College Admissions

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College Access

Introduction

Every year, we seem to reach a new peak in the escalating concern over the competition to get into America's elite colleges.[1] Despite popular conceptions of steep competition for college admissions, the reality is that most colleges accept most students who apply. But how many colleges are actually 'selective'? Using Barron's Admissions Competitiveness ratings from 2019, colleges in the three most competitive categories accounted for 21% of all colleges and roughly 30% of four-year colleges.[2] However, these colleges are smaller than average in terms of their undergraduate enrollment, in part because they limit enrollment to maintain their prestige. Indeed, they account for just 11% of all postsecondary enrollments and less than 18% of four-year enrollments.[3]

Despite their relative infrequency, selective college admissions practices dominate the public imagination for good reason. Selectivity and perceptions of prestige go hand in hand.[4] Although four-year degrees are broadly associated with economic success and a host of other lifetime benefits, these benefits accrue even more acutely to graduates of more selective colleges.[5] Moreover, hiring practices at some of the highest paying jobs in the country—top-tier banks, law firms, and management consulting firms—tend to disproportionately emphasize Ivy League credentials in their hiring process.[6] A study of the postsecondary credentials of Americans in prominent positions in "politics, the military, business, science, academic, and the arts" found that just over half graduated from one of 34 "elite" colleges, with the vast majority of those individuals holding a degree from an even shorter list of just 16 institutions.[7]

It is then unsurprising that the public pays a lot of attention to selective college admissions policies. When access to elite education is so closely tied to socioeconomic success, those institutions—both public and private—naturally draw outsized attention for how they determine who warrants admission.[8] We see evidence of the desirability of attending selective colleges in patterns of who applies to and enrolls in them. Selective colleges are much more likely to enroll students from wealthier, privileged backgrounds.[9] These trends exist in part because privileged families work to defend their social position but also because selective admissions practices tend to favor attributes that wealthy students can more easily obtain.

Thus, debates about college admissions focus intensely on how students are selected for the scarce seats available at selective colleges. Here, arguments cover not just what factors should be considered (e.g., standardized test scores) but also how much weight they should be given in the decision-making process. The stakes of these debates are high because their outcomes have equity implications for student applicants. Factors like the explicit consideration of race during admissions review—no longer legal after the recent Supreme Court decision—have direct consequences for the racial composition of a college's student body, while other factors like admissions essays may more subtly bias decisions in favor of students from higher-income backgrounds.[10]

Key findings

Key finding #1: *Nearly all selective colleges use some form of holistic review to evaluate applicants, but what this review looks like can vary between colleges.*

At a minimum, holistic review involves the consideration of a wide range of academic and non-academic factors, but colleges differ in how they weigh each of those elements and how those elements are used to evaluate an applicant within her local high school and context.

Key finding #2: *The application elements that selective colleges require, and the amount of weight they place on those elements, have important implications for who applies to and enrolls in selective colleges.*

Application elements like college admissions essays, recommendation letters, and preferences for the children of alumni are linked to students' socioeconomic background, but their use does not appear to have a large impact on the composition of enrolling classes of students. Conversely, when admissions officers have additional context about a student's high school and neighborhood, they admit more under-resourced students, but enrollments largely remain unchanged.

Key finding #3: *Scholars still debate the value of using standardized tests in college admissions, but on average, colleges that make standardized testing optional for admissions see higher enrollments of racially minoritized students, students from lower-income backgrounds, and women.*

Standardized tests are highly correlated with family income and high school resources, but they can also be helpful for identifying promising students from under-resourced backgrounds. Early adopters of test-optional policies initially saw a large increase in applications but little change in enrollments. A longer view of test-optional policies shows that they appear to boost multiple types of campus diversity.

Key finding #4: *Before the practice was ended by the Supreme Court, the use of race-conscious affirmative action in holistic review increased the racial and ethnic diversity of the student bodies at the most selective college campuses, and no race-neutral alternative to race-conscious affirmative action appears capable of generating similar levels of diversity.*

Affirmative action policies helped boost racial diversity at the most selective colleges but were less consequential elsewhere. These policies likely worked because the direct observation of a student's race was closely related to the goal of increasing campus racial diversity. Alternative policies that seek to generate racial diversity rely on factors, like high school attended or neighborhood, that only imperfectly indicate a student's race, necessarily making these practices less effective.

Key finding #5: *While holistic admissions practices are criticized because many of their components seem biased in favor of students from privileged backgrounds, alternatives to holistic review that appear fairer ultimately admit students who earn less in the long run or are less racially diverse than those admitted under holistic review.*

Policies that focus on academic factors only admit students who earn less in the long run, while policies like lotteries, fixed formulas, percent plans, or socioeconomic affirmative action admit classes that are less racially diverse than those admitted under holistic review.

Evidence

Key finding #1: *Nearly all selective colleges use some form of holistic review to evaluate applicants, but what this review looks like can vary between colleges.*

Selective admissions offices tend to rely on holistic admissions processes to admit students. At its core, holistic admissions evaluates students on a broad basis, including academic factors (e.g., test scores, high school coursetaking, and GPA), non-academic factors (e.g., essays, recommendation letters, and extracurricular involvement), and contextual factors (e.g., high school characteristics, family income, whether a student is the first in the family to attend college, and—until recently ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court—race and ethnicity). The reality of how these factors come together to determine whether a student is admitted is not standardized across colleges.[11] In general, a student's academic qualifications tend to play the most important role in holistic admissions across all colleges that use such an approach.[12] Beyond these patterns, there is little standardization or consensus on how a holistic review of applicants should be conducted.[13] For example, at colleges that collect standardized test scores, selective public colleges tend to place more weight on test scores than selective private colleges do.[14] This may in part reflect the higher volume of applications these institutions tend to receive and the need to more efficiently delineate between students with different academic records.

Scholars have identified at least two different ways of categorizing types of holistic review. One way focuses on the underlying goals of using holistic review, while the other emphasizes the different ways that holistic review is implemented. Both are helpful in illustrating how holistic review varies across the colleges and universities that use it.

Under the goal-based categorization, there are three basic types of holistic admissions reviews:[15]

- "Whole file" review of a student's qualifications where admissions officers consider all elements of a student's application, without letting any given attribute determine a student's admissions outcome, and where the relative weights of different elements could vary across applicants even at a given school.
- "Whole person" review where application officers work to evaluate students as individuals, considering their personal characteristics and perhaps emphasizing their fit with the overall campus environment.
- "Whole context" review where admissions officers work to not just understand applicants as people but also account for the context in which they lived and went to school. For example, admissions officers using whole context review might account for the number of Advanced Placement courses a high school offers when evaluating the strength of the curriculum on a student's transcript.

A survey of selective colleges revealed that 95% used one of these three types of holistic review in their admissions process. Just 29% used the whole context review, and this practice was more common among the more selective colleges. In contrast, roughly half of

the colleges used a whole file evaluation process, typically schools from the second two categories of selectivity.[16]

The implementation-based way of categorizing holistic review practices also identifies three different categories:[17]

- A "coarse sieve" approach, common at public universities, tends to emphasize quantitative measures of students' achievement like test scores and GPA.
- A "fine sieve" approach puts more emphasis on factors like extracurricular involvement, recommendation letters and essays. This type of holistic review also tends to place greater weight on factors like whether a student was the first in her family to attend college or came from a racially minoritized background. Slightly more colleges appear to use a fine sieve than a coarse sieve, and these are more likely to be private.
- A "double sieve" approach tends to emphasize both quantitative academic measures as well as more qualitative application elements like essays and extracurricular activities. Over half of selective colleges appear to use the double sieve. Like schools that rely on a fine sieve, schools that use a double sieve are much more likely to be private.

Both public and private colleges that used either a fine sieve or a double sieve were more likely to be racially diverse in terms of the representation of non-White students on their campuses than schools that used a coarse sieve.[18] However, maybe because of the greater emphasis on factors that are more easily cultivated among wealthier families—like extracurricular involvement and well-written essays—these colleges that used fine and double sieves also tended to enroll fewer students who qualified for Pell grants.[19]

The type of holistic review a college uses may also have implications for interventions designed to increase equity on campus. In fact, when presented with more contextual information about a student's high school such as median neighborhood income, admissions officers were more likely to admit students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds than admissions officers who used either of the other two types of holistic admissions practices.[20] These findings point to some of the challenges of reforming holistic admissions by highlighting that the efficacy of an intervention may vary depending on the existing norms and practices in a selective admissions office.

Key finding #2: *The application elements that selective colleges require, and the amount of weight they place on those elements, have important implications for who applies to and enrolls in selective colleges.*

Admissions essays

Various elements of the college application process can create barriers to college enrollment.[21] Although the benefits of college enrollment are high, some students may be daunted by the cost and effort associated with completing college applications. These barriers may differentially affect who ultimately enrolls in particular colleges. For example, when colleges require students to complete an essay as part of their application, they receive about 6.5% fewer applications than colleges who do not.[22] This ultimately translates into an over 6% decrease in the enrollment of Black and Hispanic students relative to colleges that do not require admissions essays, a larger decrease than for White and Asian students.[23]

Application essays are also an important qualitative piece of holistic review. Colleges vary in the prompts they use to solicit essays, but they almost all share the common goal of

encouraging students to share personal qualities, perhaps by sharing stories from their background that helped shape who they are as people, aspects of themselves that are not otherwise captured in the application. Yet, the quantification of application essay content is highly correlated with both family income and SAT score, meaning that admissions officers who are attuned to certain types of essays may simply be recognizing another proxy for privilege.[24]

Recommendation letters

Selective colleges typically require recommendation letters from teachers and/or school counselors. In holistic review, these can give insight into how a student performs in classroom settings or put a student's academic achievement in the context of her high school. As with application essays, the subjectivity of both the letter writers and the admissions officers who evaluate them allows bias to enter the holistic admission process. A large-scale study of recommendation letters at the University of California, Berkeley found that although underrepresented minority applicants generally had weaker letters, this weakness was broadly correlated with other application elements. Ultimately, the use of recommendation letters in the admissions evaluation process led to higher application ratings and likelihoods of admission for underrepresented racial minority students.[25]

Legacy status

A highly debated category of students that admissions offices tend to give admissions advantages to is legacy students. Legacy students are related to graduates of the institution. These advantages apply primarily to students whose parents attended the college as undergraduates, not as graduate students, and not to other relations who attended as undergraduates.[26] Colleges use such preferences to foster a strong alumni network and often with an eye toward securing continued donations from alumni. The strength and prevalence of these preferences are often unclear. In a recent survey of admissions professionals from selective colleges, 20% said they did not consider legacy status at all, while just over 7% said it was at least "very important". The remainder simply "considered" legacy status.[27] A study of 30 highly selective colleges found that legacy applicants had odds of admissions 3.13 times higher than typical non-legacy applicants.[28] The legacy advantage also seems more pronounced among students with higher SAT scores, suggesting that legacy status is a tool for otherwise well-qualified students to stand out when they otherwise might not.[29] Critics of legacy admissions argue that it amounts to affirmative action for wealthy students—assuming that the children of selective college graduates are likely to be well off—but at least descriptively, the colleges that consider legacy status do not appear to see any fewer Pell-eligible students enroll, except potentially at public universities.[30]

Neighborhood context

Although admissions professionals who use holistic review often work to understand the context in which students live and go to school, such information is not always readily available during the application review process. In part to make this contextualization easier, the College Board developed a data tool (now called "Landscape") that provides a set of information about every applicant's neighborhood and high school (characteristics ranging from median family income to crime rate) for participating colleges. In both simulated admissions review and actual admissions decisions, students from more challenging neighborhoods were more likely to be recommended for admission.[31] The admission advantage for students from more challenging contexts was roughly equivalent to them

submitting SAT scores that were 42 points higher.[32] In terms of enrollment, however, the contextual information did not result in any substantial change in the composition of entering cohorts, in part because few students from challenging contexts applied to selective colleges participating in the Landscape data tool to begin with.[33]

Key finding #3: *Scholars still debate the value of using standardized tests in college admissions, but on average, colleges that make standardized testing optional for admissions see higher enrollments of racially minoritized students, students from lower-income backgrounds, and women.*

There is considerable debate about the use and value of standardized test scores as part of holistic admissions evaluation. Opponents of the use of standardized test scores, specifically the SAT and the ACT, note the high correlations between race and social background and test scores, arguing that the use of test scores is essentially equivalent to giving students from wealthy families and well-resourced high schools an admissions advantage.[34] They also note that high-school GPA ends up being a stronger predictor of college performance, particularly once we account for differences between the high schools that students attend.[35] Proponents note that test scores are strongly predictive of college success and success after college.[36] Additionally, test scores are the only element of a college application that is directly comparable across all applicants, making them a clearer measure of academic potential than high-school GPA, which can vary widely across high schools. This feature can mean that students from high schools that may not be well known to admissions officers can demonstrate their potential in the absence of better information about high-school context.[37]

Another concern with dropping standardized tests as a required part of applications to selective colleges is that without being able to rely on test scores, admissions officers may turn to other, potentially more biased sources of information to distinguish between applicants.[38] For example, without test scores, admissions officers may put increased weight on extracurricular involvement to distinguish between students with otherwise similar academic backgrounds. However, even extracurricular involvement shows strong links with socioeconomic background. Students from privileged backgrounds (for example, white students, wealthier students, students who attend private high schools) list many more extracurricular activities on their applications than students with fewer markers of privilege.[39] Without additional care for students' context, this additional weight could recreate the socioeconomic bias that many hope excluding test scores would eliminate.

The primary response among colleges that want to place less emphasis on standardized testing during holistic review has been to make test score submission optional. The evidence on colleges making standardized tests an optional part of their applications is mixed. Early adopters of test-optional policies tended to be smaller, selective liberal arts colleges. It does not appear that either racial or socioeconomic diversity changed at this small group of colleges after they moved to test optional admissions.[40] Evidence from a larger sample of colleges points to equity-enhancing effects. A recent study of 99 private colleges that adopted test-optional policies between 2005 and 2015 found that the test-optional policies resulted in a 3–4% increase in enrollment of Pell-eligible students, a nearly 10 to 12% increase in the enrollment of students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and a 6 to 8% increase in the enrollment of women.[41]

Students who could succeed in four-year colleges may also not apply or enroll because they do not take either the SAT or the ACT.[42] Some states and school districts have responded by requiring that all high-school students take one of the two exams, removing many barriers students face in taking the exams by offering them for free, at school, during school hours.[43] Such requirements result in nearly 50% more students from disadvantaged backgrounds scoring at levels that qualify them for four-year college enrollment.[44] Moreover, early states that adopted the policy (Michigan, Maine, Illinois, Colorado) saw modest increases in four-year college enrollment as a result of the testing requirements.[45]

Key finding #4: *Before the practice was ended by the Supreme Court, the use of race-conscious affirmative action in holistic review increased the racial and ethnic diversity of the student bodies at the most selective college campuses, and no race-neutral alternative to race-conscious affirmative action appears capable of generating similar levels of diversity.*

Race-conscious affirmative action was the practice of explicitly considering race during the admissions review process to increase the diversity of an incoming class. Prior to banning the practice *entirely*, the U.S. Supreme court allowed for the use of race as a general 'plus' factor, but race could not be assigned a specific value in an admissions formula or be used to meet a particular enrollment quota. In practice, this meant that race was one of many considerations that colleges used during holistic review. The practice of race-conscious affirmative action was largely limited to selective colleges and universities. In surveys of admissions office practices before the Court's ban, nearly 80% of colleges in the top two categories of Barron's Admissions Competitiveness reported at least considering race in their admissions process. Only 45% of colleges in the third category did so.[46] Even among these schools, there was little evidence that the practice meaningfully influenced who enrolled at these colleges. Quantitative evidence of the consideration of race having any meaningful impact on enrollment was only apparent among the most selective Barron's Admissions Competitiveness category,[47] amounting to just 3% of all postsecondary institutions.[48] Thus, despite decades of legal challenges, the use of race in ways that had consequences on who enrolled in particular colleges was not particularly widespread.

Where the use of race was permitted in college admissions, it seemed to have a clear impact on the enrollment rates of racially minoritized students. Although this is readily apparent in the shifts in enrollment demographics that occurred in the first admissions cycle since the Supreme Court banned the use of race across the country,[49] these drops were foreshadowed by similar declines in enrollment in state systems where bans on affirmative action arose at the state level.[50]

Beyond taking away a college's ability to use race explicitly to admit racially diverse classes of students, bans on affirmative action may also lead to declines in applications from racially minoritized students because of the signal they send that those students may not be welcome.[51] The proactive recruitment of racially minoritized students appears to have helped recover declines in applications at the University of Washington,[52] but similar efforts were less successful in the University of California system.[53] Decreases in applications from racially minoritized students may be expected in cases where single campuses, or even entire state public university systems, ban affirmative action because there are alternative schools to which those students can apply. Time will tell how the Supreme Court's universal ban on affirmative action may affect application patterns going forward since, unlike with state-wide bans, there are no U.S. based campuses that students can apply to that still consider race in admissions.

Key finding #5: *While holistic admissions practices are criticized because many of their components seem biased in favor of students from privileged backgrounds, alternatives to holistic review that appear fairer ultimately admit students who earn less in the long run or are less racially diverse than those admitted under holistic review.*

Holistic admissions policies have been criticized for numerous reasons, most of which amount to concerns over a lack of transparency and alarm over the emphasis on application elements that are more related to SES than postsecondary potential. However, globally, the use of holistic admissions is unusual. Most other countries use more direct measures of academic achievement or cognitive ability to determine entry.[54] Other possible, but less widely used, alternatives to holistic admissions include determining admissions randomly conditional on students meeting some predetermined baseline level of academic achievement or the use of strict formulas that remove much of the apparent subjectivity of holistic review. Because of clear differences between contexts, or few if any cases of the implementation of such alternatives, it is difficult to make clear comparisons of holistic approaches and their alternatives. However, a few cases offer suggestive evidence.

Academic factors only

In 2004, the National University of Singapore (NUS) added a new path to admissions to its previously test-based admissions policy. Under the new discretionary approach, 10% of the class could be admitted using non-academic considerations if they did not meet the test-based academic cutoff for admission. Rather than using essays and recommendations letters, students admitted under this plan had to demonstrate merit by providing evidence of non-academic achievements and talents like leadership, participation in community service, or performance in international competitions. Although they had academic qualifications lower than the students admitted by the traditional admission path, students admitted under this discretionary pathway performed just as well academically at NUS once enrolled. Moreover, they participated more in campus activities and ultimately earned more money after graduation. These results suggest that, without a loss in ability to find students who will succeed academically, the flexibility of holistic review allows admissions officers to identify students who are on a longer-term path to success and will contribute to the non-academic life of campus.[55]

Weighted admissions formulas

Another alternative to holistic review might involve using predetermined weights to combine academic and non-academic elements into a single score that determines admissions. This is one approach that many University of California campuses took after the use of race-conscious affirmative action was banned by voters in the state. Some campuses, however, opted to shift to a more flexible holistic review of students, moving away from fixed weights to allow admissions officers to use more discretion in making their determinations. Even without the use of race in either the formulaic or holistic approach, the holistic approach resulted in a significantly higher proportion of students from underrepresented racial minority backgrounds enrolling at the campuses that used it. However, there is suggestive evidence that the holistic process may have reduced the number of lower-income students who enrolled at those campuses, giving modest credibility to the concern that holistic practices tend to implicitly favor students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.[56]

Admissions lotteries

Although no college or university has instituted lottery-based admissions, scholars have studied the potential effects of such a policy using simulations. A precondition of any lottery is the determination of a threshold for eligibility to enter the lottery—colleges use selective admissions at least in part to enroll students who are likely to be academically successful, and so a lottery should at least be able to maintain that goal. The potential for lottery-based admissions to improve enrollment equity relative to holistic outcomes is immediately clear when examining the demographics of students who might be eligible for such a lottery. For example, using the 25th percentile of students in terms of SAT scores or GPA (or a combination) who enrolled in selective colleges as a lower threshold for lottery eligibility, the characteristics of lottery-eligible students are both racially and economically less diverse than the students who enroll in selective colleges under existing holistic policies (when affirmative action was still legal). Even if we consider the year-to-year or school-to-school variation random lotteries will produce, simulations show that it is almost impossible for lotteries to ever reproduce the racial, economic, and even gender diversity of selective colleges that use holistic review.[57]

Direct admission

A few states and universities are now working to ease the administrative burden of applying to college and offer admission to students who meet prespecified academic criteria but have not proactively applied. The evidence for these 'direct admissions' policies is growing. In Idaho, the policy resulted in modest enrollment gains at two-year colleges and open access universities and had virtually no effect on the enrollment rate of Pell-eligible students.[58] A broader experiment of direct admissions at 6 universities in four different states found that direct offers of admissions made students more likely to complete a streamlined application to the college that had admitted them, a step that was required to formalize the offer, but were no more likely to enroll.[59] Thus, to date, there is no evidence that direct admissions could notably alter enrollment patterns at selective colleges.

Top X% plans

The long history of legal challenges to the use of race in admissions gave ample time for colleges and universities to search for alternative ways to create racially diverse campuses without using race in the admissions process. One of the first solutions was the use of the Top 10% Plan in Texas. As the first of several X% plans, Texas's policy guaranteed students admission to any public Texas four-year university if they graduated within the top 10% of their high-school graduating class. The logic behind this policy was that informal residential segregation by race made for racially segregated high schools, which meant that the top-ranked students at some high schools should, mechanically, be highly racially diverse. Although this logic relied on existing racial segregation, the policy itself was race-neutral enough to be legal in Texas. Related plans, but with different conditions, were implemented in California and Florida. Whatever way they were defined, the X% plans in California, Florida, and Texas were not successful at maintaining the racial diversity that each state had been able to achieve when it was able to use race-conscious affirmative action.[60]

Part of this failure to generate racial diversity may have come from their failure to change admissions patterns among students from diverse high schools—if students from the racially diverse schools do not apply, then colleges cannot benefit from the diversity they offer.[61] This is exactly what appeared to be the case in Texas. Prior to the ban on affirmative

action in Texas, the state's two flagship universities—Texas A&M and the University of Texas at Austin—each had a well-established set of high schools that had a regular pipeline of students who would enroll at one of the two universities. Conversely, there was a set of high schools that almost never sent students to the two flagships. Perhaps predictably, the never-sending high schools were much more racially diverse than the high schools with a regular pattern of sending students to the flagships. However, despite the relative simplicity of Texas's Top 10% Plan, few students from previously never-sending high schools started to enroll in the flagship universities. In contrast, the regular feeder schools continued to regularly send students to the flagship campuses. This apparent failure helps illustrate the challenges policies face when they require changing culture and practices around college application and enrollment.

Socioeconomic affirmative action

Some scholars and policy makers have proposed socioeconomic affirmative action as a second race-neutral alternative to race conscious policies, but colleges have not enacted such a policy in a widespread, meaningful way.[62] Here, rather than treating race like a plus factor, the idea is that admissions officers would treat students from lower SES backgrounds more favorably. Just like Top X% Plans rely on the connection between race and residential segregation, SES-based policies need the relationship between race and SES to be strong to generate racial diversity. Studies of the potential of SES-based affirmative action to generate racial diversity have largely been simulation based because of the limited use of these policies in real-world settings. The most sophisticated of these simulations found that SES-based affirmative action is, predictably, good at generating socioeconomic diversity on college campuses but that they do not do well at recovering the racial diversity that would be lost in the case of a ban on race-conscious affirmative action. There is some promise in the combined use of SES-based affirmative action and targeted recruiting of racially minoritized students, but the number of lower-income students such a policy would bring to college campuses might increase financial aid costs to the extent that the plan becomes unfeasible. Moreover, such a policy by selective campuses would reduce the diversity of less selective campuses who did not use the policy.[63]

Both top X% and SES-based policies seek to generate racial diversity by capitalizing on some other factor that is associated with, but not the same as, a student's race. Both fell short because the relationships between both residential segregation and SES and race are not strong enough to generate the racial diversity that can be achieved by directly considering a student's race. It then seems logical that if colleges and universities are allowed to pursue the goal of racial diversity, the most efficient way to meet that goal is to select students using direct knowledge of their race. Any other proxy for race, the use of which the Supreme Court's Students for Fair Admission decision explicitly cautioned against using, will necessarily be less effective at generating racial diversity than using race itself.[64] Indeed, it appears that no combination of commonly available information about students is capable of serving as a strong enough substitute for race to support the generation of racial and ethnic diversity close to what admissions offices could do while using race-conscious policies.[65]

Thus, it appears that although there are clearly equity challenges to holistic review, no alternative seems able to produce results that are as racially and economically diverse as holistic review does or that result in better outcomes for students in the long run. This appears true even in a world where colleges are not able to consider race during holistic review.

Endnotes and references

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