

# Elite-College Admissions Are Broken

The racial-discrimination lawsuit against Harvard, which goes to trial this week, raises questions about far more than affirmative action.

[Alia Wong](#) 7:00 AM ET



Alicia Tatone

Samantha remembers her high-school days more as a trial version of college. She seems part amused, part ashamed as she recalls the hours she dedicated to reworking her resume—or the hours on top of that spent plowing through SAT exercises in the home of her one-on-one college-application coach, even though she had already achieved near-perfect scores on practice tests. On any given weeknight in high school, she says, she was likely up until 3 or 4 a.m., studying in her twin bed, then waking up at 7 to go to school. College prep consumed her already-limited free

time, even cutting into hours she needed to work on homework ranging from AP physics problem sets to her senior thesis.

Samantha, 20, who asked to be identified by her first name only so she could speak freely about a sensitive topic, is now a sophomore at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, some 500 miles east of her suburban Cincinnati home. A Korean American who graduated from a predominantly white, affluent private high school, she's double-majoring in international relations and East Asian studies. The century-old Baltimore campus is gradually becoming home. But the way she got there still makes her uncomfortable. "I got a very high SAT score," Samantha says, "literally because my parents hired somebody."

The college-admissions process, especially for [highly selective, elite schools](#), incentivizes students to distort their identities to fit the profile they think the people reviewing their applications will find appealing. This dynamic becomes particularly problematic when it involves a student's racial identity, whether that means over- or under-emphasizing this background in an effort to seem more appealing to diversity-minded admissions officers. And that process is susceptible to subterfuge by privileged people like Samantha and her parents who can afford to hire consultants to help them game the system.

Some of the application-juicing services are unobjectionable—basic study help and practice interviews, for example. And Samantha, who'd already started to feel disillusioned with the admissions system by the time she'd embarked on the process, didn't lie about herself in her applications. But sometimes in an effort to pour their personalities into a college-friendly mold, students encounter more sinister pressures. From the get-go, Samantha says her tutor and college counselors (all of whom were white) encouraged her not to sound "too Asian" in her application. She took their advice, opting not to write about her violin-playing given the [racial stereotypes about such instruments](#), and scrapping one essay she'd written

about being an Asian in the [mostly white](#) equestrian world.

“A lot of the essays I wrote were dismantled,” Samantha says. “Now that I’ve looked back on it, I’m like: *This is the most unfair thing ever.* ... Sometimes I even have to stop and think about why I’m [at Hopkins]. Who’s not here because I’m here?”

On Monday, a federal judge in Boston will hear the opening arguments of a high-profile federal lawsuit that has brought national attention to the nitty-gritty details of the elite college admissions process in the United States. Contending that Harvard University illegally discriminates against Asian American applicants, the suit is expected to eventually bring the debate over affirmative action back to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2016, the high court ruled on *Fisher v. University of Texas*, determining the use of race as one factor in admissions to be constitutional. But there’s a key difference between the Harvard case and the many high-profile cases that have come before it. Where *Fisher* and others argued that affirmative action is harmful to white applicants, the Harvard suit hinges on the idea that affirmative action hurts minority applicants. Both *Fisher* and the Harvard case were brought by Students for Fair Admissions and spearheaded by the same conservative legal strategist, [Ed Blum](#).

Students for Fair Admissions argues in this suit that Harvard’s [subjective evaluation of things such as students' personalities](#) enables admissions officers to penalize Asian American applicants. An analysis of student data included in the plaintiffs’ court filings found that Harvard's Asian applicants have better GPAs, higher test scores, and more prolific extracurricular involvement than their counterparts of any other race. But because of the customized and inherently nebulous approach that elite-college admissions officers take to evaluating each candidate, this fact doesn’t mean Asian students are the victims of unconstitutional discrimination at Harvard. Proving that’s the case will be incredibly difficult.

Whether or not discrimination is happening at Harvard, and whether or not it can be proved in court, this suit is shining a bright, if indirect, light on a crack in the foundation of elite-college admissions across the country. The lawsuit, it seems, is a byproduct of the fact that too many students are applying for too few spots at too few colleges. The number of college-going Asian Americans in particular [has surged](#) in recent years; it may naturally follow that more seemingly eligible Asian American candidates get rejected from Harvard's limited slots.

“There’s a disease in that so many people are focused on 10 to 20 highly selective colleges that aren’t any better than 100 other colleges,” says Richard Weissbourd, a developmental psychologist and Harvard lecturer, who co-founded [a national initiative](#) trying to encourage children to be altruistic contributors to society. “If we don’t break the back of that [disease],” Weissbourd says, “we can’t get rid of achievement pressure.” The Harvard lawsuit is merely a symptom of this disease that will likely continue to metastasize.

In the early 20th century, the country’s handful of elite universities [began to](#) request essays, teacher recommendations, and other information regarding candidates’ “background” and “character” beyond an entrance-exam score in their effort to surreptitiously restrict the number of Jewish students on campus. But the scope and purpose of this “holistic” approach to evaluating students has evolved since then, and today in its most genuine form evaluates each applicant through the lens of her context—her interests and personality, yes, but also her race and parents’ educational background, for example, and the ways in which that identity may have hindered her opportunities. These days, elite colleges tend to “laud it as a legally viable method to reduce inequality and promote college access,” according to a 2017 University of Michigan [policy brief](#) co-authored by the higher-education professor Michael Bastedo. Holistic admissions can be very effective at achieving those goals: A recent study by Bastedo and several co-researchers published in the [Journal of Higher Education](#) that

analyzed higher-education institutions across the U.S. found that those that use holistic admissions are far more likely than those that don't to enroll low-income students.

But this complex, imprecise approach to admissions is used primarily by the most selective schools (possibly because those schools are in-demand enough that they have the luxury of choosing between many qualified applicants). According to the *Journal of Higher Education* study, nearly half of "[Tier 1](#)" (most competitive) institutions look at each student's context in addition to GPAs and test scores, compared with just about a quarter of those in "Tier 3." This approach to admissions is virtually unheard of in the vast majority of remaining colleges, many of which are [probably worrying](#) more about salvaging [declining enrollment](#) than they are about which articulate, awe-inspiring, accolade-bearing savant to choose from a sea of applications.

In the past 15 or so years, most of the country's colleges and universities have seen a steady surge in the number of freshman applications received, but the trend has been particularly pronounced at elite institutions. In 2015, the [most recent year for which national data are available](#), schools that accept fewer than half of all applicants accounted for just 19 percent of U.S. higher-education institutions yet still accounted for 37 percent of all applications received that year. Lower-tier universities that [primarily serve their local populations](#) are projected to see their student numbers drop by some 11 percent over the next decade or so, while America's elite colleges could see [demand rise by 14 percent](#), according to predictions from the Carleton College economist Nathan Grawe, who [maintains](#) an online index with forecasts on college-attendance rates. A key [historical turning point in the 20th century](#) was the establishment of universities geared toward working-class Americans, as well as of tuition grants earmarked for populations like veterans and low-income Americans. This led to an explosion of college-going population in the 1980s. Other factors are at play, too: the growing popularity of the Common App, which allows

students to use one application for any number of schools, including all the Ivies, and [has resulted in](#) a dramatic increase in the number of schools to which each student applies. For many, there is also [a growing sense that success](#) in the modern economy requires a college education.



The Cambridge, Massachusetts, campus of Harvard, which was founded in 1636 (Charles Krupa / AP)

What's more, an idea that two higher-education scholars once [dubbed](#) America's "gospel of education" has for decades pervaded U.S. society: the notion that schooling is the solution to everything, and that its purpose is workforce preparation. A body of evidence does suggest that attending a top school can greatly increase one's chances of getting a well-paying job. One 2017 study [found](#) a 21 percent difference in earnings between students who attended the country's most selective colleges and those who attended non-selective ones like community colleges. And a [2014 study](#) found that securing a spot at a top graduate program is incredibly difficult for students who attended less-competitive programs as undergraduates—even if they boast excellent grades and test scores.

What students want from their education may also be changing, though. Younger generations seem to value personal prestige more than older ones

—and what better to confer it than an elite school on your resume? The rate of students who identify reputation as “very important” in their college choice, for instance, has reached record-high levels in recent years, according to a nationwide survey of students that’s been conducted regularly since 1967 by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute; the survey [found](#) prestige to be a top priority for roughly two in three incoming freshmen in 2016.

[A 2012 study](#) published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and co-authored by the San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge echo this trend, finding that, in contrast with older generations, millennials and Gen-Xers view “money, fame, and image” as more important than “self-acceptance, affiliation, and community.” In 1967, for example, 86 percent of respondents in a large national survey identified “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an essential life goal; in 2004, the rate was 47 percent. The goal of “being well-off financially” saw a comparable uptick during that time frame. The fact that elite colleges are becoming more selective likely promotes these mentalities, resulting in a self-perpetuating circle.

Students and parents ([and journalists](#)) tend to give outsized attention to the few colleges atop the U.S. higher-education hierarchy that shower thousands of teens with rejection letters every spring. Just 4 percent of U.S. students [attend](#) colleges that accept fewer than one in four of their applicants, according to a 2016 analysis of U.S. Education Department data. But droves of students apply to those schools—nearly 43,000 people applied for one of the 1,655 spots in [Harvard’s Class of 2022](#)— and prospective students and parents continue to give immense weight to rankings such as those published annually by *U.S. News & World Report*, which emphasizes quantitative metrics that tend to favor such institutions (like admitted students’ standardized-test scores, alumni giving, and—until this year—selectivity). All this attention raises their profile, giving elite, selective schools disproportionate power to shape the cultural norms of the

higher-education ecosystem. And that includes how students approach the application process.

A few years after graduating from Harvard in the late 1980s, Naomi Steinberg, started volunteering as an alumni interviewer of prospective freshmen seeking to attend her alma mater. In the mid-2000s, Steinberg, who'd left her job in marketing, decided she wanted to leverage her experience as an interviewer to establish a "boutique" college-admissions consulting firm in Boca Raton, Florida. Today, she works one-on-one with no more than 15 students at a time, most of them private-school kids with big aspirations. A few years ago, she noticed that she was, more and more, having to actively discourage her clients from losing sight of themselves in their pursuit of an acceptance letter.

"You can do everything 'right'—have a 35 [out of 36 on the ACT]; have a lot of leadership, whatever that means; have all the things on some fictitious checklist of things you assumed you need to do—and you are just as likely or exceedingly not likely to get into *insert-whatever-premium-university-here*," Steinberg says, stressing how arbitrary the process can be.

"Admissions officers are thinking, 'I need a red-headed, ambidextrous tennis-star-slash-tuba-player,' and now they can't take your application that was thoughtful and wonderful because of the directive that just came down. ... They just need a student to fill that spot on the beautiful mosaic they're creating."

But as Samantha's story attests, and as Steinberg has witnessed time and time again, it's hard for teens to keep things in perspective when they're in the thick of it. The application process rests on, as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* journalist Eric Hoover [has put it](#), "a maddening mishmash of competing objectives." This can make it seem like a game to be conned—something Lenora Chu, a Shanghai-based journalist and author of the 2017 book [Little Soldiers](#) about the Chinese educational system, has noticed is widespread among students in China seeking to get into a U.S. college.

“There’s a growing perception that there are more losers than winners in this new world”—that admissions is “a zero-sum game,” Chu said in an email. “This perception of scarcity drives behavior.”

In some cases, students resort to duplicitous tactics. Some cases are extreme—[hiring ringers to take the SAT in students' place, for example](#), but for the most part they involve exaggeration or omission, often influenced by advice gleaned [from forums, application consultants](#), and [books](#) promising to help people crack the code of elite-college missions. Steinberg does what she can to discourage this impulse and emphasize the value of the process as a “journey.” One student she has worked with, for example, tried to write a personal essay about Cinco De Mayo after discovering that a distant relative had hailed from Mexico, perhaps thinking that any connection to a marginalized identity would give him a leg up in admissions. She immediately told him that wasn’t a good idea—the holiday, for starters, [is largely an American celebration](#).

Asian American protesters outside the Supreme Court in December 2015 (Jacquelyn Martin / AP)

But it’s seen as common knowledge among many Asian American students and the application consultants who cater to them that emphasizing their racial and cultural identity could hurt their prospects. Some suspect that stereotypes of Asian Americans as the overachieving “model minority” lead admissions officers to stigmatize them as boring or unoriginal, as students preoccupied with quantifiable outcomes who lack the coveted X-factor the sought-after schools are seeking to finesse a perfectly balanced freshman class.

Liana Wang, a Yale student from Houston whose parents are working-class immigrants from China, remembers how she and her friends had assimilated the message, so ubiquitous that its source is hard to ascertain, that they needed to avoid “becoming the media-caricature ‘nerd’ type,” to be “more gregarious, more extroverted,” Wang says. She and her Asian

American peers assumed that “if you’re interning in the medical center or doing research ... you shouldn’t do that because people will just see you being just another stereotypical Asian.” These days, Wang, a junior majoring in economics and global affairs, has her sights on getting a Ph.D. in economics. In high school, she shunned STEM-focused extracurriculars and tried to convince herself that she wasn’t especially good at those subjects. After taking some math courses in preparation for that degree, she was surprised to discover that they weren’t that difficult, that perhaps she’s good at math. “Maybe I could’ve pursued something that was more quantitative-focused, but I just didn’t think about it because I thought, ‘Oh, I just don’t want to be that stereotypical Asian,’” she says.

While Wang ultimately came to realize that such denial was counterproductive, to embrace interests and strengths that confirm stereotypes about people of her race. Yet many other Asian American students likely encounter constant signaling—including after they [arrive on campus](#)—that they’ll be better off if they downplay their racial identity. This underscores how the lawsuit against Harvard is a symptom of the larger problem with elite-college admissions. The stakes attached to the process have become so unwieldy, and are clashing to such an intense degree, that many Americans find it conceivable that it is enabling widespread racial discrimination.

Most methods of admissions subterfuge rely on money, savvy, or some combination of both. In some ways, holistic admissions privilege the already-privileged—who, data suggest, are already far more likely to use test-prep services and attend schools that [inflate grades](#). And many of those already-privileged people get an extra boost from the people reviewing their applications. Take, for example, the fact that most top colleges give preference to applicants whose relatives are alumni: At Harvard, for example, at least 12 percent of first-year students—a majority of them white—[fall in](#) that “legacy” category. Then there are those who are recruited for their athletic talents, [most of whom](#) come from white, middle-

class families, research suggests. In her new book [\*Race on Campus: Debunking Myths With Data\*](#), Julie J. Park, an education professor at the University of Maryland, [concludes](#) that as many as 40 percent of Harvard's white population are legacies or recruited athletes.

As a high-school senior, Jalen is in the 11th hour of his well-planned-out bid to gain admission to Yale, the University of Chicago, or UPenn, but he doesn't seem overly stressed. At 17, he's already spent years preparing for this moment both inside the classrooms of an elite boarding school in Ontario and outside of them. His extracurricular resume, for example, includes but isn't limited to piano, basketball, badminton; his school chapter of DECA, an international entrepreneurship competition for teens; and volunteer work as a photographer and marketing consultant at the Toronto Military Family Resource Center.

But Jalen, whom I am identifying by his first name only to protect his privacy as a minor, frequently catches himself wondering whether that's enough. "When you're competing against every applicant ... it's hard not to just want more and more and more and more," he says, noting that it can be hard for prolific high-schoolers like himself to figure out what's motivating them to do a certain activity. "Sometimes I notice I'm thinking a lot about what I can do to make [whatever I'm doing] grander. It's like I can't ever be satisfied."

The Swarthmore College psychologist Barry Schwartz has long [argued](#) that the abundance of choices in the U.S., whether of higher-education institutions or of salad dressings, is making Americans miserable. Abundant choice, he argues, compels those doing the choosing to set unreasonably high expectations for themselves. This, he suggests, plays out in especially acute ways in college admissions.

For example, a 2013 paper published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology* [suggested](#) that the [unprecedented numbers](#) of students seeking help at college-campus counseling centers for substance abuse,

depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and nonsuicidal self-injury might be suffering in part from the “built-up stresses from the 18 years of trying to achieve admission to top-tier colleges.”

Are elite colleges, as the *Chronicle's* Hoover suggested, “victims of their own popularity”? These sought-after institutions have certainly played a role in creating the current system's twisted incentives, but they're somewhat hamstrung in their ability to change things. How do you stop Americans from associating, to borrow the words of the Harvard law professor and affirmative-action scholar Lani Guinier, “[selectivity with excellence](#)”? Universities—both elite and open-access, private and public—are heavily reliant on students' tuition money and research-grant funding, and are thus forced to compete with each other to stay on top. And even they wanted to band together in an effort to fix the admissions system, those fixes would likely be prohibited by federal antitrust law, as *The Atlantic's* Jeff Selingo has [reported](#); many of the proposed solutions would require colleges to share information about applicants with each other and thus cooperate, violating laws pertaining to corporate competition. As one college-admissions expert [concluded](#) in a 2012 interview with *Inside Higher Ed*, students and colleges just keep “chasing each other around a round table.”

If you're looking for culprits, there are plenty of other targets on whom it's tempting to pin blame—college-application coaches who help package students into perfect candidates, sometimes at the expense of their true selves, or high-school counselors who keep aiming their students at the same famous elite colleges without considering other options. But are they perpetuating the problem or simply delivering what the system demands? Steinberg says she regularly feels a psychological tension between the fact that she profits off the cultural fixation on elite colleges but also recognizes its consequences.

“What we universally have created is a dysfunctional system that is

demanding something that most 17-year-olds aren't developmentally quite ready to [give]," she says—a definitive, nuanced answer to the question of who they are and how they fit into the world.

Some elite colleges have taken small steps to combat their own elitism. Harvard, for example, a few years ago launched an online-education portal allowing any member of the public to access and take its courses. And Jill Dolan, Princeton University's Dean of the College, says that the school's admissions officers consistently stress, on campus tours and at events for prospective students, that the Ivy League institution isn't for everyone and that a lesser-known school is often a much better fit for many candidates. Many top colleges are also members of the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success, which has developed an alternative universal application that's [designed](#) to encourage kids to think more deeply about the process. Some, most notably [Yale](#), have recently increased the sizes of their freshman classes; Princeton [has major plans](#) to expand its undergraduate body, too.

But college admissions won't be fixed by these small tweaks alone. And perhaps the lawsuit against Harvard, whatever its merits, could help start to dispel the illusion that whether one gets into an elite college or not is any reflection of a student's worth or future prospects. In a [recent survey of admissions directors by \*Inside Higher Ed\* and Gallup](#), half of respondents said that the Harvard lawsuit "has created significant distrust among Asian American applicants and their families" in the admissions process. Perhaps it's raising awareness about the flaws in the system forcing conversations that could serve as an important first step in effecting change.

In the meantime, the students who do win the elite-college-admission lottery often find themselves stuck on the hamster wheel of achievement. Though they may be better positioned for success than their peers at other colleges, they also find that the stress and competition they endured to get accepted doesn't end once they're on campus. "At Yale, everyone is

competing against these standards that they set for themselves, and ... that is something I wish just didn't exist," says Wang, the aspiring economist. "But I don't know how I could've approached [the admissions process] better in high school. It's kind of like a Tragedy of the Commons: If everybody is competitive, you have to be, too."