

CHAPTER 15

At Many Colleges, the Rich Kids Get Affirmative Action

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Despite her boarding-school education and a personal tutor, Maude Bunn's SAT scores weren't high enough for a typical student to earn admission to Duke University.

But Ms. Bunn had something else going for her—coffeemakers. Her Bunn forebears built a fortune on them and, with Duke hoping to woo her wealthy parents as donors, she was admitted.

Afterward, her parents promptly became co-chairmen of a Duke fund-raising effort aimed at other Duke parents. "My child was given a gift, she got in, and now I'm giving back," says Maude's mother, Cissy Bunn, who declines to say how much the family has contributed to the university.

Most universities acknowledge favoring children of alumni who support their alma mater. But to attract prospective donors, colleges are also bending admissions standards to make space for children from rich or influential families that lack long-standing ties to the institutions. Through referrals and word-of-mouth, schools identify applicants from well-to-do families. Then, as soon as these students enroll, universities start soliciting gifts from their parents.

Duke says it has never traded an admission for a donation. "There's no quid pro quo, no bargains have been struck," says Peter Vaughn, director of development communications. While it won't comment on individual cases, the university notes that financial gifts from parents are used to update facilities and provide financial aid, among other things.

The formal practice of giving preference to students whose parents are wealthy—sometimes called "development admits"—has implications for the legal challenge to affirmative action, which the U.S. Supreme Court will hear April 1 (2003). Special admissions treatment for the affluent has racial overtones, at least indirectly. Reflecting the distribution of wealth in America, the vast majority of

major donors to higher education are white. Defenders of minority preference say such advantages for white applicants are precisely why affirmative action is still needed.

Top schools ranging from Stanford University to Emory University say they occasionally consider parental wealth in admission decisions. Other elite schools, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, say parental means don't influence them. "I understand why universities leverage parent contacts to enrich themselves," says Marilee Jones, dean of admissions at MIT. "If somebody's offering them a check, why not take it? But I honestly think it's out of control."

While children of the wealthy have long had advantages getting into colleges, a look at how "development" admissions works at Duke shows how institutionalized the process has become at some major universities.

Under-endowed compared with rivals such as Harvard, Princeton and Stanford, Duke has been particularly aggressive in snaring donors through admissions breaks. Widely considered one of the nation's top ten universities, Duke accepts 23% of its applicants and turns down more than 600 high-school valedictorians a year. Three-fourths of its students score above 1320 out of a perfect 1600 on the SATs.

Yet in recent years, Duke says it has relaxed these standards to admit 100 to 125 students annually as a result of family wealth or connections, up from about 20 a decade ago. These students aren't alumni children and were tentatively rejected or wait-listed, in the regular admissions review. More than half of them enroll, constituting an estimated 3% to 5% of Duke's student body of 6,200.

The strategy appears to be paying off. For the last six years, Duke says it has led all universities nationwide in unrestricted gifts to its annual fund from non-alumni parents: about \$3.1 million in 2001–2002. A university fund-raising campaign recently met its \$2 billion goal. While 35% of alumni donate to Duke, 52% of parents of last year's freshman class contributed to the university—besides paying \$35,000 in tuition and room and board.

Students admitted for development reasons graduate at a higher rate than the overall student body, Duke says, although their grades are slightly lower. These applicants are held to the same lesser standard as some top athletes; not whether they can excel, but whether they can graduate. "There's never been a case where I think the student can't be successful at Duke, and the student is admitted," says admissions director Christoph Gutentag.

Caroline Diemar, a Duke senior, says she favors maintaining minority preference for college admissions because she knows from experience that well-connected white students get a boost too. The daughter of an investment banker, she applied early to Duke despite an 1190 SAT score. Her candidacy was deferred to the spring.

She then buttressed her application with recommendations from two family friends who were Duke donors, and she was accepted. "I needed something to make me stand out," says Ms. Diemar, a sociology major with a 3.2 grade point average, below the 3.4 average of the senior class. "Everybody at Duke has something that got them in." The lesson she learned: "Networking is how you go about everything."

After she enrolled, Duke recruited Ms. Diemar's parents to serve as co-chairmen of a fund-raising effort. Her father, Robert Diemar, declined to say how much he

has given to Duke. "We support all of our five children's schools," said Mr. Diennat, a Princeton alumnus. He said Duke accepted his daughter on merit.

The practice of giving preference to the children of potential donors has caused fissures on Duke's campus, with some worrying that it dilutes the student body's intellectual vitality and undermines racial and economic diversity. In November 2000, a report to the trustees by a university committee on admissions called for a one-third cut in applicants accepted for development reasons. Mr. Guttentag says he plans to reduce such admissions to about 65 this year to achieve "greater flexibility" in shaping next fall's freshman class.

Duke President Nannet O. Keohane thinks the Supreme Court should uphold affirmative action because preferences for children of potential donors is "disproportionately favorable to white students. . . . The two are definitely linked, and it seems odd to me to allow one sort of preference, but not the other."

The University of Michigan, defendant in the affirmative action case before the Supreme Court, wants to continue to allow preferential treatment for minorities. It also gives preferential admissions treatment to children of potential donors—but only if they're white or Asian.

DISCRETIONARY POINTS

Under the 150-point "Selection Index," Michigan uses for undergraduate admissions, a review committee may award 20 "discretionary" points to children of donors, legislators, faculty members and other key supporters. Minorities underrepresented in higher education—Hispanics, African-Americans and Native Americans—qualify for an automatic 20 points, but they are ineligible for the discretionary points. The university says less than 1% of admitted students receive this edge.

The late Terry Sanford, Duke president from 1969 to 1985, practiced donor preference on a large scale. Mr. Sanford, a gregarious former North Carolina governor, used his wide circle of contacts in business, politics and the media to elevate Duke from a regional to a national university. According to Keith Brodie, Duke's president emeritus, Mr. Sanford would personally meet each year with the admissions and development directors to ensure special attention for 200 of these friends' children applying to Duke. More than 100 would ultimately enroll.

As president from 1985 to 1993, Dr. Brodie says, he removed himself from the admissions process, resisted lobbying by some trustees, and trimmed the number of underqualified students admitted due to donor preference to 20 a year. "A Duke education is too valuable an asset to squander," says Dr. Brodie, a professor of psychiatry, who was criticized as president for a lack of fund-raising zeal. "University presidents are under greater pressure than ever to raise money," he adds. "I suspect many of them have turned to admissions to help that process."

Harold Wingood, who was senior associate director of admissions under Dr. Brodie, recalls that 30 to 40 students per year were upgraded from "rejected" to "wait-list," or from "wait-list" to "admit" due to their family ties. "We'd take students in some

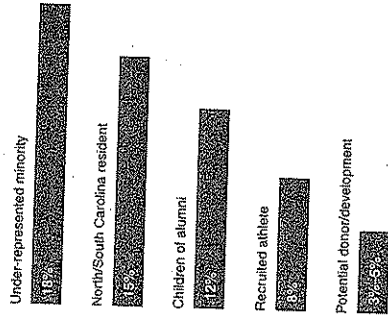


FIGURE 15.1 Study Break: Proportion of the 1,654 Current Duke University Freshmen Who Qualified for Various Admission Preferences

Note: Some students may have qualified for more than one preference, or would have qualified for admission on their academic records regardless of preference.

Source: Duke admissions office.

cases with SAT scores 100 points below the mean, or just outside the top 15% of their class," says Mr. Wingood, now dean of admissions at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. "They weren't slugs, but they weren't strong enough to get in on their own."

The numbers have increased under Ms. Keohane, Duke's current president. Duke says it admitted about 125 non-alumni children in 1998, and again in 1999, who had been tentatively rejected or wait-listed prior to considering family connections. It accepted 99 such students in 2000. Similar data aren't available for 2001 or 2002, the school says.

Ms. Keohane says she didn't intentionally increase the number of wealthy applicants given a leg up. She says "it is possible that the numbers drifted upward" during the recent \$2 billion-fund-raising campaign because "more people in development expressed interest in candidates. But this was certainly not a policy directive, or even a conscious choice."

The system at Duke works this way: Through its own network and names supplied by trustees, alumni donors and others, the development office identifies about 500 likely applicants with rich or powerful parents who are not alumni. (Children of major alumni donors are given similar preference in a separate process.) It cultivates them with campus tours and basic admissions advice, for instance, applying early increases their chances. It also relays the names to the admissions office, which returns word if any of the students forget to apply—so development can remind them.

The development office then winnows the initial 500 into at least 160 high-priority applicants. Although these names are flagged in the admissions-office computer, admissions readers evaluate them on merit, without regard to family means. About 30 to 40 are accepted, the others tentatively rejected or wait-listed. During an all-day meeting in March, Mr. Guttenberg and John Piva Jr., senior vice president for development, debate these 120 cases, weighing their family's likely contribution against their academic shortcomings.

In her 2001 book, "Admissions Confidential," former Duke admissions officer Rachel Toor recalled that most admissions officers "hated to see these kids get in" because they were "the weakest part of our applicant pool." Nevertheless, most of the 120 students are admitted.

Once these children of privilege enroll, the development office enlists their parents as donors and fund raisers. According to Dr. Brodie, Duke's parent program originated as a forum for parent concerns about safety issues, but it has evolved into a fund-raising vehicle.

A committee of more than 200 non-alumni parents provides its volunteer army for the four classes currently at Duke. Committee members usually give at least \$1,000 to Duke, and the eight co-chairmen and the national chairman much more—including at least two seven-figure gifts endowing faculty chairs.

Membership in the parents' committee is by invitation only and is overwhelmingly white. Lately, one affluent Chicago suburb—Lake Forest—has dominated its higher echelons. Lake Forest luminaries on the committee have included department-store heir Marshall Field V, who has given at least \$100,000 to Duke; Paul Clark, chief executive of Icos Corp., a biotech firm; Robert DePre, chairman of corn-meal maker House-Autry Mills Inc.; and investment banker Willard Bunn III, Mande's father.

The Lake Forest couples are social friends, serve on many of the same Chicago-area boards and several sent their children to the same private elementary school, Lake Forest Country Day. They write recommendations to Duke for each other's children.

'PRETTY INTIMATE GROUP'

Susan DePre, Robert's wife, describes the Duke parents committee as a "pretty intimate group" but not "clubby." She declined to say how much she and her husband

have contributed to Duke, but says they solicited at least one six-figure gift from a parent-committee member.

Mande Bunn, whose family lives in Lake Forest, attended an elite boarding school in Lawrenceville, N.J., where the Bunn library opened in 1996. She says other Lake Forest parents recommended her to Duke.

Cissy Bunn acknowledges her daughter didn't fit the academic profile of a star student. "She's bright, she had good grades, but she doesn't meet the super-elite," Mrs. Bunn says. "Did my normal child take the place of somebody who could really make a difference in the world? Sure, yes, to an extent. But there are so many things you can lose sleep over. I'm happy for me and my child."

Mande Bunn says she initially felt very awkward at Duke because her admission "wasn't necessarily on my own merits." But these days, the sophomore says she is thriving. "The more time I've spent here, I feel more and more confident—they didn't have to take me if they didn't think I was equal to all the other students they are admitting," she says. "I'm doing just as well as everybody I know if not better. She is studying art history and wants a career in fashion."

Now her younger sister Meg, a high-school senior, is applying to Duke. Mande says the family likes Meg's chances. "The people my mother works with for fund raising told her, 'It's really hard to get the first child in,'" she says. "After that, sisters and brothers are easier." Duke says it, like many universities, gives some preference to siblings.

Mrs. Bunn says she's not twisting anyone's arm. "I told them, 'If she's qualified at all, that would be lovely,'" she says. "If she gets in, I'd be happy to stay on the parents' committee."

As college admission becomes increasingly competitive, parents try to help their children's chances in any way they can. Duke accepted Jane Hetherington in 2000, despite SAT scores in the mid-1200s and what she calls "average" grades in high school. She attributes her acceptance to a "wonderful recommendation" by Norman Christensen Jr., then dean of Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, a graduate program. She got the recommendation after one meeting with him.

At the time, her father, John Hetherington, was vice president of Westrac Corp., a paper-products firm that had donated to the school, sponsored research there and hired some of its graduates. Mr. Hetherington asked a family friend on the school's advisory board to have the dean interview Ms. Hetherington.

Mr. Christensen, a Duke professor, says he was impressed by Ms. Hetherington's devotion to environmental studies. "The student's father later reciprocated by arranging a meeting between the school's new dean and Westrac's chief executive officer, hoping the company would increase support for the school. Nothing came of it," says Mr. Hetherington. (Westrac merged with Mead Corp. last year.)

"I don't feel we benefited from anything you would describe as the traditional white power structure network," says Mr. Hetherington, who is now a Republican state representative in Connecticut and favors a "sunset law" for affirmative action. He doesn't think his position affected his daughter's acceptance into college. "It worked out for some reason," he says. "In all candor, we got lucky."

