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Legacy Admissions: Community or Exclusion?

Imagine working tirelessly for years to achieve academic success, only to find out that your spot at your dream university might go to someone else just because of their family name. Legacy admissions continue to offer this unfair advantage, raising the question: how can we claim to value equality in education when wealth and connections still open doors that just hard work should unlock? The topic of legacy admissions is controversial because there have been lots of recent admissions decisions, the most notable being abolishing affirmative action. This gives many a lot to consider. Some argue that legacy admissions can perpetuate systemic inequalities, especially when legacy admissions policies stem from being used for discrimination against specific groups. Others argue that building generational relationships, securing funding for future students, and legacy admissions are just a symptom of a larger problem, and removing them will not do much. However, the topic has gained new urgency with increasing scrutiny of admissions policies. Overall, universities and donors benefit from the legacy system, but it disadvantages qualified students. This division and admissions policy is unethical at its base, especially for colleges that claim they value diversity and fairness. Legacy admissions are a product of larger societal inequalities and should be removed from higher education.

The practice of legacy admissions raises ethical concerns because it favors the descendants of wealthy donors over equally qualified candidates from marginalized backgrounds. It seems contradictory that while colleges and universities preach ideals of diversity and ethics, they still use practices originally intended for exclusion and have the same effect. This favoritism continues to help the well-connected and wealthy, perpetuating inequality in access to education. As one student critiques, “Legacy admissions are antithetical to this ideal... imposing a caste-like system between the names of the established and the names of the unknown” (Opinion). Legacy applicants, often benefiting from material and cultural capital, are admitted at significantly higher rates than non-legacy applicants with similar qualifications (Opinion). This preferential treatment strengthens generational privilege, making it clear that legacy admissions must be abolished to ensure fairness and equal opportunity. Essentially, “When donations to a university are followed by preferential admissions, donors are complicit in the discrimination, inequality, and injustice that follow” (Illingworth). This system allows the wealthy to give under the guise of philanthropy while eventually expecting privileges for their family. This notion of giving to receive, or moral licensing (Illingworth), shows how legacy admissions contribute to an inequitable process that undermines the idea of a meritocracy. This is very telling about the priorities of college admissions, and the fact that many can essentially get into a school, or at least have a strong edge, simply because their parents attended is absurd.

Furthermore, legacy admissions reinforce socioeconomic inequality, ensuring that elite educational institutions remain accessible mainly to those who are already in positions of power. Legacy admissions disproportionately help wealthy families, perpetuating a cycle of privilege and exclusion. Statistics show this, with legacy applicants at institutions such as Princeton having a staggering 30% acceptance rate compared to the 5% overall admission rate (Khan).

This disparity creates a sort of privilege bubble, where opportunities at elite universities are reserved for well-connected or wealthy families. Additionally, while legacy admissions are about family ties, they are also tied to wealth and donations. On the other hand, proponents of legacy admissions argue that these policies secure future donations that benefit the university and its students and help students network as well. However, this rationale is faulty. While donations can help the university, many donate generously to support racial or economic equality in higher education without expecting legacy advantages. In fact, “Some [donors] are guided by a moral compass. They give to colleges and universities that promote diversity and equality, with a focus on Black students and middle- and lower-income students” (Illingworth). These donations will promote everyone's right to education and are not based on the hope of future advantages. Also, universities with connected professors and global reputations should not have to rely on legacy admissions to build their connections. The argument that legacy students help create a network for colleges is irrational because it suggests that they do not already have the connections and resources to support students and favor legacy applicants due to their networks. The more pressing reason is donations and money, but instead of this, they should prioritize fairness and equal opportunity.

Legacy admissions create a caste-like system and contribute to a homogenous student body that does not reflect societal diversity. Historically, legacy admissions were designed to maintain the dominance of wealthy, white, Protestant families by excluding Jewish and immigrant applicants, and today, they still disproportionately benefit privileged groups. Students with legacy status often feel that their hard work is overshadowed by their advantages, leading to feelings of guilt or inadequacy. Students may “feel like I had essentially every privilege [during college admissions]” (Affirmative Action for the Rich). This sense of entitlement and privilege is

shown in a cartoon where the Supreme Court is shown to be “blind to color...except green” (Zyglis), symbolizing the influence of wealth over hard work, referencing the contrast between affirmative action and legacy admissions. So, while affirmative action sought to level the playing field, legacy admissions worked in the opposite direction, ensuring that those with financial privilege remained at the top. The issue of affirmative action is a different topic in and of itself. Regardless, the fact that the logic of being blind to a student’s background is applied with affirmative action but not when it concerns people who may donate money, like legacy students, shows that colleges only try to maintain diversity until the situation benefits them. Eliminating legacy preferences would likely increase enrollment for underrepresented students, as those spots could then be filled by more qualified candidates who are less advantaged.

Additionally, some may argue that they foster loyalty and build a sense of community among alumni. However, this alumni community is often exclusive, solely catering to those within the institution’s inner circles. So, it may seem good at the surface, but this community just perpetuates a form of elitism that is disconnected from ideals of fairness and diversity. Despite universities like Harvard promoting a commitment to diversity, they often are not true to their word, and even legacy students there do not like the hypocrisy; a student at NYU feels: “I wouldn't have a problem if it weren't so hypocritical [...] they say all these things like the things that we care most about are having a diverse campus [...] you know I actually lived with my dad's College roommate's son you know” (Affirmative Action for the Rich). So, while universities claim to value diversity, they are being hypocritical by undermining their own supposed efforts to create a more inclusive student body. The fact that students today are meeting their parents' classmates' children shows that by still considering legacies as a factor, universities keep the exclusion going and keep admitting people from the same circles. Ending legacy

admissions would be a step toward an equitable higher education system that reflects values of meritocracy, diversity, and opportunity for everyone.

Legacy admissions perpetuate inequality in higher education, favoring privileged individuals over deserving candidates and undermining the principles of fairness and meritocracy. By continuing these practices, universities reinforce class divisions and limit opportunities for underrepresented students. If we truly value diversity and equal access, why should we allow inherited privilege to dictate who gets a seat at the table?

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