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Justice Talking Radio Transcript

College Admissions: A Game of Privilege?—Air Date: 11/19/07

The college admissions process has changed significantly in recent years, particularly for students seeking to get into the nation's most elite universities. Should these schools' admissions policies favor athletes and children of alumni? Should low-income and minority students be a priority? Or should top schools only enroll the smartest and most academically accomplished? We also talk about the obstacles and misconceptions facing students who attend community college. Tune in to this edition of Justice Talking as we ask how money and privilege affect the college admissions process and whether reforms are necessary.

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MARGOT ADLER: From NPR, this is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. On today's show, the narrowing path to higher education: Who is making it on to campus and at what price?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The fact is that it's really difficult to get into college, to, you know, apply to college. And it's a long process to do that, it was kind of like, you know, I could attempt. You know, I want to do it but is it actually going to get done was my problem.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Students with cash and connections bump other applicants aside. You know, except at the very top, where you have your walk-on-water applicants, colleges are making very subjective decisions and looking out for their own self-interests.

MARGOT ADLER: The changing profile of America's campuses: coming up.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. I'm Margot Adler. Going to college isn't what it used to be. Enrollment is up steadily year after year, and so is the cost of tuition. Financial aid has changed, too.

There's a lot less of it available for people who don't have much money. At bookstores around the country, whole sections are devoted to guides promising help navigating the mysterious world of college admissions. Other titles on the shelf offer stinging criticism of the policies behind those admissions.

Today on Justice Talking: who's getting into college and what's changing the face of today's student body. High school graduates now anxiously seek entrance to college with an ever larger pool of applicants looking for a spot in a freshman class. More than 17 million people are enrolled in higher education programs in America. That's a growth rate of 21 percent over the last decade. Joshua Adams wants to be one of them.

JOSHUA ADAMS: My name is Joshua Adams. I'm 17 years old. I go to City-As-High-School and I live in the Bronx.

MARGOT ADLER: But it won't be easy for Adams. At 17, he's estranged from his family. Though he lives with his aunt, he's on his own financially. To make his dream of college a reality he has sought the help of Paul Griffin.

PAUL GRIFFIN: We have to look at--

JOSHUA ADAMS: Uh hmm.

PAUL GRIFFIN: --what it's going to require of us to get these filled out.

MARGOT ADLER: Griffin is the founder of a group called City at Peace, which gets at-risk youth involved in the performing arts. In recent years Griffin finds that he's often helping these young people get through the perplexing details of applying to college. On this day Griffin and Adams are looking at financial aid forms online.

PAUL GRIFFIN: Deadlines. We're going to look at deadlines first.

JOSHUA ADAMS: I do think it's really extra difficult for me, you know, versus people who are, who are privileged, you know, who get, you know, the person to sit down with them ahead of time, you know, to sit down and talk about college and who have the money to just, you know, go to any college that they feel like. It's really difficult, you know, for me to, you know, just-- it's just difficult.

PAUL GRIFFIN: Yes. You have to sign the application and then pay them to look at it.

JOSHUA ADAMS: Yeah. I don't understand. But--

PAUL GRIFFIN: You don't what?

JOSHUA ADAMS: No, it just doesn't make sense to me why you have to pay them to like to look at--

PAUL GRIFFIN: To let you in so you can pay them more money?

JOSHUA ADAMS: Yeah. It doesn't make sense.

PAUL GRIFFIN: It's college.

JOSHUA ADAMS: Um, I decided that I want to go to college like a long time ago actually. Like, going to college was something that I've always kind of wanted to do but I didn't really think that I would be able to do it. The fact is that it's really difficult to get into college, to, you know, apply to college. And it's a long process to do that, it was kind of like, you know, I could attempt. You know, I want to do it but is it actually going to get done was my problem.

PAUL GRIFFIN: What schools are we aiming for right now? Did we say?

JOSHUA ADAMS: Uh, yeah, the North Carolina School of the Arts, and, like, Juilliard.

PAUL GRIFFIN: And did we say--

JOSHUA ADAMS: And the Tisch Program.

PAUL GRIFFIN: No, no, no, we talked about SUNY, SUNY Purchase, right?

JOSHUA ADAMS: Oh yeah, yeah.

PAUL GRIFFIN: And then Harvard Law School, yes?

JOSHUA ADAMS: spffff [LAUGHS]

PAUL GRIFFIN: Let me see, uh, da, da-da, da-da [IN SING-SONG VOICE]. Where is it? It's amazing to me. Every time we go to one of these websites we have trouble finding the admissions information, right? And every time--it amazes me that this process is so difficult given that so many people are going through it.

JOSHUA ADAMS: I really want to go off to college. Like I just, I think it's a time in my life for--like right now I just have to be kind of independent, you know, on my own, because I know no one is going to live for me. You know, I'm going to basically have to fend for myself. And I think it should basically start now. So I'm ready to go to college. It's just the fact that, will I get there? I don't know. Hopefully.

MARGOT ADLER: Adams is African-American and low-income. He's more likely to go to college than someone that fit that description a generation ago. The U.S. Department of Education's statistics show that minority enrollment has doubled to 30 percent of college students. And other research shows that low-income students have increased their enrollment rates too.

But critics say those numbers mask a disturbing trend. The nation's top schools, public and private, have an increasingly wealthy student body. Peter Schmidt is a senior writer at The Chronicle of Higher Education. He's also the author of a new book, "Color and Money: How Rich White Kids Are Winning the War Over College Affirmative Action." Schmidt says only 10 percent of the students on these campuses come from the bottom half of the economic ladder.

PETER SCHMIDT: Students with cash and connections bump other applicants aside. You know, except at the very top, where you have your walk-on-water applicants, colleges are making very subjective decisions and looking out for their own self-interests in terms of who they admit.

MARGOT ADLER: So who's getting squeezed out?

PETER SCHMIDT: The main group being squeezed out is actually the middle class at this point, uh, working class and lower-income students as well. But when you get into low-income populations, you know, you don't really have a lot of students who meet the academic profile of coming anywhere near qualifying for admissions to these institutions.

MARGOT ADLER: Because of their grades and SAT scores?

PETER SCHMIDT: Yes, because of disparities in K-12 education. Achievement is very closely tied to class. Uh, race in itself plays a role as well. You just really don't have that large a potential applicant pool among the very low-income kids. That said, colleges do make some effort to bring in the poorest of the poor. Now at the other end of the spectrum students from the wealthiest families out there, have been growing in their representation at these selective colleges and have been squeezing the middle class out over time. A child of middle-class teachers, or white-collar workers, or what-have-you, has less chance of getting into a selective college now than was the case about 40 years ago.

MARGOT ADLER: And why is that student profile at elite colleges becoming richer and whiter? What, what is accounting for this kind of a trend?

PETER SCHMIDT: One is just a cost issue. Tuition has risen faster than inflation for decades. The share of federal dollars that's awarded based on need in the form of need-based grants has shrunk over time.

MARGOT ADLER: Let's look specifically at different forms of financial aid. First of all, what happened to the Pell Grant? It used to provide 40 percent of college tuition for low income students in the '70s. I've heard that that's now down to 15 percent.

PETER SCHMIDT: The Pell Grant has failed to keep pace with rising tuition costs and other rising costs associated with going to college. To some degree that's a reflection of public attitudes. Back in the '60s a majority of Americans thought that higher education is a cost that should be borne by the government primarily. At this point about two-thirds of Americans think that the costs of higher education should fall on students and their families primarily. And, you know, the Pell Grant reflects that. The good news, I guess, is that the Pell Grant actually has

been increased in the current year for the first time in a long time. It's gone from about \$4,050 to about \$4,300.

MARGOT ADLER: Not a lot.

PETER SCHMIDT: Not a lot. It's not going to begin to cover the costs of a year in college. Congress has made plans to increase it to \$5,400 over about the next five years, but whether it sticks to that plan or not, only time is going to tell.

MARGOT ADLER: Some have said that we are living in a new gilded age and the argument goes that there's this huge and growing moneyed aristocracy. They want access to power and privilege. And in our society one of the ways you get power and privilege is going to the most elite universities. So is that driving some of what's going on here?

PETER SCHMIDT: Oh absolutely. It's a natural human instinct for parents to want the best for their children. And when we talk about race and society for discrimination we often talk about ceilings, use the term "glass ceiling." One of the things I talk about in my book is floors that people put under their kids. You know, social mobility sounds like a great idea when we're talking about low-income people rising above their circumstances.

But there's a flipside to that which is the children of wealthy people falling. And wealthy people don't want to see that happen. They don't want to see their children making less money than they did or having less rewarding careers. So they constantly take steps to prop their children up. They get them tutoring. They get them enrolled at SAT test-preparation courses. And, you know, if they can somehow grease the skids for their children to get into top colleges, they'll do that.

MARGOT ADLER: Even if it comes at somebody else's expense?

PETER SCHMIDT: Absolutely.

MARGOT ADLER: And it's interesting, because when you meet many--many people now, their kids could not even get into the colleges that they got into.

PETER SCHMIDT: Well, college admission criteria have risen over time and it's become a lot more competitive.

MARGOT ADLER: You've covered higher education for a long time. In recent years we've had all these books and I've read a lot of them: "The Price of Admission," "The Chosen," your book. The list goes on and on. Do these books have an impact? You know, how do institutions respond to all this criticism about their student enrollment policies?

PETER SCHMIDT: One of the reasons I wrote my book for a general audience is that I really wanted to democratize the debate here and have parents throughout the socio-economic spectrum thinking about these issues. Because if you leave the question of who gets into the elite in the country up to the elite itself the elite will look after itself. They make sure their own children are

going to get in, you know. A classic example is that colleges that--the children of administrators and faculty members have a large degree of preference in applying to the institutions where their parents work. Colleges insist they have to do these things, they have to favor people with cash and connections for the sake of their own bottom line. And the context of the affirmative action debate, many people, especially when the University of Michigan cases were being fought before the Supreme Court in 2003, don't want the issue of class in class-based affirmative action to come up. They really don't want the courts to think that there is an alternative to affirmative action out there.

MARGOT ADLER: Peter Schmidt is a senior writer at The Chronicle of Higher Education. He is also the author of the new book "Color and Money: How Rich White Kids Are Winning the War Over College Affirmative Action." Thank you so much for coming on our show.

PETER SCHMIDT: Thank you.

MARGOT ADLER: Coming up on Justice Talking: One campus takes aim at the debt load so many students carry to pay tuition. And a debate: Are the public universities neglecting a duty to provide access to higher education for rich and poor alike?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: America's public colleges and universities aren't serving as engines of social mobility. Instead they're actually reinforcing the inequality that we see outside of colleges and universities.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Universities ought to be, and many frankly are, meritocracies. Who can do the best, who is best prepared, who can get the best grades, test scores, ought to get those opportunities.

MARGOT ADLER: You can weigh in with your opinion at justicetalking.org. Stay with us.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, the public radio show about law and American life. I'm Margot Adler. As colleges come under increasing criticism for exclusive admissions policies, administrators at one prestigious campus are going to dip into their endowment to help bring in more low-income students. Amherst College in Massachusetts is one of the most selective schools in the country and it strives to be among the most diverse. To attract students from modest economic backgrounds, Amherst has done away with all student loans. Amy Mayer reports.

AMY MAYER: After classes on a Friday afternoon the Keefe Campus Center buzzes with activity. Students shoot pool and sophomore Yasmine Navarro distributes packages. Navarro's from Houston. She says she has great financial aid, no loans, thanks to a policy Amherst put into practice for low-income students eight years ago. Navarro says being at Amherst has worked out

well for her. She doesn't feel stigmatized for getting the help. From the beginning, she says, the college has helped all students respect each other's backgrounds.

YASMINE NAVARRO: They had a good long orientation week. There were no visible differences between, you know, students from any different part of the country, any part of the world. So it was a good process, good mixing.

AMY MAYER: But other students say there is still class tension on campus. Emmanuel Costash, a junior from Oregon, remembers his orientation as a sad time.

EMMANUEL COSTASH: Initially I was--I felt alone, but I've also felt a little bit intimidated by all the privilege that is around.

AMY MAYER: Even though more than half the students here get some financial aid, Costash says he's heard fellow students complain about Amherst giving money to people like him.

EMMANUEL COSTASH: There are some people who don't, who aren't really fans of the financial aid system in general, some of the more conservative people on campus. But they tend to--they can sometimes be a little bit harsh in their words and not really know who they're talking to and say something about financial aid to someone who is on financial aid. It can be a little bit hurtful.

AMY MAYER: Ironically, he says, less expensive state schools were out of reach for him. Amherst had the money to offer him a package he could afford and the education that came with it. Generous alumni coupled with shrewd investing have put a \$1.7 billion endowment at the school's disposal. Leveraging that meant the school could provide all students with loan-free aid. College president Tony Marx is emphatic that Amherst trains future leaders and to lead in this diverse and increasingly divided society, he says, Amherst graduates must come from every walk of life.

TONY MARX: If we're going to do our job we have to have the best students. We cannot be not seeing the best students from three-quarters of the population. Then we are not getting the best students by definition.

AMY MAYER: Over the past several decades, he says, that's exactly what had happened.

TONY MARX: We had become wildly disproportionately populated by students from the top quintile, the top 20 percent, of the population.

AMY MAYER: To combat that, in 1999 Amherst began the no-loan financial aid program for the lowest-income students. Now more than one-fifth of students fall into that category. But Marx says many middle-class students shied away from Amherst because the \$45,000-a-year sticker price meant shouldering hefty debt. Sophomore Jessie Jockonin from North Carolina took on that debt but says now that the total will be less than she anticipated, she doesn't feel anxious to find a high paying job. Public service is an option.

JESSIE JOCKONIN: I'm considering law school, but, I mean, I've always had in the back of my mind teaching and nursing. So I know whatever I choose that I'll have the freedom to not really worry about four years of loans.

AMY MAYER: The Amherst campus itself, with white-columned buildings and top notch museums, oozes with the privilege that history and money have afforded it. But President Marx says as students learn from each other he sees gradual changes that suggest they realize a community of intellectual equals includes a great variety of backgrounds.

TONY MARX: I hear students now saying that they're going to leave their parents' fancy car at home rather than drive it around campus. That was once thought as a way to impress. Now people understand that that may have an adverse effect on everyone feeling comfortable and equal with each other.

AMY MAYER: Amherst was founded with a mission to educate the indigent Marx says. Over time first those students and then the middle class got left out as the school became more prestigious and more expensive. An Amherst education remains a privilege, but it's one you can't so readily be born into. Marx says all students must earn it and if they then can't afford it, the college will provide. For Justice Talking, I'm Amy Mayer in Amherst, Massachusetts.

MARGOT ADLER: As Amherst College puts in place a dramatic policy change to offset the high cost of tuition, public universities must balance the books without billion-dollar endowments. Financial aid that's based on income has declined significantly compared to the amount of aid available to students who show academic promise.

Here to debate university policies and the hows and whys of who is on campus today are Ross Wiener of The Education Trust, a research and advocacy group dedicated to closing the achievement gap among American students, and Peter McPherson, the president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, which represents public research universities. He was formerly the president of Michigan State University.

Ross, over the past couple of years your organization has taken a close look at who goes to college. Your findings suggest that wealth trumps academic achievement. Gifted students from low-income families have no better shot at going to college than a mediocre student whose parents have plenty of money, and this is not limited to high-priced private colleges, but applies across the board. Is this really a serious problem?

ROSS WIENER: It is a very serious problem. You know, we take pride in America, in being the land of opportunity, but we really have to acknowledge and come to grips with the fact that opportunity is very unevenly distributed in this country by race and by class. And the truth is that America's public colleges and universities aren't serving as engines of social mobility. Instead they're actually reinforcing the inequality that we see outside of college and universities. And let me just give two data points that will help ground that discussion. When you look at the differences in college graduation, the percent of young adults who have college degrees, black

Americans are about half as likely as white Americans. And Hispanic Americans are about one-third as likely as white Americans to have a college degree by the time they're 29. When you look at that by income level, the disparities are even more stark. Seventy-five percent of the young people from the top quartile of family income in this country have a bachelor's degree or higher by the time they're 24. Only nine percent of Americans from the bottom quartile have that college degree by the time they're 24, so affluent Americans are more than eight times as likely as poorer Americans to graduate from college. And we know what that means in terms of both economic opportunity and just full participation in our, in our society. So we really have to address these gaps.

MARGOT ADLER: Peter, do you share this concern and do you think that it's part of the mission of a public university to make a college education accessible no matter your economic resources?

PETER MCPHERSON: It's a complex issue, of course. One, you've got a K-12 problem in this country. Not enough of our students graduate from high school to begin with and are well prepared after that. Now having said that, I think that public universities, all universities, certainly public universities, need to focus on having more opportunities for low-income students. Low-income students unfortunately in our country disproportionately include a large number of students of color, too, so the problems overlap. It's a matter we need to worry about. In our society, and let me just say this briefly, we've always had a struggle over balancing two concepts. Universities ought to be, and many frankly are, meritocracies. Who can do the best, who is best prepared, who can get the best grades, test scores, ought to get those opportunities. And we do a pretty good job of that. On the other hand, we're also the land of opportunity and not everybody is a stellar performer when they're 18 even if they go to excellent high schools and, of course, as I said, many don't. So how you balance that is a question that society has struggled with for a couple hundred years.

MARGOT ADLER: Ross, you know, Peter was talking about a K-12 problem. Is this a high school problem or a college problem? And what do you see as the factors that are at play here and the reasons for these kinds of discrepancies?

ROSS WIENER: Well, there is no question that we have problems both in K-12 and in higher education. Low-income students, even those who have achieved at the highest level, are disproportionately either not going to college or starting off in colleges in ways that are much less likely to end up with them succeeding, so that they are either going part-time or that they are going instead of to more selective and four-year colleges and universities, they're disproportionately going to proprietary for-profit schools or to two-year colleges and universities. One of the things that we can look at is how colleges and universities use their own financial resources either to broaden access or to serve other purposes. And what we've seen is a huge shift away from providing institutional financial aid to the financially neediest students and more towards giving larger financial rewards to students who could afford to go to college whether they got a financial award or not. But these public universities, in order to move up in the ratings and the rankings systems, are actually buying up students who have done better previously. And it's a real problem because we've got to figure out how to reward and incentivize these public institutions to serve these students who are going to struggle

academically and financially. The country needs for these students to be more successful. And right now all the signals and all the status are towards universities and colleges becoming more elite, and not serving struggling students.

MARGOT ADLER: And what do you say to the critique that universities have shifted to this merit model because they want a student body of superstars which helps their campus stand out in the ranking system? Is this critique fair?

PETER MCPHERSON: I think it's somewhat fair. I think there's something to that. I also know that a campus that has an extraordinary student body provides to each other a wonderful education. I mean there's--if you want to provide, which every university does, an excellent education for all the student body, you need a certain portion of your students that are extraordinary students, too, because they create an environment.

MARGOT ADLER: Congress is taking a look at college endowments. Many universities, public and private, have enormous endowments, billions of dollars all together. And some members of Congress have said that a portion of those dollars should be used to offset tuition. Peter, yes or why not?

PETER MCPHERSON: I don't think it would be appropriate at all for Congress to determine how private property should be allocated. I mean, I would even raise a constitutional issue, frankly, on Congress determining how endowments are used.

MARGOT ADLER: Because it's the states that deal with it?

PETER MCPHERSON: Yeah, it's--first of all, it's individual donors that have given the money. The question is: Should money that has been contributed by taxpayers who got a tax deduction in a reasonably, orderly, and appropriate fashion be used for charitable purposes by the recipient, namely, in this case, the university?

MARGOT ADLER: Ross, should public universities which are supported by taxpayer dollars, be required to give a share of the admission slots to lower-income students?

ROSS WIENER: Public universities, as well as almost all of the private universities in this country, are tax-exempt organizations. I think it's quite fair to ask them whether or not they are spending down their endowments in ways that other tax exempt organization are required to. So the foundations in this country, they're tax exempt. They have to spend down some of their endowment every year in order to show that they are not just accreting wealth, but that they are actually serving that public interest. And I think that this is probably a bigger problem in the private sector than the public, but I think it's an appropriate thing to look into. There's another way in which the federal government is considering at least drawing some attention to this issue, and that's asking public universities and colleges to report on how much money they are giving in financial aid. And I think we would encourage Congress to actually go a little further and ask the universities and colleges to report on who they're giving that financial aid to, what was the financial condition of the students who received institutional financial aid, so that we really

could understand whether we're targeting our resources to the students who really do need financial help in order to pay for college.

MARGOT ADLER: I gather, Peter, that you probably have some problem with the idea of federal benchmarks, you know, of saying that for example a certain percentage of students should be made up of low-income students, etc. What's your own feeling about this?

PETER MCPHERSON: Well, I think that the discussion--and I believe the movement toward rebalance, if you will, merit versus need aid, is a good one. Now, I just think it's inappropriate for the federal government to try to legislate how endowments of charitable organizations, including universities, should be allocated. Now we all have to spend them pursuant to our purpose. In universities, it's university money.

MARGOT ADLER: Peter, a professor named Jerome Karabel at Berkeley has written extensively on admissions and he argues that we need to re-examine the very idea of merit. He says that a kid should not be judged solely on SAT scores, on class rank, on grades. He says that kids that haven't had a life of rich opportunity should not be judged by the same standards. What do you say to that argument?

PETER MCPHERSON: Well I don't agree. I think that the balance we've talked about several times here is appropriate, but we should be a society who says that we should give some rewards to people who strive and achieve. So while I don't think the SAT scores say everything, I felt at Michigan, for example, that high school class ranking was a very helpful indicator as to whether or not you were going to be successful at Michigan State, and that didn't matter whether you were from Pershing High in downtown Detroit or from a wealthy suburb out in Oakland County in Michigan. But I think to just say that high school achievement frankly doesn't matter anymore is a real mistake.

MARGOT ADLER: Ross, I'm wondering if you think that merit has to be defined differently and I've heard that you've said that you'd like to see the rankings like those done by U.S. News and World Report redefined. How would you change the ranking system?

ROSS WIENER: Well, there's no question that we--there's some imbalances in the way the rankings are structured right now. And I think that they help to explain some of the patterns that we've seen in who colleges and universities are trying to recruit. And so we really have to broaden out our definition of merit and we do need to give all students a really comprehensive review, and understand and value the achievements of students who have overcome adversity.

MARGOT ADLER: Ross Wiener is a vice president at the Education Trust. Peter McPherson is the president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. Thank you both for coming on Justice Talking.

ROSS WIENER: Thanks for having us.

PETER MCPHERSON: Have a good day.

MARGOT ADLER: Just ahead, the importance of the nation's often overlooked community colleges, where researchers say close to half the college students in America are getting their education.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: There are just about the same number of black and minority students in Bronx Community College as there are in the entire Ivy League.

MARGOT ADLER: A student at a New York City community college ticks off the advantages of her program.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: One, when I leave here I know I have a job waiting for me. And two, it allowed me to be able to come back to school, to be a nurse as I wanted to be. And give back to the community without having to worry about the financial issue.

MARGOT ADLER: And a researcher questions if it matters where you go to college--coming up on Justice Talking.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking, where we make the connection between law and American life. I'm Margot Adler. There's some research out there from 2000 about the actual importance of where a student goes to school and this study still has people talking.

Stacy Dale was one of the authors of that study, with Princeton economics professor Alan Krueger. Stacy, what did you find?

STACY DALE: What our study did was it looked at students who started college in 1976, and we compared the earnings of those who went to an elite school to those who were accepted by an elite school but actually went somewhere else, went somewhere that was less selective. And what we found was that among those who were accepted to elite colleges, students' earnings were similar regardless of where they actually went. And this was very surprising. We would think that what college you went to would matter to some extent in the earnings you would have later. But what our findings suggest is that the student's characteristics, like their ambition, or their motivation, or maybe just how smart they are, affects their earnings, but not really the college that they attended.

MARGOT ADLER: There are plenty of stories out there about panicked students, parents scrambling to get into the right school. Perhaps talented or hardworking students don't need to worry quite as much about where they go to college.

STACY DALE: I think that's right. It's more important probably to choose a school that has resources in areas that you're interested in. If you want to be an engineer, you want to go to a good engineering school. But I would not suggest to students that they worry so much about a school's reputation.

MARGOT ADLER: Now, do you think that students are not really getting a better education at one place versus another? There has to be some kind of difference in--

STACY DALE: You know, it may be that students get a better education say at Harvard than they do at a state school. It may just be that the things that they learn don't really translate to the labor market. The student might become very interested in the arts or the humanities when they go to one of these elite schools, but that just isn't rewarded when they start working. Perhaps the way to explain our findings is that a student who goes to a less selective school may be more likely to end up near the top of their class.

MARGOT ADLER: Or it could be that a lot of these students are so highly motivated it doesn't really matter what the teaching is like, they're going to get an education no matter where.

STACY DALE: Exactly, no matter where they go, that's true too. I mean, people always say that if you go to a school and you seek out the education you'll be able to find a good education anywhere.

MARGOT ADLER: Your study did point to one group of students who benefited from attending the more selective schools. That was low-income students. And for them, attending a more selective school did make a difference. How so?

STACY DALE: They did have a small rate of return, those low-income students did. And we think the reason for this is probably that the high-income students probably have network connections whether they go to Princeton or Harvard or whatever school they go to, their parents probably have connections for them. However, a low-income student probably doesn't have those connections. So they really need the networks that attending one of these elite schools might provide for them.

MARGOT ADLER: What kind of advice given the study would you offer to students and parents who are going through the hideous process of picking a college?

STACY DALE: Well, I would think carefully about what you want out of college, what you might want to be when you grow up, and choose a school that really has a program that meets your needs. I wouldn't think about the reputation of the school, but make sure you know why you have good reasons for selecting that school.

MARGOT ADLER: Stacy Dale is a senior researcher with Mathematica Policy Research.

MARGOT ADLER: Many students don't have the luxury of worrying about which four-year institution to attend. Millions of students who do not have the academic record or the finances for a university education turn to community colleges. Thomas Bailey is director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. He also co-

authored the book "Defending the Community College Equity Agenda." Welcome to Justice Talking.

THOMAS BAILEY: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

MARGOT ADLER: Tom, for most of us, when we imagine the typical student, we think of a teenager at a four-year college or university. But you say we should think again.

THOMAS BAILEY: I think most of us, and I certainly did for much of my life, think of a college student as an 18-year-old going directly from high school into college, attending full time, often living in a dorm. And that's a--there's only a minority of students, maybe 20 percent of students, that that describes. There's my interest, community colleges: Almost half of undergraduates in the United States in the course of a year who are in college are attending college at community colleges.

MARGOT ADLER: Do you think that there are misconceptions about community colleges and community college students?

THOMAS BAILEY: Oh yes. Well, I think, that most people writing and speaking about higher education didn't go to community colleges. I mean, certainly I didn't. I don't imagine you did. Many people--

MARGOT ADLER: No, I didn't. So they're invisible to us, in other words?

THOMAS BAILEY: That's right. We've never been--we've probably never been on a campus. Unfortunately, we may not have ever met anybody who went to community college, although there are a lot more than people think.

MARGOT ADLER: And what is the reality of community colleges?

THOMAS BAILEY: They're concentrated among lower-income students, certainly minorities. Especially Hispanic students are concentrated in community colleges. The students tend to be somewhat older, often they have jobs. About a third of community college students have children. Now that doesn't mean they're not 18-year-olds. There certainly are 18-year-olds who attend community colleges with the idea that they will transfer to a four-year college and complete their bachelor's degree at the college. So it's an institution that has a tremendous number of different roles that are very important to many aspects of our economy and certainly many parts of our population.

MARGOT ADLER: And what kind of an education are people getting there?

THOMAS BAILEY: First of all, many students attend and transfer and end up with a bachelor's degree. So in the end they'll have a degree from often a state university or private university having started at community college. Almost 60 percent of our nurses earn their R.N. at a community college; many of the public service jobs that we have, police and fire, the majority of

those folks are trained at community colleges; technical jobs in the health field, very heavily dependent on community colleges for their education.

MARGOT ADLER: How do students pay for community college today? And how many students are left out from even this avenue to education?

THOMAS BAILEY: Well, I think, if you see that the majority of community college students work, so that's certainly one source of the resources that they need to pay for community college. I suppose there are some who still get some from their families. And there's also the financial aid and Pell Grants, but often community college students who are attending part time may not be eligible for financial aid. And often because they're poor and they're not well counseled and they don't know--they don't have a lot of contacts with people who've been to college before, they may not know enough about the available financial aid. So I think in many cases community college students are eligible for financial aid but aren't aware of it and don't get it. But I think that the fact that they have to work so much, I mean, that makes it very difficult for, you know, for them to really have an effective college education.

MARGOT ADLER: We've been talking about access to higher education on our show today and particularly for low-income and minority students, and you say that community colleges have been left out of that whole conversation.

THOMAS BAILEY: Yes. I think if you look at the press and you think about the discussion in public, much of that is about affirmative action, access of minority students to the elite, selective universities. And I think that's a very important conversation to have. If you're talking about numbers, a number I like to give is that if you take a community college here in New York, the Bronx Community College, there are just about the same number of black and minority students in Bronx Community College as there in the entire Ivy League. So if you want to think about influencing the quality of education that minority students have, if you want to think about improving their opportunities through higher education, you can't leave these institutions out of that conversation. And in the end the most successful affirmative action program or program to increase minority enrollment at the elite, selective universities is ultimately not going to have a large numeric impact. So I think it's--I think that's a distortion of the conversation. And while I think we need to continue that, I think it's important that we focus at least as much energy, you know, on the types of institutions where the majority of those students are right now.

MARGOT ADLER: What are some of the challenges that community colleges are facing today?

THOMAS BAILEY: First of all, you need to understand the characteristics of the community college students. Often they arrive not well prepared for college-level work. More than 50 percent of community college students when they arrive and their skills are assessed, they're judged not to be prepared for college-level work at least in one area. So I think that's one thing. The students tend to be from much lower-income backgrounds. So in that sense they don't have the social and financial support that other students do. And as I also mentioned before, the majority of them are attending part time. And it's very difficult for a college to really connect with a student, to have the kind of impact that we'd like them to have if the student is working, only attending class, and then going home.

MARGOT ADLER: Do most of these students at community college--how do they fare in the economy? What happens to them later? Do we have any studies? Do we know?

THOMAS BAILEY: So, first, if you compare the earnings of an associate's degree holder to a high school degree, that is to someone with only a high school degree, they earn maybe 15 to 35 percent more, depending on different characteristics. Then if you compare an associate's degree holder to a bachelor's degree holder, they earn about half as much, so that the benefit of an associate's degree is about half of the benefit of a bachelor's degree, which is what it ought to be because it takes half as long.

MARGOT ADLER: You've written that community colleges in the past decade have shifted emphasis from access to educational attainment. First of all, what does that mean?

THOMAS BAILEY: In the past, community colleges have been seen as a door to higher education. They're located all over states. Many states have policies designed to locate a community college within like an hour, let's say, of every or 90 percent of the students in the state. Since they're so many of them and they're in many locations, students can live at home. They don't have entrance criteria in the sense that you don't have to have SAT scores at a particular level. So they're open-door institutions. So we have been very proud, I think, of the success that the institutions have had at opening the door and providing initial opportunity to higher education for a wide range of students. Now what happens to them once they're there, I think in the last few years we've focused our attention much more on that. I think that the idea is that, you know, we're good at getting them in the front door, but we're not that good at getting them out with the degrees or with their having met the goals that they arrived at the college to achieve.

MARGOT ADLER: Thomas Bailey is the director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. He also co-authored the book "Defending the Community College Equity Agenda." Thank you so much for being on our show.

THOMAS BAILEY: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

MARGOT ADLER: Justice Talking producer Viet Le recently visited LaGuardia Community College in New York City, a school that boasts 31 majors for its 13,000 students and charges less than \$3,000 a year for tuition. Viet met up with Donna VanBrackle, a fourth-semester nursing student who enrolled after 15 years working as a lab technician, and Andrea Torres, a single mother and honor student. Torres says after three years with only a high school diploma she realized she needed a college degree. She chose LaGuardia because it was close, affordable, and she says it was important to her to be on a truly diverse campus.

ANDREA TORRES: The students here, I think we represent over 160, you know, nations here. And the studies, I'm taking liberal arts so I get to touch a little bit of everything and become a

well-rounded student. I haven't yet narrowed down, and I think community college gives you a chance to study broadly before you narrow down your field.

VIET LE: And, Donna, why did you end up choosing--you know, you were in the work force for, you know, ten-plus years as lab technician, then decided to come back to college, and you chose community college. Why?

DONNA VANBRACKLE: The hospital that I work for, Queens Hospital Center, had a program to allow people to go into nursing that wanted to change their major.

VIET LE: Like, are you committed then to after you graduate to go back to them?

DONNA VANBRACKLE: That's correct. For every year they pay for me to go to school, I give them back a year, two years actually. So if I go to school for one year, I give them back two years. If I go to school for two years, I give them back four years.

VIET LE: That's a good arrangement, I guess.

DONNA VANBRACKLE: That's an excellent arrangement.

VIET LE: Why is it excellent?

DONNA VANBRACKLE: It's excellent because, one: When I leave here I know I have a job waiting for me. That's the best part. And two, it allowed me to be able to come back to school, to be a nurse as I wanted to be and give back to the community without having to worry about the financial issue.

VIET LE: So what's the most interesting part about going to community college? What's really unique about the experience?

DONNA VANBRACKLE: What I find unique about the experience is it's close to home so I'm close to my family. I get to come to school and, you know, do my work, study, then go back home to my family, get up the next day, do it all over again. Also I like the fact that when we have trips and conferences and stuff, our professors are there with us. It's like one big family. In the program that I'm in, there's some programs, everybody knows everybody, and it's like a family. It feels like home away from home.

VIET LE: Andrea, what do you think is the most interesting thing about going to community college?

ANDREA TORRES: I have to agree in part with Donna because I also get to see my--I'm close to home. I get to see everybody. I see people from my high school and we come informed of the family here. But also the diversity, like, in liberal arts you take different courses, different teachers, and the teachers are very catering to your needs and help you find your way and help you narrow down what you want to do. And they're very motivating, inspirational people here.

VIET LE: You mentioned sort of support and kind of resources: Was that surprising to you, coming into a community college?

ANDREA TORRES: Absolutely. I was really expecting--even in high school it wasn't as supportive as it is here. And I really wasn't expecting, you know, I was given the impression that I was on my own. I had to do my work. I wouldn't have the support. Teachers would, you know, would lose me in the crowd. And it's just not the way it is here. So I am definitely happily surprised.

VIET LE: Okay, Donna, you were shaking your head this time. Do you agree with that?

DONNA VANBRACKLE: Yes, I do agree with that. The teachers are very supportive. And you don't get lost in a crowd. Also, I have a brother and a younger sister who received four-year scholarships to colleges outside of state that are not CUNY colleges and I don't think their experience was as great as my experience at community college.

VIET LE: That's surprising to you it seems like.

DONNA VANBRACKLE: I'd say it is, yes. [LAUGHS] Yes, especially after receiving a four-year scholarship you would think it would just be smooth sailing for them, but the teachers I don't think are as nurturing as they are here at the community college.

VIET LE: Andrea Torres and Donna VanBrackle are students at LaGuardia Community College. Thank you for joining us on Justice Talking.

ANDREA TORRES: Thank you for having us.

DONNA VANBRACKLE: Thank you very much.

MARGOT ADLER: Is higher education fulfilling its mission? Will the pressure to reform the system of financial aid take us in the wrong direction? Join our discussion on this issue at justicetalking.org. Thanks for listening. I hope you'll tune in next week. I'm Margot Adler.
