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Legacy Student Development: The Costs and Benefits of Privilege

Jason A. Zelesky

Despite the recent movement within higher education to eliminate preferential admission based on race, gender, and socio-economic status, legacy students continue to be admitted at a higher rate than any other segment of the applicant pool, especially students of color. The debate over the continuation of this practice has college officials, incoming legacies, contributing alumni, and the concerned public arguing about the legitimacy of such an elite route of access. Often ignored in this process is the personal development of the legacy student who is tightly affixed between a rock (the alma mater) and a hard place (the pressure to follow in the familial footsteps). By admitting legacy students, colleges are lowering their admission standards and doing a disservice to the developmental needs of an at-risk student population. This paper examines the practice of legacy admission, the arguments for and against such a practice, and the eventual impact it has on the students who are admitted under this preferential stipulation.

“I’ve given my alma mater \$25,000 a year for the past decade . . . and I’ve been buying my 13 grandchildren Brown sweatshirts, baseball caps, and cutlery since they were old enough to crawl. Brown administrators have got to appreciate that.”-William Slunk, Brown University, Class of 1942

It is paradoxical to consider the United States as having an egalitarian “system” for distributing higher education when the distributive process itself is profoundly decentralized and uncoordinated. Selective admission and general admission criteria is an entirely subjective process, myopically focused on a predisposed set of “admittable” information, test scores, and qualitative equations for perceived success at that respective institution. With over 14 million students currently enrolled in American higher education, questions are perennially raised concerning who has access to the undergraduate arena and who is responsible (if anyone) to monitor the equity of college admission practices (Carlson, 1999, p. A32). Whether higher education is indeed a right or a privilege, one could argue that the admission’s selection process and the cultural myth of meritocracy are based on a system of economic trade-offs constructed in an effort to find a comfortable balance between equity and efficiency while maintaining the financial solvency of the institution. The developmental needs of incoming students are often ignored.

The Argument Against Legacy Admission

The current landscape of acceptable admission practice has recently undergone tremendous renovation. The policy of preferential admission for any affinity group, once considered a proactive method of “leveling the playing field” for students of color, low socio-economic background, etc., has become a scrutinized method of selection in light of recent challenges to affirmative action legislation. Affirmative action and race-based admission practices were ruled unconstitutional in 1996 when a federal appeals court overturned the Supreme Court’s 1978 decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, which “justified the use of racial preference in admission to achieve a diverse student body” (Jaschik & Lederman, 1996, p. A56). Recently, states like Florida and Massachusetts have eliminated racial preference in college admission while vowing to increase minority enrollment. The pendulum has swung back in a more conservative direction with little change expected following the presidential election of George W. Bush.

Admissions processes are moving toward a more “blind” selection process as it is no longer legal to consider an application based on racial classification (i.e. affirmative action, gender, or class). In an attempt to make the much maligned admission process more meritocratic, the Academy has made a philosophical decision, with some political prodding, to base admission decisions more on so called objective qualifications for admission than on financial need or personal characteristics. In an effort to become more color and need blind in their admission decisions, colleges have attempted to design an objective process using largely subjective information including standardized testing scores, class rank, and high school academic performance. Underpinning this egalitarian process is the myth that all prospective students are afforded the same opportunities with respect to their race, gender, and class. Such unfair practice ignores the overt cultural reality that such meritocracy does not exist in our society.

As colleges and universities begin to incorporate a more “blind” admission practice, it is interesting to witness one bastion of the preferential system still in place, relatively undisturbed by these recent controversies. Colleges and universities continue to admit legacy candidates at a higher rate than any other segment of the applicant pool. The hypocrisy of legacy admission in the face of national concern to eliminate preferential criteria based on race, class, and gender has many students, families, and legislators confused and angry. Elite institutions like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford admit legacy students at more than twice the rate of all other applicants (Lamb, 1993). Highly selective institutions with a highly selective admit rate (Harvard’s admission rate for Fall 2000 was 7%), contend that alumni legacies are often admitted at between 50-60% compared to the average rate of 7-10% (Gose, 1997, p. A49). Most importantly, the continued practice of legacy admission has proven to have a direct negative impact on the acceptance rate of students of color and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Legacy students do not, on average, “contribute to the racial or ethnic diversity on campus, nor do they necessarily bring any innate or special talents” (Lamb, 1993, p. 516). In other words, the continued practice of legacy admission coupled with the elimination of affirmative action based policies has led to even fewer opportunities for people of color, women, and the poor.

The Argument For Legacy Admission

In response to the criticism of legacy admission, colleges maintain that their financial solvency and survival is of primary importance. In other words, the decision to admit a student with strong alumni connections is one that benefits the financial stability of the entire institution and the services provided to all students. Admitting legacy students is seen as a necessary evil in the midst of tremendous fiscal shortfalls (Lenington, 1996). Colleges also argue that legacy admission is comparable to the continued practice of admitting recruited athletes, children of faculty and staff, and academically gifted students. In defense of legacy student admission, college officials argue that they receive a double-bonus: a talented student and a guaranteed gift. In 1998, Harvard received \$207,906,283 in alumni support. To date, Harvard is the most alumni-supported institution in the United States, followed by Cornell University (\$139,635,851), Princeton (\$131,132,251), and Stanford (\$117,644,347) (Carlson, 1999, p. A32). Following this argument, denying a legacy applicant would most likely sever the legacy bond between family and institution, eliminating what once was a solid and predictable source of revenue. With tuition costs rising and the price of a higher education so prohibitive, colleges argue that this preferential decision will keep costs down and student services maintained while improving the overall satisfaction of all matriculating students. In other words, the legacy student maintains a financial lineage that a college cannot afford to betray.

Legacy Students

According to *Webster’s Dictionary* (1965), a “legacy” is any “candidate” for membership in an organization who is given special status because he [sic] is related to a member” (p. 129). As applied to the arena of college admissions, the term “legacy” has evolved to refer to “sons and daughters of donating and/or influential alumni” (Lamb, 1993, p. 492). To many in the college and university environment, admitting a legacy is comparative to hitting the jackpot. Finally, critics of legacy preference often use the misnomer “affirmative action babies” when referring to this privileged and “spoiled” segment of incoming students (Lamb, 1993, p. 492).

Demographically, legacy students are almost always members of affluent, white, two-parent families who have been groomed to follow the legacy path since their earliest recollection. Additionally, legacy candidates for college admission are, on average, less intelligent (based on standardized test scores), less involved in extra-curricular or community service activities, and less positively recommended by guidance counselors and high school teachers (Lamb, 1993, p. 504). The only segment of an incoming class with “worse qualifications” (on average) is the recruited student-athletes who are being selected based on athletic rather than cognitive or social ability (Lamb, 1993, p. 504). Rejected or wait-listed legacy applicants are also subject to special treatment. Whereas a “normal” applicant would receive written notification of the admission decision, legacy students are often telephoned and informed why the decision was made and how that particular student can improve his/her future chances at admission. In many cases, a follow-up call to the alumni parent is also made to secure a positive and lasting connection. (Gose, 1997).

Indeed, legacies are “special” students who receive preferential and favored status in the college admission process, placing them in an interesting and precarious set of developmental challenges. While little research is available regarding the unique challenges related to working with this particular population of students, the

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need for student affairs professionals to understand these related issues is critical. Because legacy students are often viewed as “sacred cows” by the administration and as outsiders by fellow students, student affairs staff members may be called upon to mediate this impending developmental crisis. Legacy students have large shoes to fill, and their issues of privilege, status, and influence can have a lasting and negative impact on their college experiences and their personal development.

Legacy Student Development

Integrating the research of such prominent student development theorists as Arthur Chickering (1993), Janet Helms (1993), and Alexander Astin (1984), legacy students can be seen in at least three distinct categories each following a different proposed developmental schema: the willing legacy, the silent legacy, and the rebellious legacy. Membership in each category is, in itself, an indication of the maturation of the student and the stage of his/her personal development. Each category presents unique challenges and proposed recommendations for adequate support and/or intervention from student affairs professionals. It is also important to note that, as a student matriculates and develops, s/he may identify with any, all, or none of these three classifications.

The Willing Legacy

The willing legacy is a student who voluntarily accepts his/her status as a legacy candidate, embracing the perceived rank and privilege that accompanies such a decision. Whether this student feels academically inferior or not, s/he sees no reason not to be proud of the fact that it is her/his turn to carry the traditional academic torch. The willing legacy may not be cognitive of the legacy controversy, nor may s/he understand that the practice is related to privilege or class standing. Willing legacies accept their privileged membership as part of their accepted paradigm.

John Gardner's (1987) report on the status of admission, retention, and attrition in colleges and universities hypothesized that the willing legacy can be viewed in relation to Haller's (1982) Status Attainment Theory. Gardner states that there is a strong correlation between a student's aspirations of higher education and a parent's educational vitae. While Gardner is not focusing on the general decision to attend or not attend college, his argument can easily overlap the developmental issues of a willing legacy student. Haller's (1982) Status Attainment Theory predicts that a child is significantly influenced by the educational, professional, and personal decisions of his/her parents, especially if they yield positive results (i.e. financial stability, comfortable standard of living, and valuable material assets). Specifically, children are interested in attaining the same educational, occupational, and financial status as their parents. (Gardner, 1987). The voice of a willing legacy emerges when these attainments are frequently compared or credited to a parent's alma mater. A willing legacy is prepared to continue this educational lineage based on the perceived privileges that have defined her/his lifestyle and values.

While first-generation college students “lack the tacit knowledge about college life,” willing legacies may arrive with a tainted and ahistoric view of what to expect and what is expected of them (Kuh, 1999, p. 69). Willing legacies may have adopted the narrative of their preceding generations. Such a “new-expert” may arrive on campus only to realize that her/his surrogate expectations are not congruent with the present reality. Willing legacies are at risk of depression and disillusionment when their images of college life are deflated. Rather than living through the narratives of alumni, they are now in the position of creating their own version of reality. The pressure to survive and prosper can be daunting.

Following the “Pygmalion effect” or “self-fulfilling prophecy,” willing legacies may avoid all challenge and involvement, seeking only to rely on their privilege during moments of traditional developmental dissonance (Kuh, 1999, p. 70). Rather than face the developmental identity crisis, they may respond to the situation from a legacy or privileged perspective. For example, a willing (and public) legacy student who is unhappy with her/his roommate may avoid the developmental processes constructed by residence life (meet with the resident assistant, discuss the problems, mediate the conflict, etc.) and play the “legacy” card to achieve immediate action. Knowing this, student affairs professionals should learn to hold their ground and persist in the attempt to challenge legacy demands for service. While frustrating, the willing legacy must begin to face challenges as an individual before s/he can establish her/his identity in relation to self and not others (Chickering, 1993).

Finally, accepting privileged status may lead to significant academic and social challenges. Any student admitted with below average skills should be considered at risk in the classroom and in the campus community or residence halls. A willing legacy who is unable to perform adequately in the classroom may be vulnerable to acts of academic dishonesty, poor self-esteem, and states of depression related to poor performance. Willing legacies who are vocal about their family history can be subject to ridicule or suspicion by other students. Willing legacies may begin to reassess who they are in relation to their families in terms of their privilege and status: a necessary but emotional developmental process.

The pressure for willing legacies to succeed can come from multiple directions. Student affairs professionals should be prepared to challenge and support these students in the wake of their privilege and with the understanding that with increased self-awareness comes a need for affirmation, acceptance, and support (Chickering, 1993).

The Silent Legacy

Silent legacies can be seen as shying away from using their privilege to gain access to the familial alma mater. They are more interested in gaining acceptance based on their perceived merits, skills, and abilities. While Haller's (1982) Status Attainment Theory still holds some relevance, silent legacies are in a much different developmental place.

Crawling out from underneath the oppressive shadow of their parents, silent legacies appear to be grappling with Chickering's (1993) third vector, "Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence" (p. 117). Characterized by a "freedom from a continual and pressing need for reassurance, affection, or approval from others," these students may be just starting to develop their voice (Chickering, 1993, p. 117). Silent legacies wish to keep their admission privilege a secret while having a strong desire to earn that acceptance after-the-fact by succeeding in solving "problems in a self-directed," independent manner (Chickering, 1993, p. 117). For example, a silent legacy student may see her/his legacy status as a means to gain admission to an elite college or university as well as the commencement of a life independent of parental influence.

Silent legacies may be looking for "separation and individuation" (Chickering, 1993, p. 115). This is a tremendous developmental step for many students, and student affairs professionals should be prepared to address issues of separation anxiety, poor or under-developed self-esteem, and a reluctance to get involved. Suffering from a shift in their locus of control, these students may seek to gain control in unhealthy ways including the abuse of alcohol or other drugs or the start of an eating disorder, both manifestations of control and addiction. Additionally, silent legacies may enter college questioning the role of their parents as they become, according to Perry (1970), more "multiplicitic thinkers" (as cited in Chickering, 1992, p. 128). Those who were once idolized are falling from their pedestals. The metaphor of "the Fall," as detailed by Chickering & Reisser (1993), transforms the silent legacy from "innocent" to "orphan," or from autonomy toward interdependence (p. 129). This fall can be a difficult adjustment period for students, and student affairs professionals who advertise themselves as "willing to listen" may become the new mentor or surrogate parent for these students who are on a quest for voice, values, and identity. This stage of development is often characterized by family disputes, acting out behavior, or strategic challenges of the status quo or authority (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The temptation for student affairs professionals may be toward the "quick fix," but such a decision will result in increased dependence. The trick, according to Chickering & Reisser (1993), is to balance the challenge and support equation so that these silent legacies are able to "tell and retell their personal experiences in a way that overcomes denial . . . and begin to talk about taking responsibility for their own lives" (p. 129). Rather than fixing the problem, student affairs professionals should offer their ear, concern, and support by providing a venue for a voice to develop.

The Rebellious Legacy

The most at-risk legacy student may be the one who is vocally opposed to attending the alma mater of legacy lineage, and who, in one way or another, has expressed discontent and anger regarding the perceptions of control and power being wielded against them. Some rebellious legacies are not interested in that particular institution while others have no interest in pursuing the next level of education. Characterized by issues of denial from the family and the student, the rebellious legacy, if s/he arrives on campus, may be considered the most at risk and in need of support.

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Rebellious legacies are certainly in a more active stage of identity development as they are passionate and vocal about their wants and needs. Rebellious legacies may feel as if they and their aspirations do not matter or carry enough weight to be considered substantial by their parents. According to Schlossberg (1989), legacies may feel marginalized as they enter the college that was chosen for them; they have a voice, but no one is listening (as cited in Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 27). This concept of “mattering,” feeling that your opinions, thoughts, and desires, right or wrong, matter to someone else (p. 27). The rebellion of legacy status is most likely a manifestation of a life-long series of episodes when that student felt insignificant because of the power and privilege of his/her parents. Schlossberg (1989) might contend that these students lack “attention,” feelings of “importance,” and “ego extension,” the belief that someone else is proud of them (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 27). Student affairs staff can combat these issues by helping rebellious legacies see that they matter in the campus community.

Again, following Chickering & Reisser (1993), these students will need assistance in managing their tumultuous emotions. Legacy students, growing up in predominantly privileged households, may have been weaned on messages of “doing good,” “working hard,” “being perfect,” and “never losing control” (Chickering & Reisser 1993). Awareness that these messages are not necessarily valid may help a rebellious legacy begin to understand and manage the feelings of regret and dissonance. It is also important to note that some rebellious legacies need assistance on how to transfer or leave the institution. Working with these students to understand their family situation and how their legacy status may affect their emotions could be helpful in bringing that student to a heightened awareness of self.

General Legacy Student Development

In summation, certain theories or stages of development seem more applicable to a certain classification of legacy student. These legacy students need to learn that their privilege (class, race, and admission) has a direct effect on the pluralism of that respective college. In a study by the Department of Education of Harvard’s legacy admission practice, it was concluded that legacy admission negatively affects the amount of multicultural students in any given incoming class (Jaschik, 1992, p. A12). In other words, legacy students take spaces away from other qualified candidates. Legacy students must be made aware of their privilege and the institutional racism that may be the foundation of the preferential admission criteria that worked in their favor.

Finally, research shows that legacy students are often the least involved in extra-curricular activities prior to their admission to college. Astin (1984) defines involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (as cited in Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 26). In order to spark learning and development into a group of students who enter the university with lower academic proficiency and less outside involvements, it is essential that student affairs professionals inspire legacy students to involve themselves in their environments, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

Kuh (1999) reminds student affairs professionals that when we “expect more, we get more [from our students]” (p. 67). In other words, when we set the proverbial bar high, we promote the cultivation of quality students in a prosperous environment of continuous challenge and support intervention (Kuh, 1999). By admitting legacy students, we are lowering the standards and making exemptions to both our mission and our values. This will, undoubtedly, have an effect on our campus climate. As we attempt to shift the paradigm of legacy admission, those of us in student affairs must consider our developmental approach to these particular students. However, the economic and political reality of preferential legacy policies indicates a need for student affairs professionals to embrace and work with these particular students while offering them an environment of appropriate challenge and support. Legacy students need to know that they matter, regardless of how they gain entrance to higher education.

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