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# Our University: High Achieving Students

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## Our University: High Achieving Students

*Fifth in a series of who our students are and how they perform.*

The role of every professor, in every classroom, guiding every student, is to challenge that student to a level at which he or she has never before been challenged. If a university does nothing else, this alone will mark it as successful.

*Man's mind stretched by a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.*

-- Oliver Wendell Holmes

High-achieving students are infrequently thought of as an underserved group; but, from a number of perspectives, they are. Performance standards for all students migrate to the threshold level of expectation. As test scores and high school preparation slide, the preparedness of students for university study and general student ability impact the level of quality for which universities aim. Race and ethnicity, geographic location of origin and income level are all correlated with the likelihood of success at the university even for high-performing students. But one factor we can control is the level of expectation we have of our students.

For example, only 9% of the students at the most selective research universities are from the bottom half of the income ladder, while 74% of the high-performing students were from the highest quartile of the income spectrum, according to Carnevale and Rose in a study supported through *The Century Foundation* in 2003.

Universities may unknowingly treat rural high-performing students differently than urban high-performing students. Or, rural students may have different expectations of themselves. A 2010 study by Holsapple and Posselt revealed that high-performing students from rural areas are less likely to complete bachelor's degrees by their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Something causes this difference.

Geographic stratification has an impact on access to the best schools almost as powerful as race and ethnicity. With rural students, expectations from the universities are often lowered, but, more importantly, the students' expectations of themselves also suffer, driven by a lack of exposure to diverse career fields or role models.

One telling factor in the Holsapple and Posselt study that may not come as a surprise is that these high-performing high school students tended to study at senior institutions that were closer to home. This fact though suggests a course of action. The way for institutions to seek out and attract rural students who may be high achievers is clear: create a campus environment that is cognizant of their roots, and help them expand their views, not only of the world, but of themselves.

Geographic stratification is just one manifestation of other, more generalized issues that can keep high-potential students from being well served by universities. According to an Educational Testing Service study in 2010, high-achieving low-income high school students enroll in four-year institutions at half the rate of similarly gifted high-income students.

Students respond to the environment in which they find themselves. In *The Shape of the River*, by Bowen and Bok, it was reported that 86% of the students who attended the most selective public universities graduated in six years, while 51% of the students who attended less selective public institutions managed to do so.

The unfortunate response of some institutions is to lower standards in an effort to respond to the lower rates of degree completion, when in fact the data suggests doing just the opposite. Higher expectations get better results.

For some this is counter intuitive, but for those who understand the nature of the university environment, it makes perfect sense. Students, like athletes, often play up to the level of competition. In an environment of low challenge, lower effort is the norm. This hurts all students, but completely countermands the opportunities that state-supported public universities owe to high potential students.

All students must be challenged, but especially those with a history of high scholastic achievement in their high school studies. By challenging these students, the performance of the general population of the university will be improved, not lowered.

Our university can only be credited with the performance that we require or inspire.