

Preferential treatment for admission to Harvard

John C. Roach

The recent lawsuit against Harvard by Students for Fair Admissions filed in 2014, which alleged that Harvard discriminated against Asian-Americans in its admissions process, provided the public access to data on how Harvard makes its admissions decisions. The lawsuit focused on the disparity of Asian-American admissions relative to Whites but uncovered preferences to other distinct applicant groups, to include recruited athletes, legacies, applicants on the dean's interest list, and children of faculty and staff (ALDC).

In "[Legacy and athlete preference at Harvard](#)" (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 26316, September 2019), Peter Arcidiacono, Josh Kinsler, and Tyler Ransom examine Harvard's admission outcomes from ALDC and non-ALDC applicants. The recent college admissions scandal involving actresses Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin has increased scrutiny on the college admission process of ALDC students.

Of all the universities in the United States, Harvard is the oldest and one of the most prestigious. The admission rate for the class of 2023 was 4.5 percent. The authors of this paper introduce three questions. How much preference is given to the characteristics of ALDC students compared with their non-ALDC counterparts? How much of an advantage is given to the preferred applicants? How would the removal of these preferences affect the racial composition of admitted students?

For the first question, the authors' results show that the qualification of the average LDC admit (excluding athletes) is weaker than the average non-ALDC admit, which suggests an admissions advantage for the LDC applicants. Recruited athletes appear to have even more of admissions advantage. The credentials for admitted athletes are significantly worse than those of non-ALDC admits and, in some instances, non-ALDC applicants. In summary, LDC applicants in certain racial groups have double the advantage in the admissions process.

For the authors' second question, research reveals that ALDC applicants are shown a significant preference. A non-ALDC applicant would experience the following increase in admission chances if she or he was in a different category: a fivefold increase being a legacy, sevenfold if on the dean's interest list, and a near certainty admission as a recruited athlete.

Finally, for the last question, Arcidiacono, Kinsler, and Ransom found that if White ALDC students had been treated as their White non-ALDC counterparts were treated, only 25 percent would have gained admission. If legacy and athletic preferences were removed, the result would significantly decrease White admits and increase or not change Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American admits.