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Felicia Nimue Ackerman: College admissions and the 'whole person'

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FELICIA NIMUE ACKERMAN

WHEN I WAS in high school, I used my summer vacations in a way that now seems quaint. I used them as vacations. Aside from two misguided stints of "productive" activity, I spent my summers sleeping late, reading whatever caught my fancy, going to movies, hanging out with friends, and generally pursuing happiness. My parents agreed that it was altogether fitting and proper that I should do this.

They wouldn't anymore, at least not if I wanted to get into a top college. Nowadays such colleges would doubtless turn me down in favor of applicants whose summers included raising AIDS awareness and promoting recycling and whose extracurricular activities during the school year likewise contrasted favorably with my indulgence in daydreaming and reading murder mysteries. Even in my high-school days, colleges often claimed to consider the "whole person." But good grades and good scores were still enough to get you into a highly selective college. Now applicants with such assets far outnumber slots at such colleges. These colleges use additional ways of making fine distinctions. "Considering the whole person" sounds warm and caring, as contrasted with a cold bureaucratic focus on academic credentials. But it puts applicants' personal lives up for scrutiny, making applicants accountable for how they spend their free time.

People who must account for how they spend their free time do not have free time.

How does this practice get defended? Here are some rationales I have heard.

"A college should favor applicants who are likely to contribute to the campus community and to the larger society." But should this trump the privacy of applicants' personal lives?

Moreover, many colleges that admit students solely on academic criteria have vibrant campus communities. And volunteer work by high-school students who know it will enhance their college applications hardly proves dedication to contributing to society.

"Dynamic people make better college students than unimaginative grinds with perfect grade-point averages and perfect SATs." But if college officials think that high schools give good grades to unimaginative grinds, why take high-school grades into account at all? Do colleges have a similarly disdainful view of their own 4.0 students?

"Nonacademic criteria offset standardized tests, which favor applicants who can afford expensive

test-preparation coaching.” But favoring applicants whose leisure activities meet with college officials’ approval is hardly the best remedy.

“Exclusive focus on academic criteria can also destroy free time, as it can lead to incessant cramming in order to get the edge of a few points.” An Asian-American student made this objection, adding that this situation occurs in some Asian countries. Cramming for this edge is scarcely unknown in America as well.

The remedy is not to factor the “whole person” into the admissions process. Far better would be a lottery among applicants who qualified by meeting a high but not outlandish threshold. Various educators have proposed various kinds of admissions lotteries. The right kind of lottery, however, would respect applicants’ privacy and also allow for intellectual and creative strengths that were not evident in grades and scores. Entrance into such a lottery would be based on high-school courses and grades, teacher recommendations about academic and creative performance and potential, and standardized test scores, plus a piece of creative work that could be submitted by any student who thought the other criteria would not do him justice. This work could be an essay, poem, science project, musical composition or anything else demonstrating intellectual or artistic excellence. Whether applicants’ evenings, weekends and vacations centered around promoting recycling or reading murder mysteries would not come into the application at all, unless an applicant chose to submit an essay about this activity, with the understanding that the essay would be judged solely on its intellectual and literary merit rather than on whether the admissions staff approved of how he spent his free time.

This method would give applicants their personal lives back. It might even give colleges the sorts of students they say they want.

Who, after all, is likely to provide a more dynamic presence on campus: an applicant whose leisure has been shaped by what he believes will impress admissions officials or one who has spent his free time developing his own interests?

Felicia Nimue Ackerman is a professor of philosophy at Brown University.