

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



By *Rebecca Zwick*

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In November, the Regents of the University of California [announced](#) the system would “continue to practice test-free admissions now and into the future.” A month later, Harvard let it be known that its test-optional policy would [extend](#) through 2026. For some, the elimination of test requirements is an assault on the very principles that should govern college admissions. “Death to Merit!” screamed the headline of a 2019 *Forbes* [opinion piece](#) suggesting that the move away from admissions tests is, in fact, a “growing disenchantment with standards of merit.” So ingrained is the belief that college admission is and should be based largely on standardized-test scores that the testing-watchdog organization FairTest evidently thought it necessary to issue [a publication](#) called “Test Scores Do Not Equal Merit” in 1998. (The organization [has emphasized this point](#) multiple times since then.)

Perhaps the tendency to equate tests and merit can be blamed on the British sociologist Michael Young, who coined the term “meritocracy” — a mishmash of Latin and Greek — as a joke. His book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, originally published in 1958, describes a smoothly running but nightmarish society in which every aspect of life — education, work, compensation, marriage — is governed by intelligence tests, which are seen as “the very instrument of social justice.” A rebellion is the inevitable result.

Debates on college-admissions policies tend to focus on what criteria best encapsulate merit: Is it traditional measures like test scores, “21st-century skills” like the ability to collaborate, or maybe personal characteristics like grit? Commentators argue about which of these is most predictive of college performance — and which is most equitable. But perhaps merit does not lie within the individual at all. And maybe we should focus less on the prediction of college performance (whether grades or graduation rates) and more on the broad impact of admissions policies on the justness and inclusiveness of our society.

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Some staunchly support the idea that college admissions should be based on traditional academic measures, including admission test scores. An [opposing faction](#) roundly rejects this principle, often echoing [debunked](#) claims that standardized-test scores measure socioeconomic status and nothing else. “If we can agree that the SAT, LSAT, and other standardized tests most reliably measure a student’s household income, ethnicity, and level of parental education, then we can see that reliance on such test scores narrows the student body to those who come from particular households,” wrote the Harvard law professor Lani Guinier in her 2015 book, *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy*.

If test scores are not merit, what is? Guinier advocated replacing “the current meritocracy — rule by testocratic merit” — with “democratic merit,” which would instead evaluate college candidates in terms of their peer collaboration, leadership, and drive. Others agitate for definitions of meritocracy based on their own favorite characteristic, whether it be grit, communication skills, or “[ethical engagement](#),” suggesting that such “[noncognitive](#)” factors represent more equitable admissions criteria and are key to successful performance in college.

Those proposing these alternate admissions criteria (like those who advocate focusing on test scores and high-school grades) still assume that merit lies within a particular applicant, and that once we determine how to define it we can pick the best candidates. But does that assumption serve us well? Whether merit is best defined by test scores, high-school grades, or grit is, in a sense, a “micro” question. Broader ones loom: Should institutions evaluate applicants’ merit in terms of their predicted college performance? Should merit even be seen as a property that’s rooted in the candidates themselves?

While it may seem perfectly reasonable to evaluate applicants according to their expected success in college, admissions decisions can’t be fully judged without reference to the college’s admissions policy, which in turn is meant to reflect its mission. Institutions vary substantially on this dimension. Some seek to identify and cultivate the most academically talented students. For example, Yale’s mission, according to its website, is “to seek exceptionally promising students of all backgrounds from across the nation and around the world, and to educate them, through mental discipline and social experience, to develop their intellectual, moral, civic, and creative capacities to the fullest.”

But that’s not always the case. Many institutions focus on the importance of increasing access and representing their communities. The State University of New York’s mission is “to provide to the people of New York educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access,

fully representative of all segments of the population.” Some colleges explicitly seek diversity — my alma mater, Antioch College, states that “diversity in all its manifestations is a fundamental component of excellence in education.” Other institutions have a special mission to serve certain populations. Howard University seeks to educate “students of high academic standing and potential, with particular emphasis upon educational opportunities for Black students.” It would be impossible to judge any institution’s admissions policies without considering its mission.

This principle — the link between mission and admission — ties in to a perspective advanced by the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen in his 2000 essay “[Merit and Justice](#).” Although Sen, an economist and philosopher, does not discuss admissions per se, he advances two particularly relevant ideas. First, meritocracy must be evaluated with respect to an identified goal. We can’t know whether an applicant should be admitted until we know what the institution is trying to do. As Sen says, “the rewarding of merit and the very concept of merit itself depend on the way we see a good society and the criteria we invoke to assess the successes and failures of societies.” And while some institutional missions are stated primarily in terms of students’ intellectual development, other institutions focus on opportunity, access, and diversity.

The second (and more radical) idea Sen develops is that although “conventional notions of ‘meritocracy’ often attach the label of merit to *people*,” the label should instead be attached to *actions*. An action is meritocratic if it furthers a particular valued consequence.

Sen gives the following example:

In India shortly after independence, a system of preference for lower-caste candidates in the civil service was introduced ... reserving a certain proportion of places for them minimally, although recruitment in general was governed by examination. The argument defending this preference system was partly based on some notion of fairness to the candidates (given the educational and social handicap typically experienced by lower-caste candidates), but, more important, it was argued that the reduction of inequality in the society at large depended on breaking the effective monopoly of upper-caste civil servants. The upper-caste bias in the distribution of justice and in the allocation of governmental help could be changed only by having civil servants from less privileged backgrounds.

Suppose a university’s admissions policy gives preference to applicants from lower socioeconomic strata. If the university’s mission includes the reduction of economic inequality in our society, the

admissions system can be defended as meritocratic because it promotes this goal.

If we accept Sen's approach, admissions policies should be evaluated less in terms of the characteristics of individual members of the accepted class and more in terms of whether the qualities of the class, considered as a whole, support institutional missions. What's wrong with judging the merit of individual people, as is typical? Sen argues that the risk of such personification is that talents may be seen "not only as being variable between one person and another ... but also as distributed according to some other readily distinguishable characteristic, such as skin color ... personification can encourage meritocratic acceptance of — rather than resistance to — inequalities of achievement (often along racial and ethnic groupings)." In other words, attempting to rate individuals' merit can seduce us into accepting harmful stereotypes. Sen notes, for example, that "a caste system often derives its rationale from beliefs regarding the distribution of talent ... a standard part of the 'intellectual' background of the practice of racism."

What would it mean to focus on the action of assembling a class rather than on the individuals who make up that class? The idea of "crafting a class" with an eye toward its characteristics as a collective is, of course, not new. Colleges routinely consider the overall impact of their admissions policies on the composition of classes. But Sen's principles provide a different lens through which to view an admissions system. Consider how these arguments bear upon the third rail of college admissions — affirmative action. In their landmark 1998 book, *The Shape of the River*, William G. Bowen and Derek Bok contend that "our country continues to need the help of its colleges and universities in building a society in which access to positions of leadership and responsibility is less limited by an individual's race than it is today." From Sen's perspective, universities that endorse this mission would then be seen as taking meritocratic action if they included racial preferences in their admissions policies. By contrast, affirmative action's [opponents](#) typically view any such preferences as undermining meritocracy.





ANDREA LEVY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Of course, colleges' mission statements are not always clear or comprehensive, and some are so lofty as to defy practical interpretation. MIT, for example, wants the members of its community to work "for the betterment of humankind." In addition, many statements have not been updated to reflect today's concerns. UC's mission statement [apparently](#) dates to the 1970s. But if institutions took action to provide up-to-date, clearly worded statements about their missions, admissions decisions that supported those missions would have a firmer justification, aided by Sen's admonition to judge the action, not the applicant.

What role would academic credentials play in such a system? Should admissions be based solely on demographics? Of course not. It's not an either/or proposition. University missions typically include both academic factors and a host of other criteria. A body of research, including some of [my own](#), has shown how academic standards can be upheld while incorporating other criteria and

improving access for underrepresented groups.

It's hard to say how, exactly, admissions decisions would differ if we adopted Sen's definition of meritocracy. But those decisions could be described in a more honest and straightforward way. And adopting such a philosophy would mean that no apologies or charades were needed for consideration of nonacademic factors — an admissions system that promoted social justice could be seen as faithful to the principle of meritocracy, rather than a repudiation of it.

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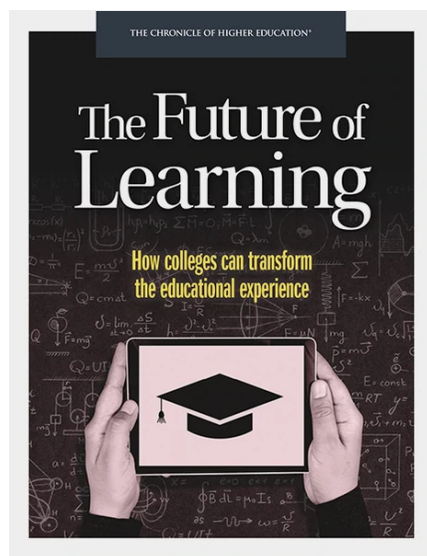
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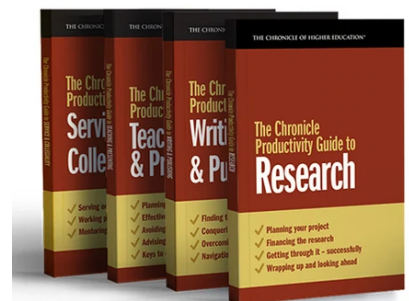
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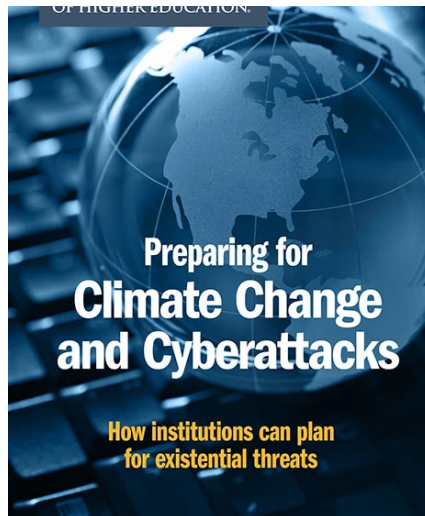
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