



A DCI Deliberation Guide

College Admissions Policies (Part II):

*How Should Applicants' Backgrounds Be Taken into Account,
If at All?*

Format for Deliberation

Before the Deliberation

- I. Read this Deliberation Guide (REQUIRED)
- II. Read "[What Do Colleges Look for in Students?](#)" from *College Data*
- III. Read "[The Athlete Advantage](#)" from *The Harvard Crimson*
- IV. Read "[Athletics Are Not Expendable, if Education is Our Goal](#)" from *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*
- V. Read "[Legacy Admissions: How Important Are Legacy College Admissions](#)" from *Ivy Wise*
- VI. Read "[Room for Debate: Why Do Top Schools Still Take Legacy Applicants](#)" from *The New York Times*
- VII. Read [A Generation of American Men Give Up on College: 'I Just Feel Lost'](#) from *The Wall Street Journal*

During the Deliberation

- I. Setting Expectations - 10 min.
- II. Getting to Know Each Other - 15 min.
- III. Understanding Tensions between Athlete & Legacy Admissions and Equal Treatment - 30 min.
- IV. Identifying, Evaluating, and Prioritizing Policies - 45 min.
- V. Reflections - 20 min.

Background

The weight that should be given for various attributes for college admissions has been a source of controversy for decades. In our first deliberation guide on this topic, we considered arguments for and against using race as a factor in the admissions process. In this guide, we'll focus on several other criteria that might be utilized in college admissions. Some argue, for

example, that athletes and children of alumni should be given special consideration, while others assert that students should be admitted based on human achievement beyond sports, such as in music, the arts, engineering, or entrepreneurship. Still others maintain that socio-economic background and gender should be considered and weighted highly. And others argue that admissions should focus strictly on academic merit, which begs the question of how such merit should be measured. In this guide, we'll review some of the relevant research on each of these factors and the arguments for and against including them in the admissions process.

Athletes

Athletes receive advantages in college admissions at many colleges and universities, and past research suggests that these advantages are significant.¹² In 2002, Writer James L. Shulman and former Princeton University President William Bowen published pioneering research showing that the admission rates for athletes were 48 percent higher than non-athletes at 30 selective colleges.³ More recent data also suggests that athletes have a distinct advantage over nonathletes in the Harvard admissions process.⁴

Those who support athlete preferences in college admissions argue that sports bring much needed **money and prestige** to colleges and universities. When college athletic programs perform well, they see an increase in the number of applicants and are therefore able to be more academically selective.⁵ Across all NCAA divisions, college sports brought in an estimated \$18.9 billion in revenue in 2019. The NCAA has reported that 90% of its revenue goes to support student-athletes through scholarship funds, student assistance funds, and assistance for academic programs.⁶ The prestige associated with college sports can also counterbalance the political polarization surrounding higher education, as nearly 60% of Republicans believe it is having a negative effect on the country.⁷ Given that many conservatives view intercollegiate athletics, and college football in particular, as embodying values like “tradition and toughness” that are important to them, strong athletic programs provide them with a reason to continue to support colleges and universities.⁸

Supporters might also point to research showing that **athlete preferences help increase the proportion of students of color and historically underrepresented groups attending college.**

¹ [“College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students”](#) *The Atlantic*

² [Who Gets the Largest College Admissions Advantage? Let’s Look at the Athletes](#)” *The Washington Post*

³ [“College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students”](#) *The Atlantic*

⁴ [“College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students”](#) *The Atlantic*

⁵ [“The Flutie Effect: How Athletic Success Boosts College Applications”](#) *Forbes*

⁶ [“Where Does the Money Go?”](#) *NCAA*

⁷ [“The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education.”](#) *Pew Research Center*

⁸ [“College football gives conservatives their own safe space on campus.”](#) *The Washington Post*

For example, at Duke University, “16 percent of the Black men have athletic scholarships compared to 1.8 percent of White men.”⁹ In Division I NCAA schools overall, Black males are 13 times more likely than White males to be on a college football or basketball scholarship.¹⁰

Another argument for giving priority to athletes is that **colleges should not only be focused on academic excellence but athletic excellence as well**. As Bates College’s Michael Rocque has argued, “Athletics are absolutely a part – a core part, even – of the student education experience.”¹¹ Higher education should cultivate all forms of human achievement, not only book learning and the work of the mind. Including athletic performance in college admissions also reinforces both ancient and contemporary goals of educating the “whole person” – mind, body, and spirit.¹² Supporters might agree that this approach suggests that applicants with special artistic, musical, engineering, entrepreneurial or other talents that demonstrate the full range of human achievement should also be prioritized in the admissions process. Doing so, however, does not negate the value of continuing to prioritize athletic excellence.

Those who oppose athlete preference in college admissions argue that athletes should not be given special treatment and that **athletes take spots that should be given to students who are better qualified academically**.¹³ At Harvard University, for example, 20% of the student body plays on 42 varsity teams, and across all Division III schools student-athletes make up on average 25% of their students.¹⁴ As Bowen and James’ research showed, these students on average do not perform as well academically in college as non-athletes, and as recent data from Harvard has shown, are on average also not as academically prepared as non-athletes.¹⁵

Another argument against athlete preferences is that **they reinforce racial and economic inequities**. While more Black men may receive basketball and football scholarships, the vast majority of students who play hockey, lacrosse, and other sports are White. Overall, 61% of NCAA college athletes are White, 16% are Black, and 6% are Hispanic, and ostensibly scholarship amounts track those percentages. They also likely track differences in economic background, which can be significant. At Harvard, for example, 46.3% of recruited athletes in the class of 2022 came from families with household incomes of \$250,000 or higher, compared

⁹ [“Study Shows that Athletes Make up Huge Percentages of Black Students at Many Universities”](#) *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ [“Athletics Are Not Expendable, if Education is Our Goal,”](#) *Diverse: Issues in College Education*

¹² [“A Holistic Approach to Education — the Mind, Body, Spirit”](#) *St. Mary’s College*

¹³ [“Ending Athletic Preference”](#) *Harvard Crimson*

¹⁴ [“Athletics Are Not Expendable, if Education is Our Goal,”](#) *Diverse: Issues in College Education*; [“Varsity Athletes Bubble Up from Concentrated Pockets Across U.S., Internationally,”](#) *Harvard Crimson*;

[“Ethical College Admissions: Is it Time to End Admissions Preferences for Athletes?”](#) *Inside Higher Ed*

¹⁵ [“College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students”](#) *The Atlantic*

with one-third of the class as a whole. Only 3.7% of recruited athletes came from families making less than \$40,000.¹⁶

Opponents of preferences for athletes also **contest the reputational and financial benefits** of attempting to create a top-tier athletic program. While a few universities do turn a profit from their athletic program, according to data from the NCAA, “only 25 of the approximately 1,100 schools across 102 conferences in the NCAA made money on college sports last year,” and “not one college in the NCAA's Division II or III saw their revenues exceed expenses that year.”¹⁷ A study by the Chronicle of Higher Education also found “less than \$1 of every \$100 in revenue generated by major college athletic departments at public colleges is directed to academic programs.”¹⁸ And as Nicholas Josefowitz has argued using the case of MIT, schools do not need strong athletic programs to have strong reputations.¹⁹

Following the **whole person logic** mentioned above, Josefowitz also agrees that the “admissions process should not ignore athletics when making its acceptance decision” and “activities outside the classroom are rightly valued by the admissions office.” But, he asserts, “athletics should be treated like any other extra-curricular activity and not given a special coach’s tag” that privileges it above other valuable activities.²⁰

Legacy Admissions

Bowen and James’ research study also found that in 1999 legacies – children of alumni -- are given a 25% boost in college admissions.²¹ While this research is over 20 years old and many schools no longer have a preference for legacies,²² many schools still do. For example, legacy applicants were five times more likely to be admitted to Harvard than non-legacies between 2010 and 2015, four times more likely to Princeton in 2018, and three times more likely to Stanford in 2017.²³ A 2011 study found that legacies at 30 selective colleges were also three times more likely to be admitted than non-legacies. Nationwide, about 48% colleges and universities gave legacies preferential treatment in 2019, down ten percent from 2004; such legacy preference is more widespread at elite schools than at less selective ones.²⁴

¹⁶ [Meet the Class of 2022](#) Harvard Crimson; “[College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students](#)” *The Atlantic*

¹⁷ “[Do Colleges Make Money From Athletics?](#)” *Best Colleges*

¹⁸ “[As Sports Programs Get Richer, Few Give Much for Academics](#)” *Chronicle of Higher Education*

¹⁹ “[Ending Athletic Preference](#)” *Harvard Crimson*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “[College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students](#)” *The Atlantic*

²² “[Legacy Preference Gets Fresh Look Following College Admissions Scandal](#)” *The Wall Street Journal*

²³ “[Is It Time to End Legacy Admissions?](#)” *Best Colleges*

²⁴ “[Legacy Preference Gets Fresh Look Following College Admissions Scandal](#)” *The Wall Street Journal*

Those who support legacy admissions argue that they are needed to “**encourage donations from alumni.**”²⁵ A 2017 Harvard University report found that eliminating legacy preferences at the institution could jeopardize financial aid funds and the “generous financial support” that “is essential to Harvard’s position as a leading institution of higher learning.”²⁶ Eliminating legacy admissions may alienate some alumni, who are a critical source of support for colleges and universities.²⁷ In 2019, “colleges and universities raised more than \$11 billion from alumni, almost a quarter of their total fundraising, according to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.”²⁸ Proponents argue that the practice of legacy admissions is necessary to raising these funds.

As Stephen Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University, has argued, **legacy admissions are a way of showing respect for tradition, honoring past contributions, and enhancing a sense of a college as an intergenerational community.** “Careful accommodation of a limited number of youngsters,” he writes, “whose parents, grandparents and great-grandparents have helped to lay the foundation on which the institution stands shows a respect for tradition and honors those without whom the contemporary university might not even exist.”²⁹

In the view of Matt Feeney, **legacies also contribute to a college’s local distinctiveness and character**, as “the consideration given to legacy families is a lineal gesture, and represents one of the final emblems of qualitative distinction among schools—the regional, religious, pedagogical, and historical differences that once gave America’s many colleges their many different personalities.”³⁰ Another argument in favor of showing a preference for legacy applicants is that they are more likely to enroll, **boosting a college’s yield rate**, which has numerous benefits to the institution.³¹

Some schools, such as Princeton University, where roughly half the student population is now non-White, also point to data showing that **legacy admissions increase demographic diversity**, given that “among legacies admitted last year, 27% were students of color.”³²

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ [“Legacy Preferences Show a Respect for Tradition”](#) *The New York Times*

³⁰ [“The Pointless End of Legacy Admissions”](#) *The New Yorker*

³¹ [“Is It Time to End Legacy Admissions?”](#) Best Colleges; [“What Is “Yield” in the College Admissions Process?”](#) ThoughtCo.

³² [“Legacy Preference Gets Fresh Look Following College Admissions Scandal”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*

Those who oppose legacy admissions argue that legacy preferences run counter to colleges' "stated goal of attracting a more diverse student body."³³ They claim that legacy admissions allow people who have money and connections to manipulate the system and "**disproportionately benefits wealthy, white families.**"³⁴ As Michael Dannenberg has written, "More white students are admitted to top 10 universities under an alumni preference bonus than the total number of Black and [Latino/a] students admitted under affirmative action policies."³⁵ Data from Harvard further shows how legacies are more likely to be wealthy; over 46% of legacies in Harvard's Class of 2022 come from families making more than \$500,000; less than 1% come from families making less than \$40,000.³⁶

Connected to these concerns about racial and economic equity, opponents also argue the **advantage provided to legacy applicants is unfair to any student** – rich or poor, White or non-White – whose application is stronger than those of legacies. As Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) has stated in introducing his bill that would effectively ban legacy admissions, "Selecting applicants to universities based off of family names, connections, or the size of their bank accounts creates an unlevel playing field for students without those built-in advantages, especially impacting minority and first-generation students."

Opponents of legacy admissions also contend that **research doesn't support the notion that legacy admissions are necessary for fundraising.** A study of the top 100 universities using data from 1998 to 2008 found that no statistically significant causal relationship exists between legacy admissions and alumni giving.³⁷

Other Factors to Consider

Socioeconomic Background: Rather than focusing on race, legacy status, or athletic ability, some suggest that admissions officers should prioritize low-income students.³⁸ Only 3% of the student body at America's most selective colleges are from the bottom socioeconomic quartile, while 72% come from the top quartile.³⁹ Multiple studies have shown that weighing admissions by both income and wealth factors can "achieve racial diversity on selective college campuses while maintaining high academic standards,"⁴⁰ and the University of Colorado Boulder's class-based admissions system "increased admit rates for not only low-income students but also

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "[The Real Reasons Legacy Preferences Exist](#)" *The Atlantic*

³⁵ "[Is It Time to End Legacy Admissions?](#)" *Best Colleges*

³⁶ "[Meet the Class of 2022.](#)" *Harvard Crimson*

³⁷ "[An Empirical Analysis of the Impact of Legacy Preferences on Alumni Giving at Top Universities](#)" *The Century Foundation*

³⁸ "[Affirmative action should be based on class, not race.](#)" *The Economist*

³⁹ "[Should Low-Income Students Get More Preference in College Admissions?](#)" *Money.com*

⁴⁰ "[Affirmative action should be based on class, not race.](#)" *The Economist*

underrepresented minorities, as compared to race-only affirmative action.”⁴¹ One study found that preferences based on socioeconomic status instead of race increased the share of first generation students from 7% to 25% and underrepresented minority students from 28% to 30%. A study published by ETS, however, concluded that affirmative action policies based on socioeconomic status are not likely to result in as much racial diversity race-based policies would.⁴²

Gender: Higher education is increasingly facing a gender imbalance, with more women enrolling than men. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, “Men made up just 40% of college students during the 2020-21 school year, while women made up around 60%. Men also accounted for more than 70% of the decline in students at US colleges and universities over the last five years.” Some colleges and universities are admitting a larger percentage of male applicants in order to maintain a gender balance in their student bodies. Baylor University, for example, admitted 7% more men than women in 2020 to increase the proportion of men at the school, which at the time stood at 40%. Some have framed this as “affirmative action for men,” who may not be applying to or attending college for a variety of reasons.

Merit: A common argument made is that college admissions should be based on merit alone. How such academic merit should be determined, however, continues to be a contested question. Frequently used indicators include Grade Point Average (GPA), Class Rank, SAT or ACT scores, extracurricular activities, community service, essay quality, recommendations, and rankings by alumni or admission staff.⁴³ What dimensions of “merit” are these indicators measuring, and should they all be weighted equally? These are also important questions to consider in thinking about college admissions policies.

⁴¹ [“Class-Based Affirmative Action Works.”](#) *New York Times*

⁴² [“Can Socioeconomic Status Substitute for Race in Affirmative Action College Admissions Policies? Evidence From a Simulation Model!”](#) ETS

⁴³ [“Admission Decisions: What Counts.”](#) *College Board*

Varsity Blues Scandal

In 2019, a college admissions scandal dubbed “Varsity Blues” that involved Hollywood actors and other wealthy families emerged that shed light on the role of money in college admissions. According to the Department of Justice, dozens of individuals were “allegedly involved in a nationwide conspiracy that facilitated cheating on college entrance exams and the admission of students to elite universities as purported athletic recruits” and “were arrested by federal agents in multiple states.”⁴⁴ Athletic coaches from Yale, Stanford, USC, Wake Forest, Georgetown and other universities were implicated, as well as parents and exam administrators.⁴⁵ For some, this scandal demonstrated how preferential admissions for athletes can reinforce existing inequities, but for others it was something that should be avoided by implementing more accountable and transparent processes, but it did not undermine the underlying role of athletics in the admissions process.⁴⁶

In the wake of this scandal, numerous proposals have been advanced to reform the college admissions process. One such proposal preferred by Sally Rubenstone, a former admissions officer at Smith College, is to simplify the process “to a single, proctored application, preventing parents or consultants from rewriting students’ essays.”⁴⁷ Former Stanford admissions officer Jon Reider argues that fraud prevention efforts will not prevent advantages for wealthy families. He argues that colleges should instead “eliminate early decision applications and stop giving an edge to athletes and legacy applicants.”⁴⁸

Setting Expectations (10 min)

In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Deliberative Dispositions,” and “Conversation Agreements” below.

Expected Outcomes of the Conversation

The purpose of this deliberation is to deepen our understanding of college admission policies in the United States. Over the course of the deliberation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow deliberators as well as share our own experiences and beliefs related to college admission policies. By the end of the conversation, we will have deliberated about the strongest and weakest arguments for preferential consideration for

⁴⁴ [“Investigations of College Admissions and Testing Bribery Scheme”](#) *U.S. Department of Justice*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ [“A Year after the College Admissions Scandal, Here’s what Has \(and Has Not\) Changed”](#) *Time*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

athletes and children of alums and discussed our highest and lowest priorities for reforming college admission policies in the United States as they relate to legacy status, athletic performance, gender, socioeconomic status, and academic merit. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of both agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

Deliberative Dispositions

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a commitment to egalitarianism, open mindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

Conversation Agreements

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgements
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

Getting to Know Each Other (15 min)

In this section, we will each take 1-2 minutes to share our names, where we live, and what drew us to this conversation. We’ll also answer one of the following questions:

1. What personal identities are most important to you and why?
2. What are your hopes and concerns for your family, community and/or country?
3. What would your best friend say about who you are?
4. What sense of purpose / mission / duty guides you in your life?

Understanding Tensions Between Athlete & Legacy Admissions and Equal Treatment (30 min)

In this section, we will examine the arguments for and against preferential consideration for athletes and children of alums. We will each take 1-2 minutes to answer the question below, without interruption or crosstalk.

1. What are the strongest and weakest arguments for preferential consideration for athletes in college admissions?

Once everyone has answered these questions, we will each take 1-2 minutes to answer the next question:

2. What are the strongest and weakest arguments for preferential consideration for children of alumni in college admissions?

After everyone has answered these questions, the group is welcome to take a few minutes for clarifying or follow up questions and responses. Continue exploring the topic as time allows.

Identifying, Evaluating, and Prioritizing Policies (45 min)

We will now identify, evaluate, and prioritize specific measures to take related to college admissions policies. We will each address 1-2 of the questions below, and then together we'll explore our areas of agreement and disagreement. We can also generate additional ideas that may transcend and elicit more support than existing proposals.

1. Should preference be shown to athletes?
2. Should preference be shown to outstanding artists, musicians, engineers, entrepreneurs, and other exemplars of human achievement? If so, should such preference be equivalent to the preference shown for athletes?

3. Should preference be shown to legacies?
4. Should preference be shown to applicants with disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds?
5. Should preference be shown to first generation college applicants?
6. Should preference be shown to men?
7. Should applicants be judged by their academic merit only? If so, how should “merit” be defined?

If there is strong disagreement in the group, try to explore the underlying reasons for the disagreement – are they based on different factual interpretations, different value emphases, or different life experiences? Perhaps you can agree on where precisely you disagree, which can be helpful. Alternatively, if there is widespread agreement in the group, try to dig deeper and examine the nuances of these policies – are there particular contexts, for example, where your agreement breaks down? Or perhaps your reasons for supporting particular policies are different? Exploring this complexity can be helpful as well.

Reflections (20 min)

While today’s conversation is an important step in the journey, effectively balancing concerns about college admission policies will take time and commitment. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, we can continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
2. Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
3. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today? Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problem and its potential solutions?
4. Was there anything that was said or not said that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
5. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations on issues related to college admission policies?
6. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?

About This Guide

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The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics as well as organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.

DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathway Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they become even more valuable when they lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative and email dc@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathway Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.