

Treasure Bacon

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### Changing the Legacy

In this ever famous statement, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” William Shakespeare proposes that a name, whether associated with prominence or deficiency, is not reflective of the ability of the object being named (Weston 1). The same proposal holds true in regards to legacy, which leaves one wondering about the fairness of the college admission process of elite schools that weigh this as a decisive attribute. The reputations of family members who have come before in no way reflect the academic ability and future success of a legacy applicant. It is time to look at the capabilities and accomplishments of the student alone, rather than allowing legacy applicants with less than impressive credentials to lean on the unearned reward of being born into a prominent family. To apply such a superficial test on the ability of a student to succeed is inherently unacceptable. By insisting upon looking no further than the name space on the application, deserving students beholding a promising degree of potential will be unjustly disregarded. It is crucial, in attaining the greatest degree of equality in a process that many characterize differently, to take a deeper look at the merit and leadership capabilities of the student, not the family. It is time that the student’s history of merit and leadership be the primary deciding factor in college admissions, not the status of legacy.

Admitting students based upon their status as a legacy challenges the fairness of the college admission process which is meant to extend the highest standard of fairness in consideration to all prospective students. In his article, “President Bush’s Comments on Legacy

Admissions Spark New Debate,” Ronald Taylor quotes the response of President Bush, a beneficiary of legacy status, to a question about the use of legacy in college admissions as saying that, “No look, if what you are saying is, is there going to be special treatment –in other words, we’re going to have a special exception for certain people in a system that’s supposed to be fair, I agree, I don’t think there ought to be” (1). Scott Baldauf, in his work of “Making Kids of College Alumni Earn Their Place,” echoes President Bush’s stance on this admission criterion as being a challenge to a process that is meant to reflect the utmost fairness. Baldauf outlines the attempt of Texas Representative, Lon Burnam, to eliminate this long practiced tradition of legacy admissions and emphasizes that “it’s a matter of fairness” (1). The college admission process is meant to promote the essence of ultimate fairness, but when factors beyond the control of the student, such as legacy, are factored into the decision and weighted to catapult a less qualified student ahead of a more qualified student, the fairness of the system is undoubtedly undermined. In his article, “A Fascinating, Disturbing Look at Elite-College Admissions,” Eric Arnesen presents the feelings of Jerome Karabel toward the use of legacy in the college admission process in emphasizing that “he denounces legacy preferences as a flagrant violation of core American principals,” which reflects the tone of Karabel being harmonious with those of Bush and Burnam (3). It is imperative to understand that the application of pedigree in the college admission process handicaps the attainment of the ultimate goal in American society, indispensable fairness. Legacy consideration contradicts the foundation upon which America was built, therefore, undermining the ability of an individual to attain success based upon their own efforts and abilities.

The weight given to the criterion of legacy in college admissions, specifically at elite colleges and universities, destructively undermines and, often times, outweighs the weight given

to the merit of the prospective student. In his article, “New Pressures Put On Colleges to End Legacies in Admissions,” Peter Schmidt reflects the contrasting stance of University of Wisconsin at Madison’s Admission Director, Robert A. Seltzer, by quoting him as saying “if they are not qualified for admission... being a legacy is not going to get them in” (2).

Contrastingly, University of Michigan legacy graduate and Capitol Hill Legislative Correspondent Ari Melber was quoted by Margarita Bauza in her article, “College Legacy Rules Lock Out Minorities, Critics Say; - Favoritism of Alumni’s Children Under Attack,” as saying that “there is a sense of entitlement among the advantaged... [Legislators] assume that [those] whose parents went to Harvard are probably good students. [Legislators] also assume that someone whose parents didn’t go is not fit” (2). This statement implicitly states that the merit of the individual applicant is negligible because if their parent was good enough to get in, then they are certainly worthy of the same fate. This statement is further supported by the fact that Harvard University, an institution which firmly believes in the legacy preference, reportedly “accepts 40 percent of its undergraduate legacy applicants, compared with about 11 percent of its overall applicant pool” (Schmidt 2). This overwhelming percentage of admitted legacies compared to that of the overall population admitted reflects that pedigree is weighted heavily in the minds of elite college admissions counselors. The individual merit of the student is bypassed when “prominence” is associated with one’s blood line due to holding the student to the same capabilities of those who have come before them. This false association is detrimental to the healthy nature of merit because it draws a false connection between a student’s capabilities and that of their last name.

The place of legacy in the college admission process diminishes the desire of prospective non-legacy applicants to work hard, because being the offspring of a former student outweighs

the consideration given to meritocratic credentials. Those whom were born to privilege are only furthered in their advantaged lifestyle by being issued an undoubted acceptance package without even having to go so far as to fill out the application. Contrastingly, non-legacy applicants are less motivated to put forth effort due to the feeling that their academic excellence is of little importance if they have no prominent name attached to their credentials. In his article, "The Other Affirmative Action," Earl G. Graves Jr. revealed that "it is common for students to gain admission based on legacy status even when their academic records, leadership experiences, and other measures of merit are inferior to those of [non-legacy] applicants who are not admitted (12). This extends credibility to the notion that non-legacy applicants exhibiting greater ability in various merit-based areas of the application process have less of an incentive to expend great effort due to the ideal that they will still be viewed as less valuable when compared to a legacy applicant, even legacies with less impressive credentials. As the Assistant Director of Admissions at Defiance College, Jennifer Stark has first-hand knowledge of the nature of legacy in college admissions. In correlation with the view of Graves, when asked about the drawbacks associated with legacy as an admission factor, Stark responded by saying that "the drawback would be that students with the same or better academic standards may not be accepted." This discourages students with strong capabilities, but lacking a prominent bloodline, from fulfilling their potential due to the understanding that their delivery of more impressive merit-based qualities will not give them an edge over legacy applicants. This lack of a prominent bloodline develops into the lack of determination to succeed because they are not given any possibly of success due to the continuance of inferiority looming over their head.

It is an undoubted injustice to allow those whom have already been born into a privileged style of life, without requiring any prior deed to make them worthy of such privilege, be given

even more special consideration. Peter Schmidt reflects the perspective of North Carolina Senator John Edwards, who agrees that legacy benefits those already advantaged, by quoting him as remarking, “the legacy preference rewards students who had the most advantages to begin with” (5). Great parallels can be drawn between the thoughts of Senator Edwards and Jerome Karabel due to both men viewing the legacy consideration as beneficial primarily to those who comprise the “upper crust” of American society (Arnesen 1). Karabel’s thoughts of legacy admissions emulate the same perspective as Edwards through the statement “their lofty proclamations notwithstanding, [Harvard President James] Conant and other Big Three presidents ‘systematically favored the most privileged segments of American society,’ not just giving ‘preference to socially elite applicants’ but actively soliciting them as well” (Arnesen 2). Karabel’s disgust is further emphasized by Arnesen by emphatically stating that “today, [Karabel] contends [persuasively], wealth and power continue to matter a great deal in elite university admissions” (3). Those who benefit from the continued practice of legacy admissions are the very ones who are in no need of such an unearned advantage, while those who are desperately in need of a fair playing field are crippled even further. Bauza reflects the claim of University of Michigan as supportive of this argument by stating that “they and others argue that so-called legacy admissions preferences work against minorities and reward those who historically need the least help” (1). The use of legacy in college admissions widens the gap between those born into prominence and those who are not by favoring those already born with a head start, while forcing those who are not so lucky to come from even further behind.

Legacy admissions make it extremely difficult for those not born into privilege to make a name for themselves because they extend preferential treatment only to those who have a last name with pre-established prominence attached to it. Bauza states the frustration of Jordan

Levine, a University of Michigan student, in saying that “no kids who live in extremely poor areas are going to have parents who went [to the University of Michigan]” (1). The fact that students stemming from an economically challenged background do not have the luxury of benefitting from their parents’ reputations is reflected in the inevitable truth that “economically disadvantaged students remain greatly underrepresented in the student bodies of elite schools” (Arnesen 3). In order to embark upon an academic mission aimed at extending education to all those worthy of such, regardless of the absence of a prominent bloodline, it is time to look beyond the name and focus upon the ability of the student and the promise their credentials behold. In a time when more high school students from a variety of backgrounds are worthy of the right to pursue higher education, it is imperative to phase out legacy as a consideration factor because it refuses to admit students based upon a factor they have no way of controlling even though they exhibit impressive qualifications. An unavoidable relationship exists between that of legacy preference and suppression of non-legacy applicants to improve upon their own situation. Without allowing room for students emerging from a less fortunate background to break the cycle of poverty and misfortune that they were born into, they are forced to succumb to the rule of a superior class stemming from prominent bloodlines which will continue to support legacy preference, further isolating the ability of the less fortunate to control their own fate. This irrefutable injustice of destruction at the hands of legacy has no place in a process that is advertised to emit fairness, and consequently should be phased out.

Elite university and college officials defend the use of legacy in the college admission process because they feel that it continues loyalty and deepened engagement between the institution and their alumni. Defiance College Admissions Director, Brad Harsha, emphasized the importance of legacy when asked about the benefits and drawbacks that could be associated

with this preference by saying that “[a] benefit would be parental support, which today is a huge factor in the decision process, [and] a drawback would be [the] loss of alumni involvement in the future.” In his work, Discriminating Against Discrimination, Robert M. O’Neil expresses firm agreement through stating that “all such preferences are justified by the desire of the institution to retain or attract a resource which it deemed vital to its welfare” (50). College admission officials argue that extending to alumni a feeling of security in regards to their offspring’s admittance to the institution creates a greater degree of loyalty to and involvement in the affairs of the institution. Graves further echoes these defenses by insisting that “alumni are willing to donate more money to their alma mater when they know their alumni status will get their child’s foot in the door” (12). College officials view the implementation of legacy in college admissions as vital in securing financial resources which serve to aid not only legacy students, but non-legacy students as well. Institutions of higher education defend their use of legacy preference in college admissions due to a large amount of their financial contributions stemming from the pockets of alumni.

College officials deem the use of legacy preference as a favorable practice in college admissions due to generating increased financial contributions from alumni. To the contrary, however, Steven I. Wilkinson, in his article entitled “Unfair Admissions,” opposes this widely cited defense in arguing that “institutions as diverse as Cooper Union, Caltech and Berea College get donations from many people (including their alumni) without employing legacy preferences because they have provided a first-rate education to their graduates, and because they have an educational and social mission people can believe in” (1). However, during the most recent fund-raising campaign conducted at the University of Virginia, “65.4 percent of legacy alumni donated, giving an average of nearly \$34,800 each, compared with just 41.1 percent of non-

legacy alumni, giving an average of about \$4,100 each,” which severely conflicts with the proposal that alumni do not provide significant financial resources (Schmidt 3). Although the financial abundance of alumni is indisputable, it in no way justifies the use of legacy preference because it does not override the injustice legacy creates. In justifying the use of bloodline preference in college admissions, college officials are knowingly admitting less qualified legacy students while rejecting overly qualified non-legacy students due to a financial agenda. A financial motive in no way justifies the harm incurred upon the principals of equality and fairness founding this country, but rather more actively discourages the use determination and work ethic by the American youth to control their own destinies. In order to emulate ultimate fairness in the process of college admissions, the only just alternative is to eliminate the use of legacy as a consideration factor in order to use the merit of the individual applicant as the primary measuring stick of an individual’s future success.

North Carolina Senator John Edwards stated that “the legacy preference rewards students who had the most advantages to being with. That’s an old barrier of the past, and it needs to be knocked down for good” (Schmidt 5). Using legacy as a deciding factor in college admissions is a discrimination against those already disadvantaged. Applying excessive weight to legacy status generates an unnecessary boost to those who have been privileged since birth. How is it fair to create a preference that unduly rewards those born into a family of prominence and excessively punishes those born into a family of lesser status? Legacy preference allows one’s future to be determined by an attribute over which an applicant had no control. Is it justifiable to use a birth-right, or in many cases a “birth-wrong,” to determine the destiny of applicants? Is it defensible that futures can be made brighter or dimmer based upon the capabilities of those who have come before?

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