



Signed By:

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No Apologies Initiative

Our coalition of undergraduate governments and first-generation, low-income student groups supports the No Apologies initiative, with the goal that by the 2017-2018 college application cycle, application fees will automatically be waived for first-generation and low-income applicants to our schools.

Four years ago, I began my fight for a better future for my family. As a low income student, I knew that going to college was one of the best ways to break out of the cycle of poverty. My choices, however, were limited. My list of colleges only comprised of the few schools that could meet 100 percent of my demonstrated need. Getting into one of these schools was, with little exaggeration, one of the only ways I could afford to go to college. With our financial situation at that time, even the low cost of the wonderful nearby community college would have been too much.

I knew that the college application process would be difficult. What I hadn't anticipated was the financial burden that the process would put on my family. While these schools provided outstanding financial aid once admitted, the support in the application process was another story. Between \$11 per school to send test scores, \$16 per school for the CSS profile, and \$75 to just submit an application, there were moments where I wondered whether I had the financial ability to even apply. These numbers seem insignificant, but considering that the average high school senior applies to 10 schools, the costs add up. It was a thousand dollars that could have gone to food or rent.

Even after discovering that there were a limited number of waivers I could apply for to help subsidize the fees, I couldn't justify spending money on the remaining amount, money that was the equivalent of three weeks worth of food for my family.

In a last ditch effort, I emailed the remaining schools explaining my financial circumstance, praying that they would waive the fees. My emails were filled with apologies. I was apologizing for the inconvenience I was causing. I was apologizing for how embarrassed I felt. I was apologizing for being poor.

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The night I sent my emails, I didn't sleep. I thought I had ruined my chances of going to college. Why would these schools want a student who couldn't even afford to pay such a small fee? Who did I think I was to even ask? Eventually, all of the schools did end up waiving the fees, but the process to get there was convoluted. It was humiliating. It was unnecessary. The guilt and shame alone almost stopped me from going to college.

My story is not uncommon. In 2014, the White House report, ["Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students"](#) highlighted these application fees as one of the main deterrents for students from low socio-economic backgrounds from applying to college. Even with the availability of waivers, it takes a certain level of self-advocacy and knowledge of the educational system to know to even ask for them, knowledge that is inherently less accessible for those who are the first in their families to go to college.

The lack of socioeconomic diversity at these elite institutions reflect the high barriers of the process. A [recent New York Times study](#) found that in these colleges, there are more students from the 1 percent, making more than 630K a year, than there are students from the bottom 60 percent. In the top 25 US universities, [only 3 percent of](#) the combined student population came from the bottom quarter of income earners.

College access organizations like Questbridge and Posse are doing fantastic work to address this socioeconomic disparity by tackling issues of undermatching, the concept that low-income students with the necessary academic credentials are not applying to colleges where they would be competitive. However, there should also be a greater onus and responsibility for colleges themselves to do the same.



In 2015, Bowdoin and Trinity took on that responsibility, leveling the playing field by automatically waiving application fees for all students who will be the first in their family to attend college. Bowdoin took it a step further and waived it for all students applying for financial aid.

With that simple move, they removed an unnecessary barrier for low-income students: no more humiliating emails explaining why I couldn't afford to pay a small fee. No more sleepless nights questioning if I was selfish for essentially gambling a thousand dollars away.

As a poor student in this elite space, I, along with a coalition of low-income, first generation students and student body governments, urge our colleges to follow the example of Bowdoin and Trinity and automatically waive the application fees for low-income and first generation applicants this upcoming admissions cycle.

If higher education is serious about our commitment to providing access to students regardless of their class background, we need to actively work to ensure that they are not deterred even before they apply. Eliminating these application fees will be an integral step towards tackling the socio-economic disparities within our student population.

By the luck of the draw, we were afforded the opportunity to enter the Ivory Tower. It is our responsibility and our prerogative to open those very same doors for those who follow.

-Viet Nguyen

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