



America's Best Colleges

Evaluative Judgments Vs. Bias In College Admissions

Thomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford 08.11.10, 6:00 PM ET

A balding, somewhat paunchy, middle-aged man walks into a plastic surgeon's office and holds up a picture of a youthful Mr. America. "Doc," he says, "I wanna look like this." Imagine that you're the doctor, and you'll know how college admission officers feel every year. Their job is to create an entering freshman class that comes as close as possible to having the ideal "shape." But they are confronted with an applicant pool that may need a lot of crafting and sculpting before the task is done. Botox and liposuction in just the right places--that's the job of an admission dean.

A college or university's mission drives the ideal composition of its student body. At Wellesley, a women's college, men have no merit in undergraduate admission. The same might be said of ice hockey players applying to Penn, which does not have an ice hockey team. At Cornell, however, a top hockey prospect might have a completely different reception. The point is that candidates for admission are evaluated in terms of their expected contributions to an institution's mission. And the task of an admission team is to admit the subset of all applicants that collectively maximizes the entering students' potential contributions to campus life, subject to the size of the financial aid budget and the number of seats in the first-year class.

One implication is that many applicants who appear to be outstanding are denied admission, because their expected contributions to the institution are not high enough when seen in the light of other applicants. Another is that merit in the eyes of admission deans is a holistic concept that means more than academic merit. Too many parents and their children assume that colleges are looking mainly for high academic potential, and too often the tendency is to equate academic preparedness with a stellar SAT score.

Of course, how much picking and choosing a school gets to do depends on how selective it is. Some schools admit almost everyone who applies. In this case, the bottom-line objective is to meet enrollment targets and produce a balanced budget. Higher up the selectivity scale, institutions are able to focus in addition on strong academic ability. When there is a surplus of high-quality candidates, colleges also want to ensure sufficient variety and diversity among the student body.

At the most elite colleges and universities, admission rates have recently dropped into the single-digit range. Admission deans are often heard to say they could admit a freshman class, throw those applications away, and admit another freshman class with the same quality. Here, the ability to handle the academic demands receives first priority in admitting students. But so many applicants easily pass this bar that other factors also come into play, including exceptional academic potential, ability to contribute to campus diversity in all its many dimensions, the likelihood of making future contributions to the welfare of society, and institutional loyalty.

We have recently completed an [extensive examination](#) of how much weight is placed on applicants' many characteristics in the elite private university admission process. Race and ethnicity matter in

producing a diverse class. Measured on an all-other-things-equal basis, black applicants have an admission advantage compared with whites equivalent to 310 SAT points (on the old 1,600-point scale), while the advantage for Hispanic candidates is 130 points. Asian-American applicants face a disadvantage of 140 SAT points. This means that Asian students have to have an SAT score 450 points higher than otherwise similar black applicants to have the same chance of being admitted. Social class background matters too, but it matters less. Compared with middle-class candidates, lower-class applicants receive a boost equal to 130 SAT points, whereas upper-class students face a small disadvantage. Other applicant characteristics that raise the odds of admission include being a recruited athlete or an alumnus' child, having high standardized test scores and high school grades, graduating from a private high school or a public or private high school considered elite.

Some conservative commentators have recently claimed that academically selective private colleges and universities are "biased" against white, working-class, rural, Christian applicants, especially those from "Red" states. If this were true, what would bias mean? It would mean knowing that a particular individual in the applicant pool has the potential to make an exceptionally strong contribution to the institution, is very likely to enroll if admitted, and nevertheless rejecting this applicant for other reasons. It is hard to imagine this scenario actually playing out. We didn't ask in our study about students' religion or the nature of his or her residence. But we do know that lower- and working-class students receive a bump up in admissions, although this plus factor counts more heavily for nonwhite than for white students. We also know that candidates from Utah, Montana, West Virginia and Alabama--all traditional red states--have a better chance of being admitted than otherwise similar applicants from California. Why? There is not a college president who does not like to stand before the freshman class and proudly announce that every state in the union and many foreign countries are represented there.

At the same time the overall acceptance rate increases as one goes up the social class ladder. Our data show the private-college admission rate for lower- and working-class students is 19%. It increases to 21% for middle-class students and to 27% for applicants with upper-middle- or upper-class backgrounds. So one challenge for admission deans is admit, enroll and then graduate a larger proportion of students from families of modest means. But an even bigger challenge is to expand the applicant pool itself to ensure that talented students from all corners of America are well-represented.

Admission deans need to think of themselves not just as gatekeepers, but also as recruiters. Only when the composition of the applicant pool mirrors the ideal shape of the entering first-year class can students be admitted at random. Only then--and that day is not yet a reality--can evaluative judgments be suspended in the elite college admission process.

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