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Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions

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Of all the contemporary issues that define today's higher education landscape, few are more important than the question of whether the procedures that colleges and university officials use to decide who gets admitted to their institutions are fair.

In fact, the question of the role that race and ethnicity should play in these decisions — if any — has been at the center of a series of United States Supreme Court cases.

Those who are charged with the duty of making admission decisions — and crafting the policies that govern those decisions — must be circumspect about the way they do it, lest they run afoul of the law.

At the same time, scholars stress the importance of ensuring that America's higher education enterprise be made more accessible to diverse segments of the population and members of historically underrepresented groups. At stake is a chance for individuals from historically marginalized communities to share in prosperity and assume positions of leadership — the paths to which destinations are often paved with postsecondary education.

It is with this and other issues in mind that Dr. Rebecca Zwick, professor emeritus in the Department of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, makes an important auctorial foray into the admissions discussion by means of a new Harvard University Press book titled *Who Gets In? Strategies for Fair and Effective College Admissions*.

In the book, Zwick examines subjects that range from the attention colleges and universities should pay to the development and execution of their mission statements to the emphasis that institutions should or shouldn't place on high school grades versus college entrance exam scores as they determine the suitability of applicants.

She also explores the pros and cons of 16 different "admission models," including some that incorporate race-based affirmative action and the effect that the models have on admissions for different ethnic groups and for women.

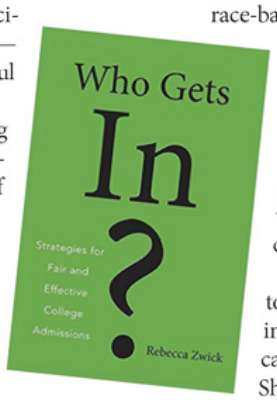
The models include 12 that are based on a "rank-ordering" of the applicants — half of which rank applicants on academic grades and test scores and half of which include racial preferences, socioeconomic preferences or noncognitive factors as well.

"For the most part, the admissions rules that augmented the academic composite to incorporate affirmative action policies or to include noncognitive measures produced college grades, graduation rates, and postcollege accomplishments similar to those obtained using the unvarnished composite," Zwick concludes.

Zwick spends considerable time fleshing out the exceptions and the nuances of the findings and their implications for diversity in higher education.

Some advocates have put forth the idea that colleges should focus on increasing socioeconomic diversity as a means of increasing racial and ethnic diversity.

But Zwick's research indicates that socioeconomic-based affirmative action rules do not increase ethnic diversity. "Similarly, the race-based rules did not increase the representation of low-income applicants."



She adds: "Although race and SES are quite closely related among the applicants considered as a whole, there is almost no correlation between underrepresented minority status and SES among the applicants with the highest academic qualifications."

Zwick also gives considerable attention to the role that mission statements play in influencing how institutions of higher education go about the business of admissions. She examines the various tacks that institutions — from SUNY to Yale to MIT — take when it comes to crafting their mission statements. But there's only so much one can glean from a mission statement, Zwick argues.

"Ideally, we could examine a college's admissions policy and determine whether it flows from the schoool's stated educational mission," Zwick writes. But unfortunately, she says, it's not so simple, and she goes on to say that "we cannot treat a school's stated mission and its admissions policy as independent pieces of information and then analyze their interrelationship," because each influences the other.

Zwick also delineates the various goals of admissions and how those are actualized within the context of broader realities.

"It is no secret that institutions may accept academically unimpressive applicants whose parents are expected to make large donations," Zwick writes. But admissions goals can also include purposes such as expanding college access, promoting social mobility and maximizing the benefit to society.

Zwick's book is an invaluable resource for anyone who reflects on or worries about the state of college admissions today and what it means for diversity in higher education. But Zwick herself acknowledges the need for more refined and rigorous research on the topic and related questions. ◘