Legacy Admissions Practices in Higher Education

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Higher education is one area of our society which has endless potential to provide individuals with better opportunities. This is one of the reasons why competition for admission to many institutions has continued to increase in recent years. This competition produces the ever-challenging question in admissions of who should be admitted (Hurwitz, 2011). For over one hundred years one of the ways that question has been answered has been through admissions preference for applicants who are related to alumni. This system continues to breed the same social inequality in which it began (Coe & Davidson, 2011). Prominent institutions such as Texas A&M, University of Georgia, and the University of California system have ceased use of this admissions practice, but many other institutions continue to use it (Schmidt, 2004). At elite institutions the practice has been shown to provide a substantial benefit, particularly for legacy applicants who are children of alumni (Hurwitz, 2011). This benefit creates both ethical and legal dilemmas which should be thoroughly explored. Possibilities for research on the topic of legacy admissions policies are seemingly endless and include not only exploration of the benefit the policy provides, but also the financial implications to institutions. The practice of legacy preference in higher education admissions has a long history and currently presents a number of ethical and legal issues which must be explored through research. This research will be difficult due to the overwhelming number of variables which influence admissions decisions and many other areas which legacy admissions policies impact.

**Historical Foundations of Legacy Admissions**

Legacy preference in college admissions provides advantages to students who are related to alumni of the institution. Nearly 75% of selective research institutions and most elite liberal arts colleges incorporate legacy preferences into their admissions procedures (Kahlenberg, 2010). Coe and Davidson (2011) write that the history of legacy admissions policies is based on social inequality which is rooted in religious stratification. In order to maintain dominance, wealthy Anglo-Saxon protestants utilized multiple mechanisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to keep immigrants separate and in lower social roles (Coe & Davidson, 2011). In the early 20th century the majority population founded private preparatory schools which would give students like them advantages in college admissions, and expanded the reach of private protestant colleges (Coe & Davidson, 2011). Eventually, explicit discrimination based on religion ceased, and categories such as “proper social standing” and legacy status were included in admissions decisions (Kahlenberg, 2010; Coe & Davidson, 2011). It is clear that the history of legacy admission is one of prejudice, and while that history is enlightening, it is important to focus on the fact that today, this policy reinforces social inequalities. Many mistaken beliefs about this admissions practice contribute to why it should be considered a significant issue in higher education today. Many people believe that legacy admissions fosters loyalty in institutions, is not illegal in any way, supports financial well-being of the institution, and is low stakes because it does not prevent non-legacy students from attending college (Kahlenberg, 2010). These myths perpetuate the practice and create an illusion that it is fair and equitable, when in fact it does have a number of negative implications for non-legacy students.

 **Current Legacy Admissions Issues**

Legacy admissions is a current and widely used practice with implications in many issues; rising competition in admissions, finances, and the United States’ supposed merit-based educational system. Institutions such as Texas A&M, University of Georgia, and the University of California system have dropped legacy consideration from their admissions processes in the past twenty years, and for various reasons including legal and consideration for fairness in regards to public education (Schmidt, 2004). Despite that change of practice at these institutions, legacy admissions policies are still widespread across higher education in the United States. Defenders of legacy admissions often refer to the financial benefits of the policy, that retaining these policies encourages alumni to donate more. One university revealed that in a major fund raising campaign, 65% of legacy alumni donated and only 41% of non-legacy alumni donated, and also specified a much larger average donation for legacy alumni versus non-legacy alumni (Schmidt, 2004). When considering this data, other variables must be considered such as legacy alumni having more advantages before and after college, often based on finances, over non-legacy students. This skews data on alumni contributions, but it also blurs the data on the impact that legacy policies have on admissions decisions. It is remarkably difficult to control for all of the variables in admissions, one of the repercussions of the holistic admissions review. In a conditional logic regression analysis, from a sample of 300,000 applicants to thirty highly selective private colleges, it was found that a legacy student’s odds of admissions were that of a non-legacy applicant multiplied by 3.13 (Hurwitz, 2011). If the legacy applicant was a child of an alumni that multiplier was 7.63 (Hurwitz, 2011).

Legacy admissions preference is often compared to recruitment of athletes or musicians (Larson, 2006). The different between an athlete and a legacy student is that the athlete is receiving the benefit based on their work and individual characteristics, while a legacy student gains the benefit based on a characteristic of a relative (Larson, 2006).

Legacy admissions requires ethical, legal, and constitutional considerations. Legacy admissions reinforces prejudices and inequalities of the past because most institutions admitted miniscule numbers of minority students into the 1960’s and 1970’s, meaning that legacy applicants are less prevalent from minority populations (Ladewiski, 2010). Additionally, the benefits of higher education, at least financially speaking, are greater for minority groups. The difference between annual earnings for a white high school graduate versus white college graduate is 17% smaller than the difference for a black high school graduate compared to a black college graduate (Baum & Payea, 2005). Logic suggests that the same benefit only increases with the selectivity of an institution, and to diminish those opportunities for minority applicants is an ethical issue. The legality of legacy admissions policies is also questionable because it violates the nobility clause of the constitution which prohibits hereditary privileges (Larson, 2006; Kahlenberg, 2010), which legacy admissions policies clearly are (Larson, 2006).

**Directions for Future Research**

Legacy admissions practices have the potential to slow the expansion of access to higher education for minority applicants, which is counterproductive to another highly relevant issue in the field. Existing literature acknowledges that legacy admissions policies disproportionately benefit white applicants (Kahlenberg, 2010; Ladewiski, 2010; Coe & Davidson, 2011). One of the difficulties in understanding the impact of legacy admissions policies is the many variables that contribute to an admissions decision and to alumni and donor financial contributions. While Hurwitz (2011) provided valuable, controlled data on the impact on admissions decisions at elite schools, there is opportunity for a great deal more research. First, these results must be replicated, and should also be studied at less elite institutions, to verify that the same inequality exists there. This is especially important since Hurwitz (2011) revealed a larger advantage through legacy admissions at more elite institutions.

There is also vast opportunity for research focusing on some of the other claims around legacy admissions to test their validity. Coe and Davidson (2011) suggested that rather than view claims such as legacy policies contributing to diverse study bodies, fostering sense of history at institutions, or supporting financial donations as facts, researchers should use them as questions to focus studies on. Minority status should also be strongly considered because one of the biggest potential impacts legacy admissions has on higher education is limiting access and opportunity to institutions for students of diverse backgrounds. Diversity is widely regarded as an important part of education and college campuses (Hurwitz, 2011). Other opportunities, programs, and support mechanisms for promoting a sense of history within institutions should be explored, as well as what that sense of history contributes to the prestige, student outcomes, and overall campus environment. Research on sense of history would best be executed through mixed methods research in order to incorporate data from many stakeholders from alumni through prospective students as well as administrators and faculty. That vast data could be filled out with a sample of interviews from each group of stakeholders. All of these topics of research will build on the literature, literature that currently strongly opposes legacy admissions practices. Responsible research must approach the topic by using claims as research questions (Coe & Davidson, 2011), and avoiding bias based on existing research opposing the practice.

**Conclusion**

 Legacy considerations in admissions is a practice that can be traced back over one hundred years, unfortunately to discrimination and perpetuating social inequality. The practice continues, despite clear ties to discrimination, and today presents multiple ethical and legal issues for consideration by practitioners and scholars. These issues must be explored through research, taking into consideration an overwhelming number of variables which must be controlled for as well as the potential for bias based on the currently available research on the topic.

After World War I, discrimination in admissions focused on immigrant populations, namely Jewish applicants, and when explicit discrimination was no longer an option, institutions installed new admissions requirements such as “proper social standing” to effect the same or similar results (Coe & Davidson, 2011). Today, the policy does not have the same purpose, of blatant discrimination, but has the same effect of excluding minority populations from the same opportunities as white applicants. While some institutions of higher education have ceased considering legacy status in admissions, the practice is still widely used in the United States, at both public and private universities (Schmidt, 2004). Multiple justifications for the continued practice of legacy consideration in admissions exist, including financial benefit to the institution, instilling a sense of history on campus, belief that the practice is low-stakes for populations it may not benefit, and categorizing legacy consideration the same as athletic or musician recruitment practices. All of these justifications are part of the issue around legacy consideration and benefit in admission, but also springboards for future research. Coe and Davidson (2011) suggested that researchers use these claims to build their research questions. In this way, researchers can responsibly execute research on this expansive issue and provide unbiased data regarding the benefits or detriments of legacy consideration in admissions.

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