

Opening the Doors of Academe

Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions

Robert K. Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg
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Comprehensive, well written, and accessible, this book should be of interest to parents, faculty and staff, and higher education policy makers. The authors treat a variety of issues relevant to understanding what we, as a society, must do to level the playing field in college and university admissions and ask a number of important questions: What are the social roles of the modern university? Are the goals of academic excellence and equal opportunity incompatible? What problems underlie the achievement gap in education?

Fullinwider and Lichtenberg's primary concern is that too many Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are under-represented in four-year institutions. Given that many institutions of higher education are not selective, why are so many low-income and minority high school graduates sitting on the sidelines?

The authors offer well-reasoned arguments supporting two principles to guide college and university admission policies. First, given that a college education is a "central good" that deeply affects a person's life prospects, it matters greatly how higher education is allocated. Affluent students, because they grow up in atmospheres conducive to academic success, generally attend the better colleges and universities and are more likely to graduate from college. Other things being equal,

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the authors argue, justice requires that “educational opportunities ought to be enhanced or enlarged for those who have been traditionally shortchanged.”

The authors’ second principle is that potential college students not be helped or hindered in their efforts at educational advancement by factors irrelevant to the legitimate goals of educational institutions. Affluent students, the authors argue, have access to money, connections, and companies that assist them in their college search. These things may help a student in the admissions process, but they are irrelevant to the legitimate goals of educational institutions. Seats in colleges and universities, they say, should be open to all who can perform the required academic tasks—that is, seats should be allocated on the basis of merit.

But what does it mean to reward people according to merit? Fullinwider and Lichtenberg contend that it is impossible to understand merit except in relation to an institution’s mission. For example, the admissions policy for the University of Maryland, College Park lists 24 admissions criteria. The criteria proceed from high school grades, SAT/ACT scores, first generation in college, to ethnic diversity, language spoken at home, and demonstrated interest in the university.

The social roles that colleges must play in modern society justify these institutions considering admissions criteria beyond the narrowly academic. The larger social roles may, for instance, justify racial preferences as a compelling interest. The authors’ point is that a person’s merit depends, among other things, on the university’s aims, purposes, or mission. Hence, merit is relative to a particular end.

The authors discuss as well the uses, abuses, and alternatives to admissions tests. How useful is the SAT I? Is it culturally biased? Are there other approaches to predicting academic success? Should institutions adopt performance-based rather than prediction-based models of testing? They argue that there are deeper problems that cause the academic attainment of Blacks, Hispanic, and Native American students to fall short of their white and Asian peers’ performance. For instance, a key reason low-income and minority students are under-represented in higher education is the lack of a solid elementary through secondary academic background. The authors’ conclusion: “Changing or even abandoning the SAT I won’t alter the prospects for low-income students who will still find themselves on the lower rungs of the admissions ladder.”

In the final three chapters, Fullinwider and Lichtenberg defend affirmative action in college admissions. The mission of colleges and universities, they argue, is so wide ranging that pure academic ability is only one of a number of markers for preparing students. The social roles—education for work, for citizenship, and living—that colleges and universities must play in society, the authors note, justify their use of affirmative action. 