Feature Article
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Intro to Journalism

The Problem of Socioeconomic Diversity at Tufts

Charlie Zhen is a Tufts junior from New York City. He is a first generation college student on a full financial aid package. When he moved into his dorm freshman year, naturally he introduced himself to the other kids on his floor. The first person he met was also from New York, but a very different part of New York. “The part of New York where the chairman of the Fed comes into your living room and sits down and talks with you; New York City with your pinky up.” Further down the hall was a kid whose father oversaw Merrill Lynch for continental Europe. He was rooming with someone also in the 1%, who “literally makes millions of dollars per year.” Further down the hall was the grandson of the former CEO of Exxon Mobile. “The funny thing about economic diversity at Tufts,” Zhen says, “is that there pretty much is none.”

The lack of socioeconomic diversity at Tufts is well documented. According to a study reported by the New York Times, Tufts has more students from the top 1% than the bottom 60%. In fact, 18.6% of Tufts families earn more than $630,000 annually, whereas just 11.8% of families earn less than $65,000. This discrepancy places Tufts as the tenth worst in the nation among elite colleges. Tufts also ranks as eighth highest for median parent income ($224,800), fifteenth highest for share of students from the top one percent (18.6%), and fourth highest for share of students whose families are in the top fifth of yearly income (77%).

Nathan Foster, a Trustee member of Tufts Senate who has reported on tuition hikes in the past, thinks that Tufts has the ability to admit more low income students and provide more financial aid if it wanted to. “The administrators I talked to do understand that economic diversity is important, but those creating the budget have to decide between many different priorities, all of which require money, and affordability tends to be forgotten along the way,” Foster said. “It is quite possible to devote more resources to admitting more lower-income and middle class students, the university just needs to make it a priority.”

At $54,318, Tufts has the the seventh highest tuition in the country, and it is increasing. Since 1990 when tuition was $13,974 per year, tuition has nearly quadrupled and even if one adjusts for inflation, the cost to attend Tufts has still nearly doubled. Accounting for all expenses including housing and meal plans, it will cost over $70,000 to attend Tufts this year.

Tuition isn’t everything, though. Columbia University, which has the highest tuition in the country admits almost twice as many students from the bottom 60% as the top 1%. One of the reasons: Columbia is need blind and offers 100% demonstrated financial aid to every student.

Unlike Columbia, Tufts is a “need aware” school. According to Karen Richardson, the dean of undergraduate admissions at Tufts, this means that when considering a student for admission “the student’s ability to pay tuition is taken into account.” This is not to say that need is always taken into consideration. Richardson emphasizes that need blind practices —evaluating the student’s merits without taking need into account — are often used as a first measure, and if a student is a

particularly good fit, admissions will accept them no matter what. But, at the end of the day, the admissions team “has to stay within a budget as [they] are shaping the class.” Richardson added that despite a demonstrated lack of socioeconomic diversity at Tufts, it is still something they “continuously strive to achieve” and believe is “important to a dynamic campus.”

It must be noted that comparing Columbia to Tufts in terms of financial aid is a bit unfair. After all, Columbia’s endowment of $10 billion is more than six times that of Tufts. In fact, if Columbia used its 2014 return on endowment to pay for its students’ financial aid it wouldn’t only be able to admit every student for free, it would be able to admit every student for free EIGHT times over. A better comparison is Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Both Tufts and Vassar have endowments around $1 billion and both have tuitions between $50,000 and $55,000. Yet, Vassar is need blind, meets 100% of demonstrated financial need for all admitted students and ranks among the best in socioeconomic diversity. Vassar admits nearly three times as many students from the bottom 60% as the top 1%, more than even Columbia. The difference? Vassar prioritizes financial aid.

In an interview with Malcolm Gladwell on his podcast Revisionist History, the president of Vassar College, Catharine Hill, talks about the school’s financial aid policies. Since she became president in 2006, the amount spent on financial aid has more than doubled from around $25 million to around $60 million. Naturally, this sort of shift in budget comes with tradeoffs.

“[An example tradeoff] would be spending more to renovate old dormitories and bathrooms, it would be better food in the dining hall. Many of those things are really good things but you’re always making tradeoffs,” she says in the podcast.

Gladwell concludes in his podcast that Vassar is doing the morally correct thing. By prioritizing equal access to education over perks and comfort they are making a positive contribution to society.

Parker Breza, Tufts Senior and leading member of Tufts Student Action, agrees.

“Elite institutions like Tufts are really a great way to flatten out economic statuses in the United States to actually reduce income inequality and allow students from low income backgrounds to get ahead,” Breza said, “but universities like Tufts continue to be really good at making sure a only very small number of low income and high need students are able to get ahead. They aren’t actually educating the masses like they claim to.”

Breza also notes an inconsistency between what the University portrays as a commitment to diversity, and what its admissions policies are.

“When we’re only allowing the opportunity of a Tufts education to a very small number of people but the promise says that its for everyone, as long as you’re up to the academic and social

merits," he says, "there's a gap in terms of what is being proclaimed as a core value and what the actual reality and policy is."

Karen Richardson wouldn't comment about the any specifics regarding the budget at Tufts, nor any conversations that decided allocation of funds. She did however, recognize that the new science and engineering complex, while funded partially by grants, took up a significant part of the budget. Tufts dining services, which routinely ranks among the best in the country for food, also represents a fair slice of the pie.

The problem is that these are major attractors for Tufts. As a university with a separate engineering school, it is important to have good engineering facilities. Good dining services represents one way to distinguish Tufts from comparable NESCAC schools and possibly a way to distract from the fact that many of the dorms on campus desperately need renovation. If Tufts isn't able to provide the types of resources and amenities as other elite liberal arts colleges, how can it expect to attract the economically privileged — many of whom are accustomed to a certain degree of comfort — who allow Tufts to give out any aid at all?

As tuition at Tufts continues to rise (it has risen at a consistent rate of about 4% per year over the past five years) the issue of socioeconomic diversity at Tufts will continue to be debated. Whether Tufts will follow Vassar's model and commit to leveling the applicant playing field, or continue its current model is unclear. Either way, someone loses out, which make the situation all the more difficult. Who wins, will be up to people like Karen Richardson and Parker Breza. Will

the administration side with the students and create a Tufts Education affordable for all, or will Tufts continue to prioritize other initiatives? Only time will tell.