

## Need-blind admissions challenged

Brian Freskos October 27, 2013

When prospective students submit their applications to UNC, admissions officials consider many factors — but applicants' financial situation is not one of them.

UNC's admissions policy is need blind, but the University faces significant challenges ahead in meeting financial aid obligations amid rising costs and shrinking state and federal support, underscoring the growing importance of private donations, said Steve Farmer, vice provost for enrollment and undergraduate admissions.

"It's harder to meet the need than it's ever been," he said. "We've been able to hold on, and we're hoping to continue to hold on."

Revelations surfaced last week that George Washington University misled applicants about the role their financial situations played in admissions decisions, raising fresh concerns that budgetary woes will force universities to rethink admissions policies. The Hatchet student newspaper reported that George Washington gave preference to wealthier applicants while wait-listing low-income ones — a practice that need-blind policy advocates fear is growing commonplace.

"A troubled economy is putting extra pressure on families to be able to pay for tuition and on colleges to raise not only tuition revenue but also revenue from private sources," said Halley Potter, policy associate with The Century Foundation, a left-leaning think tank.

Richard Vedder, director of The Center for College Affordability and Productivity, said being need-blind is growing more difficult in the face of dwindling state and private assistance.

"My concern is that may be a more prevalent problem than just at George Washington because universities are so desirous to get ahead of other universities," he said.

Farmer said UNC has never seriously considered replacing its need-blind admissions policy. Still, he said the University is ratcheting up fundraising efforts because private donations will be critical to preserving student financial support.

"The scale of the effort is going to be different than anything we've taken on before," he said.

George Washington scrambled to defend its admissions procedures after The Hatchet began publishing reports last week. Officials said their “need aware” admissions policy enabled the university to provide more attractive, albeit fewer, aid packages.

Experts say it is not unusual for universities to mislead or be secretive about admissions policies, as the desire to foster a prestigious reputation conflicts with goals of keeping access to higher education equitable.

“By keeping admissions behind a closed door, colleges hope that they can do what they need in order to climb their way in rankings without getting public outcry,” Potter said. “That’s really frustrating because colleges, whether public or private, are receiving huge public subsidies ... and they have a duty to the public to be transparent.”

Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said he could not fault George Washington for being need aware given budgetary pressures, but it should have been more transparent.

“It’s worth investigating what happened there,” he said.