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Commentary: What elite universities can learn from Alexander Hamilton

By Erika M. Kitzmiller, Commentary

6 MIN READ



At the University of Pennsylvania’s recent commencement ceremony, Lin-Manuel Miranda, the playwright of Broadway’s award-winning musical, Hamilton, gave a passionate speech challenging Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric.



A student walks on the campus of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut November 12, 2015. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Miranda, the son of a Puerto Rican immigrant and recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship “genius grant,” implored Penn’s Class of 2016 to remember that many of them made miracles happen to graduate from Penn. Their families made miracles happen to get them there. He understands because his family did the same for him.

Generous, fully-funded loan-free tuition programs have afforded low and middle-income first generation students unprecedented opportunities. At Columbia, 18 percent of first-year students have parents who did not earn a bachelor’s degree; 12 percent of undergraduates have family incomes low enough that they qualify for full aid. Columbia and other institutions use the stories of these youth to attract and promote diversity. As their numbers increase, so does the awareness of the fiscal challenges that these students face.

Many of the students who benefit from these programs are still struggling financially. Because their packages often do not adequately account for extraneous expenses, students are cutting corners to cover the costs of textbooks, extracurriculars, and in some cases, rent and food. In a survey conducted last year, 22 percent of Cornell University students said that they skipped meals or ate less frequently to cut costs.

The problem is growing. As elite universities increasingly outsource their meal plans to for-profit entities, students have less access to inexpensive, healthy food options on or near campus. Schools should expand emergency meal plans and open food pantries to address these challenges. No student should have to choose between buying breakfast or books.

Faculty members can play a role in keeping college costs down, by assigning books and articles that are free in the library or on the internet, or by offering low-income first generation students part-time, flexible research opportunities so that they can retain their work-study positions and paid summer jobs while still developing the skills essential for the labor market and graduate school.

In addition to these research opportunities, low-income students need more help finding summer internships and on-campus research opportunities - the very experiences that their more affluent peers already rely on to cultivate networks and secure employment after graduation.

By discussing the opportunities and shortcomings at our institutions, we can let students know that they have allies. Those of us who, like Miranda, identify as first-generation college students can establish affinity groups - such as Barnard College’s Faculty are First Gen, Too! - to help students understand that they are not alone.

Faculty can also serve as activists for these students, demanding that our institutions recognize and help first-generation youth not only to graduate but to have access to the opportunities and experiences that our institutions promised them when they matriculated. Those of us who had families that worked miracles owe this to our students.

Clearly, elite institutions have done much to alter their culture and to become more responsive and welcoming to low-income first generation students. Many individuals probably think that families have an obligation to fund these extraneous costs - that universities have already done enough by giving out generous aid packages. Most of these families are already taking out loans to support their children. They are trying to work the kinds of miracles that Miranda talked about at Penn.

Elite institutions tout their commitment to diversity and benefit from the increased enrollment of these individuals. Their students benefit from the presence of low-income, first generation students. The ivory tower has the resources to ensure that all students can reap full advantage of the academic and social opportunities.

Amherst College is one example of success. Over the past five years, it has led the way initiating on-campus programs and services to attract low-income youth and guarantee them the support they need. Today, one in four Amherst students qualifies for federal Pell grants, which are earmarked for low-income families. A little over a decade ago, that figure was one in seven.

Making our nation’s elite college and universities sites of social mobility for low-income first-generation youth is, as Miranda suggests, part of the great American experiment. And in his protagonist, Alexander Hamilton, we can see an instructive lesson. Even Hamilton, the emigrant son who rose to national prominence, had much more support than the average King’s College student. His West Indian merchant employer, who supported Hamilton and his single mother through his adolescence, personally covered all of his expenses. Elite universities should marshal their resources and provide first-generation, low-income youth with a similar level of the support.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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