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# Blog

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By Elias Vlanton

“B” was all he texted me, but I knew Tramon was disappointed. His first report card at Dartmouth College was not straight A’s, matching his high school record. He was already analyzing that single B, he assured me when we talked later, and thinking about where he needed to improve. A few days later Morganne, my future veterinarian and a Cornell University freshman, was similarly disappointed with her B’s; she, too, had only known A’s in high school. My steady, quiet one, Arnetta, a pre-med freshman at the highly-competitive Bryn Mawr College, was pleased with her 3.2 average. So was I. That this was shaping up to be a fine first semester was confirmed when Angie, knowing that I was waiting, reported hours after grades were released that she had earned two A’s and two B’s at Middlebury College, the fiercely competitive Little Ivy. All received the same heartfelt piece of advice: They were doing extremely well, they were outperforming many of their freshman peers, and doing so at some of the most challenging schools in the country. To me, their A’s and B’s were just, in language they could understand, “awesome.”

Yes, I am very proud. Tramon, Morganne, Arnetta, and Angie were all students of mine in Advanced Placement classes at Maryland’s Bladensburg High School. Bladensburg is neither a private school, nor a “we skim the cream of the crop” magnet

public school. It is in one of Washington, DC's poorest suburbs, where family income ranks in the bottom quarter of the state, and a school where less than ten percent of any graduating class makes it through college.

This semester, while Morganne proudly posts videos of her next dissection and Anngie writes another long essay in French, the Supreme Court, in deciding *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, will determine whether my students deserve to attend the colleges where they are being so successful. In addition to attending a low-performing high school, my kids are all African American and Latino. They were accepted into their elite colleges as part of those schools' commitment to the mission of promoting diversity in higher education, the very diversity that affirmative action attempts to encourage—and that *Fisher* seeks to declare unconstitutional.

The anti-affirmative action pitch is succinctly expressed by Chief Justice Roberts: The way to stop discrimination is to stop discriminating. Admitting “unqualified” minority students to schools when they don't meet the objective admissions requirements, the argument continues, only stigmatizes them and encourages academic failure.

But from where I sit, the talk of minority preferences misses the main point. The discrimination that I see is the regular advantage that wealthier students enjoy in the admissions process. The admissions criteria we accept as neutral—SAT scores, rigor of high school courses, extra-curricular activities, GPAs—are far from benign. They stack the admissions process against the economically disadvantaged.

I see an admissions playing field that is not at all level for my students. While wealthier parents improve their children's SAT scores by paying thousands of dollars to enroll them in summer

SAT prep courses or to hire one-on-one test prep tutors, these options are out of reach for my students. Their main preparation comes, if scheduling permits, from the school's SAT class.

Competently taught, the class is partially a dumping ground for students who need to be put somewhere. The result is more than 40 students per class, many of whom neither pay attention nor want to ever take the test. For students who show promise, the teacher offers an SAT prep book for home study—one the teacher has bought at his own expense.

Students in affluent neighborhoods can select from more than a dozen Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses—all application-enhancing courses heavily favored by admissions counselors. But at schools like mine, where a large percentage of the student body has to repeat classes they have failed, the elective offerings shrink. A high-achiever at Bladensburg reaches senior year with few courses to take. Brown University wanted to know why one of my outstanding students this year had no math class in her senior schedule. The student had to explain that while the school offered pre-calculus, there was only one section, and it conflicted with her AP Chemistry class, also offered in only one section. Since grade point averages are partly a function of course difficulty (most schools boost the value of AP and IB courses), a limited selection of advanced courses undermines the opportunity of getting a higher GPA.

Many of my college-bound kids have no time for resume building. They focus on a more prosaic goal: family survival. One student cleans office buildings at night to help his disabled mother pay rent while another works weekends to help prevent her home from going into foreclosure. A third student shares her home with an abused, homeless woman taken in by her parents. Am I to suggest they spend a few days with Habitat for Humanity, building homes for the poor, or volunteering at the local women's shelter to burnish

their resumes so they can compete with wealthier college applicants?

Despite efforts to ease the burden of applying to competitive colleges, admissions is still a process dominated by money and its lack. College visits are largely out of reach for my students, yet visits and on campus interviews increase a student's chances. When I took a day off from work last year to take Tramon to visit Haverford College, the campus information session stressed the importance of a personal interview. Tramon's first question afterwards was: "What about the kids who don't know that it is important and can't afford to get here?" While the College Board offers our school a limited number of fee waivers for SAT testing and colleges often waive application fees with these vouchers, the system discriminates in more subtle ways. There are no waivers for the cost of sending AP scores (\$15 per school). And to apply for financial aid requires completion of the College Board's CSS Profile, which costs \$16 per school. My students have to ask their families to put aside very scarce family resources just to see if they are eligible for financial aid!

My four freshmen—my odds-beaters—had SAT scores hundreds of points below the average of the students admitted to their colleges. They took far fewer AP courses, and participated in fewer extra-curricular activities (since our school offers few activities other than sports). What set them apart was their class rank: they were all in the top two percent of the senior class, a function of their love of learning, their desire to do well, and their hard work to rise to the top. Despite the claim that, on the merits of their applications, they were "unqualified" for admission to the schools where they are getting As and Bs, all will graduate with honors from schools that are among the best in the country—joining my former students who graduated from Bowdoin College, Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University, and Stanford University.

So Chief Justice Roberts, in the end, we agree: Discrimination is discriminatory. That is why colleges must be allowed to consider the social and economic circumstances of my students when making admissions decisions—as Bryn Mawr, Cornell, Dartmouth, and Middlebury have done. My kids don't want a leg up; but neither do they deserve a kick in the chest.

[Back to Home page](#)

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