Research Uncovers How Colleges Define ‘Merit’ in Admissions

As colleges open their doors for the fall semester, a Rhode Island researcher has taken a look at the ever-changing definition of “merit” used by elite colleges in the U.S.

Leslie Killgore, currently teaching at the Community College of Rhode Island, investigated the admissions policies at 17 elite private colleges, those which typically admit less than one-third of all applicants. Killgore’s research was published this summer in The Review of Higher Education (Volume 32, Issue 4). The journal is published by the Johns Hopkins University Press.

“Those in control of elite – and private – colleges have acquired the ability to define ‘merit,’ who and what college is for, and who gets admitted and why,” she writes, adding that students can be disadvantaged by not knowing the rules of a system which judges them.

Through her research, admissions officers told Killgore the many different factors which could influence those decisions. Students who might not meet the academic criteria – which all admissions officers emphasized were the primary basis of admission – were admitted if they could benefit the athletic department, arts organizations, the diversity of the student body or might support the fiscal bottom line by not requiring financial assistance.

Killgore found that colleges have no set way of defining how they use these characteristics to choose students. The 17 colleges surveyed did have similar practices, but left enough discretion to support different institutional needs.

“Elite colleges do not simply reward superior individual talent and effort wherever it appears in the population. They pick and choose the very best students they need,” Killgore writes.

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