"I had a friend who had worse scores than me and he got into a better college": The legal and social realities of the college admissions process

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A college degree, especially from a selective postsecondary institution, is commonly valued as prerequisite to an upwardly mobile lifestyle. With limited seats available, selective institutions have their pick of an overabundance of highly qualified students each year. In the zero-sum game of selective college admissions, many qualified applicants denied admissions may question the fairness of the
selection process. For example, a YouTube video presents the following scenario, in which a White female applicant is denied admissions to a college where her Black acquaintance with lower grades and test scores was admitted, drawing the unfounded conclusion that the Black applicant was racially privileged in the admissions process:

Look at Sara, a white female high school student applying for college. Throughout high school, she achieved good grades in challenging classes and earned good test scores. She applied to one of the best universities in her state, only to be denied admission a few weeks later. She later found out that her friend Emily, an African American student, was accepted to the same school with lower grades and test scores. Unfortunately, Sara was negatively affected by affirmative action. If the standard college application simply did not include race, there would be no room for inequality.

Two key misconceptions underlie the video’s argument. First, it presumes that affirmative action is an unfair system of racial quotas that defies principles of equality. It incorrectly frames the goal of the civil rights movement as color-blindness, and thus race-conscious admissions policies as counter to principles of racial justice. Secondly, it assumes that selective institutions utilize a simplistic process of college admissions that applies the same basic criteria of test scores and grades for evaluating student achievement, aptitude, and merit. In this misconception, test scores and grades are incorrectly viewed as unquestionably reliable measures of achievement.

In reality, admissions processes are complex evaluation methods that necessarily include criteria beyond tests and grades to gauge the fit between students and a given selective institution. Admissions committees begin by answering the question: How does this university or college define “merit” in the admissions process? Among selective higher education institutions, there are many ways to define merit for admissions. According to Merriam-Webster’s, merit is defined as “character or conduct deserving reward” (Merit, 2011). Although “merit” is commonly assumed to mean high test scores and grades, students’ character and conduct extend beyond simplistic measures of academic achievement and promise. Indeed, selective institutions include more than test scores and grades in determining selection criteria that align with how they define “merit” because students are more than just what numbers can reveal.

Research demonstrates that test scores and grades are significantly limited in their ability to predict how successful a student will be in college and beyond (Sedlacek, 2010). They are also inadequate measures of student talents, gifts, achievements within specific contexts of opportunity, and other unquantifiable characteristics.

Unique institutional missions and interests inform each college and university’s admissions policies and procedures, resulting in the development and utilization of a large array of selection criteria. Given the complexities and diversity of institutional interests, it is false to assume that test scores, grades, and race are, or even should be, the only three criteria considered. It is also problematic to assume that tests and grades are objective, reliable, and race neutral measures of a student’s achievements and aptitude (Santelices & Wilson, 2010).

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1 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdBWMwpU2Opo.
Common Misconceptions

Myths surrounding race-conscious admissions policies often emerge from underlying concerns over fairness in the generally opaque process of admissions in top schools. Anxiety over the mysterious selective college admissions process is understandable given the intense public discourse on increasing competition in selective college admissions (Steinberg, 2003). Moreover, this anxiety can be fed by a general perception that the prestige of the institution attended can have direct effects on one’s future well-being and earning potential (Lareau, 2011).

**Misconception 1: Affirmative action consists of racial quotas and reverse discrimination.**

Contemporary opponents of affirmative action policies misleadingly claim that it is a system of racial quotas. Quotas are defined as an articulated allotment of a limited resource assigned to specific groups; in this case, a finite number of enrollment offers at selective colleges. Quotas have historically acted as a cap limiting certain groups from accessing elite institutions like those placed on Jews by Ivy League schools in the early 20th century (Brodkin, 1998; Karabel, 2005). Conversely, quotas are also minimum targets for certain groups; as in the case of the Ivy League Jewish quota, the limitation of Jews allowed for the assurance of a minimum target allotment of admission for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The practice of utilizing quotas in college admissions was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1978 *Bakke vs. Regents of the University of California.* However, the Court distinguished between the use of quotas and the consideration of race in selective admissions. In selecting students, admissions offices cannot legally utilize racial quotas, but they can continue to consider race as one of many factors in reviewing applications. Therefore, claims that current-day practices of affirmative action are racial quotas are misleading and false.

Opponents of race-conscious admissions also argue that affirmative action represents “reverse discrimination,” which defies values of hard work and merit. According to a 1974 opinion piece published in *The Harvard Crimson,* affirmative action, “provoked an outcry of ‘reverse discrimination’ from whites who say blacks and other minorities don’t have to work as hard to get into college” (Leonard, 1974). Arguing that affirmative action actually serves as a source of racism, a more recent opinion piece in *The Daily Texan* states, “The biggest problem with affirmative action is simple. Using discrimination to combat discrimination encourages racial hatred in our society” (McGarvey, 2012). While Whites have been the supposed targets of “reverse discrimination,” some also claim that Asian Americans are harmed by affirmative action policies (Brief for the Asian American Legal Foundation, 2012). Inherently, this view frames Whites and Asian Americans as hard workers that deserve admissions at top schools, while Black, Latino, and other students of color are stereotyped as undeserving students who generally do not work hard. While some have claimed that the elimination of affirmative action
would lead to overwhelming Asian American majorities in elite college undergraduate enrollments (Espenshade & Chung, 2005), such studies do not account for the removal of suspected negative action\(^2\) practices that would increase admissions for Asian American. Unlike affirmative action, negative action limits the admission of Asian Americans in favor of White applicants (Kidder, 2005), similar to earlier Ivy League quotas against Jews (Golden, 2007). Moreover, studies like Espenshade’s often assume that admissions criteria only include test scores and grades, which is an incomplete and deficient understanding of the admissions selection process.

Opponents of race-conscious admissions policies also argue that affirmative action is also a system of unfair racial preferences. At least as early as 2003, conservative student organizations have staged “anti-affirmative action bake sales” charging different prices determined by a given customer’s racial identity (Potter, 2003). They compare the unequal pricing schema to admissions policies that include race as a factor. Ward Connerly, a prominent, Black affirmative action opponent, has explained that his stance emerged from his commitment to civil rights. Invoking the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Connerly (2005) states, “the success of [Dr. King’s] children should be based on their individual accomplishments and merit and their right to equal treatment” (see also Thornhill, Essay 5 for further discussion). The misappropriation of Dr. King’s words is disturbing, since the late reverend was clearly not color-blind in leading a movement that acted to affirmatively confront systems of racial inequality (Turner, 1996). Bonilla-Silva (2006) has incisively argued how color-blind ideology serves to maintain racism by ignoring persistent racial injustices.

**Misconception 2: Race-blind admissions policies are fair.**

Finally, opponents of affirmative action believe that a race-blind admissions process is both possible and the only fair system of college admissions. They argue that race-blind admissions policies would be tantamount to charging everyone the same price for a cupcake regardless of social identity. In reference to the *Fisher v. University of Texas* U.S. Supreme Court case (2013), Megyn Kelly, a correspondent on *The O’Reilly Factor* stated, “in this case you have a white student who was denied admission to the University of Texas saying, ‘the reason I didn’t get in is because kids who have lower GPAs, lower test scores than I did were admitted because of the color of their skin’” (O’Reilly, 2012).

In addition to incorrectly assuming that test scores, grades, and race are the only admissions criteria, anti-affirmative action advocates also presume that tests and grades are racially neutral in their evaluative power. However, these quantitative measures can be tainted by bias, making them unfair gauges of student potential especially if they are the only factors for admissions. The evaluative power of high

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\(^2\) According to Kang (1996), “negative action against Asian Americans is in force if a university denies admission to an Asian American who would have been admitted had that person been white” (p. 3). For example, since the 1980s, there have been notable controversies and concerns that elite institutions restrict the admission of Asian Americans, in order to maintain and increase the admissions rates of White applicants (Poon, 2009; Liu, 2007; Kang, 1996; Nakanishi, 1995).
school GPA can be limited by implicit and explicit biases influencing how schools and teachers treat diverse students, creating barriers to high school academic achievement by race (Conchas, 2006; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Moreover, SAT results have been found to correlate with socioeconomic backgrounds of test takers, leading to critical questions about the reliability of such tests to fairly evaluate applicants’ academic achievement and potential (Geiser, 2008; Santelices & Wilson, 2010). Consequently, some highly competitive colleges have even decided to deemphasize or not require tests scores, including institutions like Bates College, Colby College, New York University, and Pitzer College.

Ultimately, it is essential to understand that selective evaluation methods for admissions are constructed to fit the unique interests of diverse institutions in how they define what merits a student’s admission. Therefore, narrow quantitative measures like test scores and grades are severely limited in what they can tell admissions officers about students. Taken alone, they can hinder admissions review processes from a fair and full evaluation of fit between a student and institution. Below is a glimpse into the selective college admissions process, which is a systemic approach to evaluating large numbers of highly qualified applicants for student–institutional fit.

**What Goes into an Admissions Process and Why?**

The first step to constructing an informed opinion about the fairness of admissions review criteria is to gain a basic understanding of the complicated nuts and bolts of selective college admissions. A wide range of selection criteria are used in the admissions process to evaluate whether a student will help an institution fulfill its specific interests and goals, which may include the advancement of financial health, campus traditions, athletic teams, and geographic, economic, cultural, and racial diversity. Subsequently, criteria for admissions may include preferences for geographic locations of hometowns, legacies and relatives of donors, and student athletes, among many other criteria. Race can serve as one of many factors in the process of admissions review, but legally it cannot serve as a singular criterion.

In this section, I present an overview of the role and function of admissions offices, a brief description of some selection criteria connected to institutional goals, and key legal principles that limit how race can be used in admissions decisions.

**Evaluating for Institutional Interests and “Fit”**

Specific institutional values, missions, and interests determine the methods and criteria for undergraduate admissions at selective postsecondary institutions (Steinberg, 2003). Admissions officers represent and apply their respective institutional missions, values, and goals in recruiting applicants, constructing criteria and review procedures for the evaluation of applicants, and enrolling students (Hossler, 2011). They work to ensure a strong fit between their institution’s characteristics and interests and those of incoming students. Much like in a healthy relationship, student and institution should complement each other’s interests.
Admissions processes at different schools reflect the diversity of institutional values and interests, resulting in different mixes and weighting of multiple criteria in admissions policies and practices (Steinberg, 2003). These factors and their weighting are subject to change depending on specific institutional interests and goals (Rashid, Hurtado, Brown, & Agronow, 2009). While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive list of admissions criteria at both private and public institutions, because private schools are not obligated to release details on their selection criteria, it is interesting to note the similarities in criteria between selective public universities like the University of California (UC) and the University of Texas (UT). Based on the highly selective nature these two revered institutions, it is possible to speculate that the criteria used at these two universities might share some similarities with those at elite private institutions.

The UC (2012), which consists of nine undergraduate campuses, has defined 14 criteria for admissions review for undergraduate admissions:

- Academic grade point average
- Test scores
- Number of, content of, and performance in academic courses
- Number of and performance in honors or advanced placement classes
- High school class ranking
- Quality of the senior-year program, including the number and type of academic classes in progress or planned
- Quality of academic performance relative to the educational opportunities offered at the student’s high school
- Outstanding work in one or more subjects
- Outstanding work in one or more special projects in any academic field of study
- Recent, marked improvement in academic performance as demonstrated by GPA and quality of courses completed or in progress
- Special talents, achievements, or awards in a particular field
- Completion of special projects undertaken in the context of a student's high school curriculum or in conjunction with special school events, programs
- Academic accomplishments in light of student’s life experiences and special circumstances
- Location of student’s secondary school and residence

The admissions offices at each undergraduate UC campus work with their respective campus leaders to determine the evaluation method for each criterion in accordance with their individual university ethos. Therefore, how UC Davis, UCLA, or UC San Diego each evaluate quality of senior-year program or special talents may greatly differ. Due to the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, affirmative action practices are not allowed by state law in California.

Unlike the UC, the University of Texas continues to legally consider race among many other factors in its admissions process, but only for a small proportion of the applicant pool. In 1997, the State of Texas established a law that required the university to automatically offer admission to Texas high school seniors who ranked in the top 10% of their high school classes. In 2009, the state amended the law to
automatically admit enough Texas high school graduates to fill 75% of available slots for Texas residents. With state population outpacing available slots for new students in the state’s higher education system, Texas has adjusted the class ranking threshold to the top 8% in 2013. For the remaining 25% of incoming classes, UT engages in a holistic review of qualifications for every applicant. In holistic review, the university considers, “a variety of both academic and personal achievement factors, as well as special circumstances that can help to put an applicant’s achievement into context” (University of Texas, 2012). To evaluate academic achievement, UT considers students’ class ranks, test scores, and high school coursework. To assess personal achievement, the University reviews students’ written essays, information about student activities, and letters of recommendation. It also considers special circumstances, “to get a clearer picture of the applicant’s qualifications.” These include socioeconomic status of family, single parent home, language spoken at home, family responsibilities, overcoming adversity, cultural background, race and ethnicity, and other information included in student files. This information can be provided by students in an optional essay or letters of reference.

By taking a look at these two universities’ admissions criteria, we can see they recognize that prospective college students are much more than just their test scores and grades. In constructing complex evaluation methods, selective colleges and universities intentionally select the mix of information they require to make informed admission decisions. Indeed, tests and grades are not the only means for evaluating academic merit, and are limited in their capacity to evaluate and understand who students are and what they bring to a campus community.

In constructing an admissions review method, it is important to understand what each item adds to the process and how it contributes toward the evaluation of a student according to institutional criteria for determining a student’s merit. While some assume that test scores are the best measures of academic merit, research has found that standardized tests are reliable in predicting only about 6% of the variance in college GPA (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009; Sedlacek, 2005). In other words, the SAT and ACT have the power to predict a very small amount of difference in students’ academic potential. High school grades have been found to be a stronger predictor of college freshmen year grades than test scores but are also very limited in what they say about a student (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005).

Logically then, tests and grades should not be the only standards of merit. Given the severe inadequacies of tests and grades, a fair assessment of merit must include a wide range of criteria to provide a holistic assessment of applicants. Even “The College Board has long felt that the SAT was limited in what it measured and should not be relied upon as the only tool to judge applicants” (Sedlacek, 2005, p. 177). A range of criteria should be used to understand who students are and what they bring to a campus environment. These criteria such as those used by the UC and the UT, may include place of residence and secondary school, language spoken at home, socioeconomic background (including race), ability to overcome adversity, special talents, and accomplishments.

In pursuit of fairness in selective college admissions, opponents of affirmative action are often silent about the ways in which U.S. systems of education are riddled with racial barriers (McDonough, 1994) that prevent fairness in competition for diverse college-bound students. While some criticize the use of race and
ethnicity as one factor for admissions, few of these critics are as vocal about the use of legacy preferences, which privileges children of alumni in admissions. Legacy applicants at Harvard have been found to have a 40% admission rate compared to the 11% admission rate for the general applicant pool even with lower test scores and grades compared to other applicants (Howell & Turner, 2004; Shadowen, Tulante, & Alpern, 2009). To date, there has been no lawsuit confronting the practice of legacy preferences. Private institutions may defend the use of legacy preference in admissions as a tool for preserving institutional tradition and to encourage alumni donations supporting institutional financial interests (Golden, 2007; Howell & Turner, 2004).

Generally, a student’s chances of admission at a given institution depend on a number of factors that represent institutional interests. In any given year, an institution may be seeking particular types of students to contribute toward the campus character. In addition to academic interests, colleges and universities may want to satisfy alumni demands in exchange for financial donations. For institutions with competitive NCAA sports teams, talented student-athletes may be evaluated for their academic promise as well as their athletic talents. Therefore, the captain of a state championship volleyball team or nationally or internationally ranked tennis player might have lower test scores and grades than his or her peers, yet be admitted to contribute their unique talents to the campus. Indeed, much more than just tests, grades, and race go into admissions decisions to evaluate fit between students and selective institutions.

**Racial Diversity: A Compelling Interest**

Among the various institutional interests to be met in the college admissions process, campus racial diversity is but one compelling interest. Legally, race can be one of many factors in college admissions processes through affirmative action practices. In the 1978 Bakke decision, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed for the use of race as one of many factors in college admissions, and banned the use of racial quotas. This practice of affirmative action was affirmed in the 2003 Supreme Court decision in Grutter v. Bollinger. In that case, the University of Michigan Law School successfully demonstrated that the educational benefits of racial diversity represented a compelling state interest. Based on a large and growing body of empirical research, racial diversity on campus can lead to positive educational outcomes for all students (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002), student growth and development in skills for democratic citizenship and participation (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004), and is generally linked to the educational and civic mission of higher education (Hurtado, 2007). Therefore, to fulfill legitimate educational goals, some selective institutions justifiably implement limited racial preferences, alongside a number of other preferences and criteria, in their admissions processes.

Consequently, affirmative action practices in college admissions are legally justified as long as they pass the strict scrutiny test. According to Winkler (2006), strict scrutiny consists of a two prong test in which
Courts first determine if the underlying governmental ends, or objectives, are “compelling.” . . . If the governmental ends are compelling, the courts then ask if the law is a narrowly tailored means of furthering those governmental interests. Narrow tailoring requires that the law capture within its reach no more activity (or less) than is necessary to advance those compelling ends. (p. 800)

According to the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court Fisher vs. University of Texas decision, diversity remains a compelling state interest justifying affirmative action in admissions.

Conclusion

The inclusion of race as one of many criteria in selective college admissions processes is justified in fulfilling institutional and public interests in racial diversity and equity. Without racial diversity, college campuses can be hindered from preparing and educating all students to become socially responsible leaders, socially engaged citizens with culturally competencies in an increasingly global society faced with significant challenges. Given the educational interests and benefits of racial diversity, the compelling public interest in addressing persistent racial inequalities (Zamani-Gallaher, Green, Brown, & Stovall, 2009), and traditional civil rights principles of advancing racial justice and equity, the use of race, as one factor in admissions, is necessary.

Aspiring college students come from all walks of life. Their varied life experiences, which result from social differences, can endow them with an array of unique perspectives, talents, and skills representing the strengths of diversity in the United States. Many college applicants are proven community leaders, budding scientists, talented artists, gifted athletes, brilliant musicians, future teachers, caring and integral members of their families and communities. They have passions, talents, and vocational callings that span an immense range of fields. Test scores and GPAs cannot fairly represent the totality of any given student’s qualities and strengths. With such divergent qualifications found among large and talented pools of applicants, selective colleges and universities have the difficult task of constructing methods to understand and evaluate how each student would fit into the specific school’s mission.

Thus, “merit” becomes the demonstration of characteristics that fit an institution’s values and interests. Merit is not measured in a uniform way. Consequently, selective colleges and universities determine their own mix of criteria for assessing applications. These criteria are chosen for their relevance and reliability in evaluating students for fit with institutional values and goals. While test scores and high school grades serve as limited tools in predicting college GPAs, colleges and universities that value racial diversity, equity, diverse student skills, talents, and potentials above and beyond book learning and multiple-choice test taking must include other criteria.

Accordingly, selective admissions processes represent complex methods of student evaluation involving multiple measures. Returning to the video presented
at the beginning of this essay, the narrator’s assertion that Sara was negatively impacted by affirmative action is groundless, given the wide range of goals and criteria in college admissions at different schools. Moreover, the full details of Sara and Emily’s applications are not provided in the case. Did Emily win a statewide academic award? Has she been recognized for leading a successful countywide service project? Was Emily’s grandfather an important donor to the university? Many factors may have contributed to the decision to admit Emily and the reject Sara, but we don’t know what those factors are. There are many factors that lead to various outcomes in selective college admissions. The inclusion of race as one of among many factors in admissions has become a tepid policy to advance racial diversity and equity, and yet it remains under attack. In an effort to prepare future college graduates for a multicultural and racially diverse world and to confront pervasive and persistent racial inequalities in U.S. education systems, selective institutions are justified in using race as one of many criteria in their efforts to affirmatively and intentionally pursue racial diversity and equity.

Suggested Additional Readings


Reaching Beyond the Color Line

You are a member the admissions committee at Catalina College, a selective institution that values the pursuit of knowledge, social justice, and leadership in service to humanity. Based on this three-part mission, construct criteria with which you will evaluate the following four applicants. Using the criteria you construct, select two students to accept for admission.

**Student 1:**

- Captain of tennis team; lettered in three sports (tennis, basketball, and cheerleading)
- 3.7 GPA (weighted)
- Has taken 7 of 23 (30%) AP courses offered by high school
- SAT: 740 (CR); 690 (Math); 780 (Writing)
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- Attended Middlebury College summer school (costs $8,000 for 8 weeks)
- Grandparents are alumni of Catalina who have contacted the institution because they are considering giving the school a large donation
- White female; upper middle class

Essay: Ever since I was very young, I have had the privilege of traveling all over the world. By the time I was 15, I had been to over 25 countries. I’ve always been amazed by the diversity of cultures, and had the opportunity to try all kinds of foods that I wouldn’t normally have had the chance to. When I entered high school, I knew I wanted to better understand the world around me through an academic lens. I also wanted to serve people who are not as privileged as me. So during the summer after my junior year of high school, I was accepted to Middlebury College Summer School. It was a chance to practice being a college student. I took great classes on philosophy and biology. Most importantly, I was able to confront and overcome the adversity of having a roommate with Multiple Sclerosis. She was wheelchair bound, and depended on people to help her in and out of bed. A lot of that responsibility fell on me. At first it was really burdensome for me because it took away from my time in the morning and at night to get my work done. After a while, I realized that I was lucky to not have a physical disability, and learned to help my roommate when I had time. Even though I had a lot on my plate, I came to an epiphany that it is important to help people. It helped me learn to balance responsibilities, and most importantly it made me feel good.

Student 2:

- Works 35 hours a week at a fast food restaurant to save money for college
- 3.75 GPA (weighted)
- Has taken 3 of 3 (100%) AP courses offered by high school
- SAT: 620 (CR); 750 (Math); 690 (Writing)
- Asian American female; working class; first-generation college student

Essay: I haven’t always been someone who thought college was possible. My parents were constantly struggling to make ends meet, and fighting over finances. They worked all the time to keep their store open. My earliest memories are of playing on the floor of their convenience store. The other memories after that are of being physically and verbally abused by my parents. They were always mad about not being able to make ends meet, about rude customers, and about how life in America wasn’t a dream. When I was 12, the abuse I took at home became apparent at school, and I was taken away from my parents, and placed in the foster care system. Over the last six years, I’ve lived in 5 different homes. thankfully, they’ve all been in the same city, close to the high school I go to now. When I started high school, I met Mrs. Kane who somehow saw something in me, and took me under her wing. She told me about Upward Bound, and for the next few years I learned how college offered a pathway for a better life. To make ends meet, I started working 35 hours a week, so I could save money for college. I’m grateful that I had some
great teachers who cared and a stable school community, where I started the South Asian Student Association. Last year, we raised money to support the earthquake victims in northern India. I know that I’ve benefited from support from people like Mrs. Kane and the staff at Upward Bound. Without people like them, I would not have been prepared to succeed in college. I probably wouldn’t have even known the first thing about applying to college. In my future, I plan to “pay it forward.” In college, I want to be a tutor and mentor underprivileged youth, and give back to the Upward Bound program. After college, I’m thinking about pursuing a career that would allow me to help young people in the foster care system. I hope to also find reconciliation with my parents, and let them know that I forgive them.

Student 3:

- 4.1 GPA (weighted)
- Has taken 9 of 15 (60%) AP courses offered by high school
- SAT: 770 (CR); 800 (Math); 760 (Writing)
- Elected leader in eight different activities—Key Club, Spanish Club, Chess Club, school newspaper, student government, speech and debate, Academic Decathlon, and band
- Asian American male; middle class

Essay: For as long as I can remember, my parents have been my heroes. They immigrated to the U.S. with almost nothing, and have become very successful in providing everything that my siblings and I would need. They’re even founders and leaders of our church, which keeps growing every year. My parents came to the U.S. as international graduate students. Shortly after they arrived, they found out they were pregnant with my older sister. Life as graduate students was very difficult, and raising a child on grad student salaries was going to be even harder. Several years later, when I was 3, my parents graduated from their doctoral programs, and we moved to northern California. Even with their limited English skills and cultural barriers, they knew they had to find a place to live that had good schools for their children. Last year, when we visited the ancestral villages in China on both sides of my family, I was struck by their humble beginnings. The villages were extremely poor, and only a few houses had modern plumbing. My parents’ story, where they’ve come from and how they’ve made themselves into community leaders, inspires me to be the best that I can be. They’ve taught me that hard work in America is always rewarded.

Student 4:

- 3.4 GPA (weighted)
- Has taken 5 of 15 (33%) AP courses offered by high school
- Member of a U.S. Olympic team; came in 5th place in event.
- SAT: 580 (CR); 610 (Math); 550 (Writing)
- Mixed race African American and American Indian; middle class
Essay: It’s 4 a.m., and my alarm has gone off. I feel like I just went to bed a couple hours ago, and well . . . I actually did. It’s time for practice again. My schedule looks like this: 3 hours of practice every day before school; school; 4 hours of practice after school; dinner; homework until about 1 a.m.; and sleep. On Saturdays, I have 6 hours of practice. I have one rest day—Sunday. You could say I don’t have a normal teenage schedule, but I have a dream. Ever since I first saw the Olympics on television, I knew that I wanted to be an Olympian. I have been competing nationally and internationally since I was ten years old, and finally became an Olympian. I try to bring the same intensity to my academics, but with my schedule it’s been a challenge. However, I know that the skills I’ve developed as an Olympian have cultivated strong leadership skills and a commitment to achieving all my goals in life. College will be the first time I will be able to control my schedule and explore non-athletic endeavors. I am excited about the possibilities of being involved in campus leadership programs, studying abroad, and even just meeting new people with diverse interests. I bring a unique perspective to my classes and to the campus community and am anxious to learn from my peers and accomplished faculty.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What criteria and institutional interests did you use to review and select students for admission?

2. Which two students did you select? Why?

3. Did you admit students with lower grades or test scores than another applicant? Why or why not?

4. Was your process fair to all students and meet institutional interests?

5. Do you feel that anyone can understand who you are, your accomplishments and potentials by just looking at your test scores and high school grades? Why or why not?

References


Brief for the Asian American Legal Foundation and the Judicial Education Project as Amici Curiae in support of Petitioner, Abigail Noel Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, et al. (No. 11–345).


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CHAPTER 16

“Black People Voted for Obama Just Because He’s Black”

Group Identification and Voting Patterns

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