

## CHAPTER 4

# ENDING LEGACY ADMISSIONS

All admissions policies and practices are part of the enormous power that colleges and universities wield to decide who reaps the benefits of a college degree, but none further advantage the advantaged as blatantly as legacy admissions. While institutions vary in how they define legacy applicants, the policies typically apply to prospective students who are related to alumni (e.g., their children or grandchildren).<sup>1</sup> As such, legacy admissions perpetuate the racism of decades past and give preferential treatment to students born into well-positioned families.



**"It seems unjust that just the privilege of birth should give you any sort of credit in [the college admissions] process."**

**—David Hawkins, chief education and policy officer, National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)**

Across a sample of institutions with legacy admissions, children of alumni are 3.13 times more likely to be admitted than their non-legacy peers.<sup>2</sup> Legacy status can increase an applicant's chance of admission by 45 percentage points compared with equally qualified candidates who are not legacy, even when controlling for SAT scores, athlete status, gender, and race.<sup>3</sup> In fact, legacy status alone provides a boost equivalent to scoring 160 points higher on the SAT (out of 1600 points).<sup>4</sup> Beyond favoring legacy applicants in admissions decisions, some institutions offer other advantages to legacy students, such as special guidance during the admission process (e.g., interviews or consultations) or special tuition assistance opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

## LEGACY ADMISSIONS GIVE THE MOST SUPPORT TO THOSE WHO NEED IT THE LEAST

In recent years, several media outlets have equated the legacy admissions process to receiving an exclusive “red carpet” treatment that creates two separate and unequal pathways to college.<sup>6</sup> Sure enough, some institutions provide legacy applicants extra privileges such as special interviews, consultations, advice, or even recommendations directly from the university president.<sup>7</sup> After admissions decisions are made, legacy applicants can receive preferential treatment through access to private events, like welcome receptions, early move-in, and alumni weekend campus tours.

Legacy students receive special treatment from institutions during the admissions process—support that underrepresented students need most but are least likely to obtain through legacy policies.

For example, in 2019, Northwestern University's president personally read the files of and made admissions decisions for well-connected applicants, including legacy students, family members of donors, and relatives of individuals with connections to the president.<sup>8</sup> Another example of unfair advantages extended to legacy applicants are the University of Pennsylvania's First Friday Information Sessions, where legacy applicants, along with faculty/staff families, gain access to small-group information sessions with the dean and/or the regional admissions officer that are not available to other applicants.<sup>9</sup>



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## EXAMPLE

### EXTRA PRIVILEGES FOR APPLYING AS A LEGACY APPLICANT

In 2002, the University of Miami created the Legacy Admission Program that encourages legacy applicants to submit their information via a special web portal to ensure the Division of Alumni Relations acknowledges their legacy relationship.<sup>10</sup>



Legacy tuition programs and other financial assistance opportunities maintain affordability gaps by benefiting well-off students rather than directing financial assistance to students from low-income backgrounds. At some institutions, legacy students also receive financial benefits in the form of legacy tuition programs, which provide tuition subsidies to students with a parent who is an alumnus of the university. Some institutions grant in-state status to out-of-state legacy applicants by providing fee waivers.<sup>11</sup> For example, at the University of Kentucky (UK), legacy applicants who do not reside in Kentucky can pay in-state tuition if their parent is a member of the UK Alumni Association.<sup>12</sup>

### SEPARATE BUT UNEQUAL PATHWAYS PERPETUATE HIGHER EDUCATION'S RACIST AND ELITIST ROOTS

These separate and unequal pathways are deeply problematic. Our higher education system has historically been closed to Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities,<sup>13</sup> while rising tuition costs deter students from low-income backgrounds from enrolling.<sup>14</sup> Legacy policies reinforce those inequities by typically privileging White and wealthy students whose families have had access to college for generations, while limiting the economic mobility that can come from a college degree for non-White and non-wealthy students.<sup>15</sup>

The history of legacy admissions in the United States reveals that these policies are rooted in racism. In the early 1600s, colleges were havens for White, wealthy men, while the practice of slavery restricted the freedoms of Black people and colonization stripped the rights of Indigenous people—limiting their opportunities for formal education.<sup>16</sup> Even after slavery was abolished in 1865, colleges continued to bar access to Black and Indigenous people through racist and prejudicial laws, forcing the creation of segregated colleges.<sup>17</sup> Deep divides on religious beliefs also stratified educational opportunity.<sup>18</sup> The nation's elite took active steps to preserve the status quo at colleges and universities created during the colonial period which were open only to White, wealthy, Protestant men.<sup>19</sup> One such tactic was to create scholarships for the "sons of Protestant ministers, New England schoolmasters, and Yankee farmers" to perpetuate class stratification between those with and without education.<sup>20</sup>

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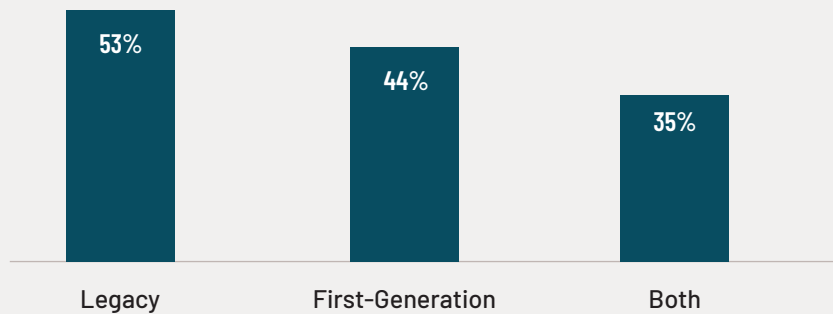
Despite these racist and elitist (as well as creedist and sexist) policies, many Jewish immigrants enrolled and received the designated scholarships.<sup>21</sup> Institutions began changing their admissions standards, adding requirements such as “proper social standing” (or lineage, character, and solidity).<sup>22</sup> Alumni at well-resourced institutions feared that a higher volume of diverse applicants would displace their children. Hoping to appease their White, wealthy, and male graduates, institutions implemented policies to maintain their institutional identity.<sup>23</sup> Legacy admissions policies, formally introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are still used today by selective public and private institutions.<sup>24</sup>

## INSTITUTIONS PERPETUATE PRIVILEGE THROUGH LEGACY ADMISSIONS, DESPITE NO EVIDENCE OF BENEFITS

Even though legacy admissions policies continue to disadvantage Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, approximately half of institutions consider legacy status when deciding whom to admit. Particularly at highly selective universities, legacy admissions policies mean that institutions over-select from the ranks of their wealthy alumni which, by definition, do not include first-generation applicants, who are most likely to be Black, Latinx, or Indigenous or from non-wealthy families. Data from the Common Data Set<sup>25</sup> reveal that while approximately 44 percent of institutions include a student’s status as a first-generation college-goer in their admissions decisions, 53 percent of institutions evaluate legacy status (Figure 4.1). This overemphasis on factors that signal a student’s privilege of wealth or background further divides postsecondary opportunities by race and class.

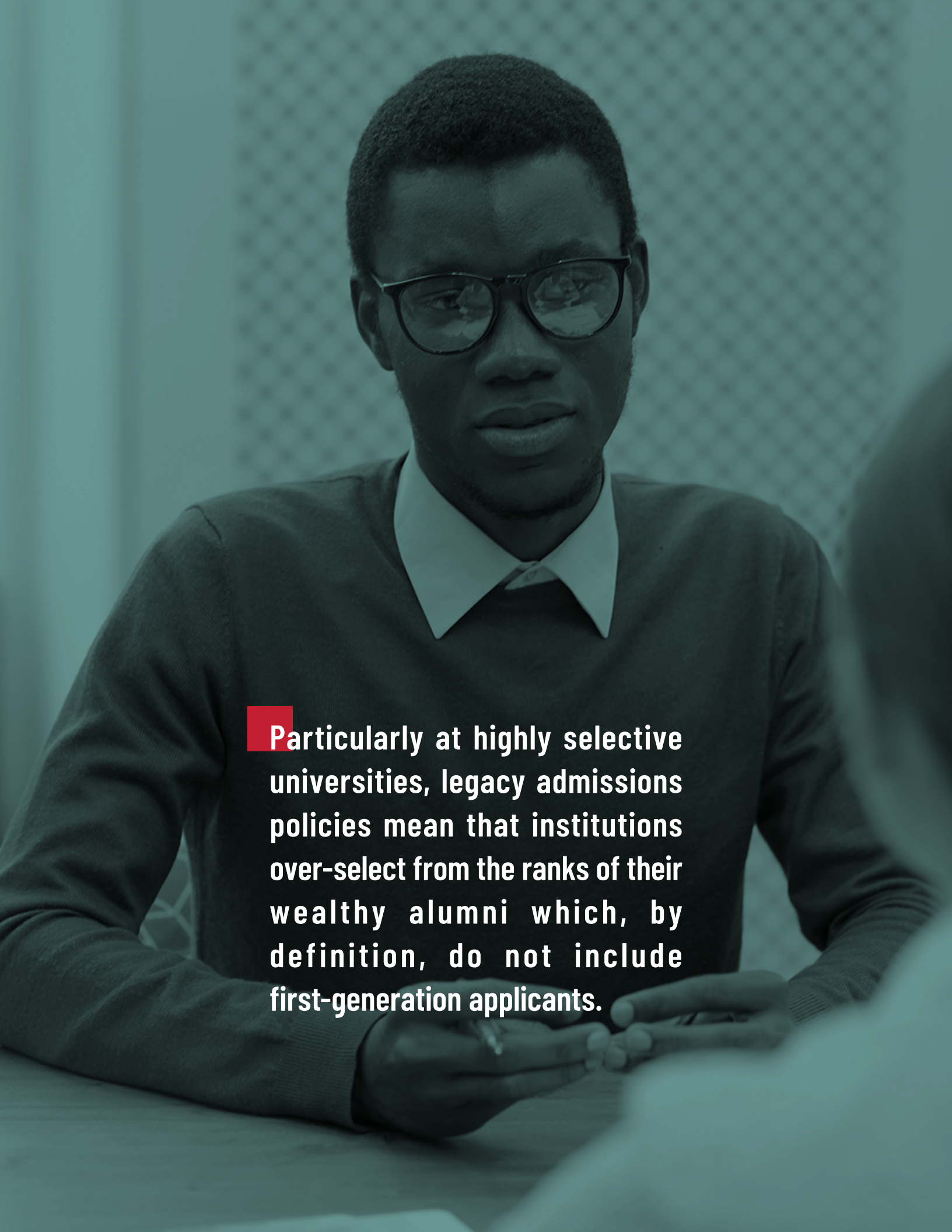
**FIGURE 4.1**

### Share of Selective Four-Year Colleges that Consider Legacy and First-Generation Status in Admissions Decisions



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. See [technical appendix](#) for detailed methodology.

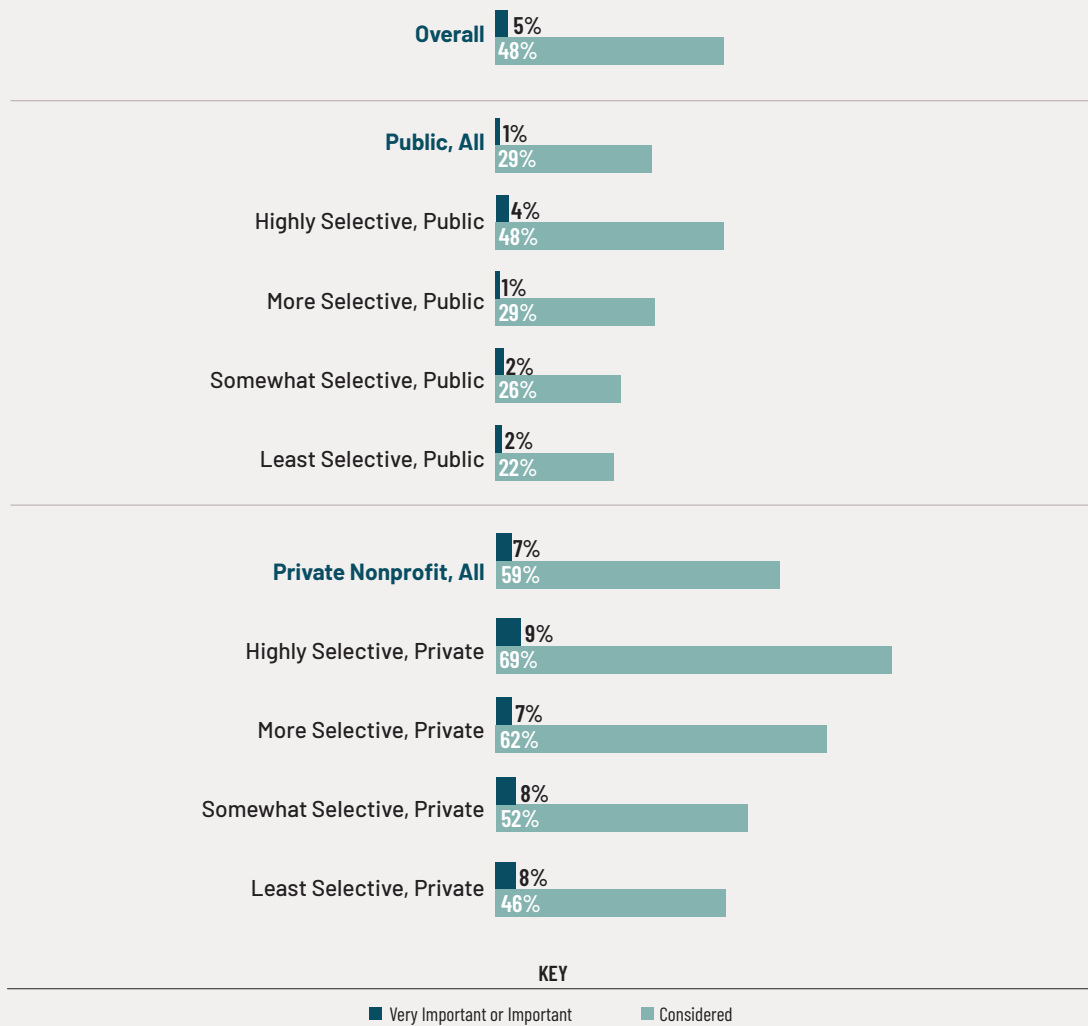
Legacy preference is most common at selective private nonprofit institutions, more than three-quarters of which use an applicant’s relationship to alumni in admissions decisions (Figure 4.2). As a result, legacy applicants are more likely to gain admission to these schools. For example, while Harvard University admitted only 5 percent of applicants in fall 2018, legacy applicants made up roughly 37 percent of the admitted class.<sup>26</sup>



**Particularly at highly selective universities, legacy admissions policies mean that institutions over-select from the ranks of their wealthy alumni which, by definition, do not include first-generation applicants.**

**FIGURE 4.2**

**Colleges' Consideration of Alumni Relations in Admissions, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges**



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See [technical appendix](#) for detailed methodology.

These policies are not relegated only to private colleges. More than half of highly selective public institutions, such as flagship universities, also use them to form their student body (Figure 4.2).

While all institutions, regardless of sector, should discontinue legacy admissions, the policies are particularly pernicious at public institutions charged with serving their state residents. Public colleges and universities are well-positioned to promote upward mobility in their communities and produce the next generation of college-educated innovators, business owners, community leaders, and more.<sup>27</sup> But when institutions consider legacy status when deciding which applicants to accept, they do just the opposite—reinforcing racism, elitism, and exclusion.

Institutions may now see legacy status in admissions decisions as a tool to foster better alumni relationships and encourage alumni support. This rationale is especially common among institutions seeking to boost endowment revenue.<sup>28</sup> Institutions may also use these policies to increase perceptions of prestige.<sup>29</sup> For example, the *U.S. News & World Report* uses alumni giving as 5 percent of its algorithm and financial resources as another 10 percent, which means that institutions may be reluctant to remove legacy preferences if leaders believe doing so will discourage alumni donations (see *Do Legacy Admissions Policies Influence Alumni Giving?*). Similarly, institutions may assume legacy admits will attend if accepted due to family loyalty, thus increasing their yield rates.<sup>30</sup>

Some institutions may claim that using legacy policies fosters an institutional community through alumni loyalty and keeping school traditions in the “family.”<sup>31</sup> These institutions argue that legacy students possess a special knowledge of and desire to protect university traditions that they learned from their family, reinforcing their institutional memory and culture.<sup>32</sup> In this vein, institutions justify using legacy preferences to cultivate a collective identity—an identity that they claim supports philanthropic efforts and prestige-building. But this idea is outdated and exclusionary, rooted in racist and elitist beliefs that assume that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI communities and people from low-income backgrounds would not fit into or enhance and strengthen the institution’s culture.

### Do Legacy Admissions Policies Influence Alumni Giving?

Institutions may believe they cannot eliminate legacy preferences because doing so will reduce alumni giving and hurt their endowment growth. However, an analysis of the top 100 universities in *U.S. News & World Report* between 1998 and 2008 shows that prioritizing legacy students in admission decisions has no statistically significant impact on alumni giving behavior, even if the university has high levels of alumni giving.<sup>33</sup> Also, the seven universities in the study that dropped legacy policies between 1998 and 2007 saw no immediate decline in donations after making the policy change.<sup>34</sup> The rationale to keep legacy admissions as a mechanism for financial survival is not supported by the research.

Proponents of legacy admissions policies may argue that, in time, the size and racial composition of the legacy application pool will expand as more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students graduate from college.<sup>35</sup> This argument relies on the future diversity of college enrollment while actively undermining it. In the face of centuries of racial discrimination and growing disparities in access and attainment by race/ethnicity,<sup>36</sup> institutions should not hope for diversity *in spite of* their admissions policies. Now is the time for institutions of higher education to use all tools at their disposal, including admissions policies, to *promote* diversity.

In sum, legacy admissions are a quintessential example of policies and practices that keep Black, Latinx, Indigenous, underrepresented AAPI, first-generation, and non-wealthy students out of higher education. Legacy admissions divert resources from those who need them most in order to benefit those who need them least. These policies create separate and unequal pathways, neither of which leads to the benefits that some use to justify their continued practice, such as alumni giving or traditions that would not otherwise continue. In fact, the only thing these policies accomplish is reducing the number of seats for first-generation students, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds at the institutions with the most resources to support college success.

Now is the time for institutions of higher education to use all tools at their disposal, including admissions policies, to promote diversity.





## OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: ENDING LEGACY ADMISSIONS

Institutions today should be part of dismantling the structures that resulted in inequitable college enrollment for too many generations. It is not enough to simply denounce racism and elitism; institutions must make actionable, intentional decisions not to use policies that perpetuate inequity—like legacy admissions policies.

### TO DO SO, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

#### In the words of higher education leaders:

“Public universities have a public purpose, including serving students of all backgrounds. That starts with an admissions process rooted in fairness.... Preferential admissions decisions for relatives of alumni—known as legacy admissions—are not consistent with this commitment to fairness.”<sup>38</sup>

—Peter McPherson, President, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

“Maintaining the long-standing tradition of affording...students a routine admissions advantage based solely on their parentage had come at a high cost. It was impairing our ability to educate qualified and promising students from all backgrounds and to help launch them up the social ladder.”<sup>39</sup>

—Ronald J. Daniels, President, Johns Hopkins University

### STOP CONSIDERING LEGACY STATUS WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Ending these policies would provide first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color a fairer shot at college admittance, especially to selective institutions that are well-positioned to support their success. Research undermines the justifications for their continued use, including the idea that legacy admissions policies increase alumni donations.<sup>37</sup>

### CONSIDER FIRST-GENERATION STATUS WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

If colleges are to truly transform postsecondary attainment, increasing the number of first-in-the-family college students should be a goal of all institutions. For example, at James Madison University, first-generation status is more likely to be used to break a tie between equally qualified candidates than legacy status.<sup>40</sup> The institution also allows flexibility in its enrollment class size to admit both students instead of selecting one over the other.

### FOCUS SUPPLEMENTARY ADMISSIONS GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES TOWARD UNDERSERVED STUDENTS:

Incentives that are extended only to legacy students, like legacy tuition programs or special legacy applicant interviews, give an unfair advantage to students least likely to need that advantage and extra support. First-generation college students and low-income applicants have the least access to advising, resources, and financing during the admissions and enrollment process. Equitable policies should target resources toward those who need them most.

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