

Connecticut Debate Association

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Shepaug Valley High School and Stamford High School

Resolved: Elite schools should prioritize ability over alternatives methods of selecting students.

The Attack on Educational Excellence

The Wall Street Journal, By Jason L. Riley, June 12, 2018 7:01 p.m. ET

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio stands 6½ feet tall but still managed to come up short last week. The progressive Democrat wanted to eliminate the entrance exam for the city’s eight elite public high schools to ensure that more black and Hispanic students were admitted. State lawmakers, citing opposition from Asian families, blocked the move. Good for them.

The number of available slots at these schools is fixed, and last year Asian students were awarded 52.5% of them, according to the city’s Department of Education. By contrast, whites comprised 28% of the total, while Latinos and blacks were 6.5% and 3.8%, respectively. You’ll find similarly lopsided racial and ethnic results in other large cities—Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia—where black and Latino students are underrepresented in academically selective public high schools while whites and Asians are overrepresented.

Asian families in particular fear that replacing an objective test with what amounts to a racial quota system would come at the expense of Asian children. Given that other schools and programs for high-achieving students around the country are being pressed to become more “diverse,” those concerns are understandable.

After the Montgomery County school district in Maryland changed admissions standards for gifted-and-talented programs—by broadening the definition of “gifted,” among other adjustments—black and Latino acceptance rates ticked up while Asian admissions fell. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology is an elite magnet school in Northern Virginia that also uses an entrance exam. The school’s acceptance rate matches Georgetown University’s (just 17%) and its student body last year was 2.2% Latino, 1.5% black and nearly two-thirds Asian. A 2017 profile of the high school in Washingtonian magazine noted that administrators are under constant pressure from outsiders to increase the number of black and Latino students by watering down the selection criteria.

In the upside-down thinking of affirmative-action advocates, academically rigorous schools should be more focused on achieving racial balance and less focused on maintaining high standards. Asian displays of academic excellence therefore become problematic. Asians are somehow to blame for outperforming others, and they are to be punished for the historical injustices that blacks suffered at the hands of whites. This is what happens when you try to reconcile what is irreconcilable: group preferences on the one hand and equal treatment of individuals on the other.

But Mr. de Blasio’s decision to call for an end to the test, instead of calling for better test preparation, is also revealing. What he and other critics of selective schools are saying is that these low-income black and Latino kids will never measure up, so we must stop trying to measure them. The mayor and his allies seem to have given up on the very students they claim to be helping. How, exactly, you help one group by holding it to lower standards than other groups isn’t clear. Deciding which groups deserve special treatment is also problematic. Schools today that are considered “too Asian” were in times past branded “too white” or “too Jewish.”

Mr. de Blasio and his fellow education egalitarians also conveniently ignore the ample evidence of minority academic success because it undermines their argument that the problem is the exam requirement, not poor exam preparation. But if the mayor is genuinely concerned with increasing the number of black and brown students matriculating at top high schools like Bronx Science and Stuyvesant, he ought to pay a visit to one of New York’s high-achieving public charter schools.

Success Academy, for example, operates 46 public charter schools in New York. They serve more than 15,000 students, the vast majority of whom are poor and black or Latino. Success students regularly shellac their peers in the city and state on standardized tests. A spokeswoman for Success Academy told me by email that the acceptance rate for Success applicants at the city’s elite schools this year was more than double that of black and Latino students citywide, and “there were three Success middle schools whose students of color were three to four times as likely to gain admission.” This year, Success Academy graduated its first high-school class, and all of its members are college-bound. These students didn’t need someone to make school admissions tests less rigorous. They needed educators and education-policy makers who believed in them.

Similarly, Mr. de Blasio doesn't need to overhaul admissions at high-performance schools to boost percentages of minority students. Instead, he could give successful charter schools, private schools and parochial schools more access to underprivileged students—something he has resisted out of fealty to teachers union leaders who vehemently oppose school choice. Here's an idea: Leave the best schools alone, and make sure the next mayor cares less about union support and more about the 47,800 children now sitting on New York's charter school waiting list.

Harvard Admissions Chief Defends Policies in First Day of Trial

The Wall Street Journal, By Nicole Hong and Melissa Korn, Updated Oct. 15, 2018 11:27 p.m. ET

BOSTON—Harvard University's longtime admissions dean defended the school's recruitment of prospective students in the first day of a landmark trial accusing Harvard of discriminating against Asian-American applicants.

On Monday, lawyers for the plaintiffs focused on internal documents showing Harvard sends targeted letters to high-school students who score well on the PSAT, encouraging them to consider applying to the prestigious school. The score thresholds vary by race.

In a recent admissions year, white students in 20 underrepresented states—which Harvard calls “sparse country”—received a recruitment letter if they scored 1310 or higher out of a possible 1600 on the combined verbal and math components, according to the plaintiffs' exhibit. In all U.S. states, Asian-American women had to score at least 1350 to receive a letter, while Asian-American men had to score at least 1380.

The PSAT is considered a preview of how a student may score on the SAT.

Black, Hispanic and Native American high-schoolers nationally who scored at least 1100 received a letter, the plaintiffs' exhibit showed.

Students who qualify for these letters are twice as likely to be admitted as students who don't qualify, according to a handbook provided to Harvard's alumni interviewers.

William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's admissions dean since 1986, defended the policy by saying the letters to white students in more rural states help the school recruit from areas where students may be less aware of Harvard. “We do everything we can to reach out to a much broader range of people,” he testified.

Mr. Fitzsimmons, 74 years old, said the lower thresholds for underrepresented minorities take into consideration how the “rather stark economic differences and opportunities” those students face may affect their ability to score higher on standardized tests.

A lawyer for the plaintiffs said a white student in a state like Nevada would receive a Harvard recruitment letter if he or she scored 1310 on the PSAT, while an Asian student in the same state with the same score wouldn't, amounting to what he called racial discrimination. Mr. Fitzsimmons denied the allegation.

The trial stems from a lawsuit filed in 2014 by Students for Fair Admissions, a nonprofit whose members include Asian-Americans rejected by Harvard. The group is run by conservative legal strategist Edward Blum, who has funded other challenges to racial preferences in college admissions.

At opening statements Monday, the two sides sharply disagreed—even about the central dispute of the trial.

Adam Mortara, a partner at Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott LLP who is representing the plaintiffs, said the future of affirmative action and the benefits of diversity weren't on trial, noting that the plaintiffs supported diversity on campus.

“This trial is about what Harvard...is doing to Asian-American applicants and how far Harvard has gone in its zeal to use race in its admissions process,” Mr. Mortara said.

William Lee, a WilmerHale partner representing Harvard, said the plaintiffs' stated purpose is to “eliminate all consideration of race in college admissions,” which he called an attack on diversity in higher education. Race is never the reason a student is admitted or rejected from Harvard, he said, adding the school considers race as one of many factors, in line with Supreme Court precedents.

“After four years of litigation,” Mr. Lee said, “the plaintiff cannot prove that Harvard discriminates against Asian-American applicants.”

Lawyers for a group of current and former Harvard students who support the university said in their opening statement that any disadvantage Asian-Americans face in the admissions process isn't due to the consideration of race, but due to preferences, such as for legacies and recruited varsity athletes, that primarily help white applicants.

The trial is expected to delve into the magnitude of those preferences. Mr. Fitzsimmons acknowledged Monday that legacy and recruited athlete applicants are much more likely to get in than other applicants. But both sides dispute whether those preferences are the only explanation for the different acceptance rates for white and Asian-American

applicants.

Vietnamese-American students at Harvard are expected to testify about how the consideration of race helped them in the admissions process. The students' lawyers say Harvard seeks to cultivate diversity within each racial group, as the label "Asian-American" encompasses a range of ethnicities and backgrounds.

Later in the trial, Mr. Fitzsimmons will be asked to explain why Asian-American applicants receive the highest academic and extracurricular scores among any racial group, but the lowest "personal" scores, a factor in Harvard's admissions that assesses personality traits such as likability, courage and kindness.

He will also be asked why he didn't pursue further investigation of internal 2013 reports that found being Asian-American decreased an applicant's chance of admission.

Harvard has said in court filings that the lower personal rating can be explained by observable and "unobservable factors" seen in teacher recommendations, essays and interviews, and that the internal reports were preliminary and incomplete.

A judge, not a jury, will decide whether the trial testimony proves Harvard's admissions practices violate federal civil-rights law. It isn't known when U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs, an Obama appointee, will issue her written ruling after the trial's conclusion, but it could take several months. Her decision is likely to be appealed.

Throughout the trial, the judge will hear from current and former admissions officers; Drew Gilpin Faust, the university's former president; and Rakesh Khurana, dean of the undergraduate Harvard College.

Stuyvesant, Other Elite New York Public High Schools Could Admit Students Who Didn't Pass State Tests

The Wall Street Journal, By Leslie Brody, Oct. 18, 2018 5:30 a.m. ET

Mayor Bill de Blasio's proposal to change admissions for eight specialized high schools could lead to students with markedly lower state test scores getting into these competitive schools, according to a review of New York City data.

His plan would offer seats to the top 7% of performers in each public middle school. If that method had been in place for this fall, data show the city would have offered spots to more than 300 students who didn't pass state tests in seventh grade.

In addition, offers would have gone to about 1,000 fewer students who excelled on state tests, judging by city Department of Education data obtained through a public-records request.

Who should get into in these prestigious schools, including Stuyvesant High School, Bronx High School of Science and Brooklyn Technical High School, has been a matter of heated debate in recent months. Supporters of the current admission system called this new data evidence that the mayor's proposal would enroll students who aren't well prepared for their demanding academics. About 5,000 eighth-graders are offered spots in these schools yearly, and nearly 4,000 choose to attend for ninth grade.

"What happens if all 300 kids below proficiency decide to go?" asked Larry Cary, president of the Brooklyn Tech Alumni Foundation. Either the schools would need to provide intensive remedial help, he said, "or you're going to have a large number of kids who can't hack it, through no fault of their own, and you've set them up for failure."

Under the current system, applicants must ace the famously difficult Specialized High School Admissions Test. Critics say it unfairly bars exceptional students who lack years of test preparation, don't test well or simply had a bad day during their one shot at the exam.

Mr. de Blasio and Chancellor Richard Carranza want to scrap this exam, saying nobody should be judged by a single score and that their plan would help diversify schools that have few black or Latino students. They want to offer seats to top students by using a mix of course grades and state test scores in English and math.

"Our proposal weighs multiple measures and takes into account student performance throughout the entire year," city Department of Education spokesman Will Mantell said in an email on Tuesday. "The grades and abilities of the students in the top 7% are on par with the grades and abilities of the students in the specialized high schools. We know they can succeed in specialized high schools if given the chance."

The department says that under the mayor's plan, admitted students would collectively have state test scores in seventh grade averaging 3.9 in math and English, nearly the same as the 4.1 average of students admitted this year, on a scale of 1 to 4.5.

But the individual scores underlying that assertion suggest a wider disparity. Data obtained through a public-records request show the state test scores of 4,959 students who would have received offers for this fall through the mayor's model, and the scores of those actually admitted.

By the state's definition, a score of 3 on state tests denotes proficiency, and scores below 3 signal students aren't meeting expectations for their grade. For this fall's freshman class at specialized high schools, only two students admitted failed to get an average of 3 or better in math and English, according to the city data. Under the mayor's plan, 318 students scoring below 3 on that measure would have gotten seats.

The number scoring an average of 4 or higher, denoting excellence, would differ, too. Currently, 3,837 admitted students hit that bar. Under the mayor's plan, 2,833 would have done so, by city data. Offering seats to top performers in each middle school means some strong students in schools with many high achievers would lose spots.

Bobson Wong, a math teacher at a public high school in Queens and graduate of Bronx Science, said "it would be tough to imagine" students scoring below proficiency on state tests in math succeeding at a specialized high school, where calculations become far more complex.

"However, that doesn't mean they should automatically be excluded," Mr. Wong said. "It is possible that kids who scored low on state tests may have other skills that would enable them to do well."

Critics of state tests call them flawed measures that don't gauge perseverance, creativity and other strengths. Some teachers say students don't take them seriously. And many educators argue classrooms benefit from academic diversity.

Aaron Pallas, an education professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, notes that under the mayor's plan, some admitted students might have higher grade-point averages than the current crop gaining entry, even if they have lower state test scores. The cutoff designating proficiency on state tests is politically determined and changes periodically, he added.

"Test scores are just one way of assessing students' academic performance, and we know grades and class rank are often good predictors of later success, too," he said. "As a society we've come to put a lot of faith in testing and cutoffs as a way of selecting people, perhaps more than we should."

The mayor needs Albany lawmakers to change the admission system for at least three of the eight high schools. His plan resembles the University of Texas policy, where students ranked in top 10% of their class in each high school automatically receive an offer.

City officials cite a 2010 study of the University of Texas that compares minority enrollees to admitted white students who were ranked lower in their classes at highly competitive high schools. The study found "top 10% black and Hispanic enrollees arrive with lower average standardized test scores, yet consistently performed as well or better in grades, first-year persistence, and four-year graduation likelihood."

State tests aim to measure whether students have mastered expectations for their grade level. The Specialized High School Admissions Test, which will be given Oct. 20 and 21, seeks to assess knowledge and skills gained over the course of students' education, including their ability to understand English prose, editing skills and math.

Last year 28,333 students tested and 5,067 got offers at one of the eight schools, including 207 black students, 320 Latino students, 1,344 white students and 2,620 Asian students.

What Would Happen if Harvard Stopped Considering Race in Admissions?

The New York Times, By Anemona Hartocollis, Oct. 23, 2018

BOSTON — For generations, being the child of a Harvard graduate has held out the tantalizing promise of an admissions advantage, a leg up over other applicants who had no Harvard ties.

Now the plaintiffs at a trial in federal court here are calling for the elimination of that preference for alumni children, who are predominantly white and wealthy.

The so-called legacy preference became the focal point of testimony this week, as witnesses discussed whether there were ways to maintain ethnic diversity at Harvard without considering the race of applicants. The plaintiffs, who accuse the university of discriminating against Asian-Americans, proposed several "race-neutral alternatives" that Harvard could use to keep its classes diverse. Harvard said these alternatives would not work.

One of the proposals was to eliminate preferences for legacies, or the children of alumni. By giving preference to wealthy white legacies, the plaintiffs say Harvard has been squeezing out everyone else, mainly high-achieving Asian-American applicants. Harvard denies discriminating against these students.

The plaintiffs' expert witness, Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, recommended that Harvard instead give a stronger preference than it does now to low-income students from across the country.

He also proposed getting rid of admissions advantages for the children of faculty and staff; students from families on the Dean's and Director's interest lists, who are often major donors; and students on the Z-list, a back door for those who are not as qualified as most of their peers and are asked to defer admission.

Mr. Kahlenberg said he would preserve the preference for recruited athletes, who are mostly white at Harvard, because eliminating it would have too “radical” an impact on college athletics.

Doing all of this, Mr. Kahlenberg said, would keep classes diverse while throwing out admissions preferences that the plaintiffs perceive to be unfair.

Harvard’s witnesses, a dean and a former dean, strongly rejected the idea that socioeconomic factors alone could substitute for race. They said that the proposal advanced by the plaintiffs would lead to an unacceptable decline in the percentage of black students.

Michael Smith, the former dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, testified that under Mr. Kahlenberg’s proposal, Harvard would lose the academic cream of the crop: The proportion of admitted students with the highest academic ratings would drop to 66 percent, from 76 percent.

The university would be “going backwards from where we are today,” Mr. Smith said.

Mr. Kahlenberg said the difference in academic qualifications would be minuscule, and could be overcome by students who had already overcome obstacles like poverty and inferior schools.

Under the plaintiffs’ proposal, which uses data from the class admitted in 2015, the proportion of students the admissions office would consider “disadvantaged” would rise to half the class, from the current 18 percent.

The share of white students admitted would drop to 32 percent from 40 percent, mostly because of the elimination of legacy and other preferences. The Asian-American share of the class would rise to 31 percent from 24 percent, and the share of “Hispanic and other admits” would also go up to 20 percent from 14 percent.

But the African-American share would decline, to 10 percent from 14 percent.

Harvard said that was a key reason that it would not make its admissions process race neutral.

The university’s witnesses also said it was necessary to preserve the legacy advantage because it helped encourage Harvard alumni to volunteer and donate. Many alumni recruit and interview prospective students in the hope that their efforts will be noticed and rewarded by Harvard when their own children apply.

Rakesh Khurana, dean of the college, said the change in the composition of the class wrought by the plaintiffs’ proposal would make going to Harvard a much different experience.

Harvard fosters the ability to “see the world from somebody else’s perspective,” Mr. Khurana said.

He said that as a residential dean at Cabot House, living among undergraduates, he had seen students from different backgrounds come together in the dining hall and library, form friendships that would last a lifetime and even “fall in love.” That understanding, he said, was as important as anything that came from books and classes.

Mr. Kahlenberg acknowledged that Harvard had been doing “a very good job” at building a racially and ethnically diverse class.

But he said it had not done such a good job at admitting students who had managed to excel academically despite poverty.

Harvard now has “23 times as many rich kids as poor kids,” Mr. Kahlenberg testified.

He said that his model could be improved by taking into account family wealth, as well as income. A wealth measure would help increase the admission of African-Americans, he said, because while their income is 60 or 70 percent that of whites, their family wealth is much lower because of generations of discrimination.

To bolster his case, Mr. Kahlenberg quoted President Barack Obama, who once said that his two daughters should not be given preferential treatment in college admissions because they came from privileged backgrounds.

The question of whether there are race-neutral alternatives to Harvard’s admissions policies could become more important if the case makes it to the Supreme Court. Past Supreme Court precedent has cited Harvard’s admissions system as a model for achieving diversity. But it has also ruled that colleges cannot consider applicants’ race “unless no workable race-neutral alternatives would produce the educational benefits for diversity.”

Finding a viable alternative could transform affirmative action as it is known today.

Mr. Kahlenberg said that Harvard was a laggard among elite universities in ending legacy admissions. Venerable universities — Oxford; Cambridge; the University of California, Berkeley; and the California Institute of Technology — do not have legacy admissions, he said.

Mr. Khurana said he was not ruling out any changes to admissions practices. But, he added, “at present we couldn’t identify a race-neutral alternative that met our overall institutional objectives.”

Study Shows Scores on Elite High School Test Predict Success

The Wall Street Journal, By Leslie Brody, Aug. 4, 2018 9:48 a.m. ET

A new puzzle piece emerged Friday in the fractious debate over how to fairly admit students to some of New York City's most sought-after public high schools.

The city Department of Education released a 2013 report by a consulting firm it hired to analyze whether the entrance exam for Stuyvesant and seven other specialized high schools was a valid predictor of academic achievement.

Its conclusion: Yes, particularly in math and science, based on accepted students' high school grades, state Regents results and Advanced Placement exams.

Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration wants to scrap the admissions test in favor of a mix of applicants' course grades and state test scores, saying that would find talented students who don't test well, and diversify schools with few black and Latino students. Supporters of the test of math, reading and writing say it is the most objective, fair method for determining merit.

The Specialized High School Admissions Test was revised for fall 2017, to add more grammar and align questions more closely to the middle school curriculum. It is unclear exactly how much the 2013 analysis would relate to the current exam, which retained many core features. Backers of the admissions test hailed the report as evidence that a single test can select top achievers.

The report by Metis Associates looked at all eighth-graders who took the Specialized High School Admissions Test every year from fall of 2005 through fall of 2009. The firm followed those who scored high enough to get into the exam schools, and those who missed the cutoff, comparing how well each group did through two years of high school, no matter what public school they ended up attending.

The study found those accepted to the exam schools had a mean grade point average of 3.1 after two years, compared with 2.4 for those who weren't accepted.

Accepted students also got higher mean scores on state Regents exams, ranging from 83 to 93 out of 100 points, depending on the subject. Students who weren't accepted had mean scores ranging from 69 to 79. Accepted students also fared better on two Advanced Placement exams that enough students took to analyze.

"It's not at all surprising that a kid who did well on the test turns out to be good high school student," said Toya Holness, a spokeswoman for the city Department of Education. "What the validity study misses is the kid who didn't do as well on the test, or didn't take it, but still stands an excellent chance of being successful in these high schools if they had the opportunity."

The mayor wants to admit eighth-graders performing in the top 7% of each middle school in the city. The department says this year those students had an average state test score of 3.9, almost the same as the 4.1 average of students offered specialized high school seats, on a scale of 1 to 4.5.

Officials at Metis Associates couldn't be reached Friday, and had referred previous requests for comment to the department.

The study was originally commissioned in response to a civil rights complaint about the admissions method. Reporters requested the study, but the department declined to release it until Friday, saying it had required legal review.

Supporters of the test said the mayor unfairly had suppressed a study that backed their argument. David Lee, education chair of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance of Greater New York, said in a release: "It's an outrageous scandal that Mayor de Blasio hid from the public for more than four years a study proving the validity of the SHSAT, while he led a political campaign to eliminate" it.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, who was the department's chief academic officer in 2013 and now is president of Bank Street College of Education, said the entrance exam was relatively cheap and "you get what you pay for."

The test differentiates students on a narrow band of math and reading, he said.

"It is sufficient to do what it is designed to do, but I don't think it should be held up as indicative of the full capacities you might want from a search for the most talented kids in the city," Mr. Polakow-Suransky said.

The revised admissions test in 2017 eliminated the unpopular "scrambled paragraphs" that asked students to put a group of sentences in the right order, and the logistical reasoning questions, akin to word puzzles. Critics thought those challenges didn't reflect what students learned in school and were especially susceptible to gaming through test prep.

Scott Overland, a spokesman for the test vendor, said by email that "Pearson works diligently with our state and district partners to create fair, valid and reliable assessments aligned to their needs."

How Elite Schools Stay So White

The New York Times, By Natasha Warikoo and Nadirah Farah Foley

Who deserves to get an elite education?

That question is being debated in Massachusetts, where court papers argue over Harvard's use of race in its "holistic" admissions process, and in New York City, where politicians are trying to increase the number of black and Latino students at top public high schools.

But the answer has always been obvious: only the elite.

While standards of merit shift over time, prominent schools and even their critics usually take for granted admissions systems that uphold the privileges of elite groups. In the United States, "elites" are mostly white people. That means Asian-Americans and underrepresented minorities — Latinos, Native Americans and African-Americans — are pitted against one another for coveted spots at elite schools.

This is patently clear in the Harvard case. A financial adviser named Edward Blum, who orchestrated *Fisher v. Texas*, the most recent Supreme Court case attacking affirmative action, is also behind the lawsuit against Harvard. But instead of alleging bias against whites, he and the plaintiffs use supposed anti-Asian bias as a way to undermine affirmative action for blacks and Latinos.

In doing so, however, they sidestep a more glaring inequality in admissions: Harvard applicants who are recruited athletes or children of alumni enjoy significant advantages, and these candidates are disproportionately white and well-off. However, neither the university nor Mr. Blum's legal team address this point. In fact, Mr. Blum's expert witness, the economist Peter Arcidiacono, excludes applicants in these "special categories" from his analysis.

Instead, Mr. Blum and the plaintiffs claim that black and Latino applicants unfairly have a higher chance of admission than Asian and white applicants with the same academic record. But that's a gross misunderstanding of how admissions policies work. When evaluating applications, Harvard takes into account many nonacademic qualities, like overcoming hardship, that are not easily captured by quantitative analyses.

If Mr. Blum were really concerned with fairness, he would instead question the metrics for admissions decisions that often benefit white applicants: not only athletic recruiting and legacy preferences, but also less visible but still unbalanced considerations like geographic diversity, which favors whites because minorities in the United States are concentrated on the coasts.

Indeed, if race alone is removed as a factor in admissions, as Mr. Blum wants, the group that will gain the most might not be Asian-Americans, but whites.

Further down the East Coast, Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York has proposed revamping admissions at eight of the city's "specialized high schools." These eight sought-after schools admit students solely on the basis of a standardized test. The State Legislature passed a law in 1971 to deter efforts to open those schools to black New Yorkers who can't afford test prep and don't have the networks to help them navigate the admissions process.

Mr. de Blasio's goal of making these elite schools more accessible to the two-thirds of the city's public school students who are black or Latino is worthy of the fight necessary to change the law. But his proposal leaves out major changes that the city can make without state approval — changes that the new school chancellor, Richard Carranza, has already set in motion.

This includes reforms to admissions into the one-third of city high schools that screen applicants, rather than consider any student interested in the school. Seventy-eight high schools give priority to students who live nearby. For example, whites are overrepresented in Manhattan's affluent District 2's desirable schools because admissions policies consider where a student lives. These selective schools educate more New York children than the specialized schools covered by Mr. de Blasio's proposal.

But the mayor has put his weight behind only changes to the specialized high schools. Perhaps he's afraid of angering white parents. As our colleagues Syed Ali and Margaret Chin have argued, it's not a coincidence that Asian-American students are the most overrepresented at the specialized schools but wealthy whites are the more overrepresented group at these other schools.

In our highly unequal society, education systems have consistently found ways to favor elite, white applicants, whether it's through slippery definitions of "merit," giving added weight to athletes or children of alumni, or fighting to change admissions policies to schools in which Asians are more overrepresented rather than those where whites are.

Admissions policies continue to push people of color to the margins while ensuring that a quorum of white students always have a place. To move toward a more equitable system, we must reject efforts to sow dissent between minority communities, as Mr. Blum is doing.

But we also must reject educational systems that, behind a supposed commitment to equity, quietly perpetuate the status quo. Instead of focusing on who from the margins is able to get in, we would do better to direct our attention to the fundamental ways selective admissions and educational institutions maintain the privileges of whiteness.

Natasha Warikoo is the author of “The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities” and an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where Nadirah Farah Foley is a doctoral student.

At Elite Colleges, Racial Diversity Requires Affirmative Action

The New York Times, By Susan Dynarski, Sept. 28, 2018

A close look at the numbers shows that the only effective way to increase racial diversity at elite colleges is by considering race when deciding who gets in.

Affirmative action has come under attack, with college admissions viewed as a zero-sum game: What one group gains, another loses. For example, a high-profile lawsuit has accused Harvard of discriminating against Asian applicants in its admission process. The Department of Justice is investigating similar accusations at Yale.

There are proposals to get around the affirmative action controversy by ignoring race and instead paying attention to economic disadvantage. Give poor applicants a boost and greater racial diversity will follow, so this argument goes.

But this approach can't do the job of race-based affirmative action for a very simple reason: Most poor people are white. Putting a thumb on the scale for low-income students will help far more white students than black or Hispanic students.

There's no doubt that greater economic diversity is an important goal. The most selective colleges enroll more students from the top one percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half. In order to increase economic mobility, it makes sense to increase the number of low-income students in selective colleges.

But if you think about it for a moment, you will see that getting more poor students into elite colleges will do little to change their racial makeup. While black and Hispanic students are far more likely to be poor than are other students, a majority of poor students who apply to elite colleges are neither black nor Hispanic.

That's because black and Hispanic students are a minority of high school graduates, an even smaller minority of college applicants, and a yet smaller minority of applicants to highly selective colleges.

Racial and ethnic gaps in educational attainment and achievement, which start in elementary school, widen as students move through high school and to college. An affirmative action program at selective colleges that targets students based on poverty will therefore admit far more white students than black or Hispanic students.

In the 1990s, when affirmative action was under legal challenge in Texas and newly banned by referendum in California, Prof. Thomas Kane of Harvard addressed this issue. In a paper, Professor Kane showed that just one out of six low-income applicants to elite schools was likely to be black or Hispanic. A program that gave an admissions advantage to low-income students would therefore admit five white students for every one black or Hispanic student.

(I was an assistant on this research while completing a master's in public policy and trying to decide whether to get a Ph.D. in economics. Working on this topic showed me how economic and statistical reasoning can give important insights for policy and helped push me to “yes.”)

Today, Professor Kane's key point still holds: Elite colleges can't achieve racial and ethnic diversity without directly considering race and ethnicity in admissions. There is no easy option that depends on other criteria such as income.

While this is a contentious topic, it's important to remember that affirmative action is not an issue that directly affects most college students, because the majority attend schools that are not at all selective. When everyone can get into a school, there is no way to offer an admissions edge to anyone. And only a handful of schools are as selective as Harvard.

A far more worrying admissions practice at elite colleges has largely flown under the radar: “legacy preferences,” which privilege the families of alumni. Legacy preferences limit diversity because they replicate in the present the student bodies of the past. Fifty years ago, elite colleges were overwhelmingly white and wealthy. As a result, a policy that boosts the admissions of the children of alumni disproportionately benefits the white and wealthy.

According to documents in the Harvard case, students from alumni families are five times as likely to get in as other applicants. A full 29 percent of last year's freshman class were relatives of Harvard graduates. The legacy advantage dwarfs any edge afforded to African-Americans or other underrepresented minorities.

Legacy admissions help applicants who, as a group, have been privileged their entire lives. This is a twisted reflection of affirmative action, which helps those who have managed to achieve excellence despite daunting hurdles.

The elite colleges can become more diverse with affirmative action and by eliminating advantages for the children of alumni. They can also add more seats, so more students can get in.

The elite colleges sit on enormous resources. Harvard, with an endowment of \$38 billion, is one of the wealthiest nonprofits in the world (second only to the Gates Foundation).

Yet with these billions Harvard has done little to expand its reach in undergraduate education. In fact, it gets harder to get in with each passing year.

In the past 70 years, Harvard has expanded its undergraduate enrollment by just 2,400 seats. It will enroll 6,700 undergraduates in 2018, compared to 4,300 in 1948, a growth of 50 percent.

During the same period, the highly selective University of Michigan in Ann Arbor doubled its enrollment, adding 15,000 seats. The University of California, Berkeley, a selective school that competes with Harvard for both students and faculty, grew by 40 percent between 1999 and 2017, expanding its undergraduate enrollment to 31,000, from 23,000. In the span of two decades, Berkeley added as many seats as the total enrollment of Harvard.

As Harvard and the other Ivies have limited their expansion, despite their deep pockets, the competition to get into these schools has grown ever more intense. When the chances of winning diminish, people tend to find scapegoats for their losses. Hence the ugly battles over admissions and affirmative action.

I don't mean to pick on Harvard but it has been a lightning rod in this national debate and it is important to me. I was a Harvard undergraduate and graduate student, and professor (after nine years on the Harvard faculty, I moved to the University of Michigan, in 2008). I have spoken out on this topic in the past, both as a Harvard alumna and as a scholar.

Harvard changed my life: It opened worlds that were unimaginable to my parents, neither of whom graduated from college (my dad was a high school dropout).

Elite colleges like Harvard pour staggering resources into the education of their fortunate students, and hoarding that opportunity is unconscionable. The billions in endowments held by the elite schools could be used to expand access to an exceptional education.

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Harvard's Other Controversial Admissions Policy

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It's no secret why conservatives are lending financial and political support to the Asian-Americans suing Harvard for discrimination in admissions. They want to kill affirmative action and replace it with a "race-blind" system.

Spare us. If you want to destroy discrimination in college admissions, underrepresented minorities are small fry.

Instead, the biggest favors are showered on the children of alumni, who are five times more likely to gain admission than those without a Harvard bloodline. Indeed, at a trial in federal court in Boston this week, the plaintiffs who are accusing the elite college of discrimination suggested that abolishing so-called legacy preferences could be a way to widen the applicant pool and keep the student body diverse, even without affirmative action.

"Legacy students" now make up almost a third of the incoming class at Harvard, with comparable numbers at other elite universities. How that came to pass is a strange story that raises profound questions about the function and future of higher-education admissions.

The first school to grapple with the problem of legacy students in the 19th century was the U.S. Military Academy. Founded in 1802, it swiftly grew, but capped the size of incoming classes, making admission increasingly selective.

In 1818, Congress debated a bill that would have given the sons of veterans killed in the War of 1812 preferential treatment in admissions to West Point. It elicited intense opposition. One congressman declared that it would "create a privileged order in the country," while another warned that such a policy would thwart the academy's mission to select only "the most fit and most worthy." The bill died.

Nonetheless, fears that admissions might be rigged dogged the institution. In 1841, Alden Partridge, the former superintendent, warned that West Point was creating an aristocracy that "has already become, in a great degree, hereditary."

In 1843, Congress stipulated that every congressional and territorial district could send one student to West Point. The applicants had to be nominated by members of Congress, and in succeeding decades, many politicians began administering competitive exams to potential beneficiaries, making admissions far more selective and meritocratic.

By contrast, private colleges and universities did not confront the problem of legacy students because anyone who could meet certain standards — mastery of Greek and Latin, among other requirements — gained admission. Like a literacy test for voting, this ensured that non-elites almost never applied, effectively guaranteeing that the children of alumni would have a place. This was particularly true because most schools did not cap the size of entering classes.

Legacy admissions began, ironically enough, out of efforts to make Harvard more inclusive. In the late 19th century, the

university's patrician president, Charles W. Eliot, began to broaden the university's admissions beyond the pool of elite, prep schools that supplied most of each year's incoming class.

As the historian Jerome Karabel has noted, Eliot abolished the Greek requirement; he would later suspend the Latin requirement, too, under certain conditions. Soon, Harvard started to admit a growing number of boys from public schools who were allowed to compete for a growing number of scholarships that paid their tuition.

These efforts to raise standards of admission — to admit the best and the brightest rather than the “stupid sons of the rich,” as Eliot pungently put it — succeeded. Harvard became more inclusive, enrolling a growing number of talented students from a wide range of backgrounds.

But these efforts, eventually emulated by other private colleges and universities, had an unanticipated effect. Increasingly, Jewish public-school students aced the exams and swept the scholarships, becoming an increasingly visible presence on campus.

The Protestant elites who ran elite schools wailed about the so-called “Jewish problem,” or what some called the “Hebrew invasion.” They instituted quotas on the number of Jewish students admitted from certain schools, but this did not lower the number of Jewish students; it simply shifted the geographic distribution.

Nor did it assuage the alumni. One graduate of Harvard reported returning a quarter century after graduation to find “Jews to the right of me, Jews to the left of me,” adding pointedly that “not one of these appeared to be of the same class as the few Jews that were in college in my day but distinctly of the class usually denominated ‘Kikes.’”

Sadly, he was hardly alone in his prejudice. As growing numbers of alumni threatened to send their precious sons elsewhere, Harvard abandoned admissions on scholarship alone, substituting a far more subjective process that evaluated personality traits and athletic ability. At the same time, the college instituted selective admission. It was no longer enough to ace an entrance exam; you had to have what prep school kids schooled in French would have described as a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

This move went hand in hand with an implicit or explicit policy of favoring the children of alumni. In 1925, for example, the Yale Board of admissions voted that the new “limitation of numbers shall not operate to exclude any son of a Yale graduate who has satisfied all the requirements for admission.” A few years later, it codified this policy still further, requiring non-legacy applicants to score higher on entrance exams.

Here and elsewhere, legacy students began to supplant Jewish students, a pattern that held into the postwar era. In 1949, for example, Wilbur Bender, the head of Harvard admissions, simply said that “we do discriminate in our admissions policy ... and I hope we always will.”

And discriminate they did at all the elite universities, giving special preference to legacy students while simultaneously forcing everyone else to vie for the remaining seats. But calls for a more inclusive study body from the 1960s onward prompted some universities to roll back the number of legacies admitted in order to build more diverse student body.

These policies, particularly those instituted at Princeton and Yale, sparked a bitter backlash among prominent alumni. William F. Buckley led the charge at Yale, mourning that the university had ceased to “the kind of place where your family goes for generations.”

Buckley was particularly bemoaned that a “Mexican-American from El Paso High School with identical scores on the achievement tests and identically ardent recommendations from their headmasters, had a better chance of being admitted to Yale than Jonathan Edwards the Sixteenth from St. Paul's School.”

Faced with a growing alumni rebellion — and unlike West Point, very much dependent on tuition dollars and donations — Yale and other universities backed down from attempts to roll back legacy admissions. Private universities would not be purely meritocratic institutions the way that the military academy became.

Instead, they adopted the strategy that remains in place today: Reserve a quarter to a third of seats for legacy students, with the remaining seats reserved for those who help achieve the kind of diversity and eclecticism that may be missing among alumni children.

These competing imperatives — admit enough legacy students to keep the alumni happy; admit enough non-traditional students to make a reasonable claim to being representative — will always be at war.

But it's worth recalling that neither constituency existed before the first attempts to democratize these otherwise elitist institutions. Discrimination and inclusion have a shared history: they emerged almost simultaneously.

Lawsuits notwithstanding, they're likely to remain twinned for the foreseeable future.
