

## Book Review

Zwick, R. (2017). *Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reviewed by

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College admission is a hotly debated topic, but discussions are often clouded by uniformed intuitions, emotions, and/or hidden agendas. This book provides a balanced and well-informed overview of different strategies for college admission. In nine chapters, Rebecca Zwick sketches a picture of how students are, can be, and should be selected for college. She discusses the political and philosophical choices that underlie different strategies of college admission and the empirical evidence that exists for different admission procedures. She adds new analyses from data of the U.S. Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 to illustrate her points throughout the chapters. In the concluding chapter she presents seven principles that college admission policies should adhere to.

Rebecca Zwick is an emeritus professor at the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and holds the position of Distinguished Presidential Appointee at Educational Testing Service (ETS). She has a rich career in educational measurement. Despite her longstanding ties with ETS, this book is by no means an ode to standardized testing; their shortcomings, including those of the SAT, are sharply addressed.

The nine chapters are entitled (1) Evaluating the fairness and effectiveness of an admission system, (2) Admission tests and high school grades: What do they measure? (3) Performance predictions and academic indexes, (4) Admission preferences: Who deserves boost? (5) Percent plans and other test-optional admission programs, (6) Noncognitive attributes: A new frontier in college admissions? (7) Casting lots for college, (8) Crafting a class, and (9) Conclusions

In Chapter 1, concepts that play a key role in the book are discussed. Central are “effectiveness”—that is, “the degree to which policies and procedures achieve their intended goals”—and “fairness,” defined as “whether the goal itself and the means through which it is implemented are ethical and just.” Different philosophical ideas about admission are briefly discussed and an introduction is provided about different statistical models that may be used to evaluate the fairness and effectiveness of admission procedures.

In Chapter 2, the constructs underlying admission test scores and high school grades, often broadly defined as measures of what we tend to define as “merit,” are discussed. The pros and cons of using them for admission purposes are portrayed based on a discussion of the history of the SAT and ACT and the many controversies that surrounded these tests. When using grades, not only academic aptitude is

measured; teachers also take into account “attendance, effort, and classroom behavior.” The drawbacks of using grades are mentioned, such as the difference in grading standards across teachers and schools, and the susceptibility to certain biases, as compared to standardized test (p. 58). Furthermore, the relations among socioeconomic status (SES), coaching, and performance on the big admission tests and high school grades are discussed. Zwick reports correlations between high school grades and SES between .12 and .18, and correlations between SES and admission tests between .20 and .25. Zwick emphasizes that the differences are less dramatic than often suggested, and that a measure of academic performance unrelated to SES still does not exist.

The psychometrics and statistics involved in admission testing is presented in Chapter 3. The use of regression analysis for assessing predictive accuracy and differential prediction and the benefit of statistical over clinical prediction are discussed, including the intriguing observation that even specialists tend to have too much confidence in the predictability of human behavior. Furthermore, Zwick discusses that the correlation between admission test scores and first year grade point average (GPA) is typically about .3 to .4.; the correlation between high school GPA and first year GPA is usually somewhat higher, and the combination of ACT or SAT scores with high school GPA boosts the correlation to around .5 (p. 81).

The topic of Chapter 4 is the complex question of whether affirmative action should play a role in college admission, and if so, how this can be and should be done. Several U.S. court decisions are discussed concluding that affirmative action is not allowed when it is for purposes of remediating past societal discrimination, but it is allowed to be taken into account when the aim is to promote campus diversity and greater diversity in society. Empirical results show that the effects of affirmative action on the admission of underrepresented minorities are mixed; some studies show that these actions, when based on SES, may even reduce the number of minority students.

In Chapter 5, Zwick provides an overview of policies that do not include standardized testing: the effect of percent plans (i.e., accepting a fixed percentage of candidates with the highest grades in their high school class) and the effect of test-optional admissions on college diversity. Test optional admission can take different forms; sometimes, standardized admission tests are completely ignored, and sometimes students may submit these scores when they think they provide a good impression of their qualities. Zwick concludes that percent plans do not result in the intended increase in the percentage of minority students. Similarly, test-optimal policies do not seem to enhance student diversity, but do enhance selectivity and make the admission system less transparent. The possible effects of these policies are complex, but the danger is that eliminating standardized admission tests would ultimately benefit the rich: “wealthier parents have the time and the money to spend all day ‘networking’ for their kids’ GPA advantage ... the GPA of rich kids applying to test-optional colleges and universities will inflate, but the GPAs of poor and minority kids ... will not.”

In Chapter 6, the potential contributions of noncognitive attributes in admission procedures (e.g., grit and personality) are critically evaluated. Although there is compelling evidence that noncognitive attributes are important predictors for study

success, and many claim that these measures show smaller differences across minority groups, Zwick points out that the challenge of measuring such attributes in high-stakes admission procedures, be it through questionnaires, interviews, or other tasks, still exists. The vast majority of research projects that include noncognitive elements were conducted in low-stakes contexts, and it is questionable whether the outcomes can be generalized to high-stakes contexts (see Niessen & Meijer, 2017), because “the desired answers are often glaringly obvious.” In addition, an often overlooked explanation for smaller subgroup differences may be lower reliability of noncognitive measures, as compared to cognitive measures. Zwick concludes that noncognitive measurement for college admissions deserves further attention; for now, the assumption that they improve predictive accuracy and reduce inequality has not yet been substantiated.

In Chapter 7, Zwick critically discusses the use of a lottery-based admission systems, with the obvious advantage that it is “blind” with respect to ethnic background and SES, but also with the disadvantage that it is “blind” with respect to past performance, which makes it an unpopular policy among college candidates and colleges. An alternative may be a lottery system with thresholds on the basis of high school grades or test scores. However, studies have shown that such “realistic lottery scenarios” would yield little gains in diversity or would dramatically reduce academic performance in college.

In Chapter 8, Zwick considers the idea of crafting a class based on techniques from operations research. When crafting a class, rather than optimizing individual expected performance, the properties of a class as a whole are taken into account as an outcome measure. A reason to engage in class-crafting is that admission officers may want to admit students with a wide variety of special talents that make studying in such a class more exciting for the group as a whole. It may also be used to admit candidates from different cultural or social backgrounds. Using these operations research techniques, it is possible to optimize outcomes such as minimum expected college grades under restrictions such as a fixed number of students from low-income families. The advantage of applying this technique is that the rules under which different admission criteria are weighted are transparent and it is thus a fairer alternative to obscure holistic admission procedures.

The final chapter contains a number of interesting recommendations. First and foremost, Zwick holds a plea for transparency, which is lacking in many admission procedures (a point well illustrated by her quotation from Steven Pinker on p. 45: “Anything can be hidden behind the holistic fig leaf”). She furthermore notes that there is no such thing as a universal definition of merit on the basis of which students can be admitted, but that they should always be selected in alignment with the mission of the college. She also proposes that high-stakes decisions should not be made on the basis of one single test score. Thus, results from interviews, portfolios, and the like should be combined with test scores. She recommends the use of a combination of high school grades and admission tests in college admissions.

Overall, Zwick distinguishes and integrates the political, societal, philosophical, and empirical aspects of the college admission debate in her discussion, conclusions, and recommendations. Although this book is an absolute must-read for those who are involved in college admission, like much of the admission literature (Sternberg,

2010; Lemann, 1999), it is also very much U.S.-oriented. For example, the principle of crafting a class would strike most European admission officers as odd. Nevertheless, this book is important and timely because of the extensive discussion of empirical evidence that provides an antidote to the often voiced but unnuanced views that standardized tests are intrinsically bad and that all kinds of alternative assessments like holistic or noncognitive approaches are the ultimate solution.

In conclusion, this is a great book for everyone who is interested in college admission and selection in general.

### References

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