Making cents of it: How the focus on financial aid by selective universities may not be enough to attract more low-income, high-achieving students.

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ABSTRACT

Most low-income, high-achieving students in the United States neither attend nor apply to selective universities despite research that shows that they are just as likely as their high-income peers to succeed if they do apply to those schools. Despite the fact that many universities have begun offering substantial financial aid packages that would often make it cheaper to attend a selective private university than a state school, low-income, high-achievers tend not to apply to selective universities. Researchers have carried out many quantitative studies testing possible variables that could influence these students’ college application decisions. However, there has been a lack of qualitative research investigating low-income, high-achieving students’ college application decisions. Therefore, using Hossler and Gallagher’s model of college choice as a conceptual framework, this study used qualitative, phenomenological methods to interview 10 low-income, high-achieving students at selective universities to understand the variables that influenced their decisions to apply to selective universities, as well as their perception of the steps that selective universities took to recruit them. Results from the study suggest that many variables influence these students’ college application decisions, including university reputation, personal connections to a university, and standardized test scores. However, students felt that selective universities did not actively try to recruit them in a personal manner, relying instead on mass mailings and high school visits from university representatives.