College Admissions: Is There a Better Way?

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Over half of America's four-year colleges accept more than 75 percent of their applicants, while 13 percent accept less than half of the applicants, and some admit as few as five percent. *Focus on ETS R&D* reached out to Rebecca Zwick, a researcher at ETS and author of *Who Gets In?*, for her view on the college admissions process.

Who enrolls in college today?

Rebecca Zwick: That depends on many things: on grades, test results, as well as the student's socioeconomic and ethnic background. A recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) looked at the 2013 enrollment rates for high school graduates who were in 9th grade in 2009. It showed that 60 percent of students in the highest socioeconomic group — the top fifth — were enrolled in a bachelor's program, compared to 12 percent for those in the bottom fifth. Half of Asian students and 39 percent of White students were enrolled, while the rates for students who were Black, Hispanic, Native American or Pacific Islanders ranged from 18 to 24 percent. The underrepresentation of these groups, and of students from low-income families, is the most pressing issue in

college admissions today — and these disparities tend to be greater the more selective the college.

Is the current system fair?

Rebecca Zwick: Well, let's begin with clarifying that we don't have a single system for college admissions in the United States, which makes it hard to answer with a simple yes or no. There are many differences even among selective four-year schools. Each school has its own criteria and selection processes, and the degree of openness about this varies. I believe that transparency is a key aspect of fairness — applicants should not be asked to play a game without being told the rules. Transparency also means that institutions have an obligation to inform the public about their admissions priorities and report on the impact of their admissions policies. I lay out several other principles for fair admissions in my book *Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions*:

- Admissions policies and criteria should align with the college's mission.
- There is no universal definition of merit. Whether an applicant is entitled to be selected by a particular school depends on that school's policy.
- Schools should be free to apply their own socioeconomic and racial preferences (more on this below).
- No applicant should be denied because of a need for financial aid, or accepted because the applicant’s parents are alumni or seen as potential donors.
- Grades should continue to play a key role in admissions since they not only summarize specific accomplishments, but also help measure students' ability to complete academic work over a sustained period of time. Test scores are particularly useful for identifying talented students who have not performed well in school and for comparing students from very different backgrounds, including home-schooled and foreign students.
- Nontraditional admissions criteria (such as measures of self-concept or educational aspirations) and holistic evaluation are not always helpful to the applicants they are intended to support. The less clear the admissions criterion, the easier it will be to game the system, and the more likely it is to benefit wealthier, more savvy applicants.

Should there be a score for "grit"?

Rebecca Zwick: There has recently been a lot of talk about "grit" as a potential admissions criterion. It's the four-letter word that colleges want to hear, according

to a website that gives advice to college applicants, but I think we need to tread cautiously. In the admissions setting, personal qualities like grit are impossible to measure accurately from students' own reports. If applicants are asked whether they are gritty, persistent or persevering, they will certainly know what the "right" answer is. It's also not clear that grittiness in the abstract is a fair or reasonable basis for judging applicants. What does make sense is to look at actual academic accomplishments that reflect the ability to persist — for example, substantial research projects completed in high school. This is essentially what Warren Willingham, then a Distinguished Research Scientist at ETS, called "follow-through" in his 1985 book, *Success in College: The Role of Personal Qualities and Academic Ability*.

Does affirmative action discriminate against White/Asian students?

Rebecca Zwick: I thought a lot about affirmative action in the course of writing my book, and it is, of course, an extremely controversial issue. The recent Supreme Court decision in *Fisher v. University of Texas* (PDF) allowed the university to continue using an admissions process that included consideration of race. But much of mass media's coverage of affirmative action admissions policies seems to be based on an oversimplified view of college admissions. Some observers believe that if a White student with an A average and high test scores is rejected, while an applicant from an underrepresented group with only a B+ average and less impressive test scores is accepted, then this must mean that the White student is a victim of discrimination. However, this belief is based on the premise that college admissions is — and should be — based only on grades and test scores. In reality, schools use many more criteria than these, including candidates' interests, special talents, work experiences and educational background. If a school's mission calls for it to increase college access for underrepresented ethnic groups, then I consider it completely legitimate to apply admissions criteria that support that mission. In my view, the most compelling justification for affirmative action is to address a problem in our society — the underrepresentation of people of color in the professions, government, and business and their restricted access to other sources of well-being, like good health care and housing. I agree with the philosopher and legal scholar Ronald Dworkin, who said that affirmative action in admissions is a forward-looking policy. It focuses on what can be done to change society going forward and should not depend on discrimination suffered by individual applicants. Ideally, schools should be transparent about the role of affirmative action goals in admissions; however, this is not always possible due to legal constraints on affirmative action programs.

Are there better ways to do college admissions?

Rebecca Zwick: Yes, there are, and recent research has suggested some ways to improve the admissions processes. Targeting outreach and recruitment programs more carefully, and providing help with applications for admission and financial aid has been shown to improve access. Considering candidates' home, neighborhood and school experiences when evaluating their applications can lead to the admission of more diverse entering classes, according to some recent studies.[1] In a somewhat different vein[2], my colleagues and I have been studying technologies borrowed from operations research that would allow admissions offices to maximize the academic performance of the admitted students, while imposing other requirements. These methods work very well for selecting a high-achieving class with the desired composition; however, the strength of these methods can also be a weakness. On the one hand, the methods are very good for translating policy into practice. So, for example, a school could require that an incoming class have at least 20 percent students from low-income families and a minimum of 10 percent from inside the state. On the other hand, some schools may not wish to formalize their requirements in this way. For this approach to be successful, the colleges must be willing to be entirely transparent.

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The opinions expressed are those of the author, and not necessarily those of ETS or its clients.

Learn more:

Zwick, R. (2016). *Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Orfield, G. (2017). Social science and the future of affirmative action: The Supreme Court's Fisher II decision and new research. In Orfeld, G. (Ed.), *Alternative Paths to Diversity: Exploring and Implementing Effective College Admissions Policies*. (Research Report No. RR-17–40). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12121

1 Bastedo, M. N., & Bowman, N. A. (2017). *Improving Admission of Low-SES Students at Selective Colleges: Results From an Experimental Simulation*. Educational Researcher, 46(2), 67–77.

2 See chapter 8 of *Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions*.