Stanford wises up

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Stanford University's announcement that it would cover the $36,000 annual tuition bills for students from families making less than $100,000 a year and also provide free room and board for students from families making less than $60,000 annually drew broad praise. Too many elite schools are simply beyond the means of many smart kids from middle-class and working-class families, even those who receive financial aid.

Stanford's motives aren't necessarily pure. Senators have been pressing top colleges with gigantic endowments to actually use their riches to help their students, who have struggled with steady increases in tuition bills. Stanford - which has $17.2 billion, trailing only Harvard ($34.6 billion) and Yale ($22.5 billion) - was a fair target of this criticism, given that its tuition has risen by more than double the rate of inflation the past 10 years.

The university also had to worry about keeping pace with the many other elite schools - including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown and Pomona College - that have offered similar tuition breaks in hopes of attracting outstanding students from less affluent families.

Still, whatever Stanford's reasons, the university should be applauded. A great education is more of a pathway to a successful life than ever before. Reducing the cost barrier to such an education for students who don't have rich parents may be a relatively small step toward a fairer, more egalitarian society, but it is a welcome one.

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