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30 Years After Michelle Obama, Cultures at Princeton Still Clash



Bryan Thomas for The Chronicle

Above: John Parvin, a Princeton sophomore, writes a letter to his father in prison. Low-income students still experience culture shock on the elite campus.

By Andy Thomason

Kevin Lopez grew up in Newark, N.J., but he had never thought of applying to Princeton University. In fact, he did not know it was in the same state, just an hour's drive from his high school.

It was only after a summer program took the high-school junior and dozens of other low-income students to the campus that he realized that admission might be within his reach.

The story of Mr. Lopez—now a sophomore at Princeton—parallels that of Michelle Obama, whose narrative the White House has put front and center as it pushes colleges nationwide to commit new resources toward easing the path between low-income students and college graduation.

“If Princeton hadn’t found my brother as a basketball recruit, and if I hadn’t seen that he could succeed on a campus like that, it never would have occurred to me to apply to that school—never,” Mrs. Obama told a group of college presidents at a White House summit on college access last month.

Mr. Lopez is not alone in telling a similar story today. Princetonians from low-income backgrounds find themselves at one of the nation's elite institutions as a result of special encouragement from a guidance counselor, organization, or family member who made them challenge their preconceptions about their qualifications or what they could afford.

But the issues underprivileged students at Princeton face—and how strongly they resemble Mrs. Obama's experience from more than 30 years ago—point to the limitations of a national policy push for access to elite institutions, or even the ability of a university to markedly improve the experience of its needy students by boosting admissions.

Despite Princeton's substantive efforts to expand its low-income population over the past two decades, the university's neediest students still talk of problems adjusting to a culture of privilege they call off-putting at best, and deeply frustrating at worst.

Ivy League Stereotype

Robin Moscato joined the Princeton's financial-aid staff in 1983, two years before Mrs. Obama graduated. A first-generation college student and graduate of Rutgers University, New Jersey's public flagship, Ms. Moscato said she found the atmosphere predictable. "It looked and felt like what the stereotype of an Ivy League campus meant in my own mind," she said, adding that it was both racially and economically homogeneous.

Now the director of undergraduate financial aid, Ms. Moscato said the campus is "radically different" today. "You walk around campus and there is so much greater diversity in every way," she said.

Only 6.8 percent of the entering Class of 1992 received the Pell Grant, she said. In the Class of 2017, 14.5 percent receive Pell Grants. And while only 40 percent of the Class of 1992 received some sort of financial aid, 60 percent of the Class of 2017 receives aid, she said. (By comparison, the main Rutgers campus in New Brunswick saw 31 percent of its students in 2011-12 receive Pell Grants, according to the most recent federal data.)

Yet old issues persist. Mrs. Obama has spoken of her own shock at seeing Princeton students driving BMWs while she was a student. Thirty years later, despite gains in Princeton's share of low-income students, some of those students still use the same word: "shock."

Like Mrs. Obama, Shawon Jackson, a junior, found Princeton a stark departure from his native University Park, Ill., roughly 40 miles south of Chicago. "Hearing my friends casually talking about how their parents have incomes upward of \$250,000 was pretty shocking," Mr. Jackson said, though he added that he never felt out of place.

Such interactions should come as no surprise at an elite Ivy League institution. But Princeton has been combating the perception of overwhelming wealth among its student body for decades. In 2001, the university began a "no loan" financial-aid policy, guaranteeing that students would incur no debt for a Princeton education. And it has applied extra energy to seeking out and admitting low-income students, Ms. Moscato said.

Princeton leans heavily on the nonprofit Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America, the organization that took Mr. Lopez to Princeton's campus during high school. The group contacts high-achieving low-income students, helps them apply to college, and offers counseling and support throughout their undergraduate experience. Princeton enrolls the largest proportion of LEDA students nationwide, and promised to increase the number of students it will enroll through the nonprofit as part of the White House summit last month.

Students at Princeton who went through the leadership program unanimously sing its praises. Much in the way Mrs. Obama credits the example of her brother, students say LEDA helped them see their potential, and overcome the intimidating application process.

Mr. Lopez said just visiting Princeton's campus was a revelation, and added that he soon came to believe Princeton was "the place for me."

Other students needed help more than exposure. Brittney Watkins, a sophomore, has been determined to attend an Ivy League school since she was "in kindergarten." What she needed was help with the application process, help she appreciated so much that she helped start a group for other LEDA scholars that establishes mentorships to help students on campus.

Princeton's embrace of Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America emulates the findings of the much-cited, much-discussed research by the economists Caroline M. Hoxby, of Stanford University, and Sarah E. Turner, of the University of Virginia. Their work suggests that more information provided via intervention increases applications from low-income prospective students.

"I think that they're exactly right," Ms. Moscato said, underlining the influence of "a trusted third party" in helping with college applications. "If everybody had an aunt or an uncle ... who they could call and say, 'Hey, could you explain this to me?' it would make a big difference," Ms. Moscato said.

Underlying Tensions

But focusing the conversation about low-income students' access on admission alone may ignore an underlying tension. Patricia A. McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University, argues that the White House's emphasis on getting lower-income students on campuses is misplaced. For example, the benefits of expanding programs like LEDA or the Posse Foundation, another group that finds bright, underprivileged students and helps place them at elite colleges, will be necessarily limited because of the larger culture of privilege at top colleges, Ms. McGuire said. "You can't just put a fig leaf over it and say, 'We're gonna help all the poor folk by taking another 10 Posse students at Georgetown,'" she said.

Colleges should instead set their sights on campus culture, and the discomfort felt by a student at an elite institution who "has two polo shirts instead of 10" and has to worry about helping his family back home, Ms. McGuire said.

Several low-income students at Princeton were familiar with this struggle. John Parvin, a sophomore, recalled having to take a year off from school to support his family in South Carolina as it faced legal and financial difficulties, and being asked where he had traveled by classmates who assumed it was a recreational gap year. Mr. Lopez also recalled being asked about his travel experiences; the farthest

away from home he had ever been was the Jersey shore.

Some students said that all the culture shock required was a mental adjustment, or treating it like one of many challenges. But others said the university could and should do more to make students like them feel less like the exception to the rule.

Mr. Parvin said that something as simple as the administration's acknowledging and publicizing the problems specific to low-income students would help.

"It would make it so that my burden, and the burden of other low-income students, is a little bit lessened because we no longer have to pick and choose what hat we put on," he said—that of the "totally fine Princetonian" or the student who faces tough financial challenges that require "very serious, adult kind of thinking."

Ms. Moscato said Princeton is fully aware that access through admission is different from access to "the full experience" of Princeton, and that granting the latter is a consideration in every new program it undertakes. "One of the key factors of leveling the playing field is to swing the critical mass," she said, adding that if the number of low-income students grows, "then it's a less isolated group."

The best way to improve the undergraduate experience for low-income students at elite colleges is unclear, and no one understands that better than the students already at Princeton, who recall never thinking they could attend such a prestigious university. "Growing up, we always assumed Princeton is a place for rich kids," Mr. Parvin said.

But the truth was quite different, he added, and should be widely distributed to more people like him. "They have enough money to take care of just anybody who walks through the gates," he said.