

Why California's legacy admissions ban won't help low-income students go to college

Catharine B. Hill, *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 2024

I've been critiquing the calls to end legacy college admissions for about two decades—clearly to no avail, given California's new law prohibiting private higher education institutions from considering applicants' family connections to alumni or donors. (The state's public universities already refrain from legacy admissions.) Maryland enacted a similar law, and Colorado, Virginia and Illinois have
5 banned the practice at public institutions.

Although higher education advocacy groups have argued against such bans on the grounds that they jeopardize institutional autonomy, particularly at private colleges and universities, I think the significant public subsidies the schools receive justify some government regulation. But these laws are a distraction from the real barriers to socioeconomic diversity at institutions that practice legacy
10 admissions, including inadequate need-based financial aid and outreach to low-income applicants. Ending legacy admissions may be defensible in the service of equity, but it's neither necessary nor sufficient to increase lower-income students' access to higher education.

Take the California Institute of Technology, a prominent example of an institution that has not practiced legacy admissions. Until recently, only around 10% of its students were eligible to receive
15 Pell Grants, a typical measure of a university's success in serving lower-income students. Caltech increased that figure to at least 20% for the last three freshman classes by addressing the real obstacles to socioeconomic diversity, which have nothing to do with legacy admissions—most importantly, by increasing its investment in financial aid.

Johns Hopkins is another university whose leaders have eschewed as well as criticized legacy
20 admissions. It also happens to have been fortunate enough to receive a \$1.8-billion gift in 2018 to support need-blind undergraduate admissions. That—not the legacy admissions policy—has been the real key to increasing Johns Hopkins' socioeconomic diversity, causing the share of its students who come from lower-income families to more than double.

Ending legacy admissions doesn't tend to increase socioeconomic diversity because the affected
25 applicants are generally replaced by other high-income students. Without significant increases in spending on need-based financial aid and efforts to bring lower-income students into an applicant pool, the legacies only make way for students whose parents are likely to have attended other selective schools. So Yale may end up taking in more children of Stanford graduates, for example, and vice versa.

Many of the selective schools that practice legacy admissions don't meet the full financial need of
30 students they admit and don't have need-blind admissions processes. That means they take the financial needs of applicants into account in making admissions decisions, rejecting otherwise qualified students because of their socioeconomic status. It also means that lower-income students who are admitted may be discouraged from enrolling because they can't afford to. We should be
35 addressing these problems before we tackle legacies.

It doesn't make sense to outlaw legacy admissions while allowing colleges to reject students because their families aren't wealthy or fail to cover the needs of the students they admit. The latter practices clearly prevent lower-income students from enrolling in selective institutions, which is the problem legacy admissions bans only purport to address.

Legacy admissions seem to be on the way out, and perhaps they ought to be. The practice certainly
40 smacks of elitism. The trouble is that merely getting rid of them will not on its own increase the socioeconomic diversity of the affected institutions. Doing that will take a concerted effort to attract talented lower-income applicants and give them the financial aid they need to attend. And that means not spending those additional financial aid resources on other programs.

My worry has always been that policymakers would eliminate legacy admissions and consider their
45 work done. In that way, these bans could distract and discourage us from making the changes that would actually make a difference for lower-income students and families.

Catharine B. Hill is the managing director of Ithaca S+R and a former president of Vassar College.