

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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September 13, 2019

That seems to be the emerging bipartisan consensus. “On the evidence we have, the meritocratic ideal ends up being just as undemocratic as the old emphasis on inheritance and tradition,” [writes](#) *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat. “Our supposedly meritocratic system is nothing but a long con,” [declares](#) Alanna Schubach, a college-admissions coach, in *Jacobin*. “Merit itself has become a counterfeit virtue, a false idol,” argues Daniel Markovits, a professor of law at Yale University, in a new book, *The Meritocracy Trap* (Penguin Press). “And meritocracy — formerly benevolent and just — has become what it was invented to combat. A mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations.”

An attack on meritocracy is invariably an attack on higher education, where meritocrats get sorted and credentialed. So the turn against meritocracy prompts big questions. Has meritocracy in fact failed? Is it time for universities to rethink the definition of merit, and, more broadly, higher education’s role in American life? Are meritocracy’s critics too sweeping in their indictment? Is it still — flaws and all — the fairest way to organize society? If we do away with it, what comes next?

We put these questions to 10 scholars and administrators from across the academy. Here are their responses.

The Opposite of Opportunity

Meritocracy has all of us trapped in a system of despair.

By DANIEL MARKOVITS

The United States has one of the steepest educational hierarchies in the world. Not just colleges and universities, but also high schools, elementary schools, and even preschools all come in shades of eliteness. At every level, elite schools invest much more in training their students than their ordinary counterparts.

Elite public schools, in places like Scarsdale, N.Y., easily spend twice as much per student as average ones. Elite private high schools spend roughly six times

Meritocracy redeems the very idea of hierarchy and transforms the elite to suit a democratic age.

the national public-school average.

And the most selective colleges spend about eight times as much as the least selective ones.

Meritocracy — the idea that places at selective schools, and the rewards that they bring, should track achievement rather than breeding — is supposed to make all this morally OK. Earlier hierarchies were malign and offensive. Meritocracy claims to be wholesome and just. No caste or family monopolizes virtue or talent; and so meritocracy, we suppose, squares unequal outcomes with equal opportunities. In this way, meritocracy redeems the very idea of hierarchy and transforms the elite to suit a democratic age.

But America's educational hierarchy is not OK. The districts that fund elite public schools are filled with expensive houses — between mortgage interest and taxes, the median house in Scarsdale costs nearly \$100,000 per year to own. Seventy percent of the students at top private schools come from the top 4 percent of the income distribution. Ivy Plus colleges educate more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half. The immense sums spent at the top of the U.S. education hierarchy are therefore devoted to students who skew dramatically, almost unbelievably, toward wealth. These students go on to dominate the rest of society when it comes to income. Just 1.3 percent of high-school dropouts and 2.4 percent of high-school-only workers will capture lifetime earnings as great as the median professional-school graduate. This is the opposite of equality of opportunity.

What has gone wrong? Equality's champions typically attack the role that legacy preferences, cultural capital, racial privilege, and even outright fraud play in university admissions. The reproach is not fanciful. Elite self-dealing is real and disgraceful. But self-dealing operates on the margins of a largely meritocratic system. Students at top universities do in fact have the highest grades and the best standardized test scores. The top five law schools, for example, enroll roughly two-thirds of all applicants with LSAT scores in the 99th percentile.

These results should not be surprising. Children of rich and well-educated parents imbibe massive, sustained, planned, and practiced investments in education from birth through adulthood. Education works; and middle-class and poor children, who receive only ordinary educations, simply cannot compete. In 2016, for example, about 15,000 high-schoolers with a parent who held a graduate degree scored over 750 on the SAT's Critical Reading Test, compared with fewer than 100 whose parents had not completed high school.

Meritocracy — conceived as the handmaiden to equality of opportunity — has in fact become the main obstacle to opportunity in America today. It produces a new form of hierarchy by living up to, rather than departing from, its ideals.

When inequality of outcome grows too great, equality of opportunity becomes impossible. Our educational hierarchy cannot become meaningfully fairer by opening elite schools and universities to meritorious outsiders. There is no substitute for reducing the absolute difference between what is invested in the most-educated and less-educated people. Fairness requires that education become less hierarchical. The top schools and colleges must become not just more open but also — simply — less elite.

*Daniel Markovits is a professor of law at Yale University and the author of the new book *The Meritocracy Trap* (Penguin Press).*

The Price of Merit

If it's something the rich can purchase, it's just another obstacle for the rest of us.

By WALTER KIMBROUGH

I attended a magnet high school in Atlanta, at that time one of the highest performing schools in the city. Close to graduation our counselor began to determine class rankings. I knew I was among the top students. I learned, though, that I had been leapfrogged by a classmate whose parents argued for some of their grades to be changed. Another classmate told me about it — her own mom was thinking about pushing for grade changes as well. My parents and I never considered doing something similar. In the end, the counselor decided to have two valedictorians, and I would be the salutatorian.

This was my awakening. Merit can be lobbied for, and in some cases, purchased. And so merit is something I had to overcome.

My high school was 98-percent black, proof that these issues exist in all types of communities. But when race is added as another variable, the myth of merit is further exposed. As a nation we are still coming to terms with a massive college admissions scandal. Wealthy parents purchased access to top universities by manipulating the system, for instance by having someone else take a standardized test on behalf of their child.

Let's stop discussing merit. It's a concept that reflects power and privilege, connections and wealth.

For those with power and privilege, lineage guarantees merit.

For people without power or privilege, merit is something that has to be overcome. In many African American households, parents tell their children that they have to be two or three times as good to get the same opportunities. My mom, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of California at Berkeley who double majored in chemistry and math, didn't just tell me that; she lived it. My concern is that too many without power or privilege falsely believe that everyone is equal, and merit is applied equally.

The statistics say otherwise. Huge racial gaps exist in terms of quality of K-12 education, graduation rates for both high school and college, and family wealth and income. Even during a period when African American unemployment hovers near record lows, black homeownership is at a record low. Too many in America do all of the right things only to realize that merit alone doesn't lead to success.

So let's stop discussing merit. It's a concept that reflects power and privilege, connections and wealth. For many Americans, success is not achieved on merit, but by overcoming it.

Walter Kimbrough is president of Dillard University.

Meritocracy Isn't Broken. Assessment Is.

Tests, rankings, and grades are blunt and discriminatory instruments.

By **LEON BOTSTEIN**

Attacks on meritocracy and its consequences are justified. But only to a degree. Our problem is the way meritocracy is defined, measured, and legitimated. It is too dependent on numerical measures, such as standardized tests, college rankings, grades, and income. All four are blunt and discriminatory instruments of comparison that trivialize merit by confusing wealth with excellence and reinforcing the power of money and privilege.

Our current meritocracy is flawed by its reliance on strategies of quantification masquerading as objective benchmarks. But the fact that merit is now defined reductively and wrongly does not justify the rejection of the principle. Society needs the pursuit of excellence by those who have earned their status through genuine superior achievement. True meritocracy should honor originality, courage, passion, and resistance to conventional wisdom — it should honor those in our society who make outsized contributions to vital fields, and who do more than simply conform and play the existing game.

The most important contributions to science, culture, and the economy have been made by rebels, entrepreneurs, and outsiders. There is nothing wrong with doing well on tests or getting into elite colleges. But these are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for excellence. The current meritocracy secures the status quo; what we need, instead, is to change the standard of practice in institutions, professions, and vocations — particularly in law, medicine, business, religion, scholarship, teaching, and above all, public service and politics.

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does not justify the rejection of the principle.*

Let's not confuse the proper defense of political equality and social justice with an ideological resistance to making qualitative distinctions that identify true excellence. A democratic society requires great scientists, great writers, great artists, great scholars, great entrepreneurs, and great individuals in business and government. These are rarely those with the highest test scores.

Colleges should foster originality and ambition without rigidly relying on standardized measurements. We must embrace qualitative judgments, with all the difficulties they entail. Tests are needed, as are grades and peer reviews of institutional practices, not as hard evidence of merit but as helpful diagnostic instruments. What is needed is the cultivation of critical inquiry, skeptical analysis, and idealism — and the will to challenge received wisdom in thought and action. An authentic meritocracy should lead us to rescue our present, rethink our past, and reimagine our future.

Leon Botstein is the president of Bard College.