Overview

For the past five years at the Center for Civil Rights at the University Of North Carolina School Of Law and at Duke University, I have been devising strategies and developing programs that address the opportunity gap that systematic racial and economic isolation in our public schools has created. In this work I share the core values of the Democratic Merit Project, the most important of which is the need to forge a new conception of merit or achievement. In this concept paper I briefly discuss one of the Project’s areas of focus: “alternatives to traditional measures of merit in the college admissions process.”

Current Notions of Merit in the Highly Selective Admissions Process

The good news is that there is a profound and widespread sense of concern about selective undergraduate admissions—to limit discussion to our most prestigious and influential colleges and universities. The bad news is that there are few if any incentives and thus little political will to make significant changes in the current admissions regime. Almost every issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education brings news that the system is broken. Blue ribbon committees abound. (See for example, the College Board’s Admissions in 21st Century initiative to get a sense of the discourse.) A list of the most troubling characteristics of the current selective admissions regime might include in no particular order: a) historically and (indeed) embarrassingly high rejection rates; b) institutional response(s) to these rates that include both sincere public concern and internal practices that continue to use these (yield) rates as evidence of institutional prestige; c) mounting evidence that current admissions practices will increasingly yield classes that fail to reflect dramatic demographic changes underway in this country; and d) general recognition that the process of admissions to our leading colleges and universities has little educative value to applicants—here, see the work of the Education Conservancy.

Despite all this, it would be a mistake to say that we are nearing a point of crisis, which as Jerome Karabel argues in The Chosen has historically been a precondition for significant changes in the selective admissions process—i.e. the admittance of women and under-represented minority applicants beginning in the 1960s. In regard to fundamentally reconsidering current notions of merit in the highly selective admissions process, my sense is that there is little interest in this task even among those who are most committed to forging greater equity in the system. To begin with, few admissions officers believe that attracting qualified applicants is a problem in the current environment. Indeed, most admissions officers believe there are an abundance of qualified and worthy candidates in their applicant pools. The lament is that literally thousands of qualified applicants need to be turned away. While there is much talk about the way academic achievement is measured and the mix between academic and other areas of achievement in the process, I do not
think there is widespread belief in the admissions profession that current admissions criteria are not delivering an excess of students who are excellent matches for the liberal arts communities that exist on their campuses. There is, to be sure, much genuine concern about equity, but these concerns are best understood as a desire to increase the pool of poor and minority students that qualify under existing admissions criteria and under existing definitions of achievement and merit.

What does the current definition of merit look like? One could cynically but not altogether inaccurately describe the highly selective admissions process as an exercise in individual human capital achievement. Here, the individual applicant must, of course, demonstrate outstanding achievement in the classroom and examinations hall. But this is just a baseline measure. The applicant should also demonstrate achievement on the athletic field, and/or the conservatory, and/or in the community soup kitchen. The challenge for the applicant is to craft a story of individual accomplishment that illuminates engagement, passion, the ability overcome challenges, and talent. While each story should have a plot—outstanding overachiever, outstanding young humanist, outstanding young athlete, outstanding young social entrepreneur, no two stories are or should be alike save for their exceptionalism. The task for an admissions director is to craft a class in which the various stories complement each other thereby invigorating the distinctive undergraduate liberal arts community that exists within and outside the classroom on their campus. In regard to equity, then, the challenge is to find more students from poor and minority backgrounds who can tell these stories of individual achievement and leadership.

Why do admissions directors, faculty members who serve on admissions committees and Deans operate as if this conception of merit is a good match for what they want students to do once they get to their campuses and what they want them to do after they graduate? The short answer to this question is that they see the incredible talents and achievements exhibited in the applications of those admitted and are unable to conceive that this group of young people will not enhance the liberal arts community on their campuses. And because it is difficult to believe that these students will not enhance the liberal arts community (and there is much antidotal evidence this is in fact occurring), few institutions have systematically tried to ascertain if the current markers of pre-college achievement are actually correlated with the outcomes most desired by the university community and implied by the institutional mission.

To provide a longer answer you would begin with a survey of the ever increasing number of quality applicants that arrive in the admissions offices of our leading colleges and universities first for the

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1 Especially, in the private college and university sector, it is very easy to overstate the import of the SAT, high school grades, and class rank in most admissions decisions. Indeed, for the great number of applicants in the pool—including poor and minority students—the variance between SAT scores and high school grades is so small that most admissions decisions are made on the basis of non-academic measures.

2 Admissions directors are reluctant to identify any one student attribute for fear it will be understood by applicants as THE required characteristic.

3 Note that environmental or context factors that play an increasingly important role in elite admissions in the United Kingdom and in a different manner in the % plans in Texas and California—such as the racial and socio-economic make up of school and community of the applicant—play little if any role in the highly selective system. Class rank and the availability of AP classes at the applicant’s school are the most common environmental factors that feature in the highly selective admissions process. The lack of consideration of environmental factors means that the admissions process will continue to reward a few poor and minority students, but will do little to grow the pipeline or address the structural challenges associated with racial and economic isolation in public education and housing. As one admissions director once told me,” I know the identity of every single African American senior who scored over 1300 on the (old) SAT this year.” There were 76 such students in my state, North Carolina, that year.
early decision deadline and then for the regular decision deadline. Then you would discuss how the most common college outcome measures—GPA and attrition—have no real meaning in the highly selective environment and thus cannot be used as evidence that current admissions criterion are related to college success. GPA isn’t helpful because the variation in GPA at our best colleges even between Humanities and Social Science majors—where it is virtually impossible to get an F, on the one hand, and Math and Science majors—where students can actually receive an F, on the other, is simply not great enough (here see Taming the River). In regard to attrition, while it is hard to get into our best colleges and universities it is virtually impossible to be asked to leave for academic reasons.

A longer answer might also include discussion of the organizational distance between the admissions office and undergraduate Schools of Arts and Sciences where the core work of the university—teaching and the faculty—are carried out. There are to be sure links between the two—faculty representation on admissions committees, membership on university wide committees, overlapping reporting lines to upper administrators, etc. But on a day to day basis there is very little formal contact between most admissions offices and the rest of the university. Put simply, the admissions director admits a class and then has very little opportunity to see what these students actually do in their college career and thus cannot be sure in any systematic manner if he/she is using the right criteria. There are, for example, excellent longitudinal panel studies of the transition from high school to college across the selective college/university sector, but few colleges are eager to undertake studies like this on their own campuses. (For studies that examine the transition to college across the highly selective sector, see, for example, The Source of the River and Taming the River by Massey and his coauthors and No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal by Espenshade and Walton Radford.) Such institutional studies would be incredibly expensive and would require some very difficult decisions. For example, universities and colleges would presumably need to develop outcome measures that were consistent with their branding and mission. Put differently, they would need to answer the question: what do we want our undergraduates to actually do during their time on campus? The lack of real data on student trajectories after admission and the poor relationship between admissions files and these trajectories is why admissions directors are so eager to get antidotal evidence from faculty about students. Most admissions directors genuinely want to know if they made the right choices.

The long answer to the question about the fit between current definitions of merit in the highly selective admissions process and what students who possess this form of merit actually do once admitted would, then, depict what social scientists call a loosely coupled institution. These are institutions in which the admissions office is weakly connected organizationally to the rest of the university, where admissions decisions are undertaken with little systematic knowledge of the relationship between admissions criterion and outcomes in college and beyond. These are institutions whose prestige makes it possible, indeed, perhaps necessary, that they be loosely coupled in this manner.

If these answers are close to an accurate picture of the current admissions process they suggest a set of challenges and opportunities for the Democratic Merit Project. For example:

- How might the Democratic Merit Project connect to the growing effort to make the selective admissions process less stressful and more educative for applicants?
Can the serious challenges facing our leading colleges and universities—increasing self segregation along racial and ethnic lines and the small number of students who are able to creatively solve problems in a multi-disciplinary manner, to name just two that I am increasingly struck by—be linked explicitly to current admissions criteria?

- My own research suggests that the racially homogenous friendship networks that are common among the white students who attend our leading universities are correlated with self-segregation on our campuses. You can't have a vibrant undergraduate liberal arts community if students are self-segregating. Elite admissions directors have found this argument compelling, but the loosely coupled nature of our universities and colleges—i.e. the fact that they are not involved or responsible for undergraduate education—makes it hard for them to act on this concern.

- Could the Democratic Merit Project convene a meeting attended by teams of admissions directors, faculty, students, and Deans of Arts and Sciences from a number of institutions to consider the link between admissions criteria and the key challenges facing elite undergraduate education?

- Does Democratic Merit provide an answer to these challenges?

Can the elements of Democratic Merit be linked explicitly to the core everyday work of the university and not just to the more abstract institutional mission? (Admissions decisions are linked more closely to institutional brands than mission statements.)

- How is democracy implicated in the working of the liberal arts communities that are the pride of our best universities?

- How precisely can students with democratic merit invigorate the—intellectual, social, and cultural—work of these communities both within and outside the classroom?