

**Rebuttal to NY Times article which appeared March 31, 2009 “Paying in Full as the Ticket Into Colleges”
By Steve Hamilton, Alumni Council on Admissions, University of Pennsylvania**

This article makes some very broad statements, implying that colleges will behave differently in a tough economy. It implies colleges will drop their need-blind admission policies, or that a family who can pay full tuition will be ranked higher on the waitlist, or that a full-pay student will stand a better chance in the admissions process.

Some of the statements I find particularly problematic come out in the opening lines of this article:

“In the bid for a fat envelope this year, it may help, more than usual, to have a fat wallet.

Facing fallen endowments and needier students, many colleges are looking more favorably on wealthier applicants as they make their admissions decisions this year.

Institutions that have pledged to admit students regardless of need are finding ways to increase the number of those who pay the full cost in ways that allow colleges to maintain the claim of being need-blind – taking more students from the transfer or waiting lists, for instance, or admitting more foreign students who pay full tuition.”

This article offers minimal data to support its claims. Since it is making statements about “many colleges,” we are led to believe that the author has surveyed “many colleges.” In fact, this article cites exactly 12 sources.

Two of those sources are not college administrators – they are a consultant and an independent counselor. They do not work at a college, and they do not set any policy at a college.

Exactly ten colleges are cited in this article. (Williams College, Bowdoin College, Brandeis University, Middlebury College, Lawrence University, Oberlin College, Carleton College, Tufts University, Colby College, Grinnell College) The author has quotes from a staff member at nine of these schools. Only 4 of those quotes came from someone in an admissions capacity. Does this fairly represent the nearly 3,000 colleges in the US? Furthermore, as I examine those quotes, I find they don’t tend to support the article’s conclusion.

The Bowdoin Dean of Admissions says they will be expanding by 50 students over the next five years. There was no mention of waitlist, transfer, or international students. There was no mention of any change in admission policy or behavior.

The Grinnell Dean of Admissions actually refutes the article’s conclusion directly, saying they will meet their promise that no student will graduate with more than \$2,000/year in loans, and it sounds like Grinnell is ready to fight to keep this policy.

The Treasurer of Middlebury also directly refutes the article’s opening claims, telling us students will contribute more of their work earnings for their education, but the school is holding fast to their need-blind policy and meeting demonstrated need. The treasurer calls this a basic operating principle, and one of the last things they would move away from.

At Carleton, the Director of Student Financial Services tells us it is not rare for families earning \$200,000 per year to apply for aid, especially if they have a couple of kids going to college. The director feels the school must continue to be honest about their need-blind admission policy, but also notes that the economic crisis can make applicants and their families behave differently -- that some students will aim for a more selective school if they are able to pay in full.

The article contains a few quotes from the President of Williams, who also believes applicants may begin to behave differently in the face of an economic downturn. He feels lower income kids will begin to look lower on the list of colleges, while affluent kids may find opportunity to look further up the list. He later states that we cannot force colleges to be need-blind unless they have the resources.

At Oberlin, the Director of Financial Aid seems to indicate that financial consideration does not occur with the majority of the class or even a preponderance, but it is a factor. We are not told Oberlin's policies, or how the admissions effort was conducted before the economic downturn.

The President of Colby says that they will continue to replace loans with grants this year, though they cannot guarantee whether future budgets can handle the policy.

Are you keeping track? I am. So far, all of these quotes acknowledge an economic crisis, and tell us that some applicants and families might behave differently (perhaps misbehave). None of them show a college that has changed its behavior or policy.

To be fair, I found a few citations in this article which **might be interpreted** as supporting the article's conclusion. Here's a synopsis:

Without citing a particular source, the author claims that Tufts continues to read applications on a need-blind basis this year, but may not be able to continue doing so in the future.

The Brandeis Dean of Admissions tells us their school admitted 10% more international students this year, an area where they are not need-blind. They also expect to take more students from the waitlist and transfer pools.

The Dean of Admissions & Financial Aid at Lawrence University says that students who may be less needy, based on ZIP code or parents' background, might be more attractive in admissions.

The author has cleverly loaded this article with catchy school names and apparently credible titles, but in the final analysis, there's no data here. Three out of ten college sources **may or may not support** the article's claims. Three sources **directly refute** the conclusion. Four sources acknowledge an economic crisis, and tell us that applicants may behave differently.

I'm not denying that this economic crisis is widespread, and I have no doubt it will have some sort of impact on higher education, but this article fails to fairly or truthfully represent higher education, and it even fails to prove its own conclusions.

Not a single Ivy League institution was cited in this article. I wish the author had interviewed someone from Penn. Perhaps she did, but chose to exclude the Penn responses when we did not support her desired conclusion.

Penn's commitment to need-blind admissions is not wavering, and our commitment to making Penn affordable and accessible is not wavering in the least. In response to the economic concerns, Penn will see its lowest tuition increase in about 40 years, along with a substantial increase to the financial aid budget, which will retain a policy of awarding grants instead of loans. I am particularly proud of our campus executive leadership, who will not be taking any increase in salary this year.

My conclusion: Some authors are not so careful of what they print, so please be careful of what you read.