

Need-Blind Admissions Is Only in Name

Jeffrey Selingo's *Who Gets In and Why* examines the concept of need-blind admissions, exposing the gap between its promise of equity and the reality of its implementation. While many colleges tout need-blind policies as evidence of their commitment to fairness, Selingo reveals that these claims often mask deeper inequities and financial calculations. The term *need-blind* suggests that colleges admit students without considering their ability to pay, yet the book demonstrates that financial need still plays a critical role in shaping admissions and enrollment decisions, albeit in less visible ways. He accurately summarizes this tendency by stating: *"Even at need-blind schools, admission eventually can come down to money. Those colleges control how much they spend on financial aid by recruiting heavily in rich high schools and admitting in early decision a significant proportion of students who tend to be wealthier."*

One of the central critiques Selingo raises about need-blind admissions is that the label itself is misleading. Colleges advertise need-blind policies to convey an image of inclusivity and fairness, but the reality is that many of these institutions adopt need-aware practices at other stages of the process. For example, while admissions officers may not explicitly consider a student's financial need when evaluating their application, the financial aid office may play a decisive role in shaping the final class. This happens most often with borderline candidates or when crafting the institutional enrollment strategy. In such cases, a student's financial profile—whether they can pay full tuition or require significant aid—can become a deciding factor.

Selingo highlights how colleges use financial aid strategically to achieve institutional goals, a practice often at odds with the ideals of need-blind admissions. Many colleges employ enrollment management firms to analyze application data and model how various financial aid offers will influence enrollment decisions. This practice, sometimes called *financial aid leveraging*, enables colleges to allocate their aid budgets in ways that maximize tuition revenue. For instance, they might offer merit scholarships to attract affluent students who can cover most of the tuition while still feeling incentivized by the discount. These strategies often prioritize students who can pay more, even if their financial need is greater than others. Selingo points out that this approach undermines the notion of admissions being entirely blind to financial considerations.

Another critical point Selingo raises is how the emphasis on revenue generation through financial aid disproportionately affects middle- and low-income students. While wealthy families can afford full tuition and receive minimal aid, and low-income students might qualify for substantial need-based aid, middle-income families are often left in a precarious position. These families may not qualify for significant financial aid yet still struggle to afford the full cost of tuition. Selingo explains that such students are often caught in the *gap*, admitted with financial aid packages that fall short of meeting their demonstrated need. This practice, known as *gapping*, forces families to rely on loans, savings, or additional jobs to cover the shortfall, making it difficult for middle-income students to attend their desired schools. He aptly describes this practice when he says: *"As a seller, Yale gives out financial aid based only on need. The senior received an aid package totaling \$33,000, less than half of the university's \$72,000 price tag. While Yale's financial aid formula might say the family can afford the difference, the girl's mother tells Campbell reality is different."*

Selingo's observations are supported by specific examples of how financial considerations shape admissions outcomes. He recounts the story of a student whose financial need became a liability in the admissions process. Despite strong academic credentials, the student was placed on the waitlist at a need-aware institution because their aid package would strain the college's budget. Meanwhile, another student with comparable academic achievements but less financial need was admitted outright. Such decisions illustrate how colleges prioritize their financial health, even when it conflicts with the ideal of providing equitable access to education.

Public universities, traditionally seen as engines of upward mobility, are not exempt from these dynamics. With declining state funding, many public institutions have increasingly relied on out-of-state and international students, who pay higher tuition rates, to balance their budgets. This shift has often come at the expense of serving in-state, lower-income students. Selingo observes that some public universities allocate significant portions of their financial aid budgets to attract full-pay or near-full-pay students from other states or abroad, resulting in less aid available for the neediest applicants.

The merit-versus-need debate is another area where Selingo critiques the impact of financial aid policies. While need-blind admissions aim to create opportunities for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the growing reliance on merit-based aid often works against this goal. Merit aid, which rewards academic or extracurricular achievements, is frequently awarded to students from affluent backgrounds who have had greater access to resources and opportunities. Selingo emphasizes that many colleges have shifted their aid budgets from need-based to merit-based awards as a strategy to attract high-achieving students who can also contribute to tuition revenue. This shift not only exacerbates socioeconomic disparities but also raises questions about the true purpose of financial aid.

The disparities in financial aid allocation also reflect the broader stratification within higher education. Wealthier institutions with large endowments can afford to be both need-blind and meet the full demonstrated financial need of admitted students. Selingo contrasts these schools with less affluent colleges, which often adopt need-aware policies to remain financially viable. For example, Ivy League institutions like Harvard and Princeton boast generous financial aid programs that eliminate loans for low-income students, ensuring that cost is not a barrier for those they admit. In contrast, less wealthy colleges may admit students with substantial financial need but provide insufficient aid, effectively pricing them out of attendance. This dichotomy creates a tiered system in which access to higher education is increasingly determined by institutional wealth rather than individual merit.

Selingo's exploration of need-blind admissions ultimately reveals the ethical and practical tensions at the heart of the current system. While the concept promises fairness and equity, its implementation often falls short, as colleges prioritize financial sustainability over accessibility. The strategic use of financial aid to shape enrollment outcomes reflects a broader shift in higher education toward market-driven practices, where students are evaluated not only for their academic potential but also for their economic value to the institution. This dynamic raises important questions about the role of higher education in promoting social mobility and addressing systemic inequities.