

Until 1993 Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota, did not take a student's ability to pay tuition and living expenses into account in making admissions decisions. That year, however, Carleton changed its policy. It adopted a system, now used by numerous other colleges and universities, under which the college admits as many students without looking at need as its financial aid budget allows, offering these students enough money to attend. When the aid budget is exhausted Carleton then only admits students who need a grant of \$2,000 or less to pay the \$25,610 that, at this time, a person needs to cover tuition and living expense costs at Carleton. Under this policy, Carleton took a student's ability to pay into account for the final 5% of admitted students in 1994, and for the final 9% in 1995 and 1996. At the time Carleton changed its policy the financial aid budget comprised one fifth of the school's annual expenditures, and the budget for financial aid had increased 38% from the previous year.

Is Carleton's policy fair or unfair? Explain your answer.

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The Carleton policy is morally justifiable. In an ideal world financial resources would be irrelevant to a person's educational opportunities. In the world we inhabit, however, higher education has a huge cost, and that cost is borne to a large extent unavoidably by tuition payments. College and university administrators, however, have a responsibility to assure that admissions policies are consistent with the educational missions of their schools. This means that to the maximum extent feasible, students should be selected on the basis of their ability to benefit from the education they receive, and to contribute positively to the educational enterprise at the school. Carleton's policy appears to be essentially consistent with this standard.

Case from the February 26, 1998 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1998.