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College Board Experiments With Selling Names of the Needy

The College Board is experimenting with allowing admissions offices to obtain the names of potential students from low-income backgrounds in a program that had been eliminated for fear that it was being used to focus attention on wealthy applicants.

While the College Board is best known for the SAT, a related activity involves selling colleges names of SAT takers with certain score levels and certain other characteristics. So a college seeking to increase its population of female students with an interest in science can buy names of young women who achieved certain scores on the SAT in mathematics, for example, and send them recruiting material. The slicing and dicing of names can get quite detailed, so a Roman Catholic college could do the previously mentioned search and focus on Catholic students if it wanted to do so. But colleges can't buy (at least from the College Board) the names of low-income students.

As reported this weekend by the [Chicago Tribune](#), however, the College Board has started an experiment to allow colleges to purchase such names, although a step removed from direct income information. Instead, colleges in the pilot program will be able to identify probable low-income students by purchasing names of those who live in certain low-income zip codes or attend certain low-income high schools. This may sound innocuous — after all, colleges routinely plan visits to certain high schools in impoverished areas as part of efforts to recruit disadvantaged students. But the pilot represents a significant shift for the College Board, which moved away from selling zip code-based names 20 years ago when some colleges were using the information to try to attract wealthier students.

The experiment — which features strict rules designed to make sure colleges use the purchases only to increase socioeconomic diversity, not to limit it — come at the request of colleges that wanted new ways to reach low-income students. Many educators believe that the key reason the poorest students have low enrollment rates in higher education is not a lack of *availability* of financial aid, but lack of information about aid that exists. The only way to combat this problem, they argue, is direct communication with prospective students and their families, with information focused on their economic situation.

Sandra Riley, a spokeswoman for the College Board, confirmed via e-mail that the experimental program had started. Riley said that it would take another six months or so before officials would have enough information to comment on how the pilot is working.

For the College Board, the issue is important not just because of the educational issues involved, but because selling the names of potential college students is a big business. The College Board sells names to about 1,000 colleges and universities, which pay about 31 cents a name (a price similar to that charged by the two main competitors in the name-selling business: ACT and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions).

In addition to the big names in name-selling, [several other companies](#) are seeking a piece of the market, and some are selling direct income information — without any of the hand-wringing that the College Board has had on the practice. Zinch, for example, lets high school students create profiles with levels of detail that exceed those commonly used for such searches and students can provide information on just about anything they want (400 information fields), including family income. Colleges then pay for access. Zinch is currently selling access to its database to 540 colleges, about twice the level of a year ago.

Brad Hagen, one of the founders of Zinch, said that the “College Board is realizing that the recruiting game isn’t as simple as providing names and test scores anymore.” Applicants want “more information and transparency,” so letting them share family income (but not require it) makes perfect sense, he said.

“Income levels have long been part of the actual application,” he said. “We believe that by allowing students to share that information earlier, colleges can better understand how they might cater the recruitment messages with financial aid packages. Understanding the needs and opportunities allow for better decision making on both sides — student and college.” Hagen said that colleges doing searches of the company’s database appear to be going for a “holistic” approach, paying less attention to test scores and more attention to a range of qualities, including income, that give them a sense of students and their backgrounds.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

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