

OUR PREFERENCE FOR THE PRIVILEGED
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WHEN THE GI BILL WAS FIRST PROPOSED, SOME UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS DID THEIR BEST TO GET IT DEFEATED, APPALLED BY THE PROSPECT OF A MOB OF UNPREPARED, UNSUITABLE MEN TRYING TO BE STUDENTS. TO THEIR SURPRISE, THE VETERANS - MANY OF THEM POOR, MOST OF THEM THE FIRST IN THEIR FAMILIES TO GO TO COLLEGE - PROVED TO BE AMONG THE BEST STUDENTS OF THEIR GENERATION.

By broadening access to college for those who had served their country, the GI Bill helped fuel the post-World War II economic boom while leveling the playing field for many Americans. The bill epitomized our country's dual commitments: to open opportunity across the economic spectrum and to invest in people, who give back to society.

Today higher education is defaulting on its egalitarian and its public-minded role. Too many universities use their admissions criteria to consolidate privilege rather than expand opportunity. Meanwhile, as tuition and costs skyrocket, higher education becomes less accessible to the poor and even the middle class; students work and still graduate with crushing debts.

Driven by a preoccupation with ranking and sorting individuals rather than serving fundamentally democratic goals, admissions decisions recreate a "geography of unequal opportunity" in which suburban students succeed and rural and urban students are left behind.

The University of Michigan admits more than a fifth of its in-state students from schools in affluent suburbs in Oakland County, north of Detroit. Although all Michigan residents pay taxes to support the university, families who earn more than \$100,000 a year are the most likely to attend. In California, 100 high schools in well-heeled suburbs virtually guarantee admission to the UC system.

A self-righteous elitism drives decision making even when schools seek to diversify their campuses. From cash-rich Harvard to cash-strapped University of Alabama, in the name of diversity the poor still lose out. Schools administer programs without sufficient

resources to identify those with untapped potential, replicating the class system that assures those who are already ahead stay ahead. Risk-averse admissions officers cherry pick among applicants of color and fail to recruit in urban or rural public schools.

Many colleges rely on private networks that disproportionately benefit the children of African and West Indian immigrants who come from majority black countries and who arrived in the United States after 1965. Affluent, well-educated new immigrants from South America bolster Latino diversity statistics while the children of migrant farm workers are left behind.

Like their wealthier white counterparts, many first- and second-generation immigrants of color test well because they retain a national identity free of America's racial caste system and enjoy material and cultural advantages, including professional or well-educated parents. They do not internalize the stigma of race and are thus less affected by the burden of "stereotype threat," the anxiety about confirming assumptions of intellectual inferiority that depresses test scores of highly motivated indigenous black Americans. Diversity produces a more interesting campus rainbow of students who benefited from a host of advantages assembled from birth.

Racial affirmative action mimics the elitist nature of admissions generally when it rewards high-stakes test-takers to the detriment of democratic values. Gone is the larger role of higher education in correcting for historical injustice, reaching out to those who are materially disadvantaged, encouraging publicly spirited innovators, or training a representative group of future leaders of all races. Those whose parents are not already educated are hyper-disadvantaged, from American blacks who are concentrated in distressed inner-city schools to poor and working class Latinos as well as whites isolated in rural pockets of poverty.

Here's a new way to think about access to college. Race is the neon light, but it is not the source of the problem. Admissions decisions reflect a preoccupation with measures of excellence that tell us more about grandparents' wealth than first-year college grades. If we use the visibility of race as a diagnostic tool rather than a distraction, we can combat the new forms of "grandfathering," which convert wealth into merit yet remain mostly hidden from view.

Our admissions emphasis on the best-prepared students is misplaced. It disadvantages poor and working-class whites, not just people of color, who may need time to transition academically but who graduate and become leaders in their community at higher rates than their higher-scoring white counterparts. We should evaluate what students will do after graduation, not just during the first year of study.

The federal government should help subsidize college costs. But schools should rethink admissions criteria too. To regain higher education as a social good in which all of us can participate on fair terms, universities should experiment with a plethora of admissions approaches. Some colleges are showing us how to unlock future opportunity rather than replicate past advantage. We must reconsider how we measure merit so that we invest in potential talent across the board and evaluate success by contributions over time and not just individual first-year college grades.

As the GIs proved to the college presidents, poor and working-class students can still exceed expectations when they are welcomed and supported. We will reap many unexpected gains if we leave no community behind.

NOTES:

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