

Fairness and Practice in Selective College Admission

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Questions Considered

- What is the meaning of “fairness”?
- How should we interpret institutional mission and the meaning of merit?
- What is current practice at selective US colleges and universities?
- Are there superior alternatives to current practice?
- Does current practice embody fairness?

Meanings of Fairness

J. Hochschild, *What's Fair?: American Beliefs about Distributive Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1981)

- “just,” “fair,” “distributive justice”—8 times, all undefined

E. Lowe, ed., *Promise and Dilemma: Perspectives on Racial Diversity and Higher Education* (Princeton University Press, 1999)

- “fairness,” “unfairness,” “fairly,” “unfairly”—19 times, all undefined

An Asian-American perspective; an African-American perspective

Dictionary Meanings

Oxford English Dictionary (online version, June 2011)

Fairness – “equitableness, fair dealing, honesty, impartiality, uprightness”

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (11th edition)

Fair – “marked by impartiality and honesty; free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism”

Webster’s New 20th Century Dictionary of the English Language (1983)

Fair – “open; frank; honest; hence, equal; just, equitable; impartial; unprejudiced”

Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (2nd edition, 2001)

Fair – “free from bias, dishonesty, or injustice”

Moral Philosophy

Fred Hargadon, Dean of Admission, Princeton University, 1988-2003

“When I talked with parents I would tell them that our admission process is ‘fair’ in the sense that we will give careful consideration to each and every application”

- note the emphasis on *process* instead of outcome

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971, 1999)

“Justice as Fairness”

The principles of justice are chosen behind a *veil of ignorance*, where in the original position of equality individuals are assumed to be ignorant about their own natural abilities and social positions.

Two principles of justice:

- (1) Each person has an equal right to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with a like liberty for others;
- (2) Inequalities of wealth, power, and authority are justified only to the extent that they can reasonably be expected to work to the advantage of those who are worst off; and are attached to positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

R. Fullinwider and J. Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions* (2004)

What does justice require? (in the context of selective college admission)

- (1) Other things being equal, it is desirable to enhance educational opportunities for those whose opportunities have been significantly limited;
- (2) Individuals should be neither helped nor hindered in their efforts at educational advancement by factors irrelevant to the legitimate goals of educational institutions.

Institutional Goals and Objectives

Admitted students must be adequately prepared for the rigors of academic life at selective colleges and universities

Beyond that, students are admitted who have the ability to:

- Take advantage of an institution's intellectual and other resources, and to contribute to the education of their peers
- Augment campus diversity
- Make distinctive long-run contributions to the welfare of society
- Uphold institutional loyalties and traditions

Meaning of Merit?

- Merit must be interpreted in the context of institutional mission
- Academic merit by itself is typically too narrow
- Admission officers aim to admit the subset of applicants that will maximize the expected contributions to institutional mission, subject to the number of seats in the first-year class (i.e. spaces available) and (perhaps) a budget constraint on financial aid.

Current Practice at Selective US Colleges and Universities

- With particular reference to applicants' racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds

**NO
LONGER
SEPARATE**

**NOT
YET
EQUAL**

Race and Class in
Elite College Admission
and Campus Life

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Overview of NSCE Project

- Purpose of the study
- Data used
 - institutional data
 - student survey
 - other extant data

TABLE 3.3
Acceptance Rates to Public and Private NSCE Institutions, by
Race and Social Class, Fall 1997

Item	Percent Admitted	
	Public Institutions	Private Institutions
<i>Total</i>	55.1	23.8
<i>Race</i>		
White	56.2	25.7
Black	58.5	31.0
Hispanic	40.8	26.7
Asian	39.9	18.4
<i>Social Class</i>		
Lower	57.8	23.2
Working	51.5	18.3
Middle	57.4	21.2
Upper-Middle	53.7	27.4
Upper	65.0	25.1

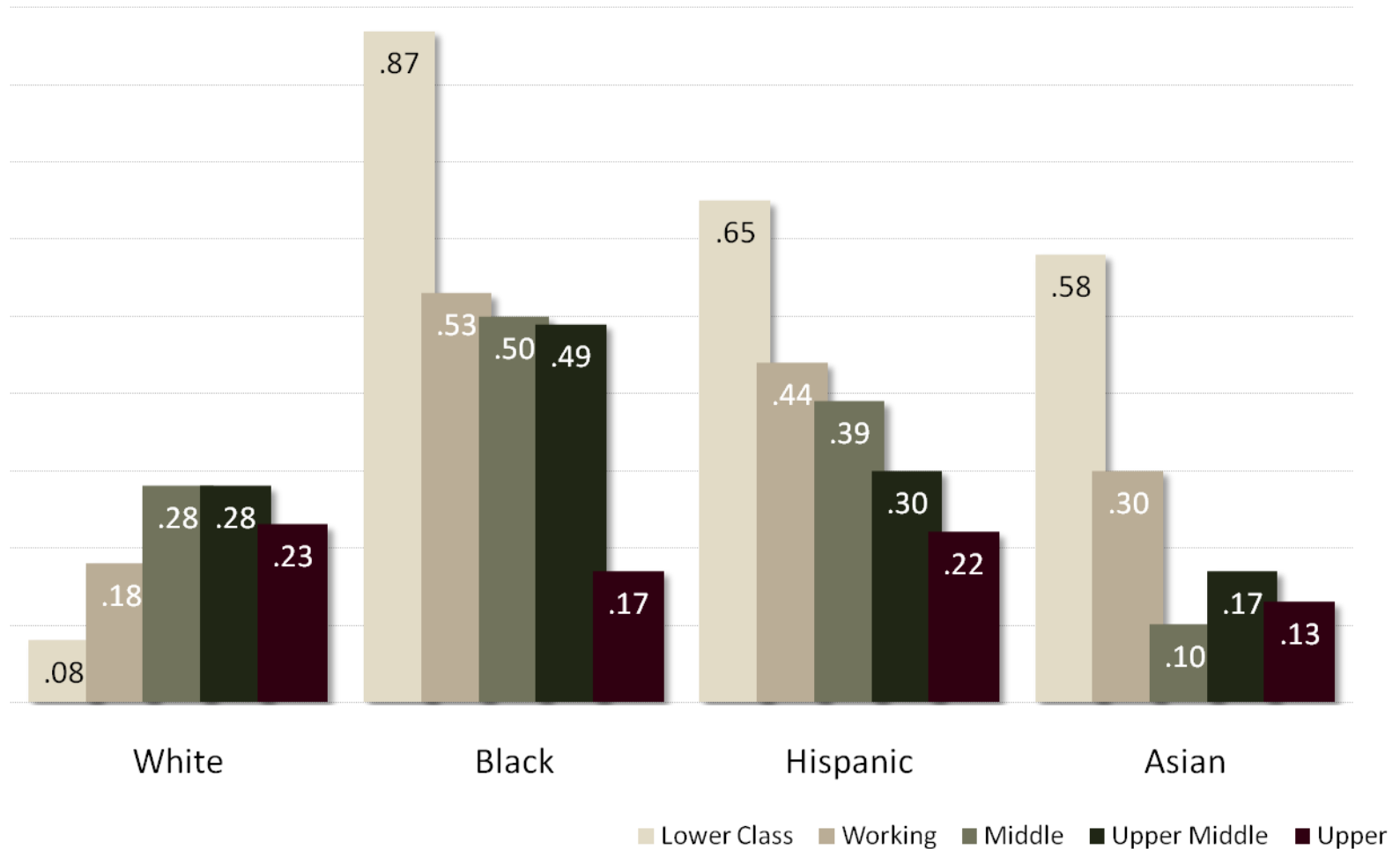
Source: NSCE

TABLE 3.5
Race and Social Class Admission Preferences at Public and Private Institutions
Measured in ACT and SAT Points, Fall 1997

Item	Public Institutions	Private Institutions
	ACT–Point Equivalents (out of 36)	SAT–Point Equivalents (out of 1600)
<i>Race</i>		
(White)	–	–
Black	3.8	310
Hispanic	0.3	130
Asian	-3.4	-140
<i>Social Class</i>		
Lower	-0.1	130
Working (Middle)	0.0	70
Upper-Middle	–	–
Upper	0.3	50
	0.4	-30

Source: NSCE

Effect of Race and Social Class on the Probability of Being Admitted to Private NSCE Institutions, All Other Things Held Constant, 1997



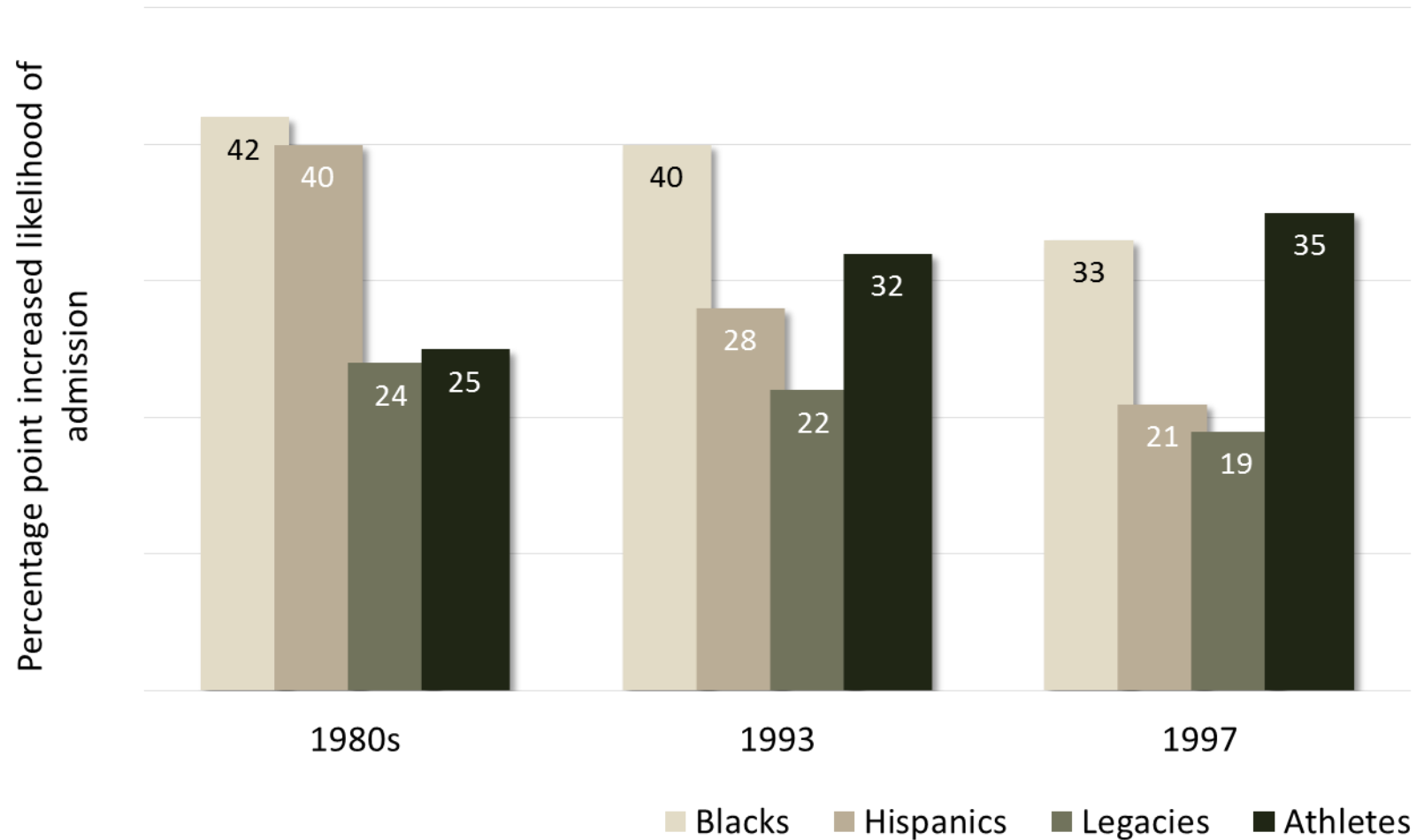
Source: National Study of College Experience

Acceptance Rates by Social Class, Fall 1997

Social Class	All Applicants	Public Institutions	Private Institutions
Higher	37	54	27
Middle	33	57	21
Lower	26	52	19
Total	34.6	55.1	23.8

Source: NSCE

Changes in Relative Importance of Underrepresented Minority, Legacy, and Athlete Preferences: 1980s to 1997



Source: National Study of College Experience

What Else Counts in Being Admitted?

For:

- Female, SAT I and II scores, high school grade point average, high school class rank, National Merit Scholar, private secondary school, “elite” secondary school, large number of extracurricular activities, large number of academic awards and/or leadership positions, large number of community service activities

Against:

- Large number of career-oriented awards/leadership positions (e.g. co-op work programs, ROTC), having taken SAT test prep course

Is there a Better or Fairer System?

- What selection criteria would a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” produce?
 - The relevance of the “maximin” rule of game theory
- What selection criteria do Fullinwider and Lichtenberg advocate?
- Alternative admission scenarios (viewed through simulations)

TABLE 9.1
Effect of Eliminating Affirmative Action at Private Institutions: Simulation Results, Fall 1997

Item	Observed Baseline Applications	Observed Baseline Admitted	Difference From Observed Baseline Admitted If	
			No Affirmative Action	Race-Neutral Admission
<i>Total</i>	51,836	12,233	0	0
<i>Race (%)</i>				
White	55.7	59.9	4.6	-6.5
Black	6.3	8.3	-4.7	-5.5
Hispanic	7.0	7.9	-2.1	-3.2
Asian	31.0	23.9	2.2	15.1
<i>Social Class (%)</i>				
Lower	1.6	1.6	-0.8	-1.2
Working	10.7	8.3	-2.0	-4.3
Middle	38.0	33.4	-0.4	5.8
Upper-Middle	43.0	49.6	2.5	-0.5
Upper	6.8	7.2	0.7	0.1
<i>Mean SAT Score</i>	1,340	1,405	5	10

TABLE 9.2
Effect of Giving More Weight to Low-Income Students at Private Institutions: Simulation Results, Fall 1997

Item	Observed Baseline Admitted	Difference From Observed Baseline Admitted If		
		Substitute Black and Hispanic Weights for Lower and Working Classes	Substitute Legacy Weight for Lower Class	Substitute Legacy Weight for Lower and Working Classes
<i>Total</i>	12,233	0	0	0
<i>Race (%)</i>				
White	59.9	-2.4	-0.4	-2.7
Black	8.3	1.0	0.2	1.2
Hispanic	7.9	0.9	0.1	1.1
Asian	23.9	0.4	0.1	0.4
<i>Social Class (%)</i>				
Lower	1.6	3.6	3.2	2.9
Working	8.3	7.2	-0.3	8.7
Middle	33.4	-4.1	-1.1	-4.4
Upper-Middle	49.6	-5.8	-1.6	-6.3
Upper	7.2	-1.0	-0.3	-1.1
<i>Mean SAT Score</i>	1,405	-17	-7	-19

TABLE 9.3
Effect of Substituting Other Policies for Affirmative Action at Private Institutions: Simulation Results, Fall 1997

Item	Observed Baseline Admitted	Difference From Observed Baseline Admitted If		
		No Affirmative Action More Low-Income Weight	No Affirmative Action, More Low-Income Weight, Less Emphasis on Academic Performance	No Affirmative Action, More Low-Income Weight, No Weight to Academic Performance
<i>Total</i>	12,233	0	0	0
<i>Race (%)</i>				
White	59.9	3.0	2.4	2.2
Black	8.3	-4.3	-2.5	-0.7
Hispanic	7.9	-1.7	-1.0	-0.6
Asian	23.9	2.9	1.1	-0.9
<i>Social Class (%)</i>				
Lower	1.6	2.5	3.0	3.4
Working	8.3	4.5	6.7	8.4
Middle	33.4	-4.0	-5.2	-5.1
Upper-Middle	49.6	-2.9	-4.7	-7.4
Upper	7.2	-0.2	0.2	0.7
<i>Mean SAT Score</i>	1,405	-5	-34	-76

TABLE 9.8
A Comparison of the Profiles of Admitted Students Under Two Conditions:
Current Policy (Affirmative Action with an Achievement Gap) Versus
No Affirmative Action and No Academic Achievement Gap,
Private and Public Institutions Combined, Fall 1997

Item	Current Policy	No Affirmative Action, No Achievement Gap
<i>Total Admitted</i>	26,418	26,418
<i>Race (percentage)</i>		
White	74.6	73.8
Black	8.0	8.4
Hispanic	4.5	4.9
Asian	12.9	12.9
<i>Social Class (percentage)^a</i>		
Low	8.1	7.0
Middle	35.9	36.6
High	56.0	56.4
<i>Mean SAT Score</i>	1299	1321

Discussion

- Does current practice embody fairness?
- Is “fairness” the only virtue? E.g., temperance, fortitude, compassion, faith, hope, love, filial piety—to name a few—are prominent virtues in other philosophical traditions.
- Fairness to whom? (other applicants, alumni, future generations, society at large, other stakeholders; to the individual candidate)
- Should we ignore recruitment and retention?
- Should public and private institutions differ in their interpretations of fairness?