



College Admissions Ride the Equality Roundabout

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Published online: 16 November 2019
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College admissions has moved to center stage with the recent tabloid-pleasing-celebrity-athletics-coach-and-SAT-cribbing-and-bribing scandals. Who gets into college, especially elite colleges, will always be contentious. Different colleges cater to different populations, but despite many varied and often idiosyncratic institutional motives, most want to admit the fraction of the applicant pool that can best benefit from and contribute to the school. How should they choose?

The problem is a tangle with many threads. To understand it, and why college admissions will always be a hotly contested issue, we need to pull on a few.

People Are Not the Same

The first thread is individual differences. People differ by almost any measure. After more than one hundred years of research it is clear that although one child may be good at math, another at writing, still another at music, these talents are not unrelated. There is a statistical relationship among various intellectual skills: a kid who is good at one kind of mental activity is likely to be good at others. This is what people have always called intelligence, which is a kind of average of talents.

The idea that there is such a thing as intelligence is not controversial. Selecting college matriculants according to their intelligence raises three issues:

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1. People differ in intelligence, however you measure it. Some people are more intelligent than others.
2. Success in higher education depends on intelligence, although dependence is far from total: motivation and previous preparation are also important.
3. Most troubling of all, racially identifiable groups differ in average intelligence as well as in these other factors.¹

These facts mean that almost any method of selection for admission to college based on intelligence will have an unequal impact on racial groups. That is, unless active contrary steps are taken, the most selective schools will admit more applicants from some groups than others. These disparities are upsetting because we, the progeny of Western civilization, are committed to two self-contradictory beliefs: equality and liberty—the modern version of the *Egalité* and *Liberté* of the French revolution which, as Wolfgang Goethe pointed out many years ago, are in conflict: “[those] who promise equality and liberty at the same time are either psychopaths or mountebanks.”² Even Karl Marx recognized the inequality of men and the inequality of reward that may result.

Groups are unequal by almost any measure. If any such a measure is used to select, then college admissions will have disparate impact—inequality. Disparate impact violates the equality imperative, so there will be pressure to select in some other way in the hope of restoring equality. Many measures may be tried (I mention a few below), but only measures that give weight to intelligence will be compatible with success in elite colleges. Since intelligence is unequally distributed among groups, any selection measure related to successful academic performance will affect groups unequally, starting the search for a better measure all over again. Because its aims are contradictory—equal access and academic excellence—the search will never end. The criteria for admission to college are on an eternal roundabout.

Almost all the innovations in selection procedures, from ability tests such as the SAT (1926) and ACT (1959) through the College Board’s “Adversity Index” (2019, more on this below), are attempts to square this circle. Inequality, among

¹Group, or race, differences in IQ (intelligence quotient) are still a horrendously controversial topic. Nevertheless, the fact is that average IQ does differ between races. Both the size of the gap and its causes (environmental, genetic, epigenetic) are still disputed. That group differences do exist is nevertheless a challenge for admissions officers, irrespective of its cause. For the latest round of explication see Eric Turkheimer, Kathryn Paige Harden, and Richard E. Nisbett, “There’s still no good reason to believe black-white IQ differences are due to genes,” *Vox.com*, June 17, 2017; Michael Barone, “Genetics Is Undercutting the Case for Racial Quotas,” *National Review*, April 6, 2018; David Reich, “How Genetics Is Changing Our Understanding of ‘Race,’” *New York Times*, March 23, 2018.

²Quoted by Hans-Hermann Hoppe: <http://mises.org/daily/357>

individuals and among groups, guarantees endless wrangling about who should be admitted to what college and on what basis.

Meritocracy and Society

The second admissions thread is social. Every civilized society is stratified to a greater or lesser degree. Well-known attempts have been made to create a “classless society.” All have failed, usually with disastrous results. Our society is stratified and will remain so. The issue is not should it be stratified or not, but by how much? And by what means? In other words, how is the elite selected? How should it be selected?

Higher education is supposed to educate. That is its chief function. But in recent years it has also become an important avenue to material and social success, entry to the elite. Elites don’t have to be chosen in this way. In years past they were not: inheritance, of wealth or title, or royal writ, conferred status. But in the modern West, increasingly, education plays a decisive role. Our devotion to educational credentials is one aspect of a slightly shaky devotion to meritocracy—elevating people according to some more or less objective measure of competence.

In the U.S., college and the selectivity of the college attended provides such a measure (in the U.K. it tends to be not college but high school—Eton, Harrow, Radley, or “other”—that decides. For the most part, these schools do not overvalue intellectual merit.) In the U.S., college is the filter of choice at career beginning, and intelligence is an important selection criterion.

Some of the problems that arise with merit-based systems of social mobility were pointed out in the book where the term meritocracy first appeared: *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, by British sociologist Michael Young, originally published (after many tries) in 1958, but republished as recently as 2017.

The book is a brilliant satire, both history and science fiction. The history covers the British educational system up to the mid-1950s. The science fiction is its subsequent history until the fictional year of publication, 2034. The satire is the book as a whole, which imagines the state of the British political system after years of unimpeded test-based meritocracy. Young’s aim was not to advance meritocracy but to dramatize the problems associated with a society stratified by intelligence tests.

Young argues that if elites are selected according to intelligence, over generations society will settle down into strata, with high intelligence on the top, low on the bottom. Many others have made a similar point, from Francis Galton to R. J. Herrnstein. The conclusion does not depend on the distracting and provocative question of genetics. Cultural or genetic, nature or nurture, it doesn’t matter: smart

individuals tend to choose smart partners and raise smart children. In merit-based systems, smart kids are likely to become successful adults. Consistent coupling of social advancement and intelligence will result in a society ranked by intelligence. Young's argument is not conclusive, but consistent data make it impossible to dismiss.

Meritocracy and the Grammar Schools

The history of "grammar schools" and the British "eleven-plus" examination provides an interesting case study. The work of British psychologist Cyril Burt and others on intelligence and IQ tests led them to conclude that intelligence was pretty much settled by the age of eight or so. This led to the British practice of selecting an intelligent minority for the university track at the age of ten via the notorious high-stake "eleven-plus" examinations. The eleven-plus tested both subject knowledge in math and English but also involved IQ-related problems. The 1944 Butler Act was approved by both the Labour and Conservative parties. Labour supported it on the ground that "it opened new opportunities for working class children," who might otherwise have been unable to access opportunities for social advance.

Young's contention that selection acts as a filter that changes the composition of social classes receives some confirmation from the British experience. After the eleven-plus was introduced, the universities, the path to further career advance, were increasingly filled with high-IQ students. Success in the eleven-plus meant that the pupil could go on to grammar schools which, if he passed two other thresholds at ages 16 and 18, meant he was on track to university, a goal achieved by 7 percent or less of the appropriate age group in 1950. British society was on its way to becoming a meritocracy, but problems soon began to surface.

Young's first point is the effect of meritocracy on the lower echelons of society:

At the beginning of my special period, 1914, the upper classes had their fair share of geniuses and morons, so did the workers; or, I should say, since a few brilliant and fortunate working men always climbed up to the top despite having been subordinate in society, the inferior classes contained almost as high a proportion of superior people as the upper classes themselves.

So, before the meritocracy had worked its magic, there were talented people at all levels of society. But afterwards, not so much. It is almost a tautology: meritocracy = class inequality.

The societal effects of the eleven-plus were not felt for several decades. In postwar Britain, talent was to be found at every level. A postman might play Bach on his piano and a manual worker read if not Proust, at least D. H. Lawrence or C. P. Snow. But after a few years the pool of disadvantaged smart kids to be freed by the eleven-plus from their poor origins seemed to be shrinking, since the now better-educated poor were able to rise to the upper classes. Critics claimed that by 1957 test-smart children increasingly came from the upper classes. The poorer classes no longer “contained almost as high a proportion of superior people as the upper classes.” In reaction, Labour Party sentiment changed from favoring grammar schools in the 1940s to shutting down most of them in the 1960s. There were many reasons, but one of them is surely the intellectual depletion of the lower classes brought about by meritocracy.

There is apparently less social mobility in the U. S. than in many other Western countries, despite most people’s expectation to the contrary.³ This is usually taken as evidence for a rigid class system. Michael Young’s argument suggests almost the opposite: the more effective a meritocracy, the better it selects, generation by generation, the less social mobility it will permit as the decades pass. In a meritocracy social mobility seems to be self-limiting.

Meritocracy and Social Classes

In earlier times, not everyone thought class divisions a bad thing. Not everyone deplored ranks of birth or station, and there was some opposition to meritocrats: “so many of our great-grandfathers were positively hostile to ‘competition wallahs’ in British government,” writes Young. Nineteenth-century Conservative peer and aphorist Lord Salisbury “once said he could not think of a logical defence of the hereditary principle and, for that reason, was disinclined to give it up.” A couple of centuries earlier, Dr. Samuel Johnson thought the class system a fine thing, because it avoids conflict. His amanuensis James Boswell quotes Johnson:

Were all distinctions abolished, the strongest would not long acquiesce, but would endeavor to obtain superiority by their bodily strength. But, Sir, as subordination is very necessary for society, and contentions for superiority very dangerous, mankind, that is to say, all civilized nations, have settled it upon a plan invariable in principle. A man is born to hereditary rank; or his being appointed to certain offices, gives him a certain rank. Subordination

³For a summary of recent studies see Apama Mathur, “The U.S. Does Poorly on Yet Another Metric of Economic Mobility,” *Forbes*, July 16, 2018.

tends greatly to human happiness. Were we all upon an equality, we should have no other enjoyment than mere animal pleasure.⁴

In other words, Johnson argued, acknowledged classes, ranks, and aristocracy, by limiting conflict, make for human happiness. Johnson would not have favored a meritocracy⁵.

Johnson lived through the time of the American Revolution. We don't know if he ever read the Declaration of Independence. But we do know that the Founders read Johnson and learned from him. Whether they would have agreed that acknowledged ranks—"subordination" in society—are essential to happiness and thus implied by the Declaration we do not know. But Johnson's argument does imply that an unrestrained meritocracy is inimical to human happiness and thus against the American spirit.

Perhaps social ranks have redeeming features, but it makes a difference just how they are determined. For Johnson, ranks were necessary, because without ranks, "there would be a perpetual struggle for precedence." He also thought hereditary aristocracy best, because then "the distinction of rank . . . creates no jealousy, as is allowed to be accidental." Both the hereditary aristocrat and the hereditary journeyman, farmer or servant knows he is there by accident; it is fate, no one is to blame, and no change is possible. Moreover, decency compels a certain *noblesse oblige* by the aristocrat to those below him, so long as they acknowledge their relative positions.

Few would accept these arguments today. Our commitment to equality, even though it conflicts with our commitment to equality of opportunity, is too strong: there is no support for any kind of fixed ranking, hereditary or otherwise, in American society. Some kind of meritocracy is here to stay.

Meritocracy and the Academy

A third strand of the admissions process is the effect of admissions policy on the academy itself. Many admissions officers at elite colleges are aware of their perceived roles as the guardians of social mobility. The idea is that we can live with social stratification so long as able people from the lower orders have the opportunity to move up. Unfortunately, this only works so long as there really is

⁴James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1791).

⁵Indeed, Johnson's aversion to meritocracy is now fashionable, although his favored alternative, aristocracy, is not. See, for example, Daniel Markovits (2019) "How Life Became an Endless, Terrible, Competition," *Atlantic*, (September, 2019).

a pool of talent among the disadvantaged. If, as seems to be the case, consistent filtering by the meritocratic principle soon leaves the lower ranks depleted of young people of ability, then mobility is blocked—unless the criteria are relaxed. Hence, the endless search for some magical new selection principle less apparently biased in favor of the upper classes.

The new Adversity Index supplement to the SAT fits the bill perfectly. It has no relation whatsoever to the applicant's actual performance, substituting fifteen extrinsic measures, such as the crime rate and poverty in the applicant's neighborhood, the quality of his high school, and others. (As one commentator pointed out, this reverses the pattern of seeking advantage by purchasing a house in a good school district. Now you can get points for buying in a bad district.) The fifteen factors are then combined, through an undisclosed formula, to yield a score visible only to admissions officers.

The reason for the Adversity Index is the growing number of legal challenges to race-based selection (affirmative action), which was one way to mitigate the disparities caused by test-based admissions. A workaround, a way to keep race-based "diversity," is simply to make the tests optional, which many elite colleges are now doing. Reducing the need for testing presented a challenge to the College Board—less clout, fewer customers. Their response has been the Adversity Index, which promised testing without its problematic disparity among groups.

Many admissions directors favor the Adversity Index because it can be used as a proxy for race ("diversity"), and its very opacity is a defense against legal challenge—an acceptable alternative to overt affirmative action. But of course, like affirmative action, it will have problems. If the new method does indeed do the same job, and if the favored groups are in fact lower in ability, less able to succeed in an elite college, then there are three possible effects:

1. Mismatch: Unqualified kids will be accepted at tough schools, will fail and drop out.
2. In the long term this failure to cope with tough intellectual demands will lead to pressure on elite colleges to come up with majors less demanding than the STEM fields that many minority students prefer initially. Mismatched groups will press for departments and programs in subjects with which they are familiar and in which they can succeed.
3. There will be a tendency to self-segregate, both academically (courses targeted to blacks or other minorities) and socially (dining facilities, dorms, even graduation ceremonies).

There are examples of all these effects. A particularly damaging long-term trend is the appearance of areas of study that are politically inspired. New departments and programs have sprung up that are intellectually suspect. Some, indeed, are not distinguishable from nonsense: “disciplines” like “whiteness studies” that give rise to peer-reviewed papers with titles like “A Framework for Understanding Whiteness in Mathematics Education”—one of many attempts to politicize the most neutral of academic disciplines. Success in these “grievance studies” requires only learning a vocabulary and acquiring appropriate prejudices. If the student can parrot “victim” politics laced with terms like “hegemony,” “oppression,” “patriarchy,” “power relations,” “cis-gendered,” and the like, success is assured. These courses appeal to students who have been persuaded of their victim status, which itself is often affirmed by their having been academically “mismatched.” They contribute to the drift away from tough disciplines that many minority students show after their first year of college. When STEM is too tough, grievance studies beckon.

A fourth factor or thread of the college admissions problem/conundrum is that private colleges depend on donations to build their foundation. And not only private colleges: UC Berkeley, for example, gets only 13 percent of its funding from the state of California. Building alumni support is essential and so “legacy” admits, relatives of (preferably generous) alumni, will be favored—with appropriate allowance made for their intellectual limitations. Likewise athletes, whose success also strengthens the support base for many schools (some of the celebrity-admissions-scandal children got in by posing as athletes). These practices will not go away, since they are probably essential to the private system, which has produced great universities of a type unique to the U.S.

Meritocracy and Democracy

A final thread is the effect of continued meritocracy on democracy. Young concludes that meritocracy is incompatible with democracy: “we [the meritocrats in power] frankly recognize that democracy can be no more than aspiration, and have rule not so much by the people as by the cleverest people; not an aristocracy of birth, not a plutocracy of wealth, but a true meritocracy of talent.”

A splendid apotheosis, and a prescient predictor of the European Union! Written from the point of view of a dedicated technocrat, the book celebrates this outcome. For the satirist Young, rule “by the cleverest people,” a technocracy, is natural, just, and efficient.

He doesn't really mean it of course. Democratic rule by a technocratic elite is a contradiction in terms. Even if the elite is all-wise (and it isn't), the mass of people, seen by the meritocrats as too dumb to understand the subtleties of technocratic rule, will feel resentful, a phenomenon at least partly reflected in the rise of populist parties and politicians throughout the West in recent years.

Moreover, the successful meritocrat is comfortable that his rise to power rests entirely on his talent. It follows, therefore, that the status of the lower orders rests equally on their lack of it. No longer are the lower orders seen as passive victims of external forces like prejudice, deindustrialization, or low wages. They have "earned" their poverty, having had every opportunity to advance along meritocratic lines, but failing to do so. While a few may recognize that the poor in a meritocracy may not be responsible for their own inferiority—a child doesn't choose his genes or the quality of his parents—and perhaps support some compensatory measures, it seems unlikely that a majority will do so, and negative attitudes toward the poor will harden.

More Diversity?

Every civilized society organizes itself into a hierarchy. There are no civilizations above hunter-gatherers that have been flat, without classes of some sort. Some have believed that total equality is possible and might be achieved. But all attempts to do so have so far failed, usually with deadly results.

In Western societies, there have been two main ways to organize the hierarchy: through heredity (aristocracy) and through selection. Heredity has fallen out of fashion, even though, in the view of Johnson and Lord Salisbury, it is better, because more peaceful, than any kind of competitive system. What remains is some kind of selection. Many types have been tried in the past, from nepotism to favoritism. Today, because of its resultant inequality, we are busy replacing merit-based selection with race-based selection, but remain so outwardly committed to merit that much of this has had to be done through subterfuge (e.g. why can't college applicants access their Adversity Index score?)

Until the growth of identity politics, it was a truism to say that a college, or a company, should pick the best—brightest, hardest-working—applicants, the best man or woman for the job. "Best" is often impossible to define precisely, so that many supposedly meritocratic organizations fail. But when selection by merit is successful, the results are often embarrassingly unequal. Apparently, some groups have more "merit" than others—a totally unacceptable state of

affairs. The difficulty in defining “merit” and the disparities that result when merit measures are applied, posed a pair of problems. What to do? Aha! “Diversity” appeared as a welcome solution. Selecting for diversity avoids these problems altogether. Being diverse is now for many enterprises either more important than, or regarded as equivalent to, merit.

Colleges and universities do the selecting in America, and that is why admission to elite colleges is and always will be a contentious matter. For the reasons I have tried to explicate, there can never be a definitive solution to the admissions problem at selective institutions. Perfect equality of outcome and universal equality of opportunity—meritocracy—are mutually incompatible.

What is the solution to this conundrum? First, recognize the contradictions faced by any scheme for selecting an elite. There is no perfect solution. Second, identify particular problems that seem to grow out of particular selection procedures. Admitting unqualified students to elite schools—the “diversity” religion, now several decades old—seems to have led to corruption of much of the curriculum in the humanities and social sciences (and may be infecting the hard sciences too), as well as unhealthy growth in college bureaucracies.⁶ Programs that might not survive in open and self-critical institutions now flourish in the siloed and incoherent colleges and universities that are now the majority. Politicized courses, social-justice polarization, academic nonsense pejoratively and justifiably labeled “grievance studies,” and senior scholars who contend that color-blindness is racist, or gender a matter of personal whim, all thrive. If we believe there is indeed a connection between a selection policy and bad results like these, then we should change the policy.

But ultimately the solution lies not with the universities but with society. Elite universities should not be the only road to success. Erudition and excellent scholarship are important, but they are not the only competencies we need. Monopoly always corrupts and conferring an effective monopoly on the likes of Harvard and Yale does no service to them or to society. It has distorted the universities, divided society, and deprived the country of talented people who might fit poorly into a university but who could contribute mightily in other ways.

The solution is indeed diversity, not diversity of race (which should be irrelevant) but of paths to success; a diversity of institutions, not of skin color. If we do it right, diversity in the current boring, irrelevant, and ultimately destructive sense, may well emerge, but as a natural consequence not an objective.

⁶John Staddon, “The Devolution of Social Science,” *Quillette*, October 7, 2018; John Staddon, “Administrative Bloat: Where Does It Come From and What Is It Doing?,” James B. Martin Center Center for Academic Renewal, June 19, 2019.