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Grappling With the Access Problem

On this point few people familiar with the state of American higher education can disagree: The country is not doing a good job educating students from low-income families now, and with the number of low-income Americans poised to grow, that problem is poised to become much more dire.

Solutions to that situation are hard to come by, which may explain why a virtual who's who of the country's leading experts on financial aid and college admissions are gathered on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill this week to discuss issues of access to college and explore one particular possible answer that is capturing the imagination of some academic leaders.

The themes of the conference, "[The Politics of Inclusion: Higher Education at a Crossroads](#)," which began Sunday night and continues through Wednesday, are broad, touching on the enrollment patterns of differing racial groups, policies on illegal immigrants, affirmative action and the American Dream. But the core of the meeting is a quiet celebration, really, of programs started by Chapel Hill and numerous other highly selective public and private institutions aimed at increasing the number of economically disadvantaged students they enroll.

Besides North Carolina's program, the [Carolina Covenant](#), private institutions like Princeton, Harvard and MIT and public institutions like the Universities of Virginia, Maryland at College Park and Michigan have [unveiled or expanded programs](#) designed to open their doors wider for low and moderate income students. About two dozen colleges and universities have taken steps in this direction.

North Carolina created its "Covenant" program to deal with the fact that there are essentially "two North Carolinas," James Moeser, the chancellor at Chapel Hill, said in his remarks to open the conference Monday. One of them, found in and around the state's thriving urban centers, produces many potential students from financially stable backgrounds who are academically well prepared to attend the highly selective university; the other, in the eastern part of the state, would "be the poorest state in America" if it were on its own, Moeser said, and its students generally do not have the means to pay even the in-state, subsidized tuition at Chapel Hill.

The Carolina Covenant program [provides qualifying students](#) (who are accepted into the program only after they are admitted through the regular admissions process) with enough grant money that, working up to 12 hours on work study, they don't have to borrow to pay for their educations; it also provides mentoring and a range of other support aimed at ensuring that they not only enroll but succeed academically. Numerous speakers at the conference discussed the need to reach down into the

elementary and secondary schools not only to find students, but to help them make their way through the academic pipeline.

Many of the public policy experts, scholars, financial aid officials and others who are [speaking at](#) and attending the conference applauded the idea behind the North Carolina program and others like it, especially given the country's changing demographics, in which students from low-income families are expected to make up ever-increasing proportions of the college-age population.

"I want a competition for these bright, talented low income students from all backgrounds," said Richard D. Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the Century Foundation who has long advocated for class-based affirmative action. But whether programs like those at North Carolina and elsewhere extend "beyond those [institutions] with the large endowments has yet to be seen," he said.

William E. (Brit) Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, said he was skeptical. "I think we will see the more elite public and private institutions adopting programs like this," he said. "But to think this is the ultimate solution, or a major part of the solution, would be inappropriate."

William G. Bowen, president emeritus of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, whose 2005 book *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* is [widely credited](#) with pushing elite colleges to pay more attention to low-income students and need-based aid, acknowledged at a news conference with Moeser Monday that whatever compunction institutions may feel to move in that direction runs headlong into another strong belief: in competition.

As a report released Monday by the College Board shows ([see related article](#)), colleges of all types are now awarding a significant proportion of their financial aid based on merit, often in the quest to attract better students in the related quest of trying to move up in the college rankings. Getting them to forgo that competition to provide more funds to low income students may be a hard sell, Bowen said.

"The temptation is tremendous to try to take someone away from Chapel Hill," he said. "I understand the forces that are pulling in the other direction."

Thomas G. Mortensen, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education who has made a career advocating, through research, on behalf of the underserved in higher education, had mixed feelings as he listened to the proceedings at Chapel Hill on Monday.

He credited UNC and other elite institutions with doing something meaningful to try to help low income students — especially since the colleges have in many cases paid too little attention to these students in the past — and said that "any movement" in that direction is valuable. But he noted that "all of these kids would be going to college someplace else," he said, and said that much more needs to be done to truly expand the pipeline to help the huge numbers of students who are not only financially needy but also left underprepared for college by their poor elementary and secondary educations.

"What proportion of higher education is represented here?" he asked rhetorically. "You can't be critical of this, but it isn't the answer."

Shirley A. Ort, who as associate provost and director of scholarships and financial aid at Chapel Hill both oversees the Covenant program and was credited by Moeser with proposing it, did not pretend that colleges like hers can solve the access problem alone. But she also insisted that efforts like those championed at this week's conference have helped to change the conversation, perhaps making other things, at other institutions, possible.

"Six or seven years ago, it was hard to have a discussion like this," said Ort, who added that Mortensen and a handful of others have long been "lonely voices" beating the drum about the need for colleges to do more to make room for students from lower income families.

Now, she said, “there is a growing awareness that we have to more, especially given the population that’s coming at us.” Carolina and others, she said, are just trying to do their part.

— [Doug Lederman](#)

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