

# The Bellarmine Law Society Review

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Volume XI | Issue II

Article 1

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## **The Role of Socioeconomic Status in the College Admissions Process**

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# THE ROLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

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**Abstract:** Policy regarding college admissions has always worked to achieve equality within the admissions processes. Cases like *California vs Bakke* (1978) establish legislature regarding what is considered constitutional within the admissions process. Colleges claim that socioeconomic status is not involved in the admissions process, yet it is never truly excluded. Colleges know the SES of a student based off specific extracurriculars and if attendance of a public vs private high school. Colleges further advertise to students of specific SES groups, and high tuition cost can future exclude low SES students, resulting in lack of equality within the admissions. This paper works to explore legislature outlining the college admissions process and provide recommendations to eliminate biases that still exist within the college admissions process.

## Introduction

This paper analyzes the key legal and economic issues surrounding the role of socioeconomic status (SES) in the college admissions process. As noted by numerous scholars, affirmative action is one of the most contentious issues in education policy, and challenges to race-conscious admissions policies, both in courts and at the ballot box, have become regular occurrences over the past three decades. When these challenges enacted changes, colleges and universities recognized the need to alter their admissions policies to accept more minority students. This new age of affirmative action called upon top-tier universities to focus on diversity within their applicant pool to create a well-rounded campus consisting of divergent backgrounds, values,

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and experiences. As these policy changes were implemented, scholars began calling for a focus on socioeconomic diversity—not as a substitute for racial diversity, but as a value in its own right. They claimed a focus on SES would more accurately identify those applicants who had to overcome hardships in their paths to higher education.<sup>2</sup> Since socioeconomic status is not a “suspect classification” under the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause,<sup>3</sup> class-based policies are not subject to the same legal uncertainties that race-conscious admissions policies are. Because of this, many universities decide to target groups of applicants who have faced significant disadvantages and oppression within society. The inclusion of these groups in the academic community is an essential part of fostering authentic diversity and equal opportunity. Universities have grown more diverse by instituting these new policies that are oriented towards race-conscious affirmative action, but they continue to exclude the factor of SES on applications. They still strongly evaluate one’s background on the basis of traditional qualifiers, like standardized test scores, attendance of public or private school, and participation in extracurricular activities, all of which are predominantly determined by family income. Utilizing socioeconomic factors to admit or reject students is otherwise known as class-based affirmative action, or “socioeconomic affirmative action,” which is loosely characterized as “admissions preferences for low-income students.”<sup>4</sup> Class-based policies are designed to place a “thumb on the scale” for applicants who have faced obstacles toward upward economic mobility. Since SES significantly impacts academic measures that admissions officers use to gauge applicants’ college readiness (like standardized test scores, GPA, and AP tests), class-based affirmative action needs further investigation to better

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<sup>2</sup> Kahlenberg, “THE REMEDY: CLASS, RACE, AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION,” pgs. 83-120

<sup>3</sup> The Equal Protection Clause provides that no state shall “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” U.S. CONST. Amend. XIV §1

<sup>4</sup> Gaertner & Hart, “Considering Class: College Access and Diversity,” pg. 6

allow all college applicants the opportunity to attend institutions of higher education. Not only does SES affect college admissions, but it also significantly impacts economic factors in society, such as gross domestic product (GDP)<sup>5</sup> and human and social capital.

With this context in mind, this paper analyzes the relationship between socioeconomic (SES) and college admissions. Specifically, it analyzes whether or not college admissions processes disfavor low socioeconomic students and how they do so by reviewing previous college cases that attended to similar legal and ethical issues. This paper provides an analysis of class-based affirmative action by establishing: (1) how affirmative action is followed but flawed, (2) how top tier universities limit entry based on socioeconomic status which heavily impacts social and human capital in society, (3) how this limit of entry negatively affects GDP and other economic aspects within society, and (4) how affirmative action excludes SES to exacerbate factors affected by it.

### **History**

In 1961, the term “affirmative action” was first introduced by President John F. Kennedy as a method of rectifying discrimination that had endured in spite of civil rights laws and constitutional guarantees. In the 1950s and 60s, the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)<sup>6</sup> decision outlawed school segregation, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed any discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson enforced affirmative action policies via Executive Order 11246<sup>7</sup> to advocate for civil

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<sup>5</sup> Gross domestic product (GDP) is the total monetary or market value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country’s borders in a specific time period. As a broad measure of overall domestic production, it functions as a comprehensive scorecard of a given country’s economic health (Investopedia).

<sup>6</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

<sup>7</sup> Executive Order 11246 “requires affirmative action and prohibits federal contractors from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin. Contractors also are prohibited from discriminating against applicants or employees because they inquire about, discuss, or disclose their compensation or that of others, subject to certain limitations (1965).

rights and ensure equality within American society.

Since the 1960s, colleges and universities have adopted similar acceptance policies, causing the acceptance rates of minority students to increase. By 1978, flaws in affirmative action began to show despite the good intentions of the policy. In *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Supreme Court ruled that the use of racial quotas is unconstitutional within the admissions process, while a school's endorsement of affirmative action to focus on admitting more minority applicants is constitutional. Thus, this case proved a high-water mark for socioeconomic disadvantage in case law. Specifically, Justice Powell's opinion in *Bakke* famously held that racial and ethnic disadvantage could be considered in the holistic review of applicants. Contrary to other judges' and scholars' opinions on this case, Powell listed socioeconomic disadvantage as an aspect of diversity, essentially treating it on par with both racial and ethnic disadvantage during the college admissions processes.<sup>8</sup> Since *Bakke*, the U.S Supreme Court and other federal courts have largely ignored Justice Powell's stance on socioeconomic disadvantage and have focused instead on the relation between SES and underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup>

*Hopwood v. Texas* (1996) was the first successful legal challenge to a university's affirmative action policy in student admissions since *Bakke* (1978). In this case, four white plaintiffs who had been rejected from the University of Texas at Austin's School of Law challenged the institution's admissions policy on equal protection grounds and prevailed. The court ruled that the "University of Texas School of Law may not use race as a factor in deciding which application to admit in order to achieve a diverse student body...to alleviate the law school's poor reputation in the minority community, or to eliminate any past discrimination."<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>8</sup> *Regents of the Univ. of Cal v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978)

<sup>9</sup> Pruitt, "The False Choice Between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths," pg. 5

<sup>10</sup> *Hopwood v. Texas*, 78 F.3d 932 (5th Cir. 1996)

decision rendered the debate about economic and racial affirmative action to persist throughout the 2000s, with several landmark cases concerning unfair college admissions.

In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that although affirmative action was no longer justified as a way of addressing past injustices, it did help to promote a “compelling state interest” in diversity at all levels of society in *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003). For one, the Court ruled in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) that the University of Michigan’s point system’s “predetermined point allocations” that awarded 20 points towards admission to underrepresented minorities “ensure that the diversity contributions of applicants cannot be individually assessed” and, thus, was unconstitutional.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) held that the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment<sup>12</sup> does not prohibit University of Michigan Law School to narrowly tailor its use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.<sup>13</sup><sup>14</sup> The Supreme Court invalidated the *Hopwood* (1996) decision in *Grutter* (2003) when it found that the U.S. Constitution did not prevent the use of race as a factor in admissions. To further Justice Powell’s opinion in *Bakke* (1978), Justice Souter’s dissent in *Gratz* (2003) reaffirms the same idea by noting that the Michigan undergraduate admissions scheme at stake valued socioeconomic disadvantage as highly as racial/ethnic disadvantage.<sup>15</sup> The majority in *Gratz* (2003) mentioned “socioeconomic disadvantage only in passing,” whereas neither the Fifth Circuit in *Hopwood v. University of Texas* (1996) nor the majority opinion in *Grutter* (2003) discussed socioeconomic disadvantage. This

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<sup>11</sup> *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003)

<sup>12</sup> U.S. CONST. Amend. XIV §1

<sup>13</sup> *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003)

<sup>14</sup> Both *Gratz* (2003) and *Grutter* (2003) failed to end the government’s use of racial preferences, it achieved a minor victory of placing limits on when and how institutions may use such preferences.

<sup>15</sup> Pruitt, “The False Choice Between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths,” pg. 21

omission of SES in discussing the college admissions process has allowed universities to continue to circumvent class as a discriminatory measure when admitting students.

*Fisher v. University of Texas (Fisher II)*<sup>16</sup> (2016) is today's precedent for future cases<sup>17</sup> regarding the policy of affirmative action due to the Supreme Court's ruling that the use of race as a consideration in the admissions process does not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Fisher* (2016) invoked the debate over whether affirmative action based on socioeconomic disadvantage – which would not invoke constitutional scrutiny – should replace affirmative action of race. Regarding class, the plaintiff, Abigail N. Fisher, “turned the value sometimes associated with socioeconomic disadvantage on its head” by claiming that she should be compared in the admissions process to other middle-class applicants specifically, across all races. Not only was Fisher a socioeconomically disadvantaged white, she creatively (if not convincingly) attempted to leverage her relative affluence into an argument that skirted the value of socioeconomic disadvantage as a type of diversity. Instead, Fisher essentially argued that those alike on the basis of class should be compared to one another instead of giving racial or ethnic preferences to other underrepresented minority applicants.<sup>18</sup>

Although *Bakke* (1978) previously outlawed the use of quotas in the college admissions process, the *Students For Fair Admissions Inc. (SFFA) v. Harvard* (2014) case likewise cited the use of unfair ethnicity quotas in the college admissions process, resulting in the underrepresentation of minority groups. SFFA Inc. alleged specific discrimination against Asian-

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<sup>16</sup> *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013) (alternatively called Fisher I), 570 U.S. \_\_\_\_ (2013), a case which ruled that strict scrutiny should be applied to determine the constitutionality of a race-sensitive admissions policy.

<sup>17</sup> *Fisher v. University of Texas (Fisher II)* is an important case towards *SFFA v. Harvard* since Harvard has been involved in the Fisher case since November 2015 when filing for an amicus brief. This amicus brief supported “UT Austin’s use of race-conscious admissions policies to create a diverse student body, writing that a diverse student population is a compelling interest that justifies race-conscious admissions in higher education” (Ellis).

<sup>18</sup> Pruitt, “The False Choice Between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths,” pg. 25

Americans, who consistently score the highest percentages on the SAT and ACT, arguing that they were underrepresented “by a factor of half or even two thirds - relative to the number of applications from Asian-Americans that Harvard received.”<sup>19</sup> The complaint also strongly advocated increased use of socioeconomic factors in lieu of racial factors when seeking diversity in an admitted class.<sup>20</sup> In October 2019, Judge Burroughs rejected SFFA’s claims, ruling that Harvard’s admissions practices met constitutional requirements and did not discriminate against Asian-Americans.<sup>21</sup> SFFA appealed and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit upheld Judge Burroughs’ decisions.<sup>22</sup> Even today, there are many unresolved issues among the use of SES advantages in the college admissions process. For example, the Varsity Blues Scandal highlights how increased wealth allows for unfair admittance into elite academic institutions through monetary payments.<sup>23</sup>

Federal appellate court attention to the content of diversity has since waned. In *Hopwood* (1996), the Fifth Circuit hinted that the plaintiff represented diversity, perhaps partly on the basis class, but the Supreme Court majorities in *Gratz and Grutter* (2003) were silent on the content of diversity. Similarly, the Supreme Court in *Fisher* (2016) said nothing about the meaning of diversity, not even hinting at a response to the plaintiff’s argument that her application should be assessed in relation to those within the same socioeconomic class as she. The role of SES in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President of Harvard Coll.*, No. 1:14-CV-14176-DJC, (D. Mass. Nov. 17, 2014)

<sup>20</sup> Pruitt, “The False Choice Between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths,” pg. 6

<sup>21</sup> U.S. District Court, District of MA - *SFFA v. Harvard* Case Findings

<sup>22</sup> United States Court of Appeal for the First Circuit Amicus Brief-*SFFA v. Harvard*

<sup>23</sup> In 2019, a scandal arose over a criminal conspiracy to influence undergraduate admissions decisions at several top American universities. Thirty-three parents of college applicants were accused of paying more than \$25 millions between 2011 and 2018 to William Rick Singler, organizer of the scheme, who used part of the money to fraudulently inflate entrance exam test scores and bribe college officials. Singer unethically facilitated college admission for children in more than 750 families. Among the accused parents are prominent business-people and well-known actors, like Felicity Hauffman, Lori Laughlin, Mossimo Giannulli, Douglas Hodge, and Peter Dameris (Federal Bureau Investigation Affidavit, 2019).



admissions process, although previewed in the variety of cases discussed, still warrants additional attention to ensure fair acceptance into universities.

**Analysis**

As history has shown, SES has been utilized as a factor in the college admissions process in more ways than one, emphasizing the need for further investigation. Elite colleges — which have far more applicants than admitted students — experience pressure to be seen as “diverse” and have “diverse” student bodies. As Deil-Amen (2011) points out, “diversity” is a term that can be broadly applied to any number of deviations to the typical student.<sup>24</sup> However, in practice, the term refers primarily to racial and ethnic diversity. Due to this narrowed definition of diversity, universities can still apply exclusionary practices during the admission process, allowing for underrepresentation of low-income students at elite universities. Research has shown that there is less socioeconomic diversity than racial or ethnic diversity at the most selective colleges.<sup>25</sup>

Looking at Table 3.1,<sup>26</sup> seventy-four percent of the students at the top 146 highly selective colleges came from families in the top quarter of the socioeconomic status (SES) scale, which is measured by combining family income with the education and occupations of the parents. A little more than twenty-two percent of

TABLE 3.1 SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF ENTERING CLASSES					
	SES Quartiles (percentage)				Total
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	
<b>Tier 1</b>	3	6	17	74	100
<b>Tier 2</b>	7	18	29	46	100
<b>Tier 3</b>	10	19	36	35	100
<b>Tier 4</b>	16	21	28	35	100
<b>Community Colleges</b>	21	30	27	22	100

Source: Authors' analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., 1988 and subsequent years.

the students in the top tier of college selectivity are Asian, African American, or Hispanic (eleven

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<sup>24</sup> Deil-Amen, “The ‘Traditional’ College Student: A Smaller and Smaller Minority and Its Implications for Diversity and Access Institutions,” pgs. 5-8  
<sup>25</sup> Carnevale & Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 106-107  
<sup>26</sup> Carnevale & Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” Table 3.1 pg. 106-107

percent Asian, six percent black, and six percent Hispanic), whereas only three percent are from families in the lowest socioeconomic status quartile, and ten percent are from the bottom of the socioeconomic status scale. Thus, this research (Table 3.1)<sup>27</sup> weakens the claim that college institutions are representative of the total population, especially given that three fourths of an institution's student body is composed of individuals within the highest socioeconomic status bracket.

Even though institutions of higher education are utilizing affirmative action, many are reforming their admissions process to admit those in higher SES quartiles. Colleges tailor recruitment toward racial minority students at a much higher rate than recruitment geared toward low SES students: “the percentage actively encouraging applications from economically disadvantaged students remained the same in four-year private colleges (twenty-four percent) and declined in two-year private colleges (from twenty-four to sixteen percent).”<sup>28</sup> Even though colleges marginally recruit economically disadvantaged students, more than eighty percent of all institutions continued admitting students before aid was considered, creating “sticker price shock”<sup>29</sup> to discourage low-income student applications. Contrary to higher educational institutions' goals to recruit and retain economically disadvantaged students, many schools implicitly dissuade these students from attending their institutions, allowing higher SES students to be admitted and pay full tuition. This “sticker price shock” not only affects low SES students heavily, but also creates compounding impacts on society as a whole by decreasing the number of low-income students in higher education.

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<sup>27</sup> 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988

<sup>28</sup> Carnevale & Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 118

<sup>29</sup> “Sticker price shock” is defined as showing the full cost of attendance to deter students from attending the university secondary to financial concerns (Levine et al, 2020).

Economically speaking, higher education institutions' creation of this limited entry for low SES students affects the human and social capital within the nation. This failure to maximize raw human capital undermines the competitiveness of the nation, resulting in economic consequences for future generations. This is just one damaging implication of the current failure to value and support poor and working-class students in elite higher education.<sup>30</sup> Lani Guinier convincingly argues that this exclusion of low-income students thwarts the “American Dream” storyline by undermining the country’s egalitarian ideals. Failure to include the socioeconomically disadvantaged in this elite pipeline to the nation’s leadership means that our future leadership will lack representation of a significant cohort: those who know the realities of a poor or working-class existence.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, exclusion of low-income whites has adverse consequences as this cohort shares an experience and understanding of economic disadvantage, even though they also enjoy the benefits of racial advantage, secondary to whiteness.<sup>32</sup> This cohort of low-SES students will not be the only group that benefits from their admittance and entrance into top-tier universities: high-SES students will improve by learning and understanding their peers’ stories, backgrounds, and experiences. Therefore, by limiting admittance based on SES, college institutions are not only failing to maximize human and social capital among low SES students, but they are also diminishing human and social capital among high SES students who are unable to integrate themselves with this identified “cohort.”

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<sup>30</sup> Pruitt, “The False Choice Between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths,” pg. 3

<sup>31</sup> Guinier, “Admissions Rituals as Political Acts: Guardians at the Gates of Our Democratic Ideals”

<sup>32</sup> Guinier, “Admissions Rituals as Political Acts: Guardians at the Gates of Our Democratic Ideals”

Research<sup>33</sup> (Table 3.7) has shown that Americans associate disadvantage with income more than race — eighty-three percent of those surveyed viewed low-income status as a disadvantage, and seventy-one percent claim that being both white and from a low-income family is a disadvantage. A majority of respondents noted that being black (49 percent) or Hispanic (51 percent) is a disadvantage if the person is also from a low-income family (78 percent and 77 percent), highlighting that these inequalities can be compounded.

**TABLE 3.7 WHAT HELPS AND HURTS IN LIFE?**

	<b>Considered an Advantage (percentage)</b>	<b>Considered a Disadvantage (percentage)</b>
<b>Not getting a college education</b>	7	87
<b>Going to a low-quality/low-income high school</b>	7	85
<b>Growing up in a family that doesn't speak English</b>	8	84
<b>Growing up in a low-income family</b>	10	83
<b>Growing up in a single-parent family</b>	7	80
<b>Growing up in a low-income black family</b>	7	78
<b>Growing up in a low-income Hispanic family</b>	6	77
<b>Growing up in a low-income white family</b>	12	71
<b>Being Hispanic</b>	19	51
<b>Being African American</b>	21	49
<b>Being white</b>	57	13
<b>Growing up in a wealthy family</b>	73	15

Source: ETS/PSRA Survey (1999).

Growing up in a family that does not speak English (84 percent) and growing up in a single-parent family (80 percent) were also viewed as major drawbacks.

Overall, Americans recognize the link between higher education and success: “educational institutions have a primary role among American institutions for promoting upward mobility.”<sup>34</sup> Many Americans believe that college institutions play a leading role in an individual’s success as the economic benefits of attending a selective college are clear. Those who graduate from top-tier universities are typically known for being in the upper-echelon of society, with incomes in the top one percent of the nation. Further, top-tier colleges “spend as much as four times more per student

<sup>33</sup> Carnevale & Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” Table 3.7 pg. 123

<sup>34</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg.122

and subsidize student spending by as much as \$24,000, compared to a student subsidy of as little as two thousand at least selective colleges,”<sup>35</sup> demonstrating the differences between higher ranking academic institutions and general higher educational programs. This highlights why the exclusion of low SES students at high academic institutions stifles access to much needed resources and decreases one’s access to social capital. Overall, this demonstrates that decreasing access to academic institutions not only affects low SES students, but also significantly affects the diversity of an institution's student body, thus, reducing the understanding of oppression and privilege amongst all students. Furthermore, these factors affect one’s social and human capital, resulting in societal consequences.

In addition, as presented in Table 3.2<sup>36</sup>, students at selective colleges have higher graduation rates than similarly qualified students at less selective colleges, proving that campuses “have long been associated with socioeconomic reproduction, or passing along socioeconomic advantages and positions across generations.”<sup>37</sup> These

	All	Non-Test Taker	<900	900-1000	1000-1100	1100-1200	1200-1300	>1300
<b>All</b>	65	58	43	69	74	74	85	88
<b>Tier 1</b>	86	83	30	61	86	85	96	96
<b>Tier 2</b>	71	65	44	71	83	70	85	90
<b>Tier 3</b>	61	55	45	74	71	68	78	78
<b>Tier 4</b>	54	45	39	61	67	83	78	68

Source: Authors’ analysis of the High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., 1987 and subsequent years.

elite colleges are strong pathways into high-status occupations and professional work; for example, all but one of the current Supreme Court justices attended either Stanford, Princeton, Harvard, or Georgetown), which are all considered top-tier schools. Uniformly, elite colleges provide

<sup>35</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 107

<sup>36</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” Table 3.2 p. 108

<sup>37</sup> Lee, “Elite Colleges & Socioeconomic Status,” p. 789

increased access to postgraduate degrees, such as business, law, and medicine, all careers associated with high incomes post-grad.<sup>38</sup> Student support, preparation, and prestige at selective colleges results in higher rates of acceptance to graduate and professional schools compared to similarly qualified students graduating from lower-tiered universities. In this way, top-tier universities are uniquely positioned. On one hand, they pass along privileges and social connections for students from middle-and upper-socioeconomic status families, cementing advantages for the new generation of young adults. Conversely, they provide substantial financial aid support<sup>39</sup> to invest in student services so low-SES students may also benefit from these advantages.<sup>40</sup>

It is of the utmost importance that admissions officers at higher educational institutions understand the effects of their SES exclusion in the admissions process on the nation through the loss of GDP. McKinsey & Company calculated the cost of the GDP loss in 2008 due to the inequitable access to higher education: “\$400 billion and \$670 billion — some three to five percent of total GDP.”<sup>41</sup> Elite academic institutions allow for upward mobility in society through increased spending per student, connections introduced while at the institution, and access to higher-paying postgraduate jobs. Exclusion of low SES students in this academic sector therefore limits the monetary capital this group can obtain, further restricting the overall GDP of the nation. This increases the wealth gap without fostering any substantial progress towards equal access to education, the one proven remedy that could mitigate the growing economic divide.

As the relationship between education and income grows, families with the highest

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<sup>38</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pgs. 107-115

<sup>39</sup> Astin and Oseguera, “The Declining ‘Equity’ of American Higher Education.”

<sup>40</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 107

<sup>41</sup> Pruitt, “The False Choice Between Race and Class and Other Affirmative Action Myths,” pg. 3

incomes are increasingly likely to be those with the highest levels of educational achievement. Researchers agree that the relationship between parental education and income creates an intergenerational cycle of success.<sup>42</sup> Simply, “parental education brings strong returns to household income, which in turn tends to raise time and resource investments in children and educational expectations.”<sup>43</sup> This contributes to higher rates of high school completion and college readiness, allowing more individuals to enroll, graduate, and then secure jobs with long-term earnings potential. Growing up in a household with both high earnings and levels of parental education therefore perpetuates this cycle into future generations. Conversely, low-income families statistically are headed by single-parents’ low educational levels, perpetuating the cycle for future generations.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the United States is composed of families with both high parental education and elevated incomes, and those with neither. As a result, these two paths to college converge in a single application that favors the already economically advantaged group. With the financial reward for accessing elite education remaining concentrated amongst high income students, failure to include avenues for low-income students will result in the continued economic polarization seen at these high-achieving academic institutions.<sup>45</sup>

The college admissions process appears to exclude SES as a subsection of affirmative action, only exacerbating disadvantages in a student’s application: low standardized test scores due to tutoring, limited extracurricular activities, and attendance at a private or public school. Most admissions officers agree that admissions should be based on “merit,” resulting in the development of “merit-based admissions” approach. Here, universities

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<sup>42</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 129

<sup>43</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 129

<sup>44</sup> Carnevale & Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” Table 3.7 pg. 123

<sup>45</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 129

judge applicants on the basis of their high school achievements — students are often categorized based on class ranking, test scores, personal recommendations, leadership, and other achievements. Particularly, merit-based admissions aim to evaluate all of these factors regardless of the applicant’s socioeconomic background. Even though this approach is widely utilized,<sup>46</sup> college admissions counselors disregard that these factors are heavily determined by SES. For example, standardized test scores, like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT),<sup>2</sup> are profoundly influenced by SES since higher income students are more likely to be able to afford and receive private tutoring that greatly improves their scores. Although a small number of elite colleges have become “test-optional,” ninety-four percent of four-year colleges still require standardized test scores in their admissions process. In 2006, fifty-nine percent of top-tier universities deemed standardized tests as “considerably important” in garnering admission to their institution.<sup>47</sup> The role of extracurriculars in the admissions process have becoming increasingly important metric to determine qualified applicants, but extracurriculars yield increased opportunities for high SES students. These extracurricular activities are severely restricted for low SES students whose parents are less able to marshal resources or help their children participate in these activities, thereby further limiting their access to top-tier institutions that use merit-based admissions.

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<sup>46</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 115

<sup>47</sup> Alon, “The Declining ‘Equity’ of American Higher Education.” pg. 1476



Research findings in Table 3.14<sup>48</sup> show that the pool of students with high scores on college entrance exams is highly skewed by SES. Two out of three students who score in the top SAT percentile (score of 1300 or greater) come from the top eight percent of the SES quartile nationwide. For reference, a perfect SAT score is a 1600. Of those who score between 1200 and 1300, fifty-eight percent are from the top socioeconomic status quartile. By contrast, just three percent of those who score above 1300 and four percent of those who score between

**TABLE 3.14 HIGH-SCORING STUDENTS ARE FROM THE HIGHEST SES QUARTILE (PERCENTAGE)**

	<b>All</b>	<b>Non-Test Taker</b>	<b>&lt;1000</b>	<b>1000–1100</b>	<b>1100–1200</b>	<b>1200–1300</b>	<b>&gt;1300</b>
<b>First Quartile</b>	25	37	21	8	6	4	3
<b>Second Quartile</b>	26	30	25	24	17	14	10
<b>Third Quartile</b>	26	22	30	32	29	23	22
<b>Fourth Quartile</b>	23	10	24	36	47	58	66

Source: Authors' analysis of NELS:88.

1200 and 1300 come from the lowest socioeconomic status quartile. Scholars have noted that high school grades predict college success better than standardized tests<sup>49</sup> and that selective colleges with SAT-optional policies receive more applicants from low-income and minority students,<sup>50</sup> indicating that standardized tests are a barrier for low SES applicants.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, the standardized test scores of low-SES student provide a greater indication of whether or not they are qualified for academic work at an elite college as they typically receive high scores based on merit

<sup>48</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 130

<sup>49</sup> Alon, “The Declining ‘Equity’ of American Higher Education.” pgs. 1475-99

<sup>50</sup> Lee, “Elite Colleges & Socioeconomic Status,” p. 789

<sup>51</sup> A growing number, including DePaul University and the University of Chicago, have opted to stop requiring the SAT and ACT in their admissions process, saying the tests place an unfair cost and burden on low income and minority students, and ultimately hinder efforts to broaden diversity on campus. Critics argue that these standardized tests, which some families spend thousands of dollars to prepare for, do not accurately measure a student’s qualifications. For example, the Undergraduate Dean John Boyer at University of Chicago explains that, “There’s a big industry of test prep, and the system as it’s existed serves them very well...allowing ZIP codes to basically define the future of American life...Four years of high school is a better predictor than three hours in a testing room” (Rhodes, 2018).

instead of privatized tutoring that most students enrolled in elite colleges receive.<sup>52</sup>

The issue of standardized test scores is further compounded in the admissions process by the segregation of students based on high schools and their overall SES. Students with higher SES generally attend high schools that are more successful in providing access to colleges, especially highly selective colleges. These high schools provide a diverse range of academic courses, including Advanced Placement,<sup>53</sup> dual enrollment,<sup>54</sup> or International Baccalaureate (IB)<sup>55</sup> programs,<sup>56</sup> extracurricular activities, sports, and test preparation. There is the further stratification of students within high schools, as low SES students are less likely to take more rigorous college preparatory classes than high SES students. This separation of SES students “reduces the positive ‘peer effects’ that come from mixing youth with different social characteristics.”<sup>57</sup> American high schools vary widely in terms of teacher qualifications, personal safety of students, workload, access to technology, and family, peer, and community relationships. Notably, upper-SES students use a wide range of resources to increase their chances of admission to high-achieving institutions including: teachers and counselors, family, friends, the internet, and college promotional materials. Low-SES students have restricted access to these resources as their social circles are less likely to

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<sup>52</sup> Haveman and Smeeding, “The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility,” pgs. 12-13

<sup>53</sup> Advanced Placement is “a program in the United States and Canada created by the College Board which offers college-level curricula and examinations to high school students. American colleges and universities may grant placement and course credit to students who obtain high scores on the examinations (College Board, 2020).

<sup>54</sup> Dual enrollment, “or concurrent enrollment as it is also known, is the practice of allowing a student to be enrolled in two academic institutions at once. Usually, this involves a high school and a college. The credits apply both to high school diploma requirements and college graduation requisites (BestValue Schools).

<sup>55</sup> The International Baccalaureate Program (IB) is a European-based academic program for children and teenagers. High school students can take classes that will prepare them for college through learning key subject areas as math, science, and the arts. There are also core career classes and community service projects (BestValue Schools).

<sup>56</sup> There are differences between the AP and IB programs. “The AP program is very subject focused, while IB programs takes a holistic approach to learning. Most American high school students participate in the AP program. In the end, both programs have rigorous academic standards and will help the student prepare for college (BestValue Schools).

<sup>57</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 130

include those that can aid them with the college admissions process. Research has shown that guidance counselors only provide information about expensive top-tier universities to students who they believe can afford tuition, pushing low-SES students to attend community colleges instead of rigorous schools.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, elite colleges tend to prioritize “well-roundedness” in their admissions process. High school extracurricular activities allow students to “stand out” amongst their peers by providing them a diverse range of experiences. Some extracurricular examples include volunteering, sports, community-based projects, and service projects. Such factors increase the likelihood of admission to an elite college<sup>59</sup> by providing experiences that make students appear “well-rounded.” Indeed, prioritizing a “well-rounded” student, as done in merit-based admissions, disadvantages low-SES students who cannot afford to participate in extracurricular, or cultural capital building, activities.<sup>60</sup>

Even though standardized test scores, extracurricular activities, and academic achievement are heavily affected by SES, a group of college officials convened by the *College Board* noted that the college admissions process “should consider what a student has to overcome in order to qualify for a competitive selection process. Not all students have had the same educational opportunities,”<sup>61</sup> which can be explained by standardized test scores, participation in extracurricular activities, and rigor and achievement in academic courses. Contrary to the general public, employing an applicant’s ability to “overcome educational obstacles as a selection criterion

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<sup>58</sup> Lee, “Elite Colleges & Socioeconomic Status,” p. 788

<sup>59</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 114-117

<sup>60</sup> Lee, “Elite Colleges & Socioeconomic Status,” p. 788-90

<sup>61</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 115

is not a simply a means to correct past inequities.”<sup>62</sup> As such, we must demonstrate new methods to ensure SES diversity within academic institutions.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Ever since the *Bakke* (1978) case brought the topic of diversity in higher education to the Supreme Court, there has been a “compelling government interest”<sup>63</sup> for diversity in college admissions. Universities have attempted to reform their admissions policies to ensure an equal and fair process for their applicants that can create a diverse, well-rounded student body. While most universities have addressed race-based affirmative action issues, many have altered their policies to segregate applicants based on other factors such as SES. There is a relationship of inequity between admissions to elite colleges and SES. For one, data has shown that affirmative action is followed but flawed as college admissions circumvent race and ethnicity by looking at factors that are skewed to benefit high SES students (such as standardized test scores, GPA, attendance of private versus public school). Second, in focusing on these factors, college admission officers are limiting entry to low SES students at top-tier universities. This hindrance not only affects college applicants, but also impacts society as a whole by reducing the nation’s GDP cost and human and social capital. College admissions further limit upward mobility for low SES students by rejecting their applications to top-tier universities — a place that could provide the mobility such students need. Since affirmative action cases have established legal precedent for racial and ethnic diversity in the college admissions process, many colleges seem to have greater diversity in regard to these demographics. However, even though colleges might have greater racial and ethnic diversity, they do not have the same amount of socioeconomic diversity. This is mainly due to the fact that there

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<sup>62</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pgs. 115-116

<sup>63</sup> *Regents of the Univ. of Cal v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978)

is no legal precedent for class-based affirmative action, allowing many universities to exploit this fact during the admissions process. Who would institutions rather accept: a student willing to pay \$250K in tuition or a student needing \$250K in aid to attend your university? Ultimately, college admissions and higher educational institutions must invest more resources into bettering affirmative action for the purpose of avoiding class-based affirmative action and improving the college admissions process.

Higher educational institutions must alter their admissions strategies to empower the future leaders of society: the students they produce. Although there may be pushback from high SES individuals, elite universities need to change their admissions process to ensure equitable access for all students.

Possible solutions to address class-based affirmative action include the following:

1. Eliminate Early Action Policies: In an effort to increase diversity, universities can eliminate early action programs.<sup>64</sup> For example, Harvard eliminated its early action program for the Class of 2012 through 2015, believing that these programs disproportionately benefited affluent students. Even though eliminating early action might prove to be beneficial, unintended consequences might arise such as a possible increase in applications, since an increased number of students will be incentivized to apply to universities during the regular admissions cycle. On the other end, colleges might receive less applications, since prospective applicants may choose to attend other schools that do offer early admittance programs.<sup>65</sup>
2. Eliminating Standardized Testing: Some higher education institutions, like DePaul University and the University of Chicago, have eliminated standardized test scores from

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<sup>64</sup> “According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, early action means that ‘students apply early and receive a decision well in advance of the institution’s regular response date.’” (U.S. News).

<sup>65</sup> U.S. District Court, District of MA - *SFFA v. Harvard* Case Findings, pg. 86

their applications. These and other universities have stated that such “tests place an unfair burden on low-income and minority students, and ultimately hinder efforts to broaden diversity on campus.”<sup>66</sup> Even though eliminating test scores might lead to a reduction in the academic qualifications of applicants, standardized test scores have been recognized to be “imperfect measures” of one’s intellectual capacity and other academic abilities.<sup>67</sup> Research has already found that many high SES students receive greater amounts of standardized test preparation from school resources or private tutors.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, eliminating standardized test scores is likely to improve diversity by relieving low SES students from the unfair burden of standardized tests. Furthermore, eradicating standardized tests from the admissions process could remove a key indicator of first year college success, as many universities see a strong correlation between high standardized test scores and first-year success.<sup>69</sup>

3. Amended Merit-Based Admissions Criteria: The College Board and college admissions officials have published merit-based admissions methods<sup>70</sup> to ensure improved representation among colleges. This method fails to incorporate evaluation metrics that establish challenges students have overcome in lieu of looking for “well-roundedness” in applicants. Future admissions criteria processes should have criteria that evaluates students on the basis of personal background and academic capabilities in order to provide a better snapshot of the true challenges a student has overcome. Doing so will

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<sup>66</sup> Rhodes, Dawn. “The University of Chicago to stop requiring ACT and SAT scores for prospective undergraduates.” *The Chicago Tribune*, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> U.S. District Court, District of MA - *SFFA v. Harvard* Case Findings, pgs. 87-88

<sup>68</sup> Lee, “Elite Colleges & Socioeconomic Status,” p. 789

<sup>69</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 116-118

<sup>70</sup> Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” pg. 115

help holistically view students, providing a true metric of their aptitude towards a certain university. While this amendment has never been implemented, it might prove beneficial and also attract underprepared students to elite universities, no matter their background.

These solutions prove to be worthwhile alternatives to the current process of college admissions, but research is still needed. The best solution is to both eliminate standardized test scores and institute an amended merit-based admission criterion. This combination will likely allow for low SES students to equally compete with their high SES counterparts while also allowing all students to receive an equitable review of their applications.

Moving forward, all parties — college applicants, high schools, exterior resources, and college institutions — must come to an agreement that grants all students a fair and equitable college admissions experience and process to ensure diversity. Universities are the “choice architects” as they hold “the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions.”<sup>71</sup> It is critical that they establish these changes within the admissions process so that other institutions may be nudged into similar changes. Given the role that universities play in alleviating poverty, increasing GDP, and ensuring equal access, it is critical these “choice architects” establish this change for the benefit of society.

As Horace Mann, the Massachusetts Secretary of Education, once expressed,

“Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the condition of men -- the balance well of ‘social machinery.’ In the face of historical and

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<sup>71</sup> Thaler, “Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness,” pgs. 3-5

persistent inequality, educational opportunity is among the best tools for increasing equal opportunity more broadly.”<sup>72</sup>

Without equitable access to education, there will continue to be disparities within our society.

Solutions to eliminating class-based affirmative action are diverse in nature. The need for change in both economic and social policy is required to ensure systemic changes to the college admissions process. Academic institutions are the training centers for the future generations of students in their providing of both intellectual and social growth. Elite institutions have consistently proven to produce the future leaders of society, the same leaders that earn the top one percent of earnings and create the policies that govern the lives of the American people. By continuing to exclude those with low SES, society excludes these narratives from future policies and continues to inhibit them from escaping the poverty cycle that encompasses those with low educational levels. By implementing changes to the college admissions process to include class-based affirmative action, society is one step closer to achieving true equality for all.

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<sup>72</sup> Gaertner & Hart, “Considering Class: College Access and Diversity,” pg. 5



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