Research on the concept of meritocracy and its role in college admissions is the major focus of this article. It explores the factors that contribute to the gatekeeping process and provides a historical context that led to the evolution of today's admission protocol. It focuses specifically on the strict meritocratic practices of many colleges as they continue to preserve the longstanding and deeply-rooted admission traditions. The authors provide a discussion about options for reforming the system, along with recommendations and topics that require additional research and exploration.
INTRODUCTION

In higher education, there are two symbolic metaphors for accessing a college degree: a key and a gate. The key represents access: it will open some doors but not all. The key is powerful, but alone it is not sufficient. Similarly, the gate represents entrance and a transition from one place to another. Someone on the other side of the gate determines whether the key a student holds will unlock the gate. The gate represents the pathway to most colleges and universities in America. As long as there have been colleges and universities, there have been keys and gates. Gatekeeping began when the first set of admissions criteria was established at Harvard in 1635 (Cabrera & Burkum 2001). “Gatekeeping” is the process of determining who obtains access to higher education. It is a phenomenon that has significant implications for society. (After all, one’s education level affects one’s social class, income, and opportunities.) Gatekeeping is perpetuated by colleges and universities as a way to limit access to advanced degrees. According to Douthat (2005), pursuing a college education is an “American rite of passage.” Over the years, gatekeeping as a process has been debated because it is at odds with the core American value of equal opportunity. Gatekeeping promotes elitism, among other phenomena (Brint & Karabel 1989). This paper explores the creation, evolution, and implications of gatekeeping, particularly as it is related to meritocracy.

ORIGINS OF THE GATE

To understand the creation of the gate, one first must seek historical perspective. According to Brint and Karabel (1989), “Going to college has been the great American ambition...” (p. 58). That ambition is based on the values of economic and social advancement, meritocracy, and power. Cabrera and Burkum (2001) identified four main eras of college admissions: subjectivity, search for uniformity, search for objectivity, and the quest for holistic approach. Subjectivity was the theme of gatekeeping essentially from the 1600s through the 1890s. At this time, admissions criteria were institution specific; and for the most part, college presidents interviewed applicants. Interviews tested applicants’ facility with classical languages; knowledge; readings; and their moral character (Cabrera & Burkum 2001). Later, faculty conducted interviews, determining who would be in their classes. A search for uniformity characterized the period from 1893 through the 1910s. During this time, North Central Accreditation had its founding, along with the intent to standardize high schools’ curricula (thereby making it easier to evaluate college applicants). At the same time, the College Entrance Examination Board Test, an essay exam, was created for use in college admissions. According to Henderson (2008), the first admissions office was established in 1915 at Columbia University, thus formalizing this gatekeeping protocol. Starting in the 1920s, the search for
Elitism, Efficiency, Excellence, and Economics

Sustaining the practice of gatekeeping are four main themes that not only are interdependent but also are very powerful: elitism, efficiency, excellence, and economics. Soares (2007) provides this perspective:

Privileged social groups, in particular managerial and professional career families, strive to stay ahead by equipping their young with educational credentials that are more elite than those widely attained by middle- and working-class youths. The best insurance the professional/managerial strata have that their investments in education will pay off is their patronage of a distinctly elite sector in the educational system (p.10).

From its inception, gatekeeping was designed to protect members of the elite class. Prestigious colleges protect their elite status by differentiating themselves as much as possible from rival schools that are not elite. Elite colleges must protect their brands as intensely as Nike protects its. The culture of the elite tends to build the “strata families” capacity and drive to succeed; the inheritance of the elite creates cultural capital (Soares 2007). This capital in turn determines which college will be the best match and the recipient of a healthy investment. In other words, elite colleges woo the elite in order to establish long-term relation-ships that will enhance their endowments. Affirmative action for the rich (otherwise called “legacy”) is a special admissions process for the children of alumni. Legacy entitles certain students—merited or not—a seat in the classroom. Money alone almost always supersedes merit. Consider the following example that derives from Daniel Golden’s book, The Price of Admission, about Jared Kushner, now the youthful owner of The New York Observer:

While Jared was applying to colleges, his dad, New Jersey billionaire developer Charles Kushner, pledged $2.5 million to Harvard, to be paid in installments. (Kushner pleaded guilty to tax evasion and other counts in 2003 and recently completed a prison sentence.) An official at Kushner’s high school told Golden: “There was no way anybody in … the school thought he would on the merits get into Harvard. His GPA did not warrant it, his SAT scores did not warrant it. We thought, for sure, there was no way this was going to happen.” Kushner graduated from Harvard in 2003 (Beam 2006).

The rich have extraordinary access to deans, university presidents, and influential alumni groups—certainly far more than ordinary students or their families (Golden 2006). If your last name is Bass, Gates, Bush, Kennedy, or Ballmer, you likely will find it a lot easier to attend the college of your choice than will a peer with the same high school academic and extracurricular abilities but with the surname Jones, Lin, Martinez, or O’Neill. Elitism is in fact the template for today’s college admissions model (Stevens 2007).

Besides elitism, an economic factor also is at play in the gatekeeping process. Collectively, universities have become large, important, corporate places that determine the fate of the public. Major institutions that employ thousands, they have evolved into a national department of human resources (Lemann 1999). Major universities, especially those in the Ivy League, provide endless job opportunities—in management, admissions, placement, budget, and alumni relations—to sustain the image; a few departments within each institution are critical components of the entire operation. According to Sacks (1999), another aspect of the economic factor is the standardized test industry—a $20 billion enterprise that plays a critical role in the gatekeeping process. Thacker (2004) details the additional industries that profit: enrollment management consulting, private college counseling, scholarship
search services, athletic agents, and learning development specialists. These services reportedly generate more than $500 million annually (Thacker 2004) and perpetuate the economic impact of gatekeeping. In fact, the impact of economics on gatekeeping is far more intrusive than one might imagine. Changing this aspect of gatekeeping will be next to impossible.

To maximize profit and minimize loss, universities adopted standardized tests as the key to entrance. In devising the current meritocracy, education planners “couldn’t imagine any disadvantage to setting up school as the arena for determining individual destinies: that looked to them far more practical, more just, more efficient, and more conducive to social harmony than it has turned out to be” (Lemann 1999, p. 348). It is far more efficient to review the scores on a given test and determine if they are high enough to offer a student admission than to interview a candidate and review portfolios. Besides standardized tests, grade point averages are also an efficient way to quantitatively evaluate a student’s potential for success in college. This type of academic categorization perpetuates stratification. Efficiency is a gatekeeper.

Colleges and universities have high standards and reputations to maintain. Sometimes they are more concerned about admitting people who have high test scores (and who thus will boost the institution’s status) than about recruiting leaders. Education is undergoing a shift: from opportunities for students to explore and grow, to institutional preoccupation with rankings. Rather than training people to participate in a thriving democracy, education increasingly is about providing credentials to help graduates obtain high-paying jobs. Americans believe that an Ivy League education will:

...provide the social and intellectual equivalent of Marine Corps basic training—that being taught by all those brilliant professors and meeting all those other motivated students and getting a degree with that powerful name on it will confer advantages that no local state university can provide” (Gladwell 2005, p. 3).

Studies show that it is the college name on the diploma—not one’s test score—that determines an individual’s salary 20 years hence (Krueger 2000). Elite schools pride themselves on their success rates, so they set out to enroll the best students they can. This includes star athletes who not only will yield a high income but also the attention of financially supportive alumni. The degree of excellence maintained by Ivy League schools is based on their production of leaders and talented individuals who have left a mark on society by attaining social prominence though academic brilliance. It is the perception that only Ivy League schools can provide an excellent education—and a successful future—that misleads students into believing they will not have the same opportunities for success should they attend a different college. Excellence is a gatekeeper.

**Meritocracy**

Today’s admissions system is based on meritocracy. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1994), Michael Young defines meritocracy as “a society or social system in which people attain status or rewards because of what they achieve rather than because of their wealth or social status” (p. 5). When applied to the college admissions process, meritocracy is equivalent to an education selection system based on what a student has earned from his test scores and his grade point average. It is *supposed* to be a selection process based on merit. Meritocracy made its debut in the 1950s and created “an academic and social revolution” (Soares 2007, p. 9). It began with the Ivy League schools and progressed to high-paying occupations, which elevated social status. A new elite was established by gently pushing old-money Protestant men to the side. The new self-made meritocrats replaced the privileged family in society. The point of origin hailed from Harvard and Yale. “A shift from character to intellect by the gatekeepers of academia had produced a social revolution” (Soares 2007, p. 43).

Even though the focus of the selection process changed from social pedigree to academic excellence, money provided support venues to keep the gates open. The original intent was to create a meritocratic society, one where everyone has equal opportunity to gain the rewards merited by their efforts and talents. The original founders of the system determined that there should be a “national governing elite, chosen early in life on academic criteria and elaborately trained at public expense on the assumption that its members would repay the investment in the form of public service” (Lemann 1999). This idea warped into a completely new concept of meritocracy—one which used psychometrics as the governing force in society. IQ tests
were determined to be the best measure of the ultimate human quality, innate intelligence (which of course is inherited); it was believed that scores from these tests could determine an individual’s future.

If the commitment is to foster a meritocratic society—that is, one in which people get the jobs they deserve—then it is imperative to adopt an education system that reflects the same philosophy. This does not mean sorting and classifying students according to their test performance, athletic ability, or financial status. No one’s future is determined by a test score. According to Rooney and Schaeffer (1988):

We are mired in a testocracy that, in the name of merit, abstracts data from individuals, quantifies those individuals based on numerical rankings, exaggerates its ability to predict those individuals’ future performance, and then disguises under the rubric of ‘qualifications’ the selection of those who are more socio-economically privileged.

Meritocracy, as it is known, is another system manipulated by the wealthy to prevent access by the poor to social elevation (p. 53).

Karabel (2005) declares that “meritocracy merely deflects attention from the real issues of poverty and inequality of condition onto a chimerical quest for unlimited social mobility” (p. 5). The original intention of meritocracy was to create a just society, one based on Jefferson’s ideal of a “natural aristocracy” of merit in which those selected would dedicate themselves to public service (Bowen, Kurzweil and Tobin 2005, p. 3).

REFORM

Given the history, evolution, and advancement of the gatekeeping process, it is time to advocate for change. According to McDonough (2005), “[W]e view merit criteria as the end result of an inexorable march toward maximal educational efficiency and equity and thus the highest and only reasonable altar on which to make admissions decisions” (p. 85). Despite McDonough’s claims, there are alternatives to a merit-based gatekeeping or admissions process. Reform is critical to making the transition away from a meritocratic system and toward a more inclusive model.

At one extreme, one could remove the gate altogether. Such removal would have profound effects on student success, as well as on retention and graduation rates. Because colleges are measured according to these types of outcomes and results, we do not advocate for removal of the gate. Further, community colleges ensure the presence of an “open gate”: their open admission policies and practices provide opportunities to all prospective students without particular regard to merit.

Another option is to improve the gate. Recently, Lloyd Thacker formed The Educational Conservancy, which has as its sole mission challenging the status quo of the current gatekeeping/admissions process. The organization is “a group of admission professionals committed to calming the commercial frenzy by affirming educational values in college admission” (p. 1). Thacker calls upon admissions professionals to change their practices so as to make them “more manageable, more productive, and more educationally appropriate” (n.d.). In questioning the current state of college admissions, Thacker (2004) calls attention to the abuse of the student in the gatekeeping process; he seeks to reclaim admissions from its current commercialized state and to focus instead on the true values of education: curiosity, self-discipline, imagination, and open-mindedness, to name a few. Thacker devotes 24 pages of his book to recommendations for what students, parents, testing officials, and educators can do to protect the admissions process from returning to its elitist and restrictive roots.

Organizations that question standardized testing constitute another force for change. For example, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing works continuously to “reduce the role of standardized tests as gatekeepers” (n.d.). As a result of this organization’s efforts, more than 800 colleges and universities have become “test-score optional” schools (n.d.). Such action helps open the gate because it diverts attention from a single admissions factor. The economic and financial implications are significant: this industry is a billion dollar enterprise (Sacks 1999). Because current processes and models perpetuate historical approaches, reform is not easy. Yet this is not an excuse for inaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Meritocracy does not mean the same thing to all people. There is no pure interpretation. As Lemann (1999) writes, “Merit is various, not unidimensional” (p. 345). Neither tests nor formal education can identify every form of merit. They do not identify creativity, passion, wisdom,
tenacity, empathy, humor, or moral worth. They evaluate people according to their potential, not according to their accomplishments in the field of work for which they are being selected. True meritocracy can be established by creating more inclusive educational selection processes. Schools clearly cannot select everyone, and testing certainly has its place, but the operative principle should be to educate as many people as possible and to use tests to ensure that students are learning (as opposed to using them to select people to advance to the next educational level).

Test scores are intended to ensure that very high scorers—the top 1 percent of the distribution—are provided with great learning opportunities. To that end, testing has accomplished its intent. But it has not done much to ensure educational opportunity for the other 99 percent of prospective students. People in the top 1 percent tend to think that what works for them works for everyone. But serving the elite is not in itself the sign of a system that provides opportunity to all. Educators need to focus on the merits of learning as a lifelong journey. According to Lemann (1999), “American life is a great race” that continues long after the “schooling” has ended (p. 348). We are called to repurpose schools as “expanding opportunity, not determining result” (Lemann 1999, p. 348).

As the future of the gate is considered, one recommendation is the end of meritocracy and the creation of “holistocracy,” an admissions process based on holistic criteria well beyond test scores and grade point averages. Holistocracy considers attitudinal components, a variety of intellectual skills, intellectual maturity, leadership, potential for societal contribution, motivation, and a host of other non-cognitive variables that play a role in college success. Doubtless, such a technique would be time consuming; but it would enable American higher education to return to the democratic values originally intended. While some colleges and universities have begun to move toward holistic review, its adoption is not yet sufficiently widespread to consider it a major trend in college admissions. Nevertheless, holistic review is gaining ground.

CONCLUSION
It is time to shift the focus of college admissions to factors that predict successful engagement and away from such restrictive criteria as ethnicity, grade point average, and test scores. It is time to introduce new mechanisms that reflect applicants’ traits and qualities as well as their skills. Consideration needs to be given to the true meaning of meritocracy, and policies need to be established that adhere to its definition. Selection criteria need to move beyond grade point averages and test scores if we are to continue to be a viable power in a global society. Some areas that need to be taken into account are effort demonstrated on high school projects, performance, academic fit (based on activities in and out of school), and leadership qualities. All colleges should adopt flexible admissions procedures that incorporate as much holistic review of prospective students as possible, thus minimizing reliance on formulaic or quantitative approaches. Dialogue is one of the most important factors to be considered: dialogue between and among universities and high schools, high

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION
While the future of the gatekeeping process has yet to be determined, a variety of related topics merit additional research and exploration. For example, an historical perspective on the role of race in college admissions would provide powerful insight into society’s treatment of underrepresented races. Another unexplored topic relates to grade inflation in high schools and how it ultimately affects students’ admission to college. This is especially important given that grade point average also has financial implications in terms of the awarding of scholarships; the effect on students’ ability to access a college education is clear. College rankings by U.S. News and World Report are a controversial element of the gatekeeping process as they categorize and elevate particular schools and colleges—and do so in a financially powerful way. Ethical considerations accompany rankings in the same way they accompany the testing corporations’ (ACT and the College Board) becoming multi-million dollar enterprises that benefit significantly from the expansive and complicated gatekeeping process. In contrast, true meritocracy means stripping an application of any personal data against which a reviewer might be biased or pass judgment. It would be interesting to explore the possibility of a truly “blind” admissions process given that so much information is contained on students’ college admissions applications. Overall, a multitude of factors play a significant role in protecting and perpetuating meritocracy.
schools and elementary schools, and parents and universities in order to ensure understanding of the benefits of lifelong education. “Colleges and universities are critical gateways to economic and social success in contemporary U.S. society, and their decisions about who can attend—and how those decisions are made—are of great significance” (Rooney and Schaeffer 1988, p. 49).

Gatekeeping needs to be abolished as part of the effort to eliminate social stratification. This can be accomplished through concerted efforts that challenge the system by questioning current policies and providing research that advocates for the changing of current admissions policies. Education and communication can make this happen. The reality is that the meritocratic system does not fulfill its intent. Rather, “The present American meritocracy is an elite-selection system that accidentally got turned into a mass-opportunity system” (Lemann 1999, p. 347). Meritocracy is a myth. Ultimately, critical review of the “gate” forces one to ask: “Is there really a seat for everyone in higher education?”

REFERENCES


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