Scholarships and Financial Aid for Financially Disadvantaged Students

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Just about all Americans know by now that going to college can be very expensive these days. The purpose of the present essay is to explore scholarships and financial aid that are available for financially disadvantaged students or families who are considering college. The essay will begin with a general overview of the potential financial hardships that sending a child to a good college can cause a family. It will then proceed to identify some of the methods of receiving financial aid that are available for disadvantaged students. Finally, the essay will consider some of the specific scholarships that good students can potentially access to go to a college that might have otherwise been unaffordable for them.

**Potential Financial Hardship**

Let us begin by considering the numbers regarding the cost of college in these times. According to collegedata.com (2017), "in its most recent survey of college pricing, the College Board reports that a 'moderate' college budget for an in-state public college for the 2016-2017 academic year averaged $24,610. A moderate budget at a private college averaged $49,320" (para. 1). This includes tuition, rent, and living expenses. This means that on average, even if a family just wanted to send their child to a public college within their own state, that could be expected to cost them almost $100,000 if the student is going to attend for the norm of 4 years. Without scholarships or other forms of financial aid, this can become an insurmountable barrier for many families. As Gabler (2016) has indicated, almost half of all Americans would not even be able to afford to pay for a $400 emergency; how, then, would they possibly have the savings to send a child to college for 4 years? This highlights the importance of either borrowing or being given money when it comes to the average family considering the possibility of sending their child to college.

This explains the prominence of debt in the lives of many recent college graduates. As Kantrowitz (2016) has indicated, in the year 2016, "more than two-thirds of college graduates graduated with debt, and their average debt at graduation was about $35,000, tripling in two decades" (para. 3). It would be fair to call this a crisis, especially given that as most people know, many Millennials are often not in a position upon graduation to even consider paying off these debts in anything like a prompt manner. In short, because many American families do not have the money upfront to send their children to college, the students end up borrowing money, through private or public loans; and as the students may continue to carry this debt for a very long time, the general financial hardship of the families becomes even worse. Often the result is that it may become harder for those students to start their own families and eventually send their own children to college.

It is true, however, that there are other forms of financial aid that do not require the students to pay back the money. There are scholarships and grants, for example, which involve the student simply being given the money to defray the costs of his college education, if he meets certain basic criteria as continual enrollment and academic good standing. Such options can provide a huge relief for financially disadvantaged students and all prospective students in general, since this essentially amounts to "free money" that does not include the same long-term baggage inherent in debt. It will thus be worth considering the various methods that financially disadvantaged students have of receiving financial aid—not just loans, but also scholarships and grants. This discussion should in general produce a more hopeful picture that what the initial review of numbers may indicate. It is true that sending a child to college can impose a huge financial burden on a given family, but it is also true that there are several methods and avenues through which this burden could be defrayed.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), in recent years, over 80 percent of students enrolled at both public and private colleges have consistently been recipients of financial aid. In short, there are only relatively few students—a little less than 1 in 5, in fact—who end up having to foot the entire bill for their college experiences completely on their own. Whether through loans, scholarships, or grants, the large majority of students receive at least some financial aid from their colleges themselves or from other stakeholders in the situation. The $100,000 for an in-state public college that was reported above is thus only the "sticker price" of sending a child to college; there are a lot of potential ways in which that price could be brought down to a more manageable level.

Moreover, this is especially the case for financially disadvantaged students, given that access to an entire bloc of financial aid options is based on the demonstration of financial need. In general, there are merit-based forms of financial aid, which are based on the student's own skills and performance, without reference to the financial situation of his family; and then there are need-based forms of financial aid, which are only available to students who can show that their families do not have the capacity to fund their college educations. The need-based forms of aid are specifically there to help make going to college a viable possibility for financially disadvantaged students. It will now be worth turning attention to the methods available to such students for receiving such financial aid.

**Methods for Receiving Financial Aid**

It is almost inevitable that this discussion should begin with the Pell Grant. The Pell Grant is a major financial aid program administered by the federal government, and money distributed through this program is heavily directed toward financially disadvantaged students. Fastweb (2011), for example, has indicated that whereas in 2007 the average annual income of the family of a Pell Grant recipient was $20,302, the average income of the family of a non-recipient was $69,235 (p. 1). In other words, if a student's family is not in a financial position to fund his college education, then that student has a much greater chance of receiving financial aid through the Pell Grant program. This is a typical form of need-based financial aid, and it can clearly help open the door toward college for students who have otherwise found it financially impossible to even consider such an option. In general, the existence of the Pell Grant testifies to the basic fact that the nation has an investment in enabling qualified young people to go to college, irrespective of the financial situations of their families. This is an important component of the general idea of class mobility within the United States.

In order to be eligible for the Pell Grant, though, it is crucial that the student fill out the FAFSA application (short for Free Application for Federal Student Aid). This can be done online, and it is in general a good idea to do it as soon as possible, for several reasons. For one thing, FAFSA is used for several other financial aid evaluations than just the Pell Grant, and those other programs may only have a limited amount of money and be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis—meaning, if the student waits too long, then he may miss out on forms of financial aid that may have previously been available to him. The FAFSA requests information about the financial status of the student and his family, and this information in generally required for any considerations of need-based financial aid, because again, need-based aid is specifically tied to the inability of the student's family to pay for his college experience. As such, submitting the FAFSA is an essential step for all financially disadvantaged students. More generally, it could be suggested that *all* students should fill out their FAFSAs: it is easy enough to do, and there is nothing to lose. Only if one's family were so wealthy that one is certain not to get any aid would it be even possibly reasonable to skip this step and not report the information requested by the FAFSA.

In addition to aid from the federal government, it is worth noting that financially disadvantaged students are also fully eligible for merit-based financial aid, just like all other students. Students with a financial advantage are not eligible for need-based scholarships, but merit-based scholarships are universally available and do not take the student's financial situation into account. This means that if a financially disadvantaged student still got top grades in high school or was an athletic champion, then that student will have access to potential forms of financial aid strictly based on his accomplishments themselves. There are many such opportunities available to all students, and this means that a financially disadvantaged student should still try to achieve as much as he can during high school, without writing himself off. This is true even if he assumes that there would be no way that someone like himself would ever be able to afford college.

In fact, many people may be under the mistaken assumption that financial aid is primarily provided by the federal government, through programs such as the Pell Grant. However, as the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) has reported, for the 2007-2008 academic year, the federal government was only responsible for $22 billion of a total $62 billion administered financial aid, or just a little less than a third of all financial aid. There are various other sources of financial aid, including the colleges themselves, individual states, and private charities and organizations. The available options for financial aid could thus be understood as a kind of tapestry, with various stakeholders with potentially varied interests all contributing in their own ways to the central project of ensuring that as many students as possible who want to attend college are able to do so.

Of course, this discussion has not even addressed the financial aid option of Student loans. Student loans are obviously not ideal in comparison to grants of scholarships. As a financially disadvantaged student, if it is possible to get a grant or scholarship instead, then that is surely the route to pursue, seeing as they do not need to be paid back. However, it is true that loans are an important source of financial aid for the large majority of college students. Again, as has been pointed out above, over two-thirds of college graduates had debt in the year 2016—which means that over two-thirds of college graduates relied on loans to fund at least some parts of the college experiences (Kantrowitz, 2016). This is referring not just to financially disadvantaged students per se but rather to all students. In the broader scheme of things, when it comes to paying for college, the vast majority of middle class Americans themselves could be seen as "disadvantaged," to say nothing of Americans below the financial level of the middle class.

In general, students can get loans either from the federal government, or through private agents (such as banks). If possible, it is advised the student go with the federal loan option, given that it comes with numerous advantages. According to Federal Student Aid (2017), these include: no requirement to pay the loan back until after graduation; a fixed interest rate that is generally lower than the comparable private loan interest rates; subsidies that cover interest while the student is in college; no required credit check, in most cases; greater leeway to negotiate payment plans; and the possibility for loan forgiveness in some cases, if the student goes into public service after graduation. These are all advantages that are almost never provided by private lenders such as banks. Therefore, if the financially disadvantaged student intends to make use of a loan to help pay for his college experience, then he should surely go with the federal loan over a private loan, if possible. The benefits are tied to the fact that the federal government is not compelled to administer to the loans on a strictly for-profit basis.

**Specific Scholarships**

The general categories of financial aid options have been clearly described above. The discussion, though, has thus far primarily focused on grants and loans. It may now be worth turning some attention to specific scholarships that financially disadvantaged students could access to attend schools that may have otherwise been unaffordable for them. One key scholarship worthy of mention in this regard is the National Merit Scholarship. This scholarship is awarded on the basis of academic performance in high school classes and standardized tests (National Merit Scholarship Corporation, 2017). In addition to the stipend that comes with the scholarship itself, many colleges also recognize the merit in their own ways, including through matching the stipend and/or waiving out-of-state tuition fees for out-of-state students. This scholarship (as its name suggests) is based strictly on merit and does not take the financial situation of the student into account.

There are also scholarships that are specifically available to students who are of a particular racial/ethnic status within a given field. For example, the National Bar Institute sponsors the African-American Law Student Fellowship. That is only one example, and there are many others like it. This can be of help to financially disadvantaged students if one bears in mind that there often tends to be a significant overlap between minority racial/ethnic status on one hand and lower socioeconomic status on the other. These scholarships are sometimes controversial, because it may sometimes seem to imply a sort of reverse discrimination, given that one's race/ethnicity determines access to such scholarships. Although the federal government surely could not administer such programs, private institutions almost certainly can, under the basic protection of free association that is guaranteed to all private agents within the nation.

Likewise, there are also scholarships that are available specifically for women, especially women who are going into fields where women are underrepresented, such as the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). A sample list of such scholarships has been provided by Scholarships.com (2017). Again, the main idea behind such demographic-specific scholarships is not to exclude other talented individuals, but rather to help provide opportunity for students who may have historically not had much opportunity.

Finally, it is worth considering that top colleges tend to provide scholarships that meet most or even all of the student's financial needs, provided that the student demonstrates the necessary level of merit to get accepted in the first place. For example, the Ivy League schools have a general policy of providing no academic or athletic scholarships, but of ensuring that the financial need of the student is in fact met. These schools feel a talented student who would be an asset to the school should not be turned away just because he cannot pay (Rubenstone, n.d.). Many other colleges also provide this kind of specific need-based aid. The best advice would be for a student interested in a specific school to thoroughly investigate the financial aid sections of those schools' websites, as well as potentially speak with financial aid counselors about the matter.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this essay has consisted of a discussion of scholarship and financial aid for financially disadvantaged students. The essay has addressed the potential financial burden imposed on a family by deciding to send a child to college, methods for obtaining financial aid, and specific scholarships that may be available to financially disadvantaged students. The main categories of financial aid that have been covered here are loans, grants, and scholarships. It has been suggested that federal loans are almost always better than private loans; that virtually every financially disadvantage student is eligible for the Pell Grant; and that financially disadvantaged students have access not only to need-based scholarships but also to the merit-based scholarships that are available to all students.

It has also been suggested here that when it comes to paying for college, "financial disadvantage" may be a relative term. The cost of college is generally so high that even most middle class American families cannot afford to pay it in a direct way—hence the growing debt burden of the Millennial generation. The challenges faced by financially disadvantaged students (as in students from families below the middle class) may thus seem as a difference of degree and not of kind. Moreover, there are a lot of resources available for funding the college experience, including resources that are only available to financially disadvantaged students and not to students with relatively greater family resources at their disposal.

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