

Inquiring Minds topic – 13 December 2019

John Moore, Moderator

Who Goes to College? Admissions Criteria

Colleges and universities use many criteria, objective and subjective, open and confidential, widely accepted and controversial, to decide who gets in. The criteria and their use are particularly important for admission to elite colleges, as recent scandals have shown. While there has been debate over many of these criteria, one criterion has been generally accepted: merit. While the term is subject to interpretation, it is most commonly associated with demonstrated achievements and academic promise. The first two articles below discuss this measure from different points of view. The third proposes a radical alternative that has recently gained some traction.

Some questions to consider:

- Is the Marcovits argument pertinent to all institutions? Or just to the elite schools?
- What does the Marcovits article suggest about the role of top schools in economic and social inequality? Is this any different today from what it was in years past?
- Marcovits proposes that “The top schools and colleges must become ...less elite.” How could this be done? What elite institution would willingly become less elite?
- Would a lottery system work to reduce the apparent inequality of opportunity? Which colleges would adopt such a system?
- Do you agree with Williams that the merit system is “...the best and fairest way to locate and evaluate talent...”? Would a lottery be an improvement over the present system?
- Does the lottery system as described in the Conley article really dispose of the problems of inequality inherent in merit systems that Marcovits notes?

The Opposite of Opportunity - DANIEL MARKOVITS - *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9-13-2019

The United States has one of the steepest educational hierarchies in the world. Not just colleges and universities, but also high schools, elementary schools, and even preschools all come in shades of eliteness. At every level, elite schools invest much more in training their students than their ordinary counterparts. Elite public schools, in places like Scarsdale, N.Y., easily spend twice as much per student as average ones. Elite private high schools spend roughly six times the national public-school average. And the most selective colleges spend about eight times as much as the least selective ones.

Meritocracy — the idea that places at selective schools, and the rewards that they bring, should track achievement rather than breeding — is supposed to make all this morally OK. Earlier hierarchies were malign and offensive. Meritocracy claims to be wholesome and just. No caste or family monopolizes virtue or talent; and so meritocracy, we suppose, squares unequal outcomes with equal opportunities. In this way, meritocracy redeems the very idea of hierarchy and transforms the elite to suit a democratic age.

But America’s educational hierarchy is not OK. The districts that fund elite public schools are filled with expensive houses — between mortgage interest and taxes, the median house in Scarsdale costs nearly \$100,000 per year to own. Seventy percent of the students at top private schools come from the top 4 percent of the income distribution. Ivy Plus colleges educate more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half. The immense sums spent at the top of the U.S. education hierarchy are therefore devoted to students who skew dramatically, almost unbelievably, toward wealth. These students go on to dominate the rest of society when it comes to income. Just 1.3 percent of high-school

dropouts and 2.4 percent of high-school-only workers will capture lifetime earnings as great as the median professional-school graduate. This is the opposite of equality of opportunity.

What has gone wrong? Equality's champions typically attack the role that legacy preferences, cultural capital, racial privilege, and even outright fraud play in university admissions. The reproach is not fanciful. Elite self-dealing is real and disgraceful. But self-dealing operates on the margins of a largely meritocratic system. Students at top universities do in fact have the highest grades and the best standardized test scores. The top five law schools, for example, enroll roughly two-thirds of all applicants with LSAT scores in the 99th percentile.

These results should not be surprising. Children of rich and well-educated parents imbibe massive, sustained, planned, and practiced investments in education from birth through adulthood. Education works; and middle-class and poor children, who receive only ordinary educations, simply cannot compete. In 2016, for example, about 15,000 high-schoolers with a parent who held a graduate degree scored over 750 on the SAT's Critical Reading Test, compared with fewer than 100 whose parents had not completed high school.

Meritocracy — conceived as the handmaiden to equality of opportunity — has in fact become the main obstacle to opportunity in America today. It produces a new form of hierarchy by living up to, rather than departing from, its ideals.

When inequality of outcome grows too great, equality of opportunity becomes impossible. Our educational hierarchy cannot become meaningfully fairer by opening elite schools and universities to meritorious outsiders. There is no substitute for reducing the absolute difference between what is invested in the most-educated and less-educated people. Fairness requires that education become less hierarchical. The top schools and colleges must become not just more open but also — simply — less elite.

Daniel Markovits is a professor of law at Yale University and the author of the new book The Meritocracy Trap (Penguin Press).

Meritocracy's Condescending Critics - THOMAS C. WILLIAMS - *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9-13-2019

Last spring, I found myself on NPR in the surreal position of trying to convince David Coleman, the president of the College Board, which administers the SAT, that standardized testing was a lifeline for me when I was a young black teen with no family wealth or social connections. Standardized testing was the only tool that I could fully control, I explained. Grades seemed easily inflated and manipulated, as well as incommensurate: the parochial Catholic school I attended barely even offered Advanced Placement courses.

Coleman wasn't having it. He argued that our meritocracy is so deeply flawed, exploitable, and weighted against nonwhites like me (as well as against poor students of all colors) that standardized testing, including the College Board's own work, could not stand on its own merits.

His solution: an "adversity index" to be appended to aptitude scores — essentially a handicap to correct for "privilege." This "overall disadvantage level" would appear on the College Board's "environmental context dashboard," and would incorporate demographic and census data to rate high-school students on a scale from one to 100. A score of 50 or more would indicate adversity; anything less would indicate privilege.

As we spoke, I felt a wall rise up between Coleman and myself. He couldn't understand my abiding faith in a No. 2 pencil, a digital calculator, and a series of multiple-choice questions designed by his organization. Frustrated, I found my thoughts turning to the man who had instilled this faith in me: my father, a black man from the segregated South. He was the valedictorian of his high school and the first member of his family to get a B.A., let alone a master's degree and a Ph.D.

In his eight decades struggling in the American color caste system, my father's belief in meritocracy seldom wavered. The lesson he learned early in pre-Civil-Rights Texas was that knowledge is the only power the powerless can harness. He pressed this insight on me from the moment I was old enough to understand it. Is this — the presence of an engaged parent who values education — itself a form of privilege and therefore

unmeritocratic? Some would say yes. But life is neither perfectible nor equalizable, and success through competition — even success derived from grit, hard work, and merit — is often intergenerational.

The meritocratic ideal is flawed, yes, but it's the best and fairest way to locate and elevate talent that we've ever come up with.

The meritocratic ideal is flawed, yes, as it has become increasingly popular to proclaim. There is no getting around that fact. The affluent game the system, pass on savoir-faire, and then outright cheat when that is not sufficient. But it is nonetheless the best and fairest way to locate and elevate talent that we have ever come up with.

I didn't need an adversity index to measure my disadvantage or to tell me that a sizable portion of my future classmates would come from families with significantly more wealth than mine. I didn't need to be reminded that I was descended from slaves or that, in any previous era, an education could not have been mine. What I needed was a shelf of Barron's Test Prep books, several Nike shoe boxes stuffed with vocabulary flashcards, and what German and Yiddish speakers refer to as *sitzfleisch*: literally "butt flesh" (metaphorically, "The amount of endurance a person has for sitting still on her butt for the long hours it takes to get important work done").

The truth is that the meritocracy transformed my entire family. My young children already have diametrically different cultural references and life experiences than either my father or I enjoyed. What, in turn, I have to instill in them is an awareness that if they don't work hard, there are limitless others who will outcompete them, and this is as it should be. It is a mark of extraordinary privilege — and some well-meaning condescension — to dismiss such a system, and the transcendent power of higher education it facilitates, as some kind of pernicious fiction.

Thomas Chatterton Williams is a contributing writer to The New York Times Magazine and a national fellow at New America. He is the author of a forthcoming book, Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race (Norton).

Enough fretting over college admissions. It's time for a lottery.

[Dalton Conley](#) - *Washington Post*, August 13, 2018

Dalton Conley is the Henry Putnam University Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and the author, most recently, of "[The Genome Factor](#)."

There is a big debate about elite education going on right now within social science. And it's not the one you may be thinking of.

The public is busy arguing over [affirmative action](#) and whether Asian Americans are [discriminated against](#) in Harvard University admissions, and whether preferences based on "[legacy](#)" alumni connections, athletic skills or other attributes should continue.

But sociologists and economists are trying to assess whether all this fuss even matters. In other words, what is the value of going to a highly selective school such as Harvard, Yale or Princeton?

There's one sure way to resolve both these debates: a lottery.

Here's how it would work: Universities would set minimum standards of admission. These could be as high or low as the schools like, considering a mix of criteria such as SAT scores, class rank, personal essay, extracurricular activities and challenges such as overcoming economic hardship (all rated separately and blindly). After a cull using this automated scoring — applicants would need, say, a combination equivalent to a 3.7 grade-point average, 4 out of 5 on the essays/activities and 1500 on the SATs — the final selection for acceptance would be done purely by lottery.

The key is that the evaluation is made without any knowledge of the candidates' legacy status, race, geographic location or other criteria. It is an intentionally piecemeal system in contrast to the current approach that admissions officers pretend is "holistic." If schools wanted to weight certain factors for diversity purposes, they could do it at the drawing stage.

In the same way that medical residency programs and newly minted doctors sort each other out, the applicants would order their college preferences in advance and be matched to their top-choice school that drew their name in its lottery. Students could rank their college choices contingent on the financial packages they offer. No more strategic gaming or early decision. No waiting lists and endless nail-biting.

Such a system would make explicit what most of us already know: There's a huge amount of randomness in [elite-college admissions](#), which stirs a corresponding suspicion about how the process might be skewed. With lady luck out in the open, the narrative would change. Those who attend the crème-de-la-crème schools would know they got there at least in part by chance. Maybe these lucky kids would be a little [humbler](#) or even grateful. Those who weren't selected for their dream school would learn a good life lesson about disappointment and the need for resilience. Yet the arbitrariness might take the sting out of not matching with their dream school.

Moreover, a lottery system would be a boon to social scientists, since it would approximate an experiment to determine the actual value-added of a particular school.

If one simply looks at the [career outcomes](#) of elite-college graduates, they do appear to fare better than the typical university graduate. A student whose parents are in the top 1 percent of income distribution is [77 times](#) more likely to attend an Ivy League institution than one from the bottom 20 percent, but once students of any background have that elite diploma, [future earnings](#) are largely unrelated to family profile. No wonder there's so much fuss about who gets in.

But wait a minute. What if the admissions office is just better at identifying future high achievers than I, as a professor, am at imparting added-value to them? Given that the labor market rewards many of the same skills that admissions officers also value — fast thinking, a competitive drive and so on — maybe the college you attend is mostly incidental. Jane who scored 1500 on her SATs will be just fine, whether she goes to Stanford or State U.

A [2002 study](#) by economists Stacy Berg Dale and Alan B. Krueger suggested just that. They examined students who were admitted to the most selective schools but attended a less selective institution, whether because of financial concerns, family needs or some other reason. The students who were accepted at, say, Columbia but took a non-Ivy route ended up doing just as well in their careers as those who enrolled.

Meanwhile, a lottery would put pressure on elite-college professors to justify our institutions' exalted status. The random element makes it possible to measure the true treatment effect of attending a place such as Princeton. We could compare the career outcomes of students who went to one school vs. another school based on the straws they drew and not on the hard-to-measure individual characteristics that would have influenced their acceptance in the past. Schools would have to compete on the value they added to students' trajectories, not on the trajectories themselves.

Luck has no place in America's Horatio Alger national myth, but admissions to the country's elite universities is no meritocracy. Maybe it's time to gamble on a little randomness.