Letter to My State: A Proposal for a More Inclusive College Admissions Practice

Steve Zatarain

Vermont must consider legislation to address creating more post-secondary pathways for first-generation college students. There is a college attainment gap for first-generation and working-class Vermonters in comparison to their wealthier and continuing education peers. First-generation Vermonters who do successfully make it to college have higher completion rates in comparison to other Northeast states and often reinvest their education into the economy and labor market of Vermont. To redress the college attainment gap, the state should consider changing the practices of higher education institutions and imposing restrictions on admissions practices like Early Action and Early Decision, which benefit wealthier and continuing education students and families. One path is through passing legislation similar to Bill H.3760 (2023) in the Massachusetts legislature. This legislation would encourage curbing of Early Action and Early Decision practices through fees for engaging in those practices and reinvesting the money into resources that all Vermonters use and that disproportionately benefit low-income and first-generation college students.

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Dear Vermont,

The journey by low-income first-generation Vermont students to reach higher education and ultimately a path to serve their personal and community interests is fraught. Higher education institutions need to reform our practices and strategies for access and opportunity for our low-income first-generation students. By viewing higher education and therefore their admissions practices as sites for change, we can consider ways to increase post-secondary opportunities for poor, working-class, and first-generation college students.

Vermont, you know that changes to educational pathways in the state must change to expand opportunity pathways for post-secondary opportunities for students. The state has worked hard to transform barriers that students were finding in high schools through the creation of Act 77, creating the Flexible Pathway Initiative to postsecondary readiness, an infusion of funds to the Vermont State College System, and the ongoing support Vermont Student Assistant Corp (VSAC), the states college access organization. Despite this work, higher education universities are not shifting or altering themselves to open their gates to all students. I believe it is time to ask higher education institutions across Vermont to change and make themselves more accessible to all Vermonters, predominantly low-income and first-generation Vermonters. Other forms of college access reform have called for a complete overhaul of the college application system as a way to address opportunity hoarding from wealthy families through the creation of a national matching application process run by the federal government (Corbett, 2020). It is unclear if that extreme is the most appropriate step toward addressing college access inequality. A more modest step in this transformation would be legislation that reforms exclusionary admissions practices and develops transparency around the admissions process, which continues to leave behind low-income and first-generation students.

Vermont is developing a post-secondary climate of low degree attainment and continuing education. Recent skeptics of college reforms might argue that there is a growing interest in actively choosing not to pursue post-secondary learning opportunities and enter the workforce. Still, that idea is significantly contrasted with 91% of Vermonters who have hoped for a college education at one point in their high school career (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2021). Despite this interest in post-secondary opportunities, Vermont has the lowest college enrollment rates in the region (Great Schools Partnership, 2023). This raises the question of whether a lack of interest is really hiding a lack of opportunity and issues of access. What is of most concern for our state is that by the time high school students are seniors, they show a steep decline in aspiration to enroll in any education or a continued training program state-wide; the number is significantly lower for first-generation Vermonters (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2023b). Skepticism might sprout for students as the dubious admissions process becomes more salient with national headlines about Operation Varsity Blues, an overrepresentation of the wealthiest students at top colleges, and recent conversations about Legacy admissions (Arcidiacono et al., 2022; Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Chappell & Kennedy, 2019). Skepticism around the fairness of admissions only feeds the (mis)perception that higher education is only for the wealthy and socially connected. A depression among college-going graduates is concerning as it can result in income loss, tax revenue loss, and job loss (Aghion et al., 2009; Janzen et al., 2022; Schneider & Yin, 2011; Siegfried et al., 2007). Our state must clear the path to

post-secondary education opportunities for our state's economic health, to meet the college hopes of its students, and for the benefit of working-class students and families being left behind. One way to do so is by addressing policies of a broken college admissions system that underscores that college is for the elite and wealthy.

Inequalities in education already exist for working-class and first-generation Vermonters. Though working-class and first-generation identities are different and distinct, there is a significant overlap in these identities (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Nearly half of all graduating high school seniors in the class of 2021 were designated by the state as being economically disadvantaged–qualified for Free/Reduced Price Lunch (Great Schools Partnership, 2023). Vermont has the lowest graduation rate in the region for poor students (Great Schools Partnership, 2023). Economically disadvantaged students in Vermont struggle to make it to graduation, especially compared nationally and even regionally, with the lowest graduation rates for these students among the state's New England State peers (Great Schools Partnership, 2020). Economically disadvantaged students are three times more likely to drop out of high school than their wealthier peers and even two times more likely than other economically disadvantaged counterparts in other New England states (Great Schools Partnership, 2020). Mirroring those outcomes, working-class Vermonters are half as likely to enroll in college than their wealthier counterparts and are the least likely among other low-income students in the region (Great Schools Partnership, 2023).

As for First-Generation Vermonters, VSAC has highlighted in their most recently published study that 45% of graduating high schools will be the first in their family to graduate from college (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2023a). These students are more likely to enroll as part-time students and more likely to enroll in 2-year institutions, usually resulting in lower college completion rates (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2023a) First-generation college students often enroll in 2-year institutions and as part-time students for financial reasons (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This is a wise and well-calculated decision for these students, but the barriers that students are navigating while attending college in these ways often are insurmountable and lead to stoppage (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The national trends are reflected in Vermont, with First Generation Vermonters being more likely to leave post-secondary opportunities than second-generation peers at both 4-year and 2-year institutions and less likely to attain higher-paying jobs while navigating any debt incurred in the process (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2021).

Yet, a point of distinction to note is that once Vermonters are enrolled in four-year institutions, they have the highest college completion rate in the region. And despite the myriad of hurdles leading to higher high school dropout rates and low college enrollment rates for economically disadvantaged and First-Generation Vermonters, these groups of students have the highest college completion rate in the region (Great Schools Partnership, 2023). These low-income students are also more likely to enroll in Vermont institutions and remain engaged in the local community and economy (Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, 2023a). This demographic phenomenon is critical and something to further explore in order to amplify protective factors for our students. When poor and First-Generation Vermont students make it to college, they perform, and they remain Vermont-centered in their education and work. Yet, early admissions practices are mechanisms keeping them out.

Early Decision (ED) and Early Action (EA) at selective institutions are currently upholding admissions systems that actively disadvantage and place hurdles for first-generation and low-income students working hard to graduate and attain a further degree for themselves and their families. EA is an application round where institutions review applications and admit students early; ED is also an application round where institutions review and recruit students early, with the additional layer of students signing a contract committing to attend the institution they applied to. Students who apply early must have access to resources and support systems that help them gather application materials to meet the very early October and November deadlines. Additionally, students who utilize the binding ED application process by definition forgo comparing their financial aid packages with other institutions. Thus students who apply early to college are often wealthy applicants with access to privileged resources like high schools with small student-to-counselor ratios, schools with many rigorous AP and IB courses, and private college counselors (Park & Eagan, 2011). Wealthy students can capitalize on their privilege and are three times more likely to enroll in college than their working-class peers, even when they are equally as academically prepared (Reber & Smith, 2023). Early admissions also help enable and support legacy candidates–students whose parents attended the institution–leading to underqualified, well-resourced students being admitted to selective institutions (Hurwitz, 2011; Jensen & Wu, 2010). Yet, low-achieving and high-achieving low-income and first-generation students are under-enrolling in colleges nationwide (Hoxby & Turner, 2012). Colleges are culpable in enabling working-class students' under-enrolling through practices that benefit the wealthy and well-connected.

Institutions have often cited creating and implementing Early Decision and Early Action processes as mutually beneficial for students and institutions. Defenders of the practice have noted that early admissions processes can help attract top talent to less competitive institutions, prevent over-enrollment, and allow students to convey their enthusiasm for the institutions (Avery et al., 2009). Institutions reward this enthusiasm with up to 20% increase in admission probability for EA applicants and up to 37% increase for ED (Avery & Levin, 2010). Universities have also argued that enrolling wealthy students enables colleges to utilize funds gained from those families to recruit and retain first-generation and low-income students.

They have also attempted to stave off claims of inaccessibility by promising full tuition for students from families that make less than $100,000. Yet, the outcomes of these early admissions practices show that the more reliant an institution is on early admissions, the more likely it is to not enroll working-class students, first-generation students, and even students of color, especially for institutions that accept upwards of 38% of their incoming class via Early Decision. (Antecol & Kiholm Smith, 2012). Therefore their promises reach very few as their practices deter and or prevent the enrollment of poor and first-generation students. This outcome feels especially pertinent given the early admissions rates for places like Champlain College (67%), and University of Vermont (69%). ED/EA admissions also perpetuate privilege to these wealthy students by providing selective resources shown to improve college outcomes (Wofford, 2022). For example, at the University of Vermont, “Students who are admitted Early Decision will receive their first choice Residential Learning Community placement (University of Vermont Admissions, n.d.).” This is one-way institutions leave less desirable and fewer opportunities for students applying in the regular decision round to access institutional student

engagement opportunities, which has been shown to increase persistence. The real result of early admissions is structural benefits for the privileged and negative consequences for the working class.

Early Decision and Early Action practices within institutions of higher education are biased. They serve hyper-resourced and overly affluent students (Park & Eagan, 2011). These policies and practices at private and public institutions throughout Vermont prevent working-class students from accessing highly resourced and highly supportive institutions that could economically benefit these students and their families and improve their college completion outcomes (Brand & Xie, 2010; Hout, 2012). Change is needed to ensure institutions create pathways for working-class and first-generation students and families. They need to be held accountable for their biased preference for wealthy families through their ED and EA practices. I propose transparency around the beneficiaries of these admissions practices and the sanctioning of the anti-working class practices of Early Action and Early Decision.

My recommendation is that the State adopt a resolution similar to H.B. 3760 which is currently in the Massachusetts legislature (H.B. 3760, An Act to advance fairness, integrity, and excellence in higher education admissions, 2023). The bill targets changing college admissions policy by promoting transparent reporting and redistributing funds of institutions that continue to utilize early admissions practices. My recommendation is that Vermont moves forward with a similar resolution that will require institutions to report demographic data, including state residency, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, Pell Grant-qualified students, Perkins Loan-qualified students, legacy students, first-gen students, and students with an estimated family income of zero for each round of admissions. Radical transparency about who is being admitted in each round of the admissions process will generate accountability of admissions practices that benefit the wealthy and opportunities to address bias against low-income and first-generation college Vermont applicants.

Adopting a form of the Act to advance fairness for Vermont will also sanction the practice of Early Decision and Early Action for institutions within this state. Institutions that, as policy or practice, utilize early rounds of admissions must pay a public service fee. The associated fee ideally chills the Vermont admissions landscape's use of Early Decision and Early Action practices. This fine will be proportional to the endowment per student of each institution, and I recommend the borrowing of calculations and fees borrowed from Bill H.3760 (2023) from the Massachusetts legislature:

1. *0.01 per cent of its endowment for any offending higher education institution with an endowment per student of less than $50,000, as reported in the higher education institution's most recent annual report;*
2. *0.05 per cent of its endowment for any offending higher education institution with an endowment per student of greater than $50,000 but less than $500,000, as reported in the higher education institution's most recent annual report;*
3. *0.1 per cent of its endowment for any offending higher education institution with an endowment per student of greater than $500,000 but less than $1,000,000, as reported in the higher education institution's most recent annual report;*
4. *0.15 per cent of its endowment for any offending higher education institution with an endowment per student of greater than $1,000,000 but less than $2,000,000, as reported in the higher education institution's most recent annual report;*

5. *0.2 per cent of endowment for any offending higher education institution with an endowment per student of greater than $2,000,000, as reported in the higher education institution's most recent annual report.*

The fee paid by these institutions will then be put into a shared pool of funds that will be used to support educational resources for post-secondary pathways–including supporting high school college access programs, community colleges, vocational schools, and continued expansion of the Flexible Pathways Initiatives from Act 77, ultimately work towards redistribution of resources. In unrelated but serendipitous timing, the state congress has considered recent legislation Bill H.630. This bill is designated with the creation of "Boards of Cooperative Education Services," which would provide shared educational resources regionally and statewide and might be the best vehicle to redistribute these funds paid by institutions. The board would take funds from institutions that continue practices that benefit the wealthy and place them back into educational resources that all Vermonters are using like high schools, community colleges, and vocational schools–which are disproportionately used by first-generation and low-income students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Students attending community college and vocational programs like those at Vermont Technical College are more likely to reinvest their education into our local economy working in some of our most prevalent sectors (Vermont Technical College, n.d.). This model is both a financial carrot and a stick to early admissions and will hopefully right end the path to post-secondary opportunities by creating accountability and building an incentive structure for higher education institutions to change their practices to be friendly to working-class Vermonters.

Passing legislation to make post-secondary opportunities more accessible for low-income and first-generation Vermonters is within reach. Class differences remain in the fabric of our K-12 schools and institutions of higher education across the state. One way we can start untangling the effects of class differences is by transforming the system barriers colleges have put up through their early admissions practices that benefit the wealthy. Deciphering and democratizing information about the beneficiaries of the applicants who receive admissions to institutions disaggregated by application rounds will build accountability of colleges that are boosting applications of the overly privileged. Sanctioning institutions for the use of early admissions will force universities, especially the wealthiest, to change their approach to who they are letting into their highly resourced campuses. Service funds paid by colleges that continue to opt into the early admissions practices will directly benefit our public schools and vocational and community colleges that low-income and first-generation college students primarily use. Ultimately, these changes to higher education institutions in the state will dispel narratives around the usefulness of post-secondary opportunities and create a way forward to an economic and educational boom for the state.

Sincerely,

An Educator

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