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New white paper shows how America’s selective colleges can educate far more—and far more diverse—students

A new white paper from Harvard’s Making Caring Common explores the urgent need to reinvent selective colleges

Cambridge, Massachusetts – Selective colleges in the United States can greatly increase the number of applicants they accept each year to help alleviate staggering inequality in American higher education and excessive achievement pressure in many communities, according to a new white paper from [Making Caring Common](#), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The white paper, “[Innovation and Justice: Reinventing Selective Colleges](#)” makes the case that selective colleges should take innovative approaches to creating exciting, rigorous pathways to bachelor’s degrees that are more accessible, appealing, and affordable for economically and racially diverse students.

“Higher education in the United States is both highly inequitable and inaccessible to large numbers of people in this country,” said [Richard Weissbourd](#), lead author of the white paper, faculty director of Making Caring Common, and Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Kennedy School. “Selective colleges have contributed to this problem, and they should play a leading role in the solution.”

Selective colleges could combine traditional residential experiences, field experiences domestically and/or abroad, online learning, satellite campuses, and rich and varied internships in all sorts of ways that are just as rigorous as their current model but more affordable and appealing for many students. “Selective” colleges are defined in the paper as those accepting less than 50% of applicants each year.

The white paper suggests innovative, feasible, short- and long-term strategies for building these pathways; highlights the many benefits of these new pathways; and explores the challenges they pose and offers suggestions for meeting these challenges.

“COVID-19 has been disastrous for colleges across the country. But it has also created extraordinary opportunities to reshape higher education,” says Jake Weissbourd, co-author of the white paper and Director of Partnerships and Strategic Initiatives at Verto Education. “Selective colleges may have stumbled upon a rare moment when they can become more vibrant and exciting, do what makes sense financially, and do what is democratic and right.”

Key benefits of these innovative pathways include:

1. **Deeper learning experiences in fields such as public service that advance the public good.** Selective colleges can create pathways that are far more effective at realizing what they often declare as central to their mission—cultivating students' ethical character and civic purpose.
2. **Greater attunement to the strengths and challenges of racially, economically, and culturally diverse students.** New pathways would be more affordable for students and could better align with the realities of students' lives.
3. **More varied, engaging, and deeper learning experiences for diverse learners.** Innovative models can be constructed that harness insights from learning theory and are more responsive to diverse learners.
4. **More opportunities for people with parenting responsibilities, people engaged in part-time work, and people at different stages of their career.** Pathways that are partly or fully online could broaden access to parents and soaring numbers of non-college age adults who are seeking degrees.
5. **Greater appeal to employers.** Experiential pathways are likely to make students more appealing to prospective employers looking for real-world experience.
6. **Reduced student cost.** There are myriad ways of creating pathways that are less costly for students and colleges.
7. **Reduced harmful achievement pressure in high school.** One important way to reduce achievement pressure is to markedly increase the number of spaces available at selective colleges.
8. **Leadership in the online and hybrid learning space.** Selective colleges, given their expressed commitment to high-quality pedagogy, could lead in designing innovative online and hybrid learning experiences.

To read the full white paper and learn more about Making Caring Common, visit www.makingcaringcommon.org.

About Making Caring Common: Making Caring Common (MCC), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), helps parents, educators, and communities raise children who are concerned about others and the common good, and who work to create a more just world.