

Fair college admissions require more than banning legacy preferences

The *Times* editorial board, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 2024

Colleges have understandable reasons for giving a leg up in admissions to students whose parents or other relatives attended the same school. The applicants known as “legacy candidates” are more likely to accept the offer, which helps the schools secure a freshman class that is qualified and committed to attending. They tend to need less financial aid as students and become bigger donors as alumni.

5 Yet legacy admissions are also unfair. The applicants haven’t done anything to earn this extra consideration. They are more likely to come from privileged backgrounds—after all, they come from a college-educated family.

The public has a legitimate interest in seeing admissions made more equitable, even at private colleges. Taxpayers are still helping to support those schools in the form of Pell Grants and federally guaranteed student loans that reduce the burden of providing financial aid. Many receive government research grants and most are nonprofit institutions, which means they receive tax exemptions.

California lawmakers had their hearts in the right place when they recently banned admissions preferences for the offspring of alumni and donors at private schools. (The state’s public colleges already follow that policy.) In his statement when he signed Assembly Bill 1780 into law, Gov. Gavin Newsom said, “The California Dream shouldn’t be accessible to just a lucky few, which is why we’re opening the door to higher education wide enough for everyone, fairly.”

That’s certainly the ideal, but don’t expect too much from AB 1780. The law itself is nearly toothless, and the advantage of legacy, while significant, isn’t quite as dramatic as opponents make it out to be. More important, the law isn’t going to eliminate or even significantly reduce the bigger factors that keep everyone from having an equal shot at selective colleges.

AB 1780 provides no practical incentive for colleges and universities to change their ways. Each year, the schools will be required to report whether they have used legacy as a factor in admissions, and if the answer is yes, they must supply additional data that can be publicly posted. But there is no punishment for flouting the law aside from possible public embarrassment.

25 It also would be relatively easy for colleges to continue using legacy quietly. Applications can still ask which colleges, if any, an applicant’s family members have attended. But schools wouldn’t be allowed to give them any official consideration if they want to claim they are legacy-free. That might not stop some unofficial preference for certain applicants who have a family connection to the school.

Though legacy schools give a bump to students with family alumni, it’s also true that most legacy applicants are fully qualified to attend those schools. Reports from California’s private universities reveal only a handful of unqualified applicants who were admitted over several years—at USC, Vanguard and Pepperdine. And in fact, legacy applicants tend to be somewhat more qualified, a Harvard research group found. Even without legacy, they would be 33% more likely to be admitted than students with the same test scores, based on their other qualifications, such as grades and extracurricular activities.

35 That should surprise no one. If a student’s family attended a prestigious college, they are probably more able to provide their offspring with advantages including enrichment activities from an early age, as well as an excellent education at top K-12 schools. They are more able to afford lessons in sports, such as crew or fencing, that will give their children preference in admission as recruited athletes, as well as private tutoring.

In other words, opening the doors of private colleges to all who want to enter will take more than a superficial ban on legacy admissions. It will require addressing societal inequities so all children have an enriched early childhood where they need not fear hunger or crime or loss of housing, where they have stories read to them, toys that help build their skills and curiosity, excellent schools and beautiful parks in which to play.

If we want true equity in college admissions, we have to provide opportunities for all students that allow them to flourish so that they might become highly qualified college applicants. California deserves credit for trying, with transitional kindergarten, a progressive school-funding formula, free school breakfast and other programs for underserved children and families. There’s been progress but it has been slow and incremental because the gap between the need and the available services is so wide; there is still a massive difference between the lives and educational experiences of students in wealthy schools and those in poorer ones.

50 Equity fatigue—a recent move away from efforts to bring more fairness to many aspects of our lives—is a concern. This is not the time to give up on educational equity. That, and not a weak ban on legacy admission, is the key to more successful students, fairer college admissions and a flourishing state.