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SPECIAL REPORT

Campus Revolutionary

Tony Marx has a radical plan to get more poor kids into top colleges, starting with Amherst

Anthony W. Marx had never even thought of being a college president. "I was minding my own business" as a Columbia University political science professor in 2002, he says, when a friend who was an Amherst College alum put Marx's name in the hopper to be president of the Massachusetts liberal arts institution. Sure, Marx was flattered, but he also felt underqualified. A career academic, his most important administrative experience had come before graduate school, when he helped found a college in South Africa to educate blacks deprived by apartheid. "That is very nice," he wrote back to his friend. "But I've never been a chairman, a dean, or a provost, and besides, I didn't go to Amherst."

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Amherst's search committee felt the same way and tossed his file into the reject pile. But after grilling many top college honchos, a student member remembered Marx and suggested that the group give him a second look.

When Marx finally met the committee, he made an impassioned appeal. Elite U.S. colleges such as Amherst, he said, are perpetuating deep inequalities in American society. They equate success with serving the privileged elite and have largely abandoned talented youth from poor families, he charged. This deepens the country's growing class divisions and exacerbates the long-term decline in economic and social mobility. Feeling he had nothing to lose since he hadn't sought the job, Marx exhorted the trustees to tackle the problem head-on. "I'm not interested in being a custodian over a privileged place," he remembers telling the gathering of wealthy alums and academic stars that day.

As it turned out, Marx's radical message was just what Amherst trustees wanted to hear. Over the past two decades the college had committed to increasing minorities to a third of the 1,650-student campus, up from 13% in 1985. But while this brought in more low-income students, Amherst remains an incubator of the elite. More than half its students come from families prosperous enough to pay the full $42,000 annual tab out of their own pockets. Many shell out thousands more for cars, meals out, and other extras. (One student showed up recently with two BMWs -- one a convertible for sunny days.) "We were blown away" by Marx's passion and commitment, recalls Jide Zeitlin, a partner at Goldman, Sachs & Co. (GS) who has since become chair of Amherst's board.

Since Marx, now 46, took over in 2003 as Amherst's youngest president ever, he has waged a ceaseless crusade to make the college a leader in welcoming more lower-income students. It's a formidable goal considering how programmed the place is to seek out the best and the brightest: A record 6,300 students applied for just 431 spots in last fall's entering class. Now, Marx is challenging everything from an admissions process tilted toward affluent students to social customs that divide rich and poor students on campus. Essentially, he has set in motion a new affirmative action initiative, this time based on class rather than race.

Marx began making his case soon after he showed up at Amherst's clublike campus, with its rolling lawns and acres of tennis courts. Realizing that a college president is no ship captain who can change course by barking commands, he set out to woo students, administrators, faculty, trustees, and alumni.

One volatile issue he faced was the potential for a backlash from affluent parents worried that their high-performing kids might be displaced by poor students with less glittering résumés and lower test scores. To head off such concerns, Marx wants to expand overall admission by 120 or so slots to be reserved for low-income students. Such a move requires an aggressive campaign to raise hundreds of millions of dollars, but it also protects affluent kids from facing lower admissions odds.

At the same time, welcoming students who lower the school's 1420 SAT average also could jeopardize its No. 2 position in the *U.S.*

News & World Report ranking of liberal-arts colleges -- making Amherst less attractive to affluent students. (Williams College is No. 1.) Meanwhile, the influential athletic department is fretting over the impact of Marx's campaign on the school's 67 "athletic admits," who tend to be lower-qualified academically than other Amherst students. And professors fear that since many low-income students, however smart, come from inferior high schools, they will require a lot of help to get up to speed in writing, math, and science. "Because most professors are not fully equipped to handle this, there will be a big debate about how far to go," predicts veteran English professor Barry O'Connell, an ardent Marx supporter.

Marx already has won over many of Amherst's largely liberal professors to the basic concept. He's hoping that by the fall, faculty and trustees will approve a formal plan to give more of Amherst's coveted slots, perhaps as many as 25%, to students poor enough to qualify for a Pell Grant (usually meaning a family income of less than $40,000 a year). Doing so would vault Amherst far ahead of other elite privates such as Harvard University, where 10% of undergrads are low-income. "If we are sufficiently aggressive, we will force the rest of elite higher education to be much more serious about this," says Marx.

Boosting socioeconomic diversity is already a front-burner issue on the campuses of elite colleges. Everyone from Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers to William G. Bowen, ex-president of Princeton University, is grappling with a deeply troubling fact of American life: that 30 years of inequality have all but shut off top colleges to the poor.

Kids from the lowest socioeconomic quartile represent a mere 3% of students at the 146 most selective U.S. universities, vs. 74% from the top quartile, according to the Century Foundation, a New York think tank. It's not just a problem at elite schools, either. By age 24 only 8% of these bottom-quarter students have earned a BA from any U.S. college, vs. 46% of those from top-quarter families, according to Stephen Rose, co-author of the Century study. As educated baby boomers retire over the next 15 years, they will be followed in the workforce by more minority youth who are poor and less likely to have a degree. Says Harvard's Summers: "Social mobility is a central challenge for our country."

Harvard already has a high-profile initiative to bring in more low-income kids. Yale, Princeton, and Williams are undertaking similar plans, though none is as ambitious as Marx's. Bowen, who now heads the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a big funder of higher-education research, is on a crusade to win over admissions officers with statistics showing that low-income students succeed at elite colleges. "America's most selective institutions need to put a thumb on the scale" in favor of these students, Bowen argues.

Marx may not have been looking for a job as a campus revolutionary, but in some ways he has been preparing for the role ever since college (yes, an elite: Yale University, class of 1981). He grew up in Manhattan, where his parents settled after fleeing Germany during Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Marx's mother worked as a physical therapist after graduating from the University of California at Berkeley; his father never got a degree but earned a comfortable living as a middle manager at a metals-trading firm.

At Yale, Marx's interest in politics propelled him into the anti-apartheid movement. That led to a job with a South African educational group that was starting a school called Khanya College to help disadvantaged blacks get into the country's elite colleges. It was a formative experience: Security policed raided the house he shared -- illegally -- with several blacks, and friends were tortured and some even killed. After a year in South Africa, Marx returned to the U.S. to enroll in graduate school at Princeton. But he returned frequently to work on Khanya, spending nearly three years in South Africa on and off while pursuing a PhD in international politics. He learned, he says, that "if you can do this with kids who have suffered under apartheid, then you can't tell me we can't do better in the U.S., with all the resources we have."

TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

Even though the board hired Marx to remake Amherst, he's not taking that mandate for granted. First, to give his vision dramatic force, he asked the trustees last year to award an honorary doctorate to Nelson Mandela, whom he came to admire deeply during his years in South Africa. At a ceremony last May in New York, Mandela warned 500-plus trustees, faculty, alumni, and students that "economic inequality [in the U.S.] is growing, not declining. America's great colleges and universities...must open the door more widely. Let Amherst set the pace." The next month, Marx took 30 people, including most of the board, on a retreat to discuss his initiative. To highlight America's rich-poor gaps, he chose Kykuit, the breathtaking Hudson River estate built by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1913, when he was the world's wealthiest man. Amid the extensive ceramic, art, and antique car collections, Marx got down to business. He asked the trustees to fantasize about how Amherst could meet Mandela's challenge. "Imagine that Amherst could be free to everyone," he posited. "Get rid of the economic constraints completely. Now, which students would you take?"

Marx also laid out the economics of his campaign. Amherst's endowment surged 19% in fiscal 2005, to nearly $1.2 billion, or $712,000 per student. The college was also wrapping up a $120 million renovation that will make room for about 100 more students. But it would take hundreds of millions more to maintain Amherst's enviable 8-to-1 student-faculty ratio, plus cover the tuition and extra teaching costs for the new students Marx wants to draw. Could they raise that kind of money? he challenged. By the end of the three days the trustees had begun to plan the largest fund-raising campaign in the college's 184-year history -- $400 million to $500 million over five or so years.

THE ADMISSIONS OFFICE

The centerpiece of Marx's crusade is to change what happens in the converted 19th century farmhouse where Amherst's 14

admissions officers work. Marx is convinced that the process is stacked against poor kids. But changing that threatens the entire admissions rationale of elite colleges. The key issue: how much to lower academic credentials. Amherst got to No. 2 in the rankings in part because of its incoming students' stellar grades and test scores. Those factors are just one part of college rankings, so Amherst might slip only a few spots if other selective colleges don't follow its lead. Still, that could hurt. "If Marx lets in more low-income kids, he's going to risk his school's reputation," cautions Anthony Carnevale, a senior fellow at the National Center on Education & the Economy.

Right now, Amherst ranks each of the thousands of applications it receives every fall on an academic scale of one (outstanding) to seven (inadmissible). Most students admitted for academic reasons alone are ones, meaning they were at or near the top of their high-school class and scored 1520 or higher on the SAT. Such over-the-top performance typically aligns with affluence. In fact, only 11% of U.S. kids scoring that high on the SAT come from the bottom 40% of family-income brackets, while 75% are from the top 40%, according to a study by the Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education.

Fortunately for Marx, the person he inherited to run admissions already had a passion for democratizing elite colleges. The son of a high school football coach, Amherst Dean of Admission Tom Parker was one of the four lowest-income students in the 1969 class at Williams College -- "so I know how these places can transform poor kids," says Parker.

Since Marx came along, Parker has been speaking out about a virtually taboo subject: how top universities already bend their standards for all kinds of kids. There are the affirmative action programs for minorities, which most elite schools still run. There are also so-called legacy admits, for whom Amherst reserves roughly 10% of its seats, says Parker. Alumni kids get red-carpet treatment, often including a personal audience with Parker. Yet they rank as twos, on average, he says -- meaning that some score three or less and wouldn't be admitted on their academic credentials alone. But top universities simply can't ignore legacy donations. "The way you finance a place like this is with alumni contributions," says Parker.

Then there are the athletic admits, who get 16% of each year's slots. They rank even lower, just 3.5. Amherst reaches clear down to fives -- meaning SATs of 1250 to 1300 -- to snag some hot football and ice hockey players. Given the importance of sports to most elite schools' images, athletic admits are a necessity, too. "If we don't take any fives for football, the team will turn into a travesty," says Parker. "With ice hockey, we'd be talking about not having a team at all."

Bringing in more low-income kids would require added compromise. To meet Marx's 25% goal, Amherst would have to take more threes, says Parker, meaning those who may have straight As but SATs as low as 1360. Even though Amherst already does so for minorities, legacies, and athletes, faculty members are worried. "This could be a radical departure that fundamentally changes the character of our institution," warns physics professor David Hall, who heads the Faculty Committee on Admissions & Financial Aid.

Marx hopes to ease such concerns by finding more top-notch low-income applicants. Certainly, many students have never even heard of Amherst. So Marx is asking his admissions officers to visit more low-income high schools. And he's enlisting Amherst students in a tele-mentoring program in which they walk seniors from those schools through the college application process. Marx also started using QuestBridge, a Palo Alto (Calif.) nonprofit that has enlisted 8,000 high school teachers to identify talented low-income students for elite colleges.

However noble his goal, Marx's push for a new admissions policy may be opening a Pandora's box. Some supporters think that to make room for poor kids, Amherst should rethink its rationale for letting in less-qualified legacies and athletes. "There is no principled reason to have a hereditary system" of preferences, says Hall. Moreover, "the athletics arms race excludes people who want to learn." Others resent such views. Some faculty may see the athletes as "dumb jocks, but in reality they're some of the smartest kids in the country," says Peter Gooding, who stepped down last spring after 27 years as athletic director but has stayed on as soccer coach.

STUDENTS

Getting into a place like Amherst doesn't mean low-income students will automatically thrive, either. Rachel Cardona showed up on the Amherst quad in 2000 from a high school in Harlem, the Manhattan Center for Science & Mathematics. When she was 16 and living in a Brooklyn housing project, her mother demanded that she quit school to care for her four younger siblings. Cardona refused and moved out. She spent the next two years bouncing around, staying with her grandmother, her debate coach, even in shelters. Still, she managed to graduate as the top female student in her class.

To Cardona, Amherst was as foreign as Mars. "I didn't have much exposure to brand names," she recalls, "so when I heard students talking about Abercrombie, I thought it was a person." Her dorm mates got regular phone calls, care packages, and visits from their parents, while Rachel didn't.

The worst indignity was when she put on her apron to work in Valentine Hall, or Val, as the campus cafeteria is known. Although the job was part of Cardona's financial-aid package, it was an alienating experience. "A lot of the affluent students have no consideration for the staff," she says. "Even my friends wouldn't look at me when I was in my apron." After work, Cardona often went back to her room to sleep before getting up to study all night -- a grueling routine she found necessary to keep up with classes. After Cardona graduated in December, 2004, Marx hired her as a special assistant to help recruit low-income students and better integrate them on

campus.

Val, it turns out, is the crucible of class and other identifying social markers at Amherst. During meals inside the sprawling Georgian complex, students sort themselves out by race and status. On a fall evening during the supper rush, Michael Simmons, a black student from Chicago, looks over the balcony and decodes the scene. "Down there is what they call the Black Hole," where mostly low-income minority students sit, he says. Over there, at the far end of the cafeteria, "is where the athletes congregate. You can't walk over there unless you play a sport or know a lot of people. It's an unspoken fiat, but it is very well-followed."

Simmons, whose single mother runs a small hair salon, got off to a rough start. He did so poorly in his first semester that Amherst asked him to take a year off. After taking college classes back home, he returned in 2003 determined to buckle down. Now an articulate senior, he sports a B+ average and is the popular president of the student government. Last summer he interned for Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and now has his sights set on law school. Simmons says poorer kids are often put off by the preppy attire and lavish living they can't afford. "Low-income students can come out of here feeling diminished," he says.

To lessen the social dissonance, Marx has set out to get the whole campus talking. He holds meetings for students to discuss class differences and invites smaller groups to come for "fireside chats." His "mission has become very palpable on campus," says Jake Maguire, a junior from Attleboro, Mass. In his talks, Marx discusses ideas such as beefing up an already generous financial-aid program. At Amherst a "full ride," which about 15% of students now receive, includes tuition, room, and board, plus up to $5,000 extra a year to cover travel, books, and other expenses. Marx wants to add more aid to help poor students buy computers or bring their families to the campus for parents' weekends.

Marx also is talking with low-income students about how to integrate the campus better. Cardona is urging him to require all students to work at Val or at an off-campus job. Simmons wants the college to send all students to off-campus retreats to mix outside the exclusive Amherst bubble. "We have to figure out ways to make sure students feel more welcome here," says Simmons, whom Marx appointed to Amherst's Committee on Academic Priorities, a key faculty committee.

THE FACULTY

Economics professor Geoffrey Woglom is the quintessential Amherst prof. Engaging and erudite, he has been teaching economics since he arrived in 1978 from Yale, where he played lacrosse with Senator John F. Kerry (D-Mass.). In his spacious office where his playful spaniel sprawls across the floor, Woglom admits he's nervous about Marx's crusade. The faculty is already struggling to educate all those other students admitted for nonacademic reasons, he says. "I want to make sure we're doing a good job with the diversity we already have."

Woglom and the 200-odd other faculty members have a lot of power. They showed their clout a decade ago when a previous administration lowered admission standards to beef up a woeful football team, the Lord Jeffs (short for Lord Jeffery Amherst, who gave the college its name). Outraged professors demanded -- and won -- the dismissal of the admissions dean, as well as a nearly 40% cut in football admits, to the current 14 a year. Since the professors will be teaching any new crop of poor students, Marx must assure them they can handle the influx.

So far the response has been mixed, says Faculty Dean Gregory S. Call. Professors understand that just as class background divides students socially, so does it separate them academically. Math professor David A. Cox says his top students arrive with three semesters of calculus plus linear algebra, while some poor ones struggle just to get through the introductory level. Adds sociology professor Jan Dizard: "There's also a cultural mismatch: Working-class kids tend to come from schools that emphasize following orders, while Amherst values thinking outside the box." Tim Zeiser agrees. A junior whose single mother is a bank teller, he says he wasn't pushed in high school on Long Island and never had to write long papers. "In the first semester I had a 10-page paper due, and I just bombed it."

Marx is all too aware of the problem, which he says reflects the sorry state of U.S. high schools in general. He estimates that 10% to 15% of Amherst students -- not just poor kids, either -- have difficulty keeping up. That's a remarkably candid assessment from an elite college president. Marx thinks Amherst can meet the challenge. It already invites incoming students with relatively low test scores to a three-week summer science and math program. When school's in session, they can turn to writing and math centers, both staffed by professors and student tutors. Last year they handled several thousand requests.

Now, Woglom and Cox are taking part in an experiment to make rigorous beginner courses more successful. Last fall, Woglom taught introductory economics to 10 invited students instead of the usual 28. Week after week he painstakingly helped them work through problems his brightest students would grasp in an instant. "I spent one hell of a lot of time on just 10 students," he says. The payoff: They finished with basically the same average as students in normal sections. Woglam and his colleagues argue that Amherst will have to hire more professors to handle additional low-income kids.

Marx expects to sew up his plan in the spring, taking into account faculty suggestions. A final pitch will go before the board either in late spring or the fall. If he gets the campus behind him, Marx hopes, it would "help shift the focus of the American public toward this issue." But even if he succeeds, the practical impact of his crusade isn't clear. Only 20 or 30 colleges have the financial might to

contemplate this kind of gold-plated approach. He also fears that if Amherst and others succeed, they may just wind up stealing the best poor kids from less prestigious schools.

The questions won't stop him, though. In the end he hopes more students like Cardona and Simmons will inspire the U.S. to work harder to cultivate talent among its poorest children. To Marx this isn't a revolutionary goal; he sees it as a return to Amherst's roots. The college, he notes, was founded in 1821 by Noah Webster, creator of the *American Dictionary*, whose portrait hangs in Marx's office. "The object of this institution," Webster wrote, is "educating young men in indigent circumstances, but of hopeful piety and promising talents." The wording is antiquated, and women weren't allowed back then. But there's nothing dated about the sentiment.

By William C. Symonds