

Connecticut Debate Association

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Online Tournament

Resolved: College admission in the United States should be significantly reformed.

Note: Aff cannot simply point out problems with college admission but must propose a reform that solves any problems they point out. For example, it is pointless to argue “Resolved: The weather should be significantly improved” as we have no way to do anything about the weather other than wait for another day, no matter how bad the weather may be.

Unfair advantages are the rule in college admissions, not the exception

The Baltimore Sun, By RICHARD E. VATZ, MAR 22, 2019

The scheme, which allegedly began in 2011, centered on the owner of a for-profit Newport Beach college admissions company that wealthy parents are accused of paying to help their children cheat on college entrance exams and to falsify athletic records of students to enable them to secure admission to elite schools.

The late, brilliant comedian Joan Rivers’ favorite catchphrase was “Grow up!” It was said in jest, but meant in earnest to wake her shocked audiences from their stupor long enough to realize that her comedic targets were doing horrible things all the time.

It is in this same spirit that I urge the nation to “Grow up!” in its understanding of the university admissions process. The incredulity expressed upon the “discovery” that television stars Lori Loughlin, Felicity Huffman and other high-powered principals conspired to fraudulently get their children and others entrance into elite colleges and universities is itself incredible.

While the individual criminality of the particular perpetrators – both applicants and school officials — is somewhat surprising, the academy, despite its claims of devotion to Lady Justice style blindness, has never been very meritocratic in its admissions practices.

The god-term in universities today is “diversity” — a goal articulated ostensibly to rectify past discrimination committed, in part, against groups, mostly minorities, who couldn’t gain fair admission to higher education in the past. But the policies only selectively redress such unfair and unequal treatment: Jewish, Catholic and other disfavored applicants for most of the history of higher education were either not admitted to major universities or were limited by a quota system, but there are few compensatory initiatives at colleges and universities intended to redress those actions.

In fact, Harvard University’s infamous race-conscious admissions policy has literally gone on trial. In the words of The Chronicle of Higher Education, “The case, brought by a nonprofit group called Students for Fair Admissions Inc. ... claims the university discriminates against Asian-American applicants by limiting the number of those students it admits.”

Admission departments, often with little or no oversight within schools of higher education, arbitrarily establish priorities for small or large percentages of those they admit, including — in addition to varying weightings of grades and SAT and/or ACT scores and class rankings — such largely immeasurable factors as letters of recommendation, the reputation of your high school, your writing ability in essays, your outside interests, etc. Applying to an admissions officer who was a wrestler? You might be advantaged if you wrestle in high school.

The well-regarded College Board, on its website, states well the random array of entrance criteria in admissions policies around the country: “Geographic location, racial or ethnic background, extenuating or unusual life circumstances and experience living or studying overseas may all be influential.”

Equally significant are attributes that are rarely written down: Money, societal position and legacy status are classic considerations among the non-meritorious criteria at most colleges and universities. Different colleges and universities allow admittance according to which relatives have gone there previously; in what sports applicants excel; how famous, wealthy and significant are the applicants’ friends and kin; and generally whom they know.

There is no excusing the criminal fraudulent behavior in the scandalous college admissions bribery case now in focus nationwide, but let’s not have crocodile tears implying that this is the only salient aspect of unfair competitive advantages in the academy: They are the rule, not the exception.

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College Admissions: Vulnerable, Exploitable, and to Many Americans, Broken

The New York Times, By Anemona Hartocollis, March 15, 2019

Standardized test scores are manufactured. Transcripts are made up. High-stakes admissions decisions are issued based on fabricated extracurricular activities, ghostwritten personal essays and the size of the check written by the parents of the applicant.

American universities are often cast as the envy of the world, august institutions that select the best and the brightest young people after an objective and rigorous selection process.

But the bribery scandal unveiled by the Justice Department this week — and a number of other high-profile cases that have captured the headlines in recent months — has shown the admissions system to be something else entirely: exploitable, arbitrary, broken.

At the heart of the scandal is a persistent adulation of highly selective universities. “Elite colleges have become a status symbol with the legitimacy of meritocracy attached to them, because getting in sanctifies you as meritorious,” said Jerome Karabel, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and a historian of college admissions.

The case, in which dozens of parents are accused of buying spots at elite universities for their teenagers, comes amid already heightened scrutiny of college admissions.

Last summer, a trove of secret files in a lawsuit against Harvard was made public, outlining special admissions preferences and back doors for certain applicants.

Then the news broke last fall that a Louisiana preparatory school had fabricated stories based on racial stereotypes to get its students into selective colleges.

The court papers released this week says that the organizers of the bribery scheme identified and abused weak spots in the admissions process: special accommodations in standardized testing and a system of reserving slots for students favored by athletic coaches. The parents paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to get higher test scores for their children and to have them fraudulently recruited for boutique sports.

The charges against the parents, who include Hollywood actresses and powerful executives, have exposed how thin the line is between admissions help that most middle-class families consider not just legitimate but de rigueur, like sending a child to a Kaplan class for SAT help, and outright fraud, like paying a ringer to take the test for the student.

In the days since the scandal broke, college consultants and admissions directors have found themselves in an awkward, sometimes defensive position. They have expressed shock at how the system was manipulated, while being acutely aware that they, as part of the system, may bear some responsibility for an admissions process that has spun out of control.

“It isn’t exactly broken, it’s breachable,” said Theodore O’Neill, who was dean of admissions at the University of Chicago from 1989 to 2009.

Parents accused in the scandal took advantage of extra-time allowances on the ACT or SAT exams, court documents said, and bribed test administrators to allow someone else to take the tests or to correct students’ answers.

Cheating on standardized tests has long been seen as an admissions vulnerability. In 2011, prosecutors on Long Island accused students of hiring others to take standardized tests for them. Testing officials have also reported troubles in Asia, where SAT and ACT scores have been delayed and, in some instances, canceled because of allegations of widespread cheating.

The tests, which also routinely face attacks that they heavily favor affluent students who can afford coaching, are becoming optional at a growing number of selective schools.

Colleges say they use a “holistic” admissions system — weighing factors like hardships and service to the community — in part to account for the edge given to those who can attend better schools or pay for test coaching.

But reports of fraud at the T.M. Landry College Preparatory School in Breaux Bridge, La., in November have shown those measures to be vulnerable, too. A New York Times investigation found that administrators at the school had falsified transcripts, made up student accomplishments and exploited the worst stereotypes of black America to concoct stories that could be fed to selective schools.

Some of the revelations this week were reminiscent of the secrets of admission revealed at the trial last October, in which Asian-American students rejected by Harvard accused the university of downgrading their applications based on subjective measures. Documents in the case shed light on, among other things, the little-known Dean’s and Director’s

Interest Lists, closely guarded lists of applicants connected to top donors or other people of interest to the university, and the Z List, a back door for students who were borderline academically.

In essence, the wealthy parents accused in the federal charging documents took similar ways in. William Singer, the college consultant accused of being at the center of the bribery scheme, even called his services a “side door,” according to court papers. Compared with the more traditional route of, say, endowing a building, which could cost millions, the door Mr. Singer offered cost only hundreds of thousands of dollars, a relative bargain.

Other documents in the Harvard lawsuit showed the strong advantage that universities give to recruited athletes; at Harvard, their admission rate in recent years was 86 percent.

This week, the bribery investigation illustrated how even those preferences can be gamed.

Prosecutors said that parents funneled millions of dollars through Mr. Singer, sometimes through a charity front, to coaches, administrators and sports programs so they would designate their children as recruited athletes in boutique sports like water polo and sailing. Often the children had no experience playing on a competitive sports team, and were not expected to play once they got in.

The scandal has raised questions about whether such athletic preferences are fair — or even necessary.

“Ivy League and sports, to me that’s an oxymoron,” said Christopher Hunt, a college admissions consultant.

Mr. O’Neill said that while an argument might be made for recruiting preferences in major sports like football, it was harder to justify for less popular programs.

“It seems ludicrous that basically upper-middle-class white kids are given advantages because of their capacity to play minor sports that are meaningless to most people,” he said.

But other experts said that eliminating those preferences would be counterproductive.

“If you’re going to have an athletics program, then you need to recruit athletes,” said E. Gordon Gee, the president of West Virginia University. “If you’re going to have an orchestra, you need to have orchestra players.”

The investigation may spur more schools to reconsider other admission preferences, such as those for legacy students, or the children of alumni. Universities say those preferences encourage community and fund-raising, but impassioned criticism has mounted in the wake of the Harvard lawsuit, and recent news about the influence of wealth on college admissions is likely to keep that fire burning.

According to court documents, the admission rate for legacies at Harvard was 33.6 percent. The rate for the Class of 2022 as a whole was under 5 percent.

“It’s like going to the movies — you need a ticket,” said Mimi Doe, a founder of Top Tier Admissions, a college counseling service. “Your scores and grades get you in the door. But guess what? Half the seats are roped off with a big red cord.”

Mr. Karabel, the sociologist, said that the bribery crisis simply reflected problems in broader society. “I think that as America has become more and more unequal, affluent parents have become desperate to pass on their privileges to their children and avoid downward mobility at all costs,” he said.

Fair access to education, the engine of upward mobility, he suggested, is the casualty.

The mess that is elite college admissions, explained by a former dean

VOX, By Jason England Updated May 8, 2019

Eight things I wish people understood about my old job.

When people find out I used to work as a dean of admissions at an elite liberal arts university, they want to gab about the wealthy and famous, bribes and scandal, the boogeyman of affirmative action. People want soap opera storylines.

Rarely do they ask about why the admissions process exists as it does, the ideals and values that shape these processes and why they might be worthy of contemplation.

They simultaneously want the job to be more and less interesting than it is. They want it to be fantastical without being complex.

Here is what I wish they knew about what it’s really like to do this job.

1) Recent headlines notwithstanding, the ways the wealthy game the system are remarkably mundane

The mechanisms of affirmative action for wealthy white people are so well-oiled that few would know to name it. The process begins well before college: It’s societal and holistic and reaches beyond clichéd talking points about donated buildings and the influence of celebrity and prestige.

For instance, “early decision” — an admissions process occurring months earlier than general admissions in which

students agree to attend if admitted — did many favors for wealthy white students, more than any unofficial affirmative action ever helped students of color or first-generation college students. (I say unofficial because no admissions office has official quotas; the desire for a racially and socioeconomically diverse student body is affirmed in spirit rather than cold, hard numbers.)

Universities benefit from early decision because it guarantees the base of their yield rate; the regular decision process is more unpredictable. They like to keep the rate high because selectivity conveys status in some popular rankings (which, themselves, are not as meaningful as they look).

I hated early decision. Most students we accepted were not exceptional in the context of the regular pool, and they got in at a much higher rate. Early decision applicants tend to have savvy private high school counselors who understand this. These students also tend to be from wealthier families who got a head start on the college search: They could afford campus visits the previous summer; financial aid isn't an issue, so they don't have to wait for offers of assistance.

Whether at the top of the class or more toward the middle, on paper they look prepared for rigorous coursework at an elite university.

2) When it comes to elite college admissions, private high schools reign supreme

As we learned from the most recent college scandal, the construction of a fabricated profile with illegitimate test scores and extracurriculars is tragicomic, but rare. But a prep school applicant curated by elite counselors, tutors, essay writers, and a manipulative school profile is routine, even though it inspires less backlash.

Private schools create applicants who are difficult to reject. The candidate is “prepared” (the assumption is that private schools' courses are more rigorous), has a relatively high SAT score (a reflection of parents' incomes and education levels), and is touted by carefully crafted recommendation letters from counselors who have many fewer students and far more resources than their public school counterparts.

Hyperbolic buzzwords frequently appeared in their letters: intellectually curious; diligent; a leader in the community; an even better person than student; probing; the most exceptional student I've taught in 25 years (I saw this three times in two years from the same teacher). Some letters ran three pages, while public school applicants often got a paragraph that made it clear their recommender barely knew them. Neither type told me much about what the student might contribute to the campus.

Many top private schools manipulate their school profiles, a fact sheet that puts the applicant in context (percentage of the student body that goes to college, number of students, GPA range, etc.). An admissions dean will know who ranks in the top 5 to 10 percent of the class, but most students will be grouped in one broad block. I often couldn't tell if an applicant was just outside the top 10 percent or closer to the middle.

Some private schools provided no grades at all, substituting platitudinous fluff for any measurable achievement.

3) Standardized testing is just as problematic as the vague concept of “preparedness” and as contingent on wealth

How should you define a prospective student's value? Is there a magical chemistry between applicant and university? Should a student reflect a university's ideals? Should admissions officers primarily value self-motivation, independent thinking, creativity? Demonstrated service to the community?

In theory, our office valued a mix of all the above. But in practice, standardized test scores, class rank, and private schooling (interchangeable with “preparedness”) ruled the day. Elite universities, no matter how high-minded, have corporate souls and bottom lines. Despite being nonprofits, elite universities are competing businesses in an ever-evolving marketplace. And more often than not, professed ideals will take a back seat to whatever drives the market. If your competitors boast an SAT median of 1450 and 60 percent of their incoming class ranks in the top 10 percent of their high schools, you need to at least match that.

Although standardized tests predict little aside from first-year college academic success and retention, some people still point to a correlation between SAT scores and future earnings. But using the SAT to predict income is a chicken-and-egg riddle because family income and education level so reliably predict SAT scores and class movement in America is so stagnant. None of my personal or professional experience has legitimized the notion that an applicant with a 1440 is going to be a better classroom student or more worthwhile citizen than an applicant with a 1250.

My final year in admissions, the way we treated an applicant broke my heart. I interviewed her in my office and was struck by her depth, self-effacing humor, drive, maturity, and critical thinking. She had two working-class parents without advanced degrees and grew up in an economically depressed region of western Massachusetts. She had the grades and the extracurricular activities, but her scores were 70 points below our median.

During our committee session, I gave an impassioned speech on her behalf, which might account for the four votes I got in her favor. I'd never advocated so desperately and enthusiastically for a student. She was precisely the sort of person who would reach our campus, take full advantage of the resources she'd been lacking throughout her life, and contribute both socially and academically. Unfortunately, five colleagues still voted against her. Her case helped see me out the

door.

4) Men — especially white male athletes — have an unfair admissions advantage over women

The process at my college (and many elite liberal arts schools) was particularly brutal to qualified women. We simply had more qualified women than men in the pool; to keep a gender balance on campus, many ended up in the rejection pile. (Rarely do you hear people debate this form of affirmative action.)

There's another reason that men — specifically, well-to-do white men — had an advantage over women: athletics. Division III athletics allowed a regressive system of affirmative action for the demographic that needs it the least: white wealthy males.

No one can give a solid enough answer of why it's important for an elite liberal arts school to have a strong D-III athletic program. Some claim it raises student morale; others theorize athletes go into more lucrative fields post-graduation (business, law) and are more likely to donate down the line. In some cases, it seems as simple and silly as a better football team making wealthy donors happy: They have reason to tailgate on campus and bragging rights at the water cooler among other liberal arts alum.

The most farcical aspect of this system was it favored underwhelming white male candidates. White female athletes who were unspectacular candidates were still generally qualified enough to get admitted the traditional way.

I witnessed the cynical strategy of deferring black male athletes to the general committee, their cases then championed on the grounds of increasing diversity. This saved tips in the athletic committee for more underqualified white men, while robbing non-athlete black students in the regular committee.

It was unsettling then, and it's infuriating now. White males with wealthy, educated parents and substandard academic profiles and SAT scores had a back door into elite schools through athletic talents that couldn't net them Division I scholarships. You wouldn't want to pay to see the teams play, but these students were admitted as if they were contributing to revenue-producing sports teams at larger universities.

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6) Deserve's got nothing to do with it

The truth is, at least half the incoming class at one elite college is utterly interchangeable with half the class at colleges ranked several slots above and below.

It's never really clear which candidates are more qualified. Even less clear is who deserves a spot in the class, and how anyone could comfortably determine such a thing. The bulk of those credentialed enough for serious consideration are in that position because of circumstance and wealth. As William Munny said to Little Bill Daggett in *Unforgiven*, "deserve's got nothing to do with it."

I spoke to Doron Taussig, a visiting assistant professor of media and communication studies at Ursinus College, who is writing a book about perceptions of meritocracy. He said, "Our cultural standards for what it means to earn or deserve something are extremely subjective and flexible, probably necessarily so. This means that when people tell stories about how they got to where they are and what merit had to do with it, most of us can conclude whatever we want."

In other words, it's difficult to get anyone to acknowledge the luck of birth and circumstance. To do so undermines a key cog in the American dream machine: the myth of the self, which reduces wealthy children's built-in advantages to irrelevant biographical footnotes, while transforming others' disadvantages to personal faults. It's difficult to get those on the short end of the stick to see that diligence and acumen can take you only so far; they internalize failure or seek out scapegoats ("the black kid stole my spot").

As a society, we've created a system of credentials that keeps the wealthy in place. The wealthy define "deserve" to ensure their self-interest is disguised as the greater good. The wealthy teach the middle class the checklist for college admissions success and who to blame if things don't go their way, engendering a suspicion that their birthright is being curtailed by an undeserving "other."

7) Where you go to college doesn't define you — or guarantee your future

I was at an information session once where a colleague told the visiting parents and students that many rejected applicants are as deserving as those we accept. A mother lingered afterward to share a story about her daughter, who was extremely distressed about her own college rejections and killed herself. She didn't want her other child to ever feel this way and was thankful for his take on the process's arbitrary nature.

That story has never left me.

Where you are accepted into college is no reflection of your worth as a student, and certainly not as a person. There are duds attending Ivies and gems attending public universities. If you go to graduate school, you'll find that all sorts of talented people never set foot on an elite campus.

Just as a Gucci belt or a Chanel purse won't automatically make you stylish, the brand on your degree can do only so

much work for you.

For the underprivileged, though, some educational brands are perceived strongly enough to open doors. In my opinion, the most compelling argument for affirmative action is access to resources and to social and economic networks. I recall thinking about a brilliant black woman from Detroit I taught at a public university, “If she were at my alma mater, they’d already have her partnered with a mentor, doing research.” But at that school, no one was invested in her enough to identify her potential.

Attending an elite college has allowed me to develop a network that includes doctors, lawyers, people with multiple advanced degrees and experience in academic administration, etc. That’s what affirmative action was meant to alter — to make education a true means of upward mobility.

Ideally, college would function as a counterbalance to the rigged games of American capitalism and meritocracy. That it doesn’t is a mark of failure not on the students, but on the system itself. I’d urge students to fight the good fight here: try like hell to hold these elite universities accountable to their high-minded ideals, that they might better reflect the composition of our society.

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Princeton University, founded in 1746. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 6 percent.

Harvard University, founded in 1636. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 5 percent.

Columbia University, founded in 1754. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 6 percent.

MIT, founded in 1861. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 7 percent.

Stanford University, founded in 1885. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 5 percent.

Yale University, founded in 1701. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 7 percent.

Duke University, founded in 1838. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 10 percent.

University of Chicago, founded in 1890. Fall 2017 acceptance rate: 9 percent.

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What Makes a Fair College Admissions Process?

JSTOR Daily, By: Julie J. Park , Christine R. Yano and Nadirah Farah Foley March 27, 2019

In the wake of the college admissions scandal, scholars go back to the drawing board to answer this most central question.

The college admissions scandal exposed criminal and unethical actions that undermine the promise of the American university system. To get to the root of the crisis, this roundtable discussion—curated by Public Books and JSTOR Daily—asks scholars to go back to the drawing board and answer the most basic of questions: What would constitute a fair college admissions process?

What’s Really Unfair? Race-Neutral College Admissions

Julie J. Park

Recently news broke that dozens of individuals, including celebrities Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, paid thousands of dollars to buy admission to some of the nation’s elite universities. This spectacularly terrible scandal raises questions about how to build a more fair system. On top of the scandal, other troubling practices such as legacy admissions and donor preferences remind us that admissions is biased toward the wealthy. Some might also think that getting rid of any recognition of an applicant’s race/ethnicity, so-called “race-neutral” admissions, is a step in the right direction.

At face value, the concept of race-neutrality may seem fair. What could be more fair than something that is supposedly neutral? However, I can confidently say that any system that does not address the contexts of racial and economic inequality is deeply unfair. Given the state of educational inequality in our country, solely relying on race-neutral policies does not eliminate discrimination; it reinforces it.

The solution is not just to throw SAT prep at low-income students. The roots of inequality go much deeper.

Ironically, admissions systems that do not pay attention to the nuances of race and class oftentimes defend themselves under the guise of “fairness” or “meritocracy.” These systems, such as the process used for decades to determine admission to New York City’s most elite public high schools, are based solely on standardized metrics of achievement, in many cases on a single test score cutoff. Supporters of such systems argue that nothing is fairer than a “race-neutral” admissions system based on a single test that everyone has the chance to study for and take. Isn’t a test objective, and even better, easily evaluated, insofar as a higher number is clearly better than even a slightly lower number?

However, the highest test scores are often bought at a literal price—the price of enrollment in SAT prep courses. As I explain in my book *Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data*, East Asian American students are much more likely than other groups to take these courses, and other research indicates that they are actually the only group that demonstrates statistically significant gains from taking such courses. Of course, there are many, many incredibly talented East Asian American students. However, this research highlights how colleges should consider that so-called neutral test scores are anything but neutral. The playing field is far from equal. The same goes for privileges in college preparation enjoyed largely by affluent White families. As I explain in *Race on Campus*, the solution is not just to throw SAT prep at low-income students. The roots of inequality go much deeper.

While test-based and/or so-called neutral (i.e., “race-neutral” or “class-neutral”) admissions seem fair, they are deeply flawed, because they fail to take into account the student’s context for educational opportunity. I’ll tell you what’s really unfair. Stanford University Professor Sean Reardon identified a gap of over four grade levels in academic performance between America’s most affluent and least affluent students. Further: “On average white students score one and [a] half or more grade levels higher than black and Hispanic students enrolled in socioeconomically similar school districts.” How is this fair?

Now, to some people, race-conscious holistic admissions—the general mode of operation at selective institutions of higher education—smacks of unfairness. In holistic admissions, test scores and GPAs are looked at alongside other relevant pieces of information—not just the number of extracurricular activities, but how students describe what they got out of their experiences. Essays that provide more insight into who a student is beyond the numbers. Teacher and guidance counselor recommendations, the quality of the high school, life hardships that a student may have overcome, the likelihood of them being able to take SAT prep, special talents, career aspirations, and, among many other factors, consideration of race and social class.

In holistic admissions, race cannot be the sole or even primary determinant of admission. It cannot work in a formulaic way that guarantees anyone admission or denial to an institution. As noted in *Fisher II v. University of Texas at Austin*, race operates as “factor of a factor of a factor.” White plaintiff Abigail Fisher was denied admission from UT Austin, but hundreds of Black and Brown students with stronger academic records than hers were also rejected.

Under holistic admissions, there is no guarantee that the highest-scoring students will gain admission, in part because the number of students with such accomplishments can outnumber the number of spots available in a first-year class. Furthermore, top universities are generally interested in pulling together a class with a greater range of traits and talents than the ability to get the absolute highest test score, which makes sense given the pervasiveness of SAT prep among the upper middle class and some ethnic groups. Being the valedictorian may reflect well on a student, but it is no guarantee of admission. As Karen Arnold shows in her research on the long-term outcomes for such students, valedictorians tend not to garner exceptional achievements later in life. The type of extreme conscientiousness associated with being No. 1 in high school, while undeniably a talent, doesn’t usually translate into the student becoming a risk-taking visionary later in life. Thus, nuance and discernment are needed to examine a student’s achievements—for instance, does a top class rank say more about whether a student is a rule follower than whether they possess passion and innovation?

These are some of the issues at stake in the pending lawsuit *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, and in other affirmative action cases around the country. In *SFFA v. Harvard*, the complaint is filled with narratives of high-achieving Asian American students who did not gain admission. For example, one was a National Merit Semifinalist with a perfect ACT score and the top possible marks on two SAT II subject tests. But as I discuss here, Harvard’s applicant pool had almost 1,000 students who scored a perfect score on the ACT or SAT, and its freshman class is around 1,600 students. Nineteen percent of students who take the Math II test get a perfect 800. There are over 16,000 National Merit Semifinalists. Top marks do not make someone a standout. Is that unfair?

Let’s remember what’s even more unfair: That low-income students and so many students of color are denied access to high-quality public schools. That many affluent, White, and East Asian American students experience tremendous advantage in college preparation. And of course, that there exist policies and practices that overtly favor the wealthy, from donor preferences to the incredible admissions scandal of recent months. These things are much, much more unfair than someone with a perfect SAT score—one of thousands of similar applicants in the pool—getting turned down by Harvard and then being able to attend some other fantastic college.

Opponents of race-conscious admissions argue that such policies are unsuccessful because the vast majority of students of color at our nation’s elite colleges are wealthy, or “rich minorities.” However, as found in the groundbreaking work of William Bowen and Derek Bok, Black students at elite colleges are much more likely than White students to come from low-income families. Furthermore, White students attending such institutions are far more likely to come from the most affluent families. Research by Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford documents how colleges give considerable preference to low-income students of color, showing how both race and class are addressed in tandem.

Race-conscious holistic admissions is imperfect, because the broader K–12 system remains highly unequal. However, the answer is not to ignore race in the name of so-called fairness, but to take it into consideration. Race- and class-conscious admissions cannot fix everything that is wrong with our education system, but it is a far improvement over the alternatives, making a blatantly unfair world perhaps a little more fair.

What Constitutes a Fair Admissions Process?

Christine R. Yano

When Public Books invited me, back in early February, to contribute thoughts on fair admissions to elite colleges, I wrote the essay that follows from the most theoretical and idealistic perspective possible, questioning the very terms of fairness and college admissions. Today, however, in light of the college scam controversy swirling around William Singer and his celebrity clients, any talk of college admissions must be prefaced by analysis of the fraught nature of the playing field.

That nature is composed of several factors: (1) the high desirability of placement in elite colleges, not necessarily for learning so much as for prestige; (2) the increasingly ultra-competitive undertaking that is securing that placement; (3) the long-standing unevenness of admissions, highlighting the role of class privilege; and (4) the inevitable mix of commerce (e.g., branding) and education, making college admissions subject to the same capitalist imperatives shaping other aspects of college life. Singer’s company represents an industry built on the anxieties of parents who, lacking the personal connections to facilitate admissions for their offspring, must rely on an external business to do so. In short, what in other circumstances may have taken a personal phone call from Daddy or Uncle to someone within the inner sanctum of an elite institution is here replaced by a company that offers a surefire “side door” (Singer’s expression) to success. What family with economic means but without the historic cultural capital of “connections” could resist?

Higher education and its admissions process should not only identify and prepare “the best and brightest” among the next generation of leaders, but also cultivate its moral foundation.

That Singer’s company crossed the line into illegality and got caught is not the morality tale that it might seem. Rather, the real lesson of this criminal episode lies in our own reimagining of the pedestal upon which higher education may impossibly reside. The pedestal includes the human frailties of greed and corruption, along with the ideals of education itself. If we are to uphold the values of critical thinking that higher education espouses, then we must integrate ethical development into instruction. Herein lies the cautionary tale of the Singer fiasco—that higher education and its admissions process should not only identify and prepare “the best and brightest” among the next generation of leaders, but also cultivate its moral foundation.

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Whoever thought that admissions to a university should be fair? The idea seems peculiarly American and builds on 1960s-era social justice movements that assume elite institutions should be made available to a broad spectrum of individuals. It presumes the vitality of its intellectual, social, and political body rests in a diversity of opinions, backgrounds, experiences, and expectations within a particular range of ability. The “best and brightest”—yes. But those deserving the epithet may not be so easy to identify when one broadens what “best and brightest” might look, sound, and feel like. Fairness within this context requires admissions officers to look beyond numbers and conduct the screening process not as science, but as art. This is the art of human assessment, predicting the future from the past. Adding up test scores does not necessarily guarantee success within this ideal of a vibrant, richly diverse educational institution. Nor is GPA a pure predictor, if the successful life of a campus is also measured by unquantifiable elements such as leadership and creativity, both broadly conceived.

What admissions officers must do first, then, is understand their own institution; second, get to know the applicant; and third, assess the fit between campus and applicant. This process requires what I call “flexible fairness,” which involves the moving parts by which an institution may constantly grow and become a better version of itself. Flexible fairness privileges certain aspects—intellectual capacity, willingness to work, maturity, integrity, personal drive—while not predefining or insisting on any of these. Flexible fairness precludes any single vision of equitable admissions.

The question of “fairness” must always be addressed to the particularities of its constituencies. Thus the question is not, What practices constitute fairness in an admissions process? It must, rather, be reformulated to emphasize the issue of fairness as it pertains to specific purposes in the context of specific institutional histories. So if the institution sets a vision of itself as a particularly dynamic learning environment, then the “fairness” required to fulfill that vision builds on diversity within the pursuit of critical thinking, creativity, and productivity.

I come to these thoughts having compiled student stories while a visiting professor of anthropology at Harvard University in 2014–2015, which resulted in a coedited book, *Straight A’s: Asian American College Students in Their Own Words* (2018). My time at Harvard, and in particular my conversations with the Asian American students whom I taught in a class geared to their experiences, brought these issues home. These students were certainly impressive in their lists of accomplishments. But they were equally impressive for their energy, initiative, drive, and industry. They

knew what it took to conceptualize and complete a task. Although they may have shared similar numbers (SAT and AP Exam scores, GPAs), their contributions went well beyond those superficial achievements. These contributions surfaced not merely in examinations and term papers, but in extracurricular projects, community commitments, fierce debates, and creative endeavors. Our book, *Straight A's*, was one of these—begun as a classroom exercise, it blossomed into a collection of searingly honest stories through the networking energy and follow-through of the students. The experience left me highly hopeful for what the art of admissions might produce.

Let me return to the topic of this essay and strip down my response to the questions the editors of *Public Books* ask.

Definition of fairness: broad access to human and intellectual resources that supports institutional goals. Note that I have not used the words “equal” or “equitable,” mainly because those words tend to reinforce a one-size-fits-all approach to human potential, worthiness, and success. I strongly believe that this is not the case.

Implementation of fairness in admissions processes: acknowledging the inexact art of assessing student potential, I support qualitative, holistic review of applicants that takes a number of factors into consideration. Colleges must select judiciously, keeping in mind “whole person” concerns that include family background—of which race is undeniably a part. They must also consider the entering class that they are creating, striving for some kind of balance among gendered, regional, racialized, and classed factors. This balance, too, goes beyond strict numbers or quotas, reflecting a composite picture of idealized diversity.

Finally, let us consider the folly of “race-blind” admissions. To ignore race would be to take a foundational chunk of a student’s background life out of the reckoning. How to assess the whole person without regard for an abiding feature of their personal history? How to deny the weight of that history, an individual’s family background, and very real cultural context? The fact is, all of these elements matter in understanding just who the candidate is and how they might fit in with the institution. Holistic admissions understands this well, as it embraces the scope of the educated guess.

I write this as we await the judge’s decision on affirmative action at Harvard. Organizations such as the Harvard Asian American Alumni Alliance are paying close attention. Indeed, “fairness” in admissions is on the line, but not in the way that the anti-affirmative action activist Edward Blum—who created the group misleadingly called “Students for Fair Admissions,” with recruited Asian Americans as their public face—would have us believe. “Fairness” includes race-conscious admissions processes that build on Harvard’s and other institutions’ goal of building strength through diversity itself. This vision conceives of diversity as a fundamental part of excellence, not as a sideshow, and requires the “fairness” of admissions procedures that will assure it.

Move Away from Meritocracy

Nadirah Farah Foley

Especially in the wake of the recent news of a coordinated bribery scheme, many people seem to agree our selective college admissions process is broken. There is far less consensus, however, about why we think it’s broken, and what a better, fairer admissions process would look like. Some think that the process would be fair if it were conducted without special considerations for legacy students, development cases, or athletic recruitment. Others go further, focusing on the myriad mundane ways—aside from bribery and donations—that the system allows privileged people to leverage their resources to secure and perpetuate their advantages. But I contend the process is inherently unfair because it is based on meritocratic principles designed to produce unequal outcomes. A truly fair system would reject meritocratic logics and instead operate on the principle that high-quality education is not a reward for the few, but a right of the many.

Our current process, in which applicants are stratified into a hierarchical higher education landscape, takes a meritocratic ideology as its foundational premise. Meritocracy, the term popularized by British sociologist Michael Young’s 1958 *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, is typically imagined as a system in which all have equal opportunity to compete on a “level playing field” on the basis of “talent” and “ability,” and all are rewarded equitably based on their “merit.” While this system sounds fair at first blush, a meritocratic ideology poses two problems, either of which should be sufficient cause to critically question it, and perhaps abandon it entirely.

Rather than focusing on who “deserves” the “best” schooling, our societal commitment should be to making a high-quality education available to all.

First, upholding meritocracy necessarily entails accepting and upholding inequality. In the case of college admissions, we currently have a system in which some schools have more resources, are more prestigious, and are deemed “better” than others, and those schools have limited seats. We try to allocate those seats “fairly,” on the basis of demonstrated past success and evaluations of future potential. It’s far from a perfect system, but we can rationalize it as ideologically consistent with a meritocratic ideal of equal opportunity and reward for individual talent, effort, and ability. But perhaps, rather than focusing on who “deserves” the “best” schooling, our societal commitment should be to making a high-quality education available to all. Such a commitment would require a rejection of the stratification and inequality presupposed by a meritocratic system and lead us to question whether a stratified society—and assignment to places in an unequal education system—could ever be just.

Second, even if one were inclined to find inequality and stratification acceptable, the reality is that we are so far from the ideals of equal opportunity and a level playing field that the unfairness is glaringly obvious. As sociologist Jonathan Mijs argues, opportunities for demonstrating merit are far from equally distributed. In the United States, where racial residential segregation and local control of schools combine to disproportionately relegate nonwhite (especially black) students to underfunded schools, the claim that anything approaching equal opportunity exists is laughable. Our emphasis on standardized tests, which have roots in racist, ableist, eugenicist science, evinces a narrow understanding of what intelligence is or could be. Holistic admissions evaluations, which provide necessary latitude to consider students' contexts and lived experiences, also provide privileged applicants another opportunity to show off well-filled extracurricular profiles and essays carefully coached and edited by counselors and consultants. In sum, our current admissions process is—top to bottom—built to misrecognize privilege as “merit,” and thus advantage the already advantaged. To say wealthy white applicants are gaming the system belies the fact that they're really just playing the game—a game in which only they have full access to the equipment. Perhaps the way to fix this is not to try to change the rules, but to stop playing the meritocratic game entirely.

If that seems a drastic proposal, let me try to convince you it's a necessary one. We could try to work within the current system, striking the policies that are most obviously and egregiously unfair: legacy, donor admissions, early decision, recruitment of athletes in country club sports. While an improvement, this does nothing to address the fact that even with those components stripped out, the process still falls far short of fairness, because our very metrics of merit are skewed toward privilege. We could try to calibrate for disadvantage, but that's essentially what holistic evaluation tries to do now—and it's not enough. Meritocracy is an arms race, one in which the privileged are always better equipped.

We could, as many scholars have proposed, move toward a lottery, which would go a long way toward making explicit the role of luck in college admissions. But I'm concerned by the way some thinkers discuss a potential admissions lottery. Proponents of a lottery often suggest that there should be some baseline level of “merit” in order to enter the lottery. Such a formulation of the lottery doesn't entail a rejection of our metrics of merit, meaning it would likely reproduce existing inequalities. To avoid that, a lottery would need to not use simple random selection, but instead be carefully calibrated to ensure the resulting class is not just representative of the pool (in which wealthy white students are overrepresented), but of graduating high school students. That could be achieved by assigning different weights to students depending on their background, or by using a form of stratified random selection, in which the applicant pool would be divided into smaller pools based on, for example, demographic factors, and a certain number of students would be accepted at random from each pool.

The lottery is an exciting idea, but one likely to run into legal challenges. And beyond that, it doesn't do enough to address the unfairness inherent in our unequal education system. I think we need to go a step further than asking what constitutes a fair admissions process, and instead ask what constitutes a fair society. We should recognize that our college admissions process is merely holding a mirror up to our society, reflecting how competitive, individualistic, unequal, and unfair the United States is. A truly radical solution would require the reorganization of our entire class structure and the redistribution of resources, thus obviating the need for such a high-stakes college application process.

It seems that we cling to meritocracy as a way of clinging to some hope of a better life in an increasingly unequal world. But rather than investing our hope in a fairer admissions system, I think we should dream bigger, and invest our hope in a more just society—one in which we live in community rather than competition. That might look like taking up Harvard professor Lani Guinier's call to emphasize “democratic merit,” or it might look like dispensing with merit—and its attendant acceptance of deserved inequality—entirely.

Everyone deserves access to education. A fair admissions system would have that as a core premise and reject ostensibly just, “meritocratic” inequalities.
