Is Meritocracy Hurting Higher Education?

Does meritocracy stall social mobility, entrench an undeserving elite, and undermine trust in higher education?

10 Scholars and Administrators

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That seems to be the emerging bipartisan consensus. "On the evidence we have, the meritocratic ideal ends up being just as undemocratic as the old emphasis on inheritance and tradition," writes *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat. "Our supposedly meritocratic system is nothing but a long con," declares Alanna Schubach, a college-admissions coach, in *Jacobin*. "Merit itself has become a counterfeit virtue, a false idol," argues Daniel Markovits, a professor of law at Yale University, in a new book, *The Meritocracy Trap* (Penguin Press). "And meritocracy — formerly benevolent and just — has become what it was invented to combat. A mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations."

An attack on meritocracy is invariably an attack on higher education, where meritocrats get sorted and credentialed. So the turn against meritocracy prompts big questions. Has meritocracy in fact failed? Is it time for universities to rethink the definition of merit, and, more broadly, higher education's role in American life? Are meritocracy's critics too sweeping in their indictment? Is it still — flaws and all — the fairest way to organize society? If we do away with it, what comes next?

We put these questions to 10 scholars and administrators from across the academy. Here are their responses.

The Opposite of Opportunity

Meritocracy has all of us trapped in a system of despair.

By DANIEL MARKOVITS

The United States has one of the steepest educational hierarchies in the world. Not just colleges and universities, but also high schools, elementary schools, and even preschools all come in shades of eliteness. At every level, elite schools invest much more in training their students than their ordinary counterparts. Elite public schools, in places like Scarsdale, N.Y., easily spend twice as much per student as average ones. Elite private high schools spend roughly six times the national public-school average. And the most selective colleges spend about eight times as much as the least selective ones.

Meritocracy — the idea that places at selective schools, and the rewards that they bring, should track achievement rather than breeding — is supposed to make all this morally OK. Earlier hierarchies were malign and offensive. Meritocracy claims to be wholesome and just. No caste or family monopolizes virtue or talent; and so meritocracy, we suppose, squares unequal outcomes with equal opportunities. In this way, meritocracy redeems the very idea of hierarchy and transforms the elite to suit a democratic age.

But America's educational hierarchy is not OK. The districts that fund elite public schools are filled with expensive houses — between mortgage interest and taxes, the median house in Scarsdale costs nearly $100,000 per year to own. Seventy percent of the students at top private schools come from the top 4 percent of the income

distribution. Ivy Plus colleges educate more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half. The immense sums spent at the top of the U.S. education hierarchy are therefore devoted to students who skew dramatically, almost unbelievably, toward wealth. These students go on to dominate the rest of society when it comes to income. Just 1.3 percent of high-school dropouts and 2.4 percent of high-school-only workers will capture lifetime earnings as great as the median professional-school graduate. This is the opposite of equality of opportunity.

What has gone wrong? Equality's champions typically attack the role that legacy preferences, cultural capital, racial privilege, and even outright fraud play in university admissions. The reproach is not fanciful. Elite self-dealing is real and disgraceful. But self-dealing operates on the margins of a largely meritocratic system. Students at top universities do in fact have the highest grades and the best standardized test scores. The top five law schools, for example, enroll roughly two-thirds of all applicants with LSAT scores in the 99th percentile.

Meritocracy redeems the very idea of hierarchy and transforms the elite to suit a democratic age.

These results should not be surprising. Children of rich and well-educated parents imbibe massive, sustained, planned, and practiced investments in education from birth through adulthood. Education works; and middle-class and poor children, who receive only ordinary educations, simply cannot compete. In 2016, for example, about 15,000 high-schoolers with a parent who held a graduate degree scored over 750 on the SAT's Critical Reading Test, compared with fewer than 100 whose parents had not completed high school.

Meritocracy — conceived as the handmaiden to equality of opportunity — has in fact become the main obstacle to opportunity in America today. It produces a new form of hierarchy by living up to, rather than departing from, its ideals.

When inequality of outcome grows too great, equality of opportunity becomes impossible. Our educational hierarchy cannot become meaningfully fairer by opening elite schools and universities to meritorious outsiders. There is no substitute for reducing the absolute difference between what is invested in the most-educated and less-educated people. Fairness requires that education become less hierarchical. The top schools and colleges must become not just more open but also — simply — less elite.

Daniel Markovits is a professor of law at Yale University and the author of the new book The Meritocracy Trap *(Penguin Press).*

What Failure Feels Like

Middle-class families and the hidden injuries of meritocracy.
By CAITLIN ZALOOM

Meritocracy depends on the idea that students are admitted to college based on their accomplishments. But that's absurd. Every admissions officer knows that glowing applications are not merely produced by good grades; they're largely the result of test tutors, private music lessons, pay-to-play sports, and the halo of charity work pursued for the length of a school break. The fiction of meritocracy also produces class inequalities in more intimate ways. Not only does it deliver more success to the already successful, it quietly inflicts damage on those unable to afford the suite of advantages necessary to compete.

I've spent the past few years interviewing middle-class parents about college. What I heard most often is that the very institution that promises to open up the future for their children harms their parents. Packed résumés and inflated test scores are not merely college qualifications; they are taken as evidence of a family's collective virtue. For middle-class parents, this is harder and harder to achieve.

Unlike their affluent counterparts, middle-class parents face trade-offs. They can't afford top private schools. They can't afford houses in the best school districts. (Meritocrats, consider: How many spots at the most selective colleges go to students from the middle class?) If they shell out and somehow get their children into a top high school, there's no money left to pay for tutors, travel teams, and music lessons, let alone to save for their children's college or their own retirements. They cannot do everything for their children, yet they are measured by the same yardstick of achievement as those who can.

In other words, the college admissions system sets middle-class families up to fail. And when they do, they feel that failure in their bones.

The fiction of meritocracy produces class inequalities in intimate ways.

Meritocracy supplies the rationale for this punishment. As a doctrine it relies on an ideal of equality; as a practice it wreaths those who ascend its heights with virtue and smacks down all the rest. Meritocracy justifies the very hierarchies of class whose existence it denies.

It doesn't deserve to last.

Caitlin Zaloom is an associate professor of social and cultural analysis at New York University. She is the author of the new book Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost *(Princeton University Press).*

What We Talk About When We Talk About Meritocracy

When we disagree, we're often disagreeing about different things.

By AGNES CALLARD

Meritocracy is not a single idea, but two ideas. There is, on the one hand, the backward-looking practice of rewarding those who have accomplished something sig-

nificant, and, on the other, the forward-looking project of empowering those who will make the most of that power. The first kind of meritocrat resembles a judge, and when he uses the word "merit" he means desert; the second kind of meritocrat is closer to a talent scout, and when he uses the word "merit," he means potential.

Critics of meritocracy will do well to reflect on this distinction. If one combines demands appropriate to one sense with a description of a practice corresponding to the other, they will too readily come to the conclusion that "meritocracy" is an impossible, incoherent idea.

Both types of meritocracy involve a three-stage process. First, A does something. Then, B evaluates what A has done by some standard. Finally, B gives (or withholds from) A some power, office, or honor. Sometimes Stage 1 happens naturally: A just happened to do what he did, indifferent to or unaware of B's watchful eye. At other times, Stage 1 is artificially orchestrated by B, with the express intention of providing a context for assessing whether A will make the best use of what B has to give.

In the natural cases, B is a judge whose concern is with accurately gauging the nobility or significance of some past action. In the artificial cases, B is a scout who sets up hoops in the hope they will provide an optimal environment for predicting A's prospects. Since the former focuses on bestowing honors for what was done, I will call it "timocracy" *(time* = honor); since the latter aims to discern the talent that predicts future contributions, I will call it "technocracy" *(techne* = skill). Timocracies tend to be interested in natural opportunities for assessment (e.g. valor in wartime); technocracies tend to produce artificial opportunities for assessment (e.g. entrance exams).

A firm's hiring process, a university admissions office, a Nobel-Prize committee — these are very different kinds of meritocracies. The Nobel-Prize committee is interested largely in timocratic considerations, whereas the firm is much more technocratic.

Meritocracy is an easy target because we will always be able to complain that someone didn't earn what they received.

What makes meritocracy such an easy target is that we will always be able to complain either that someone didn't earn what they received, or that they were not the best person for the job.

Sometimes we can make both complaints: In many cases, such as college admissions, the two forms are mixed. Stage 1 is somewhat but not completely staged; the power in question is conceived both as a (backward-looking) honor and as a (forward-looking) office. In these cases, we often flip back and forth between the two models. When a student admitted to a selective college plans to do nothing but party and we bemoan the waste of resources, we are viewing college admissions in a technocratic way. When we are enraged that someone's parents paid their way into an unearned spot at a college, we view the process as timocratic.

This is not wrong, but it is important to acknowledge how different these kinds of criticisms are, and how different their remedies would have to be. When we are indignant about the injustice of some meritocratic system's distribution of power, then we are viewing the situation from a timocratic point of view — considerations of justice

tend to be backward-looking and reflect an understanding of who is owed what. So we should not expect rectifications to yield forward-looking, technocratic improvements.

We should likewise acknowledge that, to the degree that a meritocracy is technocratic, assessment will not only be imperfect but even, in principle, not perfectible. This is due both to the general unknowability of the future, and, more interestingly, to the fact that the most transformative cases of talent and promise are precisely the ones for which we have envisioned no tests. An overly rigorous technocracy is self-undermining, being closed to the very kinds of positive changes it wants to produce.

In such mixed cases, the right question about a decision will usually not be, "Is this meritocratic?" but rather: "How do we balance the timocratic and technocratic elements?" And: "What other ideas of merit might we want to incorporate?" The very fact that two such different conceptions of merit are possible leaves room for the prospect of a third or fourth.

Unlike aristocracy or democracy, there is no such thing as "pure" meritocracy. Therein lies its claim to supremacy: Commitment to meritocracy allows one to embrace a diversity of perspectives on how goodness occurs, is known, and can be produced. Meritocrats can care about both justice and utility. They can be open to incorporating new forms of value without feeling they are compromising their principles. They do not decide in advance how power must, always and everywhere, be distributed. Instead they are prepared to learn, in a bottom-up way, which considerations to press in a given case. And, when circumstances change, they are prepared to relearn.

How should power be distributed? Meritocracy is not so much an answer to that question as a way of ensuring that we don't stop asking it.

Agnes Callard is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago.

The Price of Merit

If it's something the rich can purchase, it's just another obstacle for the rest of us.

By WALTER KIMBROUGH

Iattended a magnet high school in Atlanta, at that time one of the highest performing schools in the city. Close to graduation our counselor began to determine class rankings. I knew I was among the top students. I learned, though, that I had been leapfrogged by a classmate whose parents argued for some of their grades to be changed. Another classmate told me about it — her own mom was thinking about pushing for grade changes as well. My parents and I never considered doing something similar. In the end, the counselor decided to have two valedictorians, and I would be the salutatorian.

This was my awakening. Merit can be lobbied for, and in some cases, purchased. And so merit is something I had to overcome.

My high school was 98-percent black, proof that these issues exist in all types of communities. But when race is added as another variable, the myth of merit is further exposed. As a nation we are still coming to terms with a massive college admissions scandal. Wealthy parents purchased access to top universities by manipulating the system, for instance by having someone else take a standardized test on behalf of their child.

Let's stop discussing merit. It's a concept that reflects power and privilege, connections and wealth.

For those with power and privilege, lineage guarantees merit.

For people without power or privilege, merit is something that has to be overcome. In many African American households, parents tell their children that they have to be two or three times as good to get the same opportunities. My mom, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of California at Berkeley who double majored in chemistry and math, didn't just tell me that; she lived it. My concern is that too many without power or privilege falsely believe that everyone is equal, and merit is applied equally.

The statistics say otherwise. Huge racial gaps exist in terms of quality of K-12 education, graduation rates for both high school and college, and family wealth and income. Even during a period when African American unemployment hovers near record lows, black homeownership is at a record low. Too many in America do all of the right things only to realize that merit alone doesn't lead to success.

So let's stop discussing merit. It's a concept that reflects power and privilege, connections and wealth. For many Americans, success is not achieved on merit, but by overcoming it.

Walter Kimbrough is president of Dillard University.

The Case for Admissions Lotteries

The current system has all the vices of an aristocracy, and none of the virtues.

By ANASTASIA BERG

Conservative opposition to today's merit-oriented college admissions focuses on two problems: First, universities concentrate talent and ambition in a few distinct parts of the country while depleting the rest of the land of its best and brightest, and, second, the myth of meritocracy tends to undermine the cultivation of the sort of moral values that are essential to creating a responsible elite. These worries should concern liberals and progressives, too: a morally vapid, selfish and geographically and culturally isolated elite is a grave threat to democratic governance.

It's not clear what form a solution might take. Re-establishing some form of aristocracy via legacy admissions, tempered by racial quotas to ensure diversity, as Ross Douthat recently suggested, is not actually an option. Trying to turn back the wheels would not only be unjust but entirely futile: after years of moral erosion and wealth consolidation, resurrecting legacy admission would do little to redistribute talent and

access to power across the country, let alone improve the moral character of the children of the ruling classes.

Meritocratic admissions are certainly superior to the lottery of birth. But are they superior to an actual lottery? What if admission to, say, the nation's top 150 or 200 schools were assigned at random? What kind of change in the composition of our ruling classes might occur if we were to distribute college admissions among large swaths of those who meet the standards for nonprofessional, undergraduate university degrees?

The improvement in the mental health of high-school students — no longer having to battle royale their way through adolescence while enriching a multibillion-dollar test-prep industry — might be reason enough to commence with randomization. Moreover, such a system is arguably the only way to ensure the actually equitable diversification of the student body at institutions of higher learning across gender and racial lines, as well as geographical and socioeconomic ones. As many have complained, the current methods for introducing diversity into top institutions inevitably disadvantage deserving candidates (the recent class-action suit alleging Harvard grossly discriminated against Asian Americans in its admissions process is a case in point).

But as Christopher Lasch, a staunch critic of the self-delusions of meritocracy, pointed out, the bigger problem with affirmative action and its various, softer cognates is not that it is unfair but that it is anti-democratic:

Democracy once implied opposition to every form of double standard. Today we accept double standards — as always, a recipe for second-class citizenship — in the name of humanitarian concern. Having given up the effort to raise the general level of competence — the old meaning of democracy — we are content to institutionalize competence in the caring class, which arrogates to itself the job of looking out for everybody else.

Randomized admissions will begin to rectify the moral devastation brought on by decades of running college admissions like a bloodsport.

The problem Lasch draws our attention to is not that we are rewarding the undeserving with admissions to elite institutions, but that in applying different standards to different groups we are distracting ourselves from the real educational duties of a democratic society that values self-governance: raising the level of education for all.

Randomized admissions will also distribute access to power more evenly. What first and foremost distinguishes Harvard, Yale, and Princeton from other colleges are not the syllabi, lectures or undergraduate libraries but the access they provide to the economic, political, and cultural capital that one's fellow students possess by virtue of their upbringing, prior education, family relations, and wealth. Radically shaking up the composition of colleges would either more evenly distribute such access or else help to dismantle, or at least weaken, a vast system of extra-institutional influence and advantage currently monopolized by the elite.

Finally, administering college admission by lottery might begin to rectify the moral devastation brought on by decades of running college admissions like a bloodsport. Research at Harvard's Graduate School of Education suggests that while most parents

today say they want to raise ethical, caring children, nearly as many of their children feel their parents "are more concerned about achievement or happiness than caring for others." The dissonance between such parents' supposed values and their behavior reflects the deep problem with the ideal of the "aristocracy of talent" identified by Lasch: "The talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues. Their snobbery lacks any acknowledgment of reciprocal obligations between the favored few and the multitude."

Randomized admission, one hopes, would make such self-congratulation harder to maintain. Whatever opportunities and advantages going to one school as opposed to another will provide — the famed and dedicated professor, the classmate who is already able to invest in your start-up, the roommate who can forward your short story to the editor of a prestigious magazine — none will be assumed to be earned. In turn, such rewards stand a better chance of being recognized for what they are: gifts of fate. Perhaps only then will students be disposed to think of those friends from back home who were not so lucky as equals who deserve happiness just as much as anyone else. Perhaps, too, universities, freed from having to determine who has, at the age of 17, proved themselves worthy of being part of the ruling classes, could focus instead on what kind of education will create the wisest leaders in a country where no one is born to rule.

Anastasia Berg is a junior research fellow in philosophy at the University of Cambridge and an editor at The Point.

Meritocracy Isn't Broken. Assessment Is.

Tests, rankings, and grades are blunt and discriminatory instruments.

By LEON BOTSTEIN

Attacks on meritocracy and its consequences are justified. But only to a degree. Our problem is the way meritocracy is defined, measured, and legitimated. It is too dependent on numerical measures, such as standardized tests, college rankings, grades, and income. All four are blunt and discriminatory instruments of comparison that trivialize merit by confusing wealth with excellence and reinforcing the power of money and privilege.

Our current meritocracy is flawed by its reliance on strategies of quantification masquerading as objective benchmarks. But the fact that merit is now defined reductively and wrongly does not justify the rejection of the principle. Society needs the pursuit of excellence by those who have earned their status through genuine superior achievement. True meritocracy should honor originality, courage, passion, and resistance to conventional wisdom — it should honor those in our society who make outsized contributions to vital fields, and who do more than simply conform and play the existing game.

The most important contributions to science, culture, and the economy have been made by rebels, entrepreneurs, and outsiders. There is nothing wrong with doing well on tests or getting into elite colleges. But these are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for excellence. The current meritocracy secures the status quo; what we need, instead, is to change the standard of practice in institutions, professions, and vocations — particularly in law, medicine, business, religion, scholarship, teaching, and above all, public service and politics.

The fact that merit is now defined reductively and wrongly does not justify the rejection of the principle.

Let's not confuse the proper defense of political equality and social justice with an ideological resistance to making qualitative distinctions that identify true excellence. A democratic society requires great scientists, great writers, great artists, great scholars, great entrepreneurs, and great individuals in business and government. These are rarely those with the highest test scores.

Colleges should foster originality and ambition without rigidly relying on standardized measurements. We must embrace qualitative judgments, with all the difficulties they entail. Tests are needed, as are grades and peer reviews of institutional practices, not as hard evidence of merit but as helpful diagnostic instruments. What is needed is the cultivation of critical inquiry, skeptical analysis, and idealism — and the will to challenge received wisdom in thought and action. An authentic meritocracy should lead us to rescue our present, rethink our past, and reimagine our future.

Leon Botstein is the president of Bard College.

Meritocracy Is All We Have Time For

Academic hiring could be made fairer — but it would take too long.

By JASON BRENNAN

Academia is not a lottery. Prospective graduate students are not randomly assigned to jobs. Rather, in most fields, all things being equal, graduate students with the most publications in the highest-ranked journals have better job prospects than those who don't publish or who publish in low-prestige journals. Graduate students from higher-ranked programs have a much better chance of getting a tenure-track job than those who come from low-ranked programs. In some fields, such as English, the top 60 departments hire almost exclusively from the top six.

Still, many complain that such heuristics — journal and graduate-department prestige — do not reflect real merit. They argue that graduate schools unfairly favor students from Ivy League universities, who may have been admitted on the basis of class and family income rather than ability. Thus, they reason, academic prestige is a poor proxy for talent.

Let's suppose these complaints are indeed correct. How should academia respond? One serious constraint lies in the way of radical change: time.

Consider the application process. The last time I helped to hire a tenure-track position, my department received around 500 applications. A full application is about 100 pages long, including a CV, cover letter, statements summarizing research, multiple writing samples, a teaching portfolio, and effusive letters of recommendation. Reading each application fully and carefully would take a minimum of an hour, and likely more. If our four-person hiring committee spent an hour each on each application, trying to ensure we give everyone a thorough first look, we'd spend 2,000 hours just on the first cut.

Our employers don't want us to do that. As a full professor at Georgetown, everything that falls under "service to the profession and community" is officially considered 15 percent of my job, or 300 hours in a 2,000-hour working year. Teaching is considered 35 percent, and research 50 percent. For junior faculty, research is an even higher percentage, while teaching and service are lower.

Thanks to the scarcity of time, we have no choice but to use some sort of heuristic rather than to give each candidate a thorough vetting. At some places, faculty read all the job-paper abstracts and then give the top 30 a more thorough look. (But maybe the best applicants wrote boring abstracts.) I personally cull anyone who doesn't already have a strong list of publications, accepting the risk that the best applicant hasn't yet published. Others do something different, also no doubt using what is at best an imperfect screening method.

The meritocratic ideal is simply out of reach.

Spending more time on applicants would come at the expense of other tasks — such as research or teaching — which we and our employers agree are higher priority. Should I publish one less book, cancel all my public lectures, or phone in my teaching for the year in order to spend extra time hiring a professor?

Ought implies can: You have a duty to do something only if you *can* do it. While there are things we might reasonably do to make academia more meritocratic, the meritocratic ideal is simply out of reach.

Jason Brennan is a professor at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University. He is a co-author of Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education *(Oxford University Press, 2019).*

The Worm at the Heart of Meritocracy

The ethical costs of upward mobility.

By JENNIFER MORTON

I emigrated from Peru to the United States in search of a more meritocratic society. I was born in Lima, at a time when car bombs and hyperinflation were everyday occurrences. By the time I graduated high school, the political and economic situation

had improved, but my working-class grandmother still insisted I go abroad. In Peru, careers were doled out to those born into the right family. I was not. So I left. I became the first person in my family to attend college and to receive a doctorate. I am now a tenured college professor. Some might see my story as proof that the meritocratic ideal is alive and well in the United States.

My experience of American higher education over the past 20 years has shown me otherwise. Here, too, family background plays a much larger role in determining one's opportunities than talent or perseverance. In Peru, an executive might simply hire his friend's son for a high-powered job despite mediocre grades and a lackluster résumé. In the United States, that family would buy a home in the right school district, invest in test prep, donate money to a highly selective college, and use their social network to secure the right internships. Their son would emerge with a brilliant résumé that would not only get him that high-powered job, but allow him to feel that he earned it.

There are exceptions. Some people are born with few privileges, and yet they succeed. But the cost of being the exception is high. Due to the segregation and concentration of disadvantage, many of those born into low-income and working-class communities have to go elsewhere to climb the mobility ladder. They move from where they have family, friends, and neighbors to schools and workplaces that might feel foreign culturally and socially. Students are caught between their home communities and those they are seeking to enter. Success in the latter often entails sacrificing the bonds to family, friends, and community that are central to the former. These costs are the ethical price of upward mobility.

Some might see my story as proof that the meritocratic ideal is alive and well.

This difficulty is compounded by the economic difficulties that working-class and low-income students face. Their families or friends back home are often struggling financially. Students feel torn between helping those they love and advancing their own trajectories. Every day, I see my students at CUNY contend with these choices. Whatever decision they make, they sacrifice something important.

As an immigrant, I was well aware that seeking opportunities elsewhere would require me to distance myself from the community in which I grew up. Friendships would fade, my relationship with my family would change, and I would experience the dislocation that comes from moving to a new country with a different culture. I knew that emigrating would involve painful sacrifices. We tell students born into disadvantage in this country that hard work can pay off. Many of our students are rightly skeptical of that story. But what we don't tell them is that even those who make it might have to give up more than they bargained for.

The worm at the heart of meritocracy is not just that so many other factors besides merit play a role in determining access to opportunity, but that the costs for those who make it through are so steep.

Jennifer Morton is an associate professor of philosophy at the City College of New York. She is the author of Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility *(Princeton University Press, 2019).*

Let's End the Charade

Working-class students recognize meritocracy as a myth. When will everyone else?

By LAUREN SCHANDEVEL

Igrew up in Warren, Mich., a blue-collar town in Macomb County, which is one of those stops along the Rust Belt you typically only hear about during election seasons. By any measure, my community is not a pipeline to elite institutions like the University of Michigan. So, imagine my surprise — and my parents' delight — when I was accepted there in 2015.

I spent my undergraduate years seizing every opportunity I could to advocate for the needs of working-class students. I created a viral crowdsourced guide to being not-rich on campus, co-founded an organization devoted to college affordability, and helped develop the nation's first minor in social class and inequality studies. I wanted to help students like myself save money during college. More than that, though, I wanted to address the very real barriers low-income and other marginalized students encounter before, during, and after their time in college. Because, contrary to what the president of my alma mater has condescendingly suggested, our grievances extend far beyond not being able to attend "a ski weekend in February."

When it comes to navigating elite spaces, there are unspoken rules you're supposed to follow, hidden codes of conduct; ultimately I came to learn and resent them, but initially they terrified me. In my first year of college, my peers all seemed to have things figured out: They knew how to maneuver their way through office hours and internships; they knew how to "network." Like so many of my working-class peers, I felt intimidated and inferior — was my admission a mistake?

We call this the "hidden curriculum," a kind of implicit know-how students need to have (but are never explicitly required to learn), in order to succeed in academia. Unsurprisingly, the division between who knows the hidden curriculum and who doesn't often mirrors and reinforces existing social inequalities. Most wealthy students at elite universities grew up with parents who attended similar (or the same) institutions and could afford to give them well-funded K-12 educations, complete with rigorous classes, extracurricular activities, and the insider knowledge required to bolster their college applications. They acquired the social capital they'd need to maneuver their way through elite spaces and to signal to others that they belonged there — from knowledge of which grad programs in your field are the most prestigious to holding a wine glass "correctly." How can the rest of us, as intelligent as we may be, compete with this impenetrable force of intergenerational wealth and power?

Allowing a privileged few to monopolize opportunity breeds distrust in our institutions and the people who hold power within them.

To add insult to injury, the immense privilege demonstrated by my peers at Michigan was almost always passed off as pure merit. A student could admit to spending $1,500 on SAT tutoring and *still* claim their scores were the result of hard work alone. Their parents could get them prestigious internships through personal connections,

and they'd still call themselves the most qualified candidate in the applicant pool. For students who didn't understand how power is transferred through elite spaces, this was discouraging. For those of us who did, it was infuriating.

My takeaway after four years? Meritocracy is a myth, and its pervasiveness in higher education prevents us from collectively addressing our system's most glaring problems. It seeps into every pore of the academy, spilling over into our lives after college in a natural cascade of privilege. To insist on preserving this meritocratic myth in higher education is to inflate the self-worth of the privileged and to subject those of us without means to repeated insult and demoralization — it needs to end.

Our inability to recognize or make explicit the connection between wealth, academic success, and career opportunities is a ticking time bomb. Allowing a privileged few to monopolize opportunity under the guise of merit breeds distrust in our institutions and the people who hold power within them. It also establishes a kakistocratic system that facilitates the ascent of overconfident, inept leaders whose strongest credentials are inherited wealth.

At the end of the day, if we've weighed our options and decide we actually do want an oligarchy, then fine, but let's at least drop the act — we can no longer maintain this charade.

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Meritocracy's Condescending Critics

Knowledge is the only power the powerless can harness.

By THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS

Last spring, I found myself on NPR in the surreal position of trying to convince David Coleman, the president of the College Board, which administers the SAT, that standardized testing was a lifeline for me when I was a young black teen with no family wealth or social connections. Standardized testing was the only tool that I could fully control, I explained. Grades seemed easily inflated and manipulated, as well as incommensurate: the parochial Catholic school I attended barely even offered Advanced Placement courses.

Coleman wasn't having it. He argued that our meritocracy is so deeply flawed, exploitable, and weighted against nonwhites like me (as well as against poor students of all colors) that standardized testing, including the College Board's own work, could not stand on its own merits.

His solution: an "adversity index" to be appended to aptitude scores — essentially a handicap to correct for "privilege." This "overall disadvantage level" would appear

on the College Board's "environmental context dashboard," and would incorporate demographic and census data to rate high-school students on a scale from one to 100. A score of 50 or more would indicate adversity; anything less would indicate privilege.

As we spoke, I felt a wall rise up between Coleman and myself. He couldn't understand my abiding faith in a No. 2 pencil, a digital calculator, and a series of multiple-choice questions designed by his organization. Frustrated, I found my thoughts turning to the man who had instilled this faith in me: my father, a black man from the segregated South. He was the valedictorian of his high school and the first member of his family to get a B.A., let alone a master's degree and a Ph.D.

In his eight decades struggling in the American color caste system, my father's belief in meritocracy seldom wavered. The lesson he learned early in pre-Civil-Rights Texas was that knowledge is the only power the powerless can harness. He pressed this insight on me from the moment I was old enough to understand it. Is this — the presence of an engaged parent who values education — itself a form of privilege and therefore unmeritocratic? Some would say yes. But life is neither perfectible nor equalizable, and success through competition — even success derived from grit, hard work, and merit — is often intergenerational.

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The meritocratic ideal is flawed, yes, as it has become increasingly popular to proclaim. There is no getting around that fact. The affluent game the system, pass on savoir-faire, and then outright cheat when that is not sufficient. But it is nonetheless the best and fairest way to locate and elevate talent that we have ever come up with.

I didn't need an adversity index to measure my disadvantage or to tell me that a sizable portion of my future classmates would come from families with significantly more wealth than mine. I didn't need to be reminded that I was descended from slaves or that, in any previous era, an education could not have been mine. What I needed was a shelf of Barron's Test Prep books, several Nike shoe boxes stuffed with vocabulary flashcards, and what German and Yiddish speakers refer to as *sitzfleisch:* literally "butt flesh" (metaphorically, "The amount of endurance a person has for sitting still on her butt for the long hours it takes to get important work done").

The truth is that the meritocracy transformed my entire family. My young children already have diametrically different cultural references and life experiences than either my father or I enjoyed. What, in turn, I have to instill in them is an awareness that if they don't work hard, there are limitless others who will outcompete them, and this is as it should be. It is a mark of extraordinary privilege — and some well-meaning condescension — to dismiss such a system, and the transcendent power of higher education it facilitates, as some kind of pernicious fiction.

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10 Scholars and Administrators
Is Meritocracy Hurting Higher Education?
Does meritocracy stall social mobility, entrench an undeserving elite, and undermine trust in higher education?
September 13, 2019

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