgrounds who are struggling.³⁷ Low-income students are also likely to exhibit more compassion and empathy for others due to their class background, as a recent study of college students found.³⁸

The language of an asset-based view is necessary on an institutional level for designing more effective policies and support programs.³⁹ On the student level, students will conceptualize their identities differently as well as their goals for social mobility and inclusion – and universities can support this autonomy by taking on a capabilities approach. In adopting an institutional asset-based view, universities would be operating with an underlying perspective of social inclusion and mobility that would enable social inclusion and opportunity for low-income students while respecting the merits of their background culture and values. An asset-based view would also likely begin to change the rhetoric in higher education from simply focusing on ‘diversity and inclusion’ to also considering equity and justice.⁴⁰ Already, some universities have changed the name of their diversity and inclusion offices or centers to include the word “equity,”⁴¹ making an outward statement about the importance of equity beyond just diversity for diversity’s sake.

Washington and Lee University

Returning to the scenarios presented in the introduction, we see some of the overlooked aspects of the college experience at Washington and Lee University. Considered a top-ranking national

appeared on Quora, a “knowledge sharing network where compelling questions are answered by people with unique insights.” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/quora/when-you-dont-fit-in-with_b_14011794.html.

³⁷ See Jim McCorkle’s “An Open Letter to America’s Rising Scholars, Low-Income Graduates of 2016,” published May 19, 2016 on *The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-mccorkell/an-open-letter-to-america_b_10051942.html.

³⁸ Jennifer E. Stellar, Vida M. Manzo, Michael W. Kraus, and Dacher Keltner, “Class and Compassion: Socioeconomic Factors Predict Responses to Suffering,” *Emotion* 12, no. 3 (2012): 4494-459.

³⁹ Stephen John Quaye, “Girl or Woman? Dorm or Residence Hall? What’s the Big Deal About Language?: The Power of Language,” in *Contested Issues in Student Affairs* (2011): 287-288.

⁴⁰ Dafina-lazarus Stewart, “Language of Appeasement,” published March 30, 2017 on *Inside Higher Ed*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay>.

⁴¹ For example: Harvard, Penn, Vanderbilt, Smith College, University of California schools, University of Southern California, Colgate, NYU, UVA, among many others.

liberal arts college by *US News and World Report's* standards,⁴² Washington and Lee University is comprised of about 1,800 undergraduates and located in the small town of Lexington, VA. While the school prided itself on not giving much thought to rankings and statistics,⁴³ a recently published *New York Times* article called attention to some that are hard to ignore. According to a study by Stanford economist Raj Chetty and others, Washington and Lee ranked third among the 38 colleges that enrolled “more students from the top 1 percent [of the income distribution] than the bottom 60.”⁴⁴ The data used in the study found that the median family income of Washington and Lee families is \$261,000, with 81 percent of students coming from the country’s top 20 percent.⁴⁵ Compared to other elite colleges, Washington and Lee ranked 14 out of 65 for the percentage share of students from the top one percent. What was most concerning to many people was the overall mobility index, which takes into account the number of low-income students enrolled and the fraction who end up in the top fifth of America’s household incomes.⁴⁶ Washington and Lee ranked last out of 64 elite colleges, and nearly last out of all 2,137 colleges. In other words, Washington and Lee is not only far behind its peers in enrollment, but some of its low-income students remain low-income even after graduation.

Such statistics are glaring in spite of Washington and Lee’s recent, deliberate efforts to recruit high-achieving, low-income students since 2007 under its new strategic plan – “a liberal arts college for

⁴² <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-liberal-arts-colleges>

⁴³ As evidenced by the website’s lack of any prominent mentioning of rankings by *U.S. News and World Report*, President Ruscio’s message to parents at admissions panels many times throughout his tenure, and Student Ambassadors’ information for prospective families.

⁴⁴ Gregor Aisch, Larry Buchanan, Amanda Cox, and Kevin Quely, “Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours,” *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2017.

⁴⁵ This data was for approximately the Class of 2013. “Economic Diversity and Student outcomes at Washington and Lee University,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/washington-and-lee-university>. In 2014, the top 20% of American household earned about \$111,000. “Most Americans Make It to the Top 20 Percent (At Least for a While),” NPR, May 5, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/05/05/308380342/most-americans-make-it-to-the-top-20-percent-at-least-for-a-while>.

⁴⁶ Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan, “Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility,” The Equality of Opportunity Project, Jan. 2017, accessed April 10, 2017, http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/papers/coll_mrc_paper.pdf.

the 21st century.” By the fall of 2010, the first cohort of QuestBridge Scholars arrived,⁴⁷ marking a new and important partnership for the university. In the fall of 2013, the university announced the W&L Promise, Washington and Lee’s ambitious commitment to any student admitted coming from a family that makes under \$75,000. Still, in 2014-2015, while 59 percent of students received financial aid, only 10 percent of the total undergraduate body received Pell grants.⁴⁸ The generous new financial aid policies have been making a small difference in terms of enrollment of low-income students, but Washington and Lee still has some way to go. As a selective school with a history it continually strives to be both proud and critical of, Washington and Lee has dealt with difficulties in integrating and appreciating diverse students for a long time. Low enrollment of low-income students is not much different from their greater struggle to enroll minority students.

Like other selective schools, Washington and Lee boasts both high retention and graduation rates⁴⁹ – but those figures are not the whole story. In addition to improving the less-than-ideal impact on social mobility, universities need to recognize and try to better understand the other challenges low-income students face on campus. Because of how academic, social/cultural, and personal challenges intersect and create barriers to equal access to the full college experience, low-income students can face further social exclusion and compounding inequality. In some cases, students feel so isolated or unhappy that they want to transfer, but because their financial aid at Washington and Lee is so generous and exclusive to Washington and Lee, low-income students may be trapped into staying. An alum once told me over Facebook that “if a poor person could just ‘get up and go’ there would hardly be

⁴⁷ QuestBridge is a national non-profit that matches high-achieving, low-income students to America’s top colleges through an intensive application process. For more information, visit <https://www.questbridge.org/>.

⁴⁸ Put in perspective, the peer institutions with highest Pell enrollment are Grinnell College, which has about 25%, and Williams College, which has around 20%. See: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/can-wealthy-private-colleges-better-serve-low-income-students/>. Still, Washington and Lee is far behind. “Academic Indicators: Washington and Lee University,” Washington and Lee University website, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://www.wlu.edu/institutional-effectiveness/academic-indicators#fin-aid>.

⁴⁹ (recently as high as 97 percent). University website.

ANY [low-income] people on this campus (considering there aren't that many) ... people that don't have the problem don't know. It's a sacrifice." Unfortunately, this is not an isolated sentiment; I have heard these feelings repeated by many students. This is not to undermine the truly amazing financial aid policies of Washington and Lee, but instead to emphasize why improving the experiences for low-income students is so important. Ideally, all Washington and Lee students would feel so included and have all of the same opportunities available that they would all want to stay voluntarily.

Moral Responsibility

Before parsing out the different types of challenges low-income students face at selective colleges, we must first discuss why we should even care to begin with. This might seem extreme or blunt to some people, but beyond agreement on this initial premise, there is likely to be disagreement over the level of responsibility that universities have in mitigating students' unique challenges anyway. At the most basic level, the conversation about low-income students and higher education institutions centers on the notion that education is not just about educating an individual. It is about improving society as well, through the individual. By educating these individuals, colleges prepare students to be contributing members of society, helping them to discover and pursue their own conceptions of the good. To define the level of responsibility schools have to promote social inclusion and opportunity for low-income students, I will apply John Rawls' ideal and non-ideal theory, social bases of self-respect, and theory of justice, as well as Martha Nussbaum's central capabilities.

Advocating for selective colleges like Washington and Lee to better support low-income students is expected to be criticized by three main perspectives. First, it may seem like too much to ask of the institution; if tuition, room, and board are covered for low-income students, then the university has fulfilled its responsibility. Second, it may seem like the issues at hand are too small-scale to warrant much concern, given that so few low-income students currently attend selective schools like Washington and Lee and the majority are at state or community colleges. Third, some may argue that

students should not be overly coddled once they arrive at college; students are responsible for making their own way, creating their own opportunities, and ultimately determining their own outcomes – and the academic institution does not have a role in this.

However, these claims ignore the moral responsibility that selective schools have to better support low-income students. Just as a nuanced view of poverty requires a broader lens than simply an income threshold, a nuanced view of supporting low-income students requires a broader lens than simply providing for required fees, though that is a start. Second, the lack of low-income students at selective colleges does not excuse colleges from their moral responsibility to support them; moral responsibility does not depend on critical mass. Finally, when selective higher education institutions admit students, they are extending to them an invitation to become part of their community. Communities should be at some level responsible for their members, and higher education institutions are no different. It is not coddling students to ensure that they have basic needs met and are able to make best use of the university, in an equal capacity to students with higher socioeconomic background. Providing more resources and equalizing opportunities for those least-resourced in the community does not mean that students are not partly responsible for their own outcomes, because they are – in addition to institutions.

Ideal and Nonideal Theory

In order to make effective policies, we must strive toward the ideal scenario. In the case of selective institutions, the ideal scenario would mean all students regardless of socioeconomic background would be socially included and have equal access to personal and economic opportunity. Some challenges may not be able to be overcome on an institutional basis due to constraints of money and other resources, but Rawls' nonideal theory is what helps us to see that we should not just give up on the ideal. Instead, we must still pursue the ideal as the objective and recognize that ideal scenarios

“might be achieved, or at least worked toward, generally in gradual steps.”⁵⁰ If we keep in mind the goal of social inclusion for low-income students and expanding opportunities for them, then we can better evaluate the progressive steps toward eventually reaching that ideal scenario. At Washington and Lee and other selective colleges, the stated ideal is set forth in their mission statements. Washington and Lee’s mission statement is not designed for certain students, but it is designed for all of its students. Using the mission statement as the guiding ideal of the college, we must critically examine where the university is falling short of reaching that ideal – and devise morally permissible and politically possible policy solutions that advance the ideal instead of disregarding the ideal as being too hard to reach.

Capabilities

Basic notions of respect for human dignity pushed the field of poverty studies to expand its definition of poverty from simply a lack of financial resources to a broader consideration of what capabilities a person has. Similarly, colleges should care about their students beyond just accepting and graduating them, but they should also care about the capabilities students have to be able to live as they choose, making truly free choices about their lives. As stated in the mission, Washington and Lee understands this responsibility as developing capacities, and looking at students as overall people. Martha Nussbaum explored a basic list of central capabilities that could be used to measure quality of life and therefore represent social justice.⁵¹ As I am arguing that social inclusion and opportunity be recognized by the university as worthwhile ideals, it is especially helpful to think about Nussbaum’s capabilities of freedom of senses, imagination, and thought, affiliation, play, and control over one’s environment.

Students regardless of socioeconomic background should have access to these capabilities. Freedom of senses, imagination, and thought would mean that students could imagine themselves in a

⁵⁰ John Rawls, “The Law of Peoples,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 60.

⁵¹ Martha Nussbaum, “Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice,” *Feminist economics* 9, no. 2-3 (2003): 41-43.

career of their choice, and would not limit themselves to certain majors based on potential earnings. It would mean that students had the ability to think about things they want to, instead of having to stress about budgeting money all the time. Affiliation is important because it is about being able to be a full member of society, with the social bases of self-respect. This essentially means that people should be able to connect with others, and when there are exclusive organizations on campuses like Greek life, we should enable everyone's capability to be able to affiliate if they want. Rawls expanded more on the social bases of self-respect, which I will briefly return to shortly. Play is about the ability to enjoy recreation, but if low-income students are working all of the time to make ends meet, then they are being denied this capability. Finally, the capability of having control over one's environment would mean that low-income students These might seem like impossible ideals, but again Rawls would say that we should use these ideals to formulate our nonideal, more practical compromises. Establishing the realization of all of these capabilities must start with small steps, even if we do not reach the full ideal.

If we agree that these capabilities are central to social justice and empowering individuals, then maximizing the capabilities of each student is necessary. This preserves their dignity and allows them to be better positioned to contribute in meaningful ways to their communities – which in this case would be a vibrant campus community, before graduating a joining a broader global community.

Social Bases of Self-Respect

Social bases of self-respect matter to individuals' self-determination and self-respect. As mentioned earlier in the context of Nussbaum's affiliation capability, social bases of self-respect have to do with the relationship between people and the society around them. Rawls defines the social bases of self-respect as a critical public good that includes "things like the institutional fact that citizens have equal basic rights, and the public recognition of that fact."⁵² Rawls is not saying that institutions are directly responsible for individuals' personal conception of self-respect, but he is saying that Institutions

⁵² John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2001: 60.

have the responsibility to acknowledge the worth of every individual and to arrange structures so that they support individuals in their own states of self-respect. First, if low-income students are left feeling alienated on their campuses, the academic institution is doing a disservice. Second, by ignoring or minimizing the needs of low-income students, selective schools are inhibiting the social bases of self-respect of low-income students. Finally, if schools have assistance programs available, but they are so disjointed or hardly known that students have to sacrifice their dignity and ask people all around campus where to go to find what they need, the institution has also violated those students' social bases of self-respect.

While universities may believe they are operating with the best intentions behind bringing underrepresented students to their campuses, failing to follow through in supporting these students and their social bases of self-respect throughout their undergraduate careers can come across as further proof to these students that their institutions are using them to merely boost diversity statistics. In order to continue to ethically recruit low-income students, selective institutions must recognize their moral responsibility to provide as much support as possible within a respectful and dignified context.

[Veil of Ignorance, Equality of Opportunity, and Justice](#)

In order for a something to be just, John Rawls would posit that we all must come to agreement about something from an unbiased perspective. An unbiased perspective is difficult to entertain, but behind a veil of ignorance, it is possible. The veil of ignorance takes out irrelevant characteristics that could come into consideration, such as one's socioeconomic status. From behind the veil of ignorance, we all would likely agree that people should have access to education. This access would have to include the full college experience, including social inclusion and opportunity, because it is not likely that behind the veil of ignorance, people would agree that students should have unequal experiences based on their income status. There are differences among various colleges and universities, but specifically looking at

individual schools, once everyone has arrived on campus who has been accepted, there should not be any substantial differences to how low-income or high-income students experience their education.

Attempting to equalize opportunities available to all students regardless of background does not imply that students would not be responsible, at least in some part, for their own outcomes. Instead, ensuring more equality of opportunity on campus for low-income students would preserve their autonomy when making choices about their undergraduate careers and futures, as well as their dignity. Because we should want the best for individuals regardless of what Rawls would call their irrelevant characteristics, we should strive to prioritize equality of opportunity. In order to do so, the university must take seriously the explicit and implicit ways it is contributing to unequal opportunities on campus – as well as how this inequality leads to further inequality after graduation. Only after examining how policies are directly and indirectly affecting low-income students can we truly better serve them.

Elite private schools have long been aware of the opportunities they can provide students, and through rigorous, selective admissions processes they are essentially choosing who is able to benefit from what their campuses offer. Attending an elite college is part of what helps keep social inequality alive because not only do social inequalities continue to exist on college campuses, but they can actually manifest into differences in future job prospects.⁵³ As evidence suggests that an institution's selectivity matters for mobility, the national conversation about college access should accordingly focus more on the role that selective institutions play in shaping higher education and society through social inclusion and mobility.⁵⁴ Until those conversations, selective institutions can independently play an active role in mitigating some of the structural injustices that low-income students face – directly and indirectly affecting the opportunities available to students while they are enrolled and beyond.

⁵³ Lauren Rivera, *Pedigree*, Princeton: Princeton Press, 2015.

⁵⁴ Matthew M. Chingos, "Don't Forget Private, Non-Profit Colleges," *Economic Studies at Brookings, Evidence Speaks Reports 2*, no. 9 (2017): 6.

Beyond Access and Retention: I Got Bills (and Other Types of Challenges)

Realizing the challenges to social inclusion and opportunity that low-income students face can be a daunting task. The difficulties are not always obvious, and sometimes go unnoticed by people who do not interact with any low-income students. I see these challenges often. Last summer, a parent reached out to me because she was concerned about her son after his first year at college; we had met when he first moved in before pre-orientation trips started. He had made many friends, but he wasn't making good grades and he wasn't getting involved on campus. She wanted someone to look out for him in his sophomore year and to keep him out of trouble; I promised to do my best. Then, about halfway through fall semester, a first-year QuestBridge Scholar approached me about another first-year QuestBridge Scholar who had a meltdown in the dorms, crying because she said she didn't fit in, had no friends here, and didn't belong. A few weeks ago, a mother reached out to me about one of her son's friends, yet another first-year QuestBridge Scholar who was struggling to adjust. According to her, this student was partying too hard, not succeeding in his classes, and was dealing with depression as a result of not getting into a fraternity, not feeling like he deserved to be here, and not catching on quick enough to how college works.

These scenarios do not stand alone at Washington and Lee University; they reflect larger trends. The challenges that limit opportunities, both personal and economic, also prevent social inclusion, and the challenges that prevent social inclusion can then serve to further limit opportunities; there is a self-perpetuating cycle. The anecdotal evidence I present is mostly from QuestBridge Scholars that I know personally, because currently the easiest way for low-income students to connect with each other at Washington and Lee (aside from word-of-mouth) is if they are associated with QuestBridge.⁵⁵ However, there are other low-income students on campus aside from QuestBridge Scholars. I also present some

⁵⁵ Through QuestBridge's national headquarters, chapter leaders are provided lists of students who are QuestBridge Scholars in order to contact them about events and meetings. These students updated their information with QuestBridge personally, and consented to being affiliated with the campus chapter. Once on campus, these students can decide the degree to which they remain involved.

initiatives that are attempting to mitigate some of these challenges at other schools, focusing especially on schools that are officially noted as Washington and Lee's peer institutions⁵⁶ or schools from which Washington and Lee could strive to learn.

Academic Challenges

At elite colleges like Washington and Lee University, it is not clear that the low-income students are faring worse academically. A widely cited statistic is that QuestBridge Scholars have the highest GPA of any student group on campus, which might be true, but looking at data provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, the average GPA of all students receiving a Pell grant actually does not differ much from the average GPA of students receiving neither a Pell grant nor a Stafford Loan.⁵⁷ However, the primary academic issues I call attention to are major choice and perceived job prospects, asking for help, and research and soft academic skills.

Major Choice and Job Prospects

For low-income students, financial considerations affect many decisions related to college choice.⁵⁸ Beyond college choice, financial considerations and social background affect students' choices of study; students from higher socioeconomic status tend to choose arts and sciences majors while students from lower socioeconomic status tend to choose vocational majors.⁵⁹ Given the rising costs of

⁵⁶ These institutions are: "the top 30 US News Best Liberal Arts Colleges (2016 edition) excluding the three service academies (West Point, Annapolis, and Air Force). They include five women's colleges (Wellesley, Smith, Bryn Mawr, Barnard, Scripps) and Amherst College, Bates College, Bowdoin College, Bucknell University, Carleton College, Claremont McKenna College, Colby College, Colgate University, College of the Holy Cross, Colorado College, Davidson College, Grinnell College, Hamilton College, Harvey Mudd College, Haverford College, Kenyon College, Macalester College, Middlebury College, Oberlin College, Pomona College, Swarthmore College, University of Richmond, Vassar College, Wesleyan University, and Williams College." (<https://www.wlu.edu/institutional-effectiveness/academic-indicators>).

⁵⁷ Looking at the 2010 cohort. The average GPA for all Pell recipients was 3.43, while the average GPA for students without a Pell grant or Stafford Loan was 3.40. For students only receiving Pell grants, the average GPA was 3.51, but for students only receiving Stafford Loans, the average GPA was 3.33. Because the GPA for all Pell recipients was not much higher than the GPA for other students, and taking into account the GPA for Stafford Loan recipients who received those loans based on financial need, the QuestBridge Scholars' GPA probably does not signify that low-income students have no academic struggles.

⁵⁸ Michael B. Paulsen and Edward P. St. John, "Social Class and College Costs: Examining the Financial Nexus between College Choice and Persistence," *The Journal of Higher Education* 73, no. 2 (2002): 189-236

⁵⁹ Arts and sciences majors include art, humanities, languages, religion, science and math, social science; vocational majors include business, education, pre-professional tracks (medicine, law, journalism, public health,

higher education plus the years following the Great Recession, many of today's college students are looking at college as a way to get a job – and it is likely that low-income students feel financial pressures even more so than higher-income peers.⁶⁰ Of course, this instrumental valuation of college irks some professors who tell students “don't worry about getting a job” or “you'll end up in the elite no matter what you do,” but a common metric that schools, parents, and students care about is post-graduation employment rates, as they probably should. Further, career centers already exist at all selective institutions.

Although some faculty and staff claim that major choice during undergraduate does not matter at all, the majority of America's colleges are still set up under this compartmentalized system and some fields do require experience or knowledge before entering. Post-baccalaureate programs are sometimes an option to fill in gaps, but for low-income students thinking in terms of limited resources and saving money, those can seem out of reach. Further, if low-income students do take to heart that major choice is not all that important for job prospects, it requires some reliance on faith that they will find a job regardless – and they still may struggle with explaining their choices and decisions to their parents.

The value of a residential liberal arts education is undeniable. Many employers have recognized the desirability of liberal arts students, as a liberal arts curriculum cultivates well-rounded, informed citizens. However, too often faculty do not take seriously the needs and values with which low-income students come to campus. Faculty who are concerned about preserving the intrinsic valuation of college by students should recognize that not all students come from the same background and can completely disregard the instrumental value of college, but they should also recognize that it does not have to be a zero-sum appreciation. For low-income students, the fear of not getting a job after graduation is

social work. Kimberly A. Goyette and Ann L. Mullen, “Who Studies the Arts and Sciences? Social Background and the Choice and Consequences of Undergraduate Field of Study,” *Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 3 (2016): 497-538.

⁶⁰ “Americans' Financial Security,” Pew Charitable Trusts Brief, http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/02/fsm-poll-results-issue-brief_artfinal_v3.pdf

tangible because the stakes are higher and the risks seem greater; they feel the acute need to find a well-paying job.⁶¹ It is also not uncommon for low-income students to go to college with wanting to give back to their communities or families in mind.⁶² Attending a selective school often represents more than just a diploma – it is the opportunity to pursue futures that they choose for themselves, and perhaps the opportunity to change their family’s fate.

Asking for Help

Low-income students may not reach out and ask for help when they need it. Some research attributes this class-based behavior difference to beginning with parenting trend differences among social classes, although others criticize the majority of these parenting studies for oversimplifying the various components of socioeconomic status.⁶³ Still, Annette Lareau thoroughly and convincingly describes noticeable patterns among parenting approaches of low-income parents compared to higher-income parents, differentiating between what she calls “the accomplishment of natural growth” versus “concerted cultivation.”⁶⁴ She finds that with the former, low-income children are raised in a more hands-off way, whether this is by parental choice or because parents are too busy working to earn money and provide food. Higher-income parents take a more active role in raising their children, and tend to pass on specific directives about situational behavior.

These differences lead to developing a sense of restraint or a sense of entitlement. A study of children within an elementary school corroborated Lareau’s findings.⁶⁵ Middle-class students, compared

⁶¹ Douglas Guiffreda, Martin Lynch, Andrew Wall, and Darlene Abel, “Do Reasons for Attending College Affect Academic Outcomes? A Test of a Motivational Model From a Self-Determination Theory Perspective,” *Journal of College Student Development* 54, no. 2 (2013): 135-137.

⁶² Nicole M. Stephens et. al, “Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102, no. 6 (2012): 1187-1189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0027143>

⁶³ Greg J. Duncan and Katherine A. Magnuson, “Off with Hollingshead: Socioeconomic Resources, Parenting, and Child Development,” in *Socioeconomic Status, Parenting, and Child Development*, ed. Marc Bornstein and Robert Bradley, New York: Routledge (2012): 83-105.

⁶⁴ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Berkeley: UC Press (2003): 1-13.

⁶⁵ Jessica McCrory Calarco, ““I Need Help!” Social Class and Children’s Help-Seeking in Elementary School,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 6 (2011): 862-882.

to working-class peers, “receive more help from teachers, spend less time waiting, and are better able to complete assignments.” They ask for help more frequently, even when they do not need it, and “rather than wait for assistance, they call out or approach teachers directly, even interrupting to make requests.” As cultural habits solidify over time and form cultural capital, students are likely to exhibit the same differentiated authority engagement behaviors in college.⁶⁶ To help address the reticence of low-income students asking for help, targeted and direct outreach on the part of the university or professors can make a difference to low-income students’ actions.⁶⁷

Research and Soft Academic Skills

Because admission at Washington and Lee and other selective schools already requires demonstrated high achievement, low-income students at schools like Washington and Lee do not need remedial courses – at least no more than any other student. In personal conversations, several Washington and Lee professors have noted improved classroom discussion quality since the school’s QuestBridge partnership started, and one professor told a peer that the “spectrum of student aptitudes and readiness for college-level work” was distributed randomly. However, academic disparities may arise because low-income students will certainly join other students on campus coming from high schools with many more resources and opportunities. This is not the case for all low-income students, as Harvard professor Anthony Abraham Jack notes that there are the “privileged poor” who have been able to gain access and benefit from some of those same elite high schools,⁶⁸ but those students are not the majority of low-income students.

⁶⁶ Anthony Abraham Jack, “(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University,” *Sociology of Education* (2015): 1-19, http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/anthonyjack/files/jack_no_harm_so_e_forthcoming.pdf.

⁶⁷ Benjamin L. Castleman, “Prompts, Personalization, and Pay-offs: Strategies to Improve the Design and Delivery of College and Financial Aid Information,” in *Decision Making for Student Success*, New York: Routledge (2015): 79-100.

⁶⁸ Anthony Abraham Jack, “What the Privileged Poor Can Teach Us,” *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/opinion/sunday/what-the-privileged-poor-can-teach-us.html?_r=0.

Instead of remediation programs, low-income students at selective colleges could use summer bridge⁶⁹ and research mentoring programs. Elsewhere, these programs have mostly arisen out of concerns that low-income students are arriving on campuses with academic deficits, but still they have the potential to equalize familiarity and exposure to certain aspects of the university that may be new to low-income students. In contrast to treating all low-income students as in need of intensive remediation, summer bridge and research mentoring programs instead can be implemented as talent development programs because they can be competitive and build capabilities. Summer bridge programs provide students added social and cultural capital,⁷⁰ due to early access to the college's physical campus as well as relationships with peers and professors, and can help students transition to college more smoothly.⁷¹ Research mentorship programs help students overcome doubts about their abilities through continued experience, and can lead them to become passionate about research or graduate school.⁷² These programs could also have long-term implications, because significant disparities between low-income and higher-income students exist beyond the undergraduate level; they continue at the graduate level.⁷³ In supporting opportunities like summer bridge and research

⁶⁹ A summer bridge program is a program that takes place between high school graduation and arriving on campus for freshman year; some schools offer a course taken for credit, others offer a week-long orientation program of sorts, and still others incorporate research opportunities. Washington and Lee University piloted a summer bridge program in 2016, called the "ARC (Advanced Research Cohort) Program," to "get a diverse group of incoming first-year students interested in STEM in the hopes of retaining them, and to help them flourish by bringing them to campus before the fall start so they would already feel at home, having developed relationships early on with one another, as well as with faculty and with current students." It received great student reviews. See: <https://columns.wlu.edu/wl-launches-advanced-research-cohort-arc-pilot/>.

⁷⁰ Kathleen Stolle-McAllister, "The Case for Summer Bridge: Building Social and Cultural Capital for Talented Black STEM Students," *Science Educator* 20, no. 2 (2011): 12-22.

⁷¹ MaryBeth Walpole et al., "Bridge to Success: Insight into Summer Bridge Program Students' College Transition," *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 20, no.1 (2008): 11-30.

⁷² John Ishiyama, "Expectations and perceptions of undergraduate research mentoring: Comparing first generation, low income white/Caucasian and African American students," *College Student Journal* 41, no. 3 (2011): 540.

⁷³Kevin A. Tate et al., "Underrepresented First-Generation, Low-Income College Students' Pursuit of a Graduate Education: Investigating the Influence of Self-Efficacy, Coping Efficacy, and Family Influence," *Journal of Career Assessment* 23, no. 3 (2014): 427-441.

mentoring programs at the undergraduate level, institutions may in turn help low-income students advance to graduate school.⁷⁴

Social/Cultural Challenges

Social Capital

Low-income students tend to arrive on selective campuses with lower social capital than other students do. Social capital refers to the benefits available to people because of their connections to other people and resources.⁷⁵ Among QuestBridge Scholars at Washington and Lee University, the majority come to campus without knowing any other student at the school beforehand. Low-income students have smaller, more limited networks,⁷⁶ resulting in lower social capital, though social networking sites have shown some promise in helping students to increase their social capital despite socioeconomic background. Students connect and deepen ties with others online through college-related discussions and “by learning more about their hobbies, talents, tastes, and interests.”⁷⁷ Many low-income and first-generation students turn to supportive Facebook groups like the national QuestBridge-created groups or the First-Generation Low-Income Collegiate Network group; accepted student groups are also popular on Facebook and GroupMe.

Just as social capital matters for students throughout the college admissions process,⁷⁸ social capital continues to impact students’ sense of belonging on campus and can largely determine what opportunities students have. To understand how this works, scholars differentiate between the

⁷⁴ This is important because despite what some people believe about the undergraduate degree-granting institution not mattering, research shows this is not the case. Undergraduate prestige makes a difference in both graduate school acceptances as well as earnings. Joni Hersch, “Catching Up is Hard to Do: Undergraduate Prestige, Elite Graduate Programs, and the Earnings Premium,” Vanderbilt Law and Economics Research Paper No. 14-23, Vanderbilt Public Law Research Paper No. 16-17, July 28, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2473238>.

⁷⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice, New York: Greenwood, 1986: 46-58.

⁷⁶ Mary Bruce and John Bridgeland, “The mentoring Effect: Young People’s Perspectives on the Outcomes and Availability of Mentoring,” report for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership (2014): 3-8.

⁷⁷ Christine Greenhow and Lisa Burton, “Help from my ‘Friends’: Social Capital in the Social Network Sites of Low-Income Students,” *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 45, no. 2 (2011): 240-241.

⁷⁸ Daniel Golden, *The Price of Admission: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges*, New York: Random House, 2006.

processes of bridging and bonding social capital – that is, making connections to others in different social groups with different identities versus making connections to others who are part of a shared identity. The degree to which students are able to bridge and bond capital affects the development of their identity, including the academic and professional aspects.⁷⁹ Multiple studies have shown that these “interpersonal relationships both on and off campus play a role in mediating student success in college.”⁸⁰ Negotiating social capital is instrumental in gaining access to certain social groups such as Greek life,⁸¹ which is especially important at Washington and Lee, where nearly 80 percent of students affiliate.⁸² Additionally, membership and elected leadership positions in other prestigious organizations on campus such as Kathekon, the student alumni group, or Omicron Delta Kappa,⁸³ the national leadership honor society, are tied to one’s social capital.

Cultural Capital

Aside from social capital, cultural capital can also present challenges for low-income students. A large part of the residential liberal arts college experience is about cultivating meaningful and lasting relationships with people around you. In *Pedigree*, Rivera describes many of the social challenges low-income students face can relate to cultural capital differences – and argues that these challenges have consequences even beyond the college experience. Low-income students may lack the cultural capital needed to blend in well at selective schools like Washington and Lee.⁸⁴ They might not know the

⁷⁹ Dorthe H. Jensen and Jolanda Jetten, “Bridging and bonding interactions in higher education: social capital and students’ academic and professional identity formation,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (2015): <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00126>.

⁸⁰ George D. Kuh et. al, “What Matters to Student Success: A review of the Literature,” Commissioned Report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success (2006): 12-13.

⁸¹ Jay K. Walker, Nathan D. Martin, and Andrew Hussey, “Greek organization Membership and Collegiate Outcomes at an Elite, Private University,” *Research in Higher Education* 56, no. 3 (2015): 205-207.

⁸² “Frequently Asked Questions About Greek Life: Washington and Lee University,” Washington and Lee University website, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.wlu.edu/student-life/student-activities/greek-life/resources/faq#Percentage>.

⁸³ Founded at Washington and Lee in 1914. ODK selection relies on someone within the organization flagging a student’s name for consideration, researching the candidate’s campus involvement, and then advocating for who should be voted into the circle.

⁸⁴ Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 1986.

unwritten curriculum of how to operate within academia,⁸⁵ how to socialize at a cocktail party, or the unspoken rules of etiquette at a networking event or formal dinner. This lack of cultural capital can affect others' perceptions of them, which can then lead to differences in social inclusion and therefore opportunity.

UVA has tried to bridge this gap by sending out monthly newsletters as well as hosting small cohort workshops.⁸⁶ The newsletters include information on resources and opportunities available as well as campus happenings and relevant information. For workshops, the school offers a "College 101" session for low-income and first-generation students about things students should know about, such as how to get engaged, how to thrive academically, and how to balance time, stress, and competing expectations of home and school life. Additionally, workshops on resume writing and interview and networking skills are held specifically with low-income and first-generation students in mind, to build their confidence before going to career services.

Culture Shock

Low-income students tend to come to college to work and make good grades, which stands in stark contrast to the party culture that characterizes many selective residential colleges.⁸⁷ Culture shock hits almost everyone when they are a minority within a majority, so it makes sense that it researchers have also documented the phenomenon along the lines of social class differences.⁸⁸ A study that investigated the college experiences of low-income students found that at an elite college, more than at a state college, low-income students felt "negative feelings based on class-based differences: inadequacy, inferiority, intimidation, exclusion and powerlessness" as a result of greater wealth

⁸⁵ Buffy Smith, "Leave No College Student Behind," *Multicultural Education* 11, no. 3 (2004): 48-49.

⁸⁶ Phone call with Dean Laurie Casteen from UVA for talking about current initiatives at UVA.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton, *Paying for the Party*, Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2013.

⁸⁸ Anthony Jack, "Culture Shock Revisited: The Social and Cultural Contingencies to Class Marginality," *Sociological Forum* 29: 453-475. http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/anthonyjack/files/jack_culture_shock_revisited_2014.pdf.

disparity and then heightened social class awareness.⁸⁹ At Washington and Lee, this can happen for students when they realize that they do not have the right brands for the W&L uniform, as they walk through Commons and are constantly asked to “swipe things home” for their parents to pay for, or when other students talk about lavish trips or events like the ‘Filthy Rich’ party.⁹⁰

To mitigate culture shock and help low-income better transition to selective colleges, some schools have established identity centers. On the question of whether identity centers in general do more harm or good for a university community, higher education professor Kristen Renn argues that these centers are undoubtedly important for the influence they continue to have. Campus identity centers respond to non-inclusive campus climates, help to ground identity groups, bridge academic and student affairs, and serve as an institutional symbol of the commitment to these students by the university. At schools like Pomona, Brown,⁹¹ and UVA, established spaces for first-generation and low-income students are a place for resources like textbook exchanges, identity exploration materials, and information about scholarships or other campus opportunities, as well as for connecting with others and hosting events.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Aries and Maynard Seider, “The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students,” *Qualitative Sociology* 28, no. 4 (2005): 426.

⁹⁰ Filthy Rich was described to first-year students on a pre-orientation trip this year, which was the first time I had heard of the event. According to the student leader who went to it, the party is held every other year by a fraternity that rents out limousines to drive students around and buys brand new flat-screen TVs and other things for students to throw off the house’s roof. A few students approached me after asking if that is what many W&L students do.

⁹¹ Brown University started making more concerted university efforts toward supporting low-income and first generation students since 2004. After a few years of organizing programming such as panels for first-generation students and families, and giving responsibilities of coordinating student efforts to various student affairs staff, Brown received a convincing proposal from two students “to establish a First-Gen center at Brown” in spring of 2015. The school took on the proposal, and later added “Low-Income Students” to the title of the newly established center as a result of low-income students pushing for it. Now, the center is thriving and hosts many kinds of events for different audiences. See more: “Brief History of First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Initiatives,” Brown University First-Generation College And Low-Income Student Center, <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/first-generation-students/about/brief-history-first-generation-college-and-low-income-student-initiatives>.

Personal Challenges

Breakaway Guilt and Imposter Syndrome

When low-income students arrive on selective college campuses, they can experience a type of survivor guilt known as ‘breakaway guilt’ as well as imposter syndrome. Breakaway guilt manifests in a variety of ways, from leaving behind friends and family,⁹² but usually results in the development of two different identities – one for home and one for school.⁹³ While low-income students may want to make their families proud, they might also struggle with the guilt of being at a selective college instead of being home for family occasions or to help with bills. Meanwhile, low-income students surrounded by wealthy peers can experience imposter syndrome as other minorities might at predominantly white institutions – though more research is called for to document this phenomenon more completely.⁹⁴

To support students as they deal with both of these challenges, many schools have started building connections through mentorships and support groups. At Grinnell College, a chaplain has made it her personal charge to organize fellowship dinners monthly. Students are able to bond over a meal, sharing the personal triumphs and struggles they face. At Columbia University, the recognition of first-year QuestBridge Scholars at an induction ceremony at the beginning of the year serves as a testament to those students that they really do belong on campus. They then meet their upperclassmen mentors, who will hopefully be able to guide them and serve as a support for them throughout the college

⁹² Howard B. London, "Breaking Away: A Study of First-Generation College Students and Their Families," *American Journal of Education* 97, no. 2 (Feb., 1989): 144-170.

⁹³ Linda Banks-Santilli, "First-generation College Students and Their Pursuit of the American Dream," *Journal of Case Studies in Education* 5 (2014): 1-32.

⁹⁴ Bridgette J. Peteet, LaTrice Montgomery, and Jerren C. Weekes. "Predictors of Imposter Phenomenon among Talented Ethnic Minority Undergraduate Students." *Journal Of Negro Education* 84, no. 2 (Spring2015 2015): 175-186.

transition. Research shows that having this personal mentorship and engagement, whether with other students⁹⁵ or faculty,⁹⁶ makes a significant difference for happiness and retention.

Financial and Logistical Concerns

Sometimes, the personal problems that low-income students face in college include the same financial problems that they faced at home or before arriving on campus. When unexpected financial commitments come up, low-income students are less likely to have a personal safety net of savings – mirroring low-income trends on a broader level. Although students may have tuition, room, and board covered without loans, financial concerns arise from emergencies and difficult trade-offs. Many schools have set up emergency funds, for students who need to make an unexpected trip home, find themselves unable to make some bills, need to pay for medical expenses, or come into a variety of other circumstances. Schools like UVA and University of Richmond have clear information about these emergency grants online.

Meanwhile, other logistical concerns for low-income students can include transportation, food, and books. While the problem of food insecurity is often overlooked with regard to students at selective schools, it does still exist. Cornell University's Perceptions of Undergraduate Life and Student Experiences survey last year found that 22 percent of respondents "had skipped meals or had not had enough to eat at least occasionally because of financial constraints."⁹⁷ When campuses close for breaks, many do not provide meals for students, though Harvard started providing vouchers to local restaurants for low-income students to get food. Other schools like Columbia University, George Washington

⁹⁵ Elisa J. Grant-Vallone and Ellen A. Ensher. "Effects of peer mentoring on types of mentor support, program satisfaction and graduate student stress: A dyadic perspective," *Journal of College Student Development* 41.6 (2000): 637-642.

⁹⁶ Toni A. Campbell and David E. Campbell, "Faculty/student mentor program: Effects on academic performance and retention," *Research in higher education* 38, no. 6 (1997): 727-742.

⁹⁷ Nick Anderson, "For the Poor in the Ivy League, a Full Ride Isn't Always What They Imagined," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/for-the-poor-in-the-ivy-league-a-full-ride-isnt-always-what-they-imagined/2016/05/16/5f89972a-114d-11e6-81b4-581a5c4c42df_story.html?utm_term=.7caa9c3531f3.

University, and Virginia Tech have established food pantries for students.⁹⁸ Usually the trade-off for food is textbooks; while there has been a push to make textbook requirements more transparent for students during course registration, the implication here is that students are basing what courses they can take on what books they can afford.⁹⁹ To prevent issues like this, Denison College and Williams College give free textbooks to low-income students.¹⁰⁰

Other Psychological Needs

College is stressful, and so is poverty. Trying to navigate cultural divides between home and school, manage time for class, work, and leisure, and figure out what one's vocational calling is difficult. While low-income students work through culture shock, breakaway guilt, and imposter syndrome among other things, they sometimes feel isolated and alone. This can lead to anxiety and depression issues, as low-income individuals "have access to fewer financial and material goods, which might otherwise offset tangible stressors."¹⁰¹ Further, low-income students who are worried about making ends meet – or concerned about their families continuing to make ends meet – continue to pay a version of what the World Bank refers to as poverty's cognitive tax on people's mental bandwidth. This tax, because of "constant, day-to-day hard choices," pushes "an intense focus on the present to the detriment of the future."¹⁰² When students' capacity to think clearly and make decisions is impaired, additional stress can push students closer to needing extra psychological support.

⁹⁸ "Our Members," College and University Food Bank Alliance, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://www.cufba.org/member-info/>. Also, University of Wisconsin-Madison might soon become the country's first college campus accept SNAP at on-campus dining facilities. See more: http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/university/university-of-wisconsin-moves-to-let-students-use-food-stamps/article_52866824-88a6-5c3e-afd1-004c56d9dd4a.html.

⁹⁹ Related to the Federal Textbook Disclosure Act of 2008. For more information on this, see example from Barnard College: <http://spc.columbiaspectator.com/news/2016/01/21/21-percent-more-barnard-courses-list-textbook-information-semester-accordance>.

¹⁰⁰ Mikhail Zinshteyn, "How Can Wealthy Private College Better Serve Low-Income Students?," PBS, Jan. 24, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/can-wealthy-private-colleges-better-serve-low-income-students/>.

¹⁰¹ Linda C. Gallo and Karen A. Matthews, "Understanding the Association Between Socioeconomic Status and Physical Health: Do Negative Emotions Play Role?" *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 1 (2003): 10-51, <http://www.sci.sdsu.edu/lcgallo/gallopb.pdf>.

¹⁰² "Poverty," in "World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior," World Bank, 2015: 81.

College counselors as well as staff familiar with the struggles of low-income students can be helpful resources for students as they develop coping strategies.¹⁰³ Many students at selective colleges already utilize university counseling resources, but as low-income students are reluctant to ask for help anyway, they might be less likely to take advantage of such resources. Peer support groups and mentors are helpful for this aspect, as they can help to informally check in on students who are not adjusting well. Universities can also alleviate stress for low-income students by lowering the barriers to finding and accessing resources they do need, and providing financial assistance for as many necessary aspects of the college experience as possible.

Practical Suggestions

While providing sufficient financial aid for tuition, room, and board is important, this is not the only solution that colleges can offer low-income students, and as conventional wisdom would tell us, money cannot fix everything, especially related to social inclusion and opportunity. To jumpstart conversations about what practical actions Washington and Lee could take to better support low-income students, I present the following suggestions.

1. Rethink how and when financial aid is disbursed.

It makes a difference to students when money is available. For students receiving financial aid, all money is deposited as a lump sum at the beginning of each semester. To transfer money to a bank account via direct deposit or an in-person check pick-up, students must email the Business Office. However, there is currently no information available to students about when the Business Office has scheduled check runs, which prevents students from being able to plan when they want or need to withdraw their money. There have been a number of instances when students need money for bills or expenses sooner than they can get it from the school, most notably at the beginning of this school year,

¹⁰³ Joseph A. Lippincott and Neil German, "From Blue Collar to Ivory Tower: Counseling First-Generation, Working-Class Students," In *Special populations in College Counseling: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals*, ed. J. A. Lippincott and R. B. Lippincott, Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2007.

when students could first get access to their funds on September 20. Because this was three weeks after most students arrived back on campus, it caused unnecessary stress for low-income students needing access to their money in order to get back to campus, and it prevented students from being able to purchase textbooks or food except on campus.

An interesting study exploring a new system of financial aid disbursement called ‘Aid Like a Paycheck’ also holds some promise.¹⁰⁴ Instead of giving one lump sums of money, the new model would cover tuition, room, board, and other required student fees, but then the excess money would be routinely disbursed throughout the rest of the semester similar to a biweekly paycheck basis. Piloted at two universities, the model was designed to help students manage their funds better, to protect universities and students from the financial implications of students having to withdraw partway through a semester, and to incentivize continued student success.¹⁰⁵ While the final report on the program’s implementation is due for release next year, the questions this new model raises are still applicable to Washington and Lee in the present.

2. Reconsider what constitutes the “essential parts” of a Washington and Lee experience – and strive to equalize access to such aspects.

Every student should have equal opportunity for the same kind of Washington and Lee experience, regardless of socioeconomic background. This includes things like being able to attend interviews, academic conferences, study abroad programs, and social aspects such as Greek life and Fancy Dress. For example, the Student Recruiting Days organized by the Selective Liberal Arts Consortium are advertised and encouraged by the Career Center, but if students cannot afford to go to DC or New York, there is no fund set up to support them. Similarly, for conferences and competitions, departments do not always have the resources to sponsor students to attend – and unlike students with

¹⁰⁴ Evan Weissman and Jesse O’Connell, “Aid Like a Paycheck: Engaging with Policymakers and Practitioners to Evaluate and Improve Financial Aid,” *Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 2016. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED567201.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Michelle Ware, Evan Weissman, and Drew McDermott, "Aid Like a Paycheck: Incremental Aid to Promote Student Success. Policy Brief," *MDRC*, 2013, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED546639.pdf>.

more financial resources, low-income students may not be willing or able to make such sacrifices. For academic and professional-related expenses, as well as unexpected emergency expenses, the school should put money toward establishing new permanent grants.¹⁰⁶

Access to social components of Washington and Lee, like joining Greek life or attending Fancy Dress, should also be increased because the campus should not be a pay-to-play system; low-income students will almost always miss out. Fancy Dress won a student-nominated award this year for being the best student event, but many students concerned about the cost of a ticket did not go. In prior years, free tickets have been offered to QuestBridge Scholars and through the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, but this year free tickets were only given away through a social media contest. Financial support for these social aspects could come from the organizations' budgets, or they could come from alumni donations.¹⁰⁷

3. Create more platforms for low-income students to connect with others.

When students are engaged with their communities and feel like they have meaningful relationships with others, they are happier and more likely to succeed. More platforms for low-income students to connect with others would ideally include host families, a support group, and a new faculty mentor program. Setting up optional host families for low-income students would be similar to the current practice with international students, as many low-income students cannot go home for breaks and are sometimes navigating a similarly difficult transition to campus. A university-led support group for low-income and first-generation students would be beneficial as well, to help students build a community of peers, develop confidence in their identities, and cope with the challenges of being an invisible minority on campus. The Washington and Lee QuestBridge Chapter's Dessert and Discussion

¹⁰⁶ The current Essential Opportunities Grant is a great resource for students who get it, but information about the grant is not widely available. Also, unallowable expenses include graduate school admissions exams and visits, interview expenses, cell phones, automobiles, household furnishings, Greek fees, social event fees, and everyday apparel, all of which are arguably essential parts of many students' Washington and Lee experiences.

¹⁰⁷ After I published my Odyssey article in September, a number of Greek-affiliated alumni had said they would willingly contribute to a fund for students to rush if they wanted.

meetings were successful when they happened, but because they were left entirely to students to run, it is understandable why those group meetings sometimes did not happen.

Finally, a new faculty and staff mentor program could help to keep low-income students' aspirations and engagement high. While showing students that others have been in similar situations and can relate or want to be allies to them, a faculty mentor program would also build meaningful relationships between students and faculty that currently may only happen by chance. Faculty or staff mentors could be the initial advisor assigned to first-years, or an additional mentor figure on campus – and eventually a mentorship program could incorporate alumni as well.

4. Establish a dedicated space and coordinator for low-income students.

Institutions often demonstrate their commitments to programs and people through designated spaces. Washington and Lee University has various identity centers already established, such as Casa Hispánica, Global Service House, Hillel House, Hill House, John Chavis House, and the resources rooms in Commons for international, women's, and diversity and inclusion needs. However, nothing so far has been dedicated to low-income or first-generation students. Even on the Washington and Lee Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) website, there is only one brief mention of class as an identity, and only in the context of student-led efforts;¹⁰⁸ the ODI resource room webpage itself has no reference to class or first-generation status.¹⁰⁹

While 'student-led' efforts are helpful, they should not be the university's only method of supporting low-income students. A dedicated staff person could make a big difference in organizing efforts for low-income and first-generation students. The current Student Affairs staff is wonderful, but to serve a growing population with distinct needs and wants, it makes sense to hire someone who would work in a similar capacity to the LGBTQ or Hillel student coordinator. Having a staff person

¹⁰⁸ "Office of Diversity and Inclusion," Washington and Lee Website, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.wlu.edu/student-life/culture-and-diversity/office-of-diversity-and-inclusion>

¹⁰⁹ "ODI Resource Room," Washington and Lee Website, accessed April 10, 2017, <https://www.wlu.edu/student-life/culture-and-diversity/office-of-diversity-and-inclusion/multicultural-life/odi-resource-room>

enables more continuous support during the year but also over multiple years. The staff person would ideally lead the earlier mentioned support group, as a trained professional, and would be a point person for low-income and first-generation students to find resources they need.

Conclusion

As Washington and Lee University follows national admissions trends from the last decade, actively recruiting more first-generation and low-income students, presumably their efforts will become more successful and eventually the university will see higher enrollments of these students. Waiting until there are more students from underrepresented backgrounds to develop supportive programs for them discounts the importance of current students' experiences, and in effect only delays the inevitable because these students and the needs they have will not be going away any time soon. Better systems of support do not always or necessarily entail costly, complicated interventions or levying troublesome burdens on staff and faculty. At selective colleges and universities like Washington and Lee, large endowments and unrestricted funds already allow for supporting other initiatives and extras that could seem like too much to ask of academic institution if they did not already exist. Some improvements to address the issues low-income students face would benefit other students as well, both directly and indirectly, as proven by the creation of the Traveller airport shuttles this year.

Washington and Lee University is in the ideal position to begin evaluating and rethinking current university policy. The strategic plan, adopted in 2007, is now being replaced – while a new president took office in January 2017, not too long after the end of a record-breaking capital campaign that ended with \$542 million in 2015. By many people's judgment, campus climate has improved with regard to diversity. However, we do not have enough quantitative or qualitative data to really assess the experiences or outcomes of low-income students on our campus. Further study should seek to explore the degree to which low-income students are finding the campus welcoming and supportive, as well as the more specific ways in which they could be better supported.

Perhaps a first-step from here would be to start holding more campus-wide dialogues about the challenges and triumphs of low-income students on our campus. The majority of low-income students may seem well-adjusted to Washington and Lee, but personal experience and observations tell me that there are still needs that are not currently addressed. There are still low-income students who feel trapped here. There are still low-income students who feel that they don't belong. For those students, these conversations and institutional support improvements are crucial and should not be delayed. These students cannot wait.

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