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EQUITABLE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

Ensuring Fairness in College Admissions

Rethinking Recruitment, Demonstrated Interest Strategies,
Early Decision, and Legacy Admission

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The Campaign for College Opportunity and the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)



Preface

Over 50% of American students in our public schools are Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), or American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN). Tapping into their talent and ensuring their access to a college education is essential to our future economic power and the success of our multi-racial democracy. Despite the historical exclusion and current underrepresentation of many Americans in our colleges and universities, in June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States severely curtailed the use of race in higher education admissions, prohibiting the consideration of an applicant's racial status as part of that process.

Race-conscious admissions helped ensure America's colleges and universities were more diverse. Without it, there is a greater urgency for college leaders and policy makers to review current practices for equity, and to identify solutions that provide a fairer approach to preparing students for college, admitting them, and supporting their success. Towards that aim, the Campaign for College Opportunity is releasing a series of briefs, including this one, as part of our [Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion and Empowering Action initiative](#). The series will elevate practices that support the college preparation, admission, affordability, and success of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, ensuring America does not return to an era of exclusion in higher education.

Overview

This brief offers college leaders and admissions officials clear recommendations to ensure that their campus admissions are fair by rethinking recruitment strategies and demonstrated interest practices, and eliminating early decision and legacy admission. These practices too often are barriers to the economic mobility a college degree can offer. For all Americans to have access to a valuable college education, there must be a thorough review of current admissions practices and, most importantly, the courage to change them in ways that prioritize equity.

With an estimated two-thirds of jobs in the U.S. requiring at least some postsecondary education, access to college is a vital step toward economic stability for many individuals and their families.¹ Every person, regardless of race, background, or circumstance, deserves the opportunity to pursue this stability and the host of benefits postsecondary education affords.² Furthermore, our nation's economic competitiveness relies on colleges and universities educating a strong and diverse workforce to fill the jobs of the future.

Rather than opening the doors of opportunity to today's Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, as well as to all students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation collegegoers, many recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices — particularly at selective institutions — exclude these students. Racial and socioeconomic inequities have been characteristic of our postsecondary education system throughout the nation's history, and these current-day practices perpetuate a higher education system in which the circumstances of one's birth (especially one's wealth level, race, and ethnicity) still largely determine which college a student can attend. To build a more competitive economy and hold true to our nation's egalitarian principles, colleges and universities must re-envision their recruitment, admissions, and enrollment practices.



When designed with equity as the top priority, recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices can promote the inclusion — rather than the exclusion — of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, as well as all students from low-income backgrounds.

Since longstanding gaps in enrollment by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status persist,³ and the use of race-conscious admissions has been banned, now is the time for college and university decision-makers to rethink the policies and practices that shape access to their institutions. **When designed with equity as the top priority, recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices can promote the inclusion — rather than the exclusion — of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, as well as all students from low-income backgrounds.**

In this brief, which draws on a thorough review of existing research, original data analysis, and conversations with institutional leaders and experts, we urge colleges and universities to address longstanding inequities in college access by rethinking four policies and practices: recruitment strategies, demonstrated interest policies, early admission deadlines, and legacy admission policies. We focus on selective public and private institutions because they often provide a strong chance of success — specifically, degree completion⁴ — for historically underrepresented and excluded students, but also employ policies and practices that limit these students’ chances for admission. For example, policies such as legacy admission favor students who are not first in their family to attend college. Historically, legacy admission was used at several Ivy League colleges to favor white Christian students and purposely exclude Jewish students and non-white Black, AIAN, and other minoritized students.⁵ Other practices, such as admitting students based on their demonstrated interest in a particular college, or early decision admission, which requires an early, binding commitment to a school that is the candidate’s top choice, may seem neutral, but they perpetuate inequities, in practice, by advantaging students who attend well-resourced high schools with sufficient college counseling support, substantial financial resources, and family members with experience navigating the college admissions process.





Rethink Recruitment

Recruitment refers to the strategies colleges and universities use to engage prospective students. These strategies shape the makeup of incoming classes and are key to expanding access and promoting diversity on campuses. For example, the high schools and college fairs that institutions of higher education choose to visit and recruit applicants directly influence who enrolls, and these visits exert a particularly strong influence on college choice for first-generation students who are currently less likely to be enrolled in schools visited by recruiters, and less likely to attend college fairs.⁶

To improve rankings and perceived prestige and to meet revenue targets, many institutions choose to expend significant resources recruiting white, wealthy, and out-of-state students who will pay higher tuition. The result is a system in which racial and socioeconomic diversity is sacrificed. Some public universities, particularly the flagship schools of public university systems, invest significant amounts of money, time, and energy to recruit out-of-state students to help balance their books. Yet, research indicates that this can reduce the diversity of their student bodies.⁷ In fact, at these flagship schools, when out-of-state student enrollment increases by 10 percentage points, the enrollment of students from low-income backgrounds (as measured by the number of Pell Grant recipients) declines by nearly three percentage points.⁸

A study of 15 public research universities found that most prioritize visiting wealthy high schools and schools with primarily white students, and that they skip visits to nearby schools with more students from lower-income households and with higher proportions of students of color.⁹ This approach also results in deprioritizing visits to schools in rural areas¹⁰ and overlooking returning adult¹¹ and community college transfer students¹² who often are eager to engage with these institutions but are not engaged.



Pell Grants are need-based grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to help eligible students from low-income backgrounds pay for college costs, including tuition, fees, room and board, and other educational expenses.



Policy Recommendations

Shaping a more equitable and just higher education system starts with implementing equitable student recruitment policies. To do so, institutions should:

- ✓ Prioritize recruitment from communities with high proportions of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students and students from low-income backgrounds, in general.
- ✓ Offer alternative recruitment opportunities to students in rural areas and to low-income students. These might include virtual campus visits or fly-in programs, which provide prospective students with travel vouchers to schools they ordinarily could not afford to visit.
- ✓ Prioritize the recruitment of returning adult and community college transfer students.
- ✓ Prioritize recruiting applicants who are state residents.

State lawmakers can help institutions prioritize recruiting in-state students by investing in higher education. Many public colleges and universities recruit large numbers of students from wealthy, out-of-state public, and private high schools to generate revenue in the face of state budget cuts because out-of-state students typically pay two to three times as much as in-state students.¹³



Rethink Demonstrated Interest

Demonstrated — or applicant — interest is broadly defined as the contact students make with a college that signals their preference to enroll, if admitted. This contact includes visiting a campus, attending on- and off-campus information sessions, participating in interviews, calling the admissions office, engaging with the university’s website, and reading email sent from the school. Demonstrated interest policies favor applicants who express interest in enrolling at a given college, reinforce any inequities embedded in an institution’s recruitment strategies, and enable privileged students to “work the system” to their advantage.

To proactively take advantage of demonstrated interest policies, students need to know they exist. But intricate knowledge of the college admissions process is more readily available to white, high-income, or non-first-generation students who are more likely to have access to college counselors¹⁵ or networks of adults with postsecondary experience.¹⁶

Even if students are aware of demonstrated interest policies, most opportunities to signal interest are not equally accessible. On-campus engagements are particularly inequitable, privileging students with the time and financial resources necessary to visit a campus.¹⁷ And students without access to reliable broadband and internet-enabled devices may be unable to take advantage of virtual engagements.¹⁸

While engaging with an institution during the application process, especially through campus visits, can provide critical information to help inform a student's decision, possessing the resources to make such visits is a privilege. When admissions offices use demonstrated interest policies to make admissions decisions, they exacerbate inequities in college access for students who are low-income, first-generation, or from rural areas, further excluding historically marginalized individuals.



Middle-achieving, high-income students are more likely to benefit from a demonstrated interest policy than students from a lower socioeconomic background.¹⁴

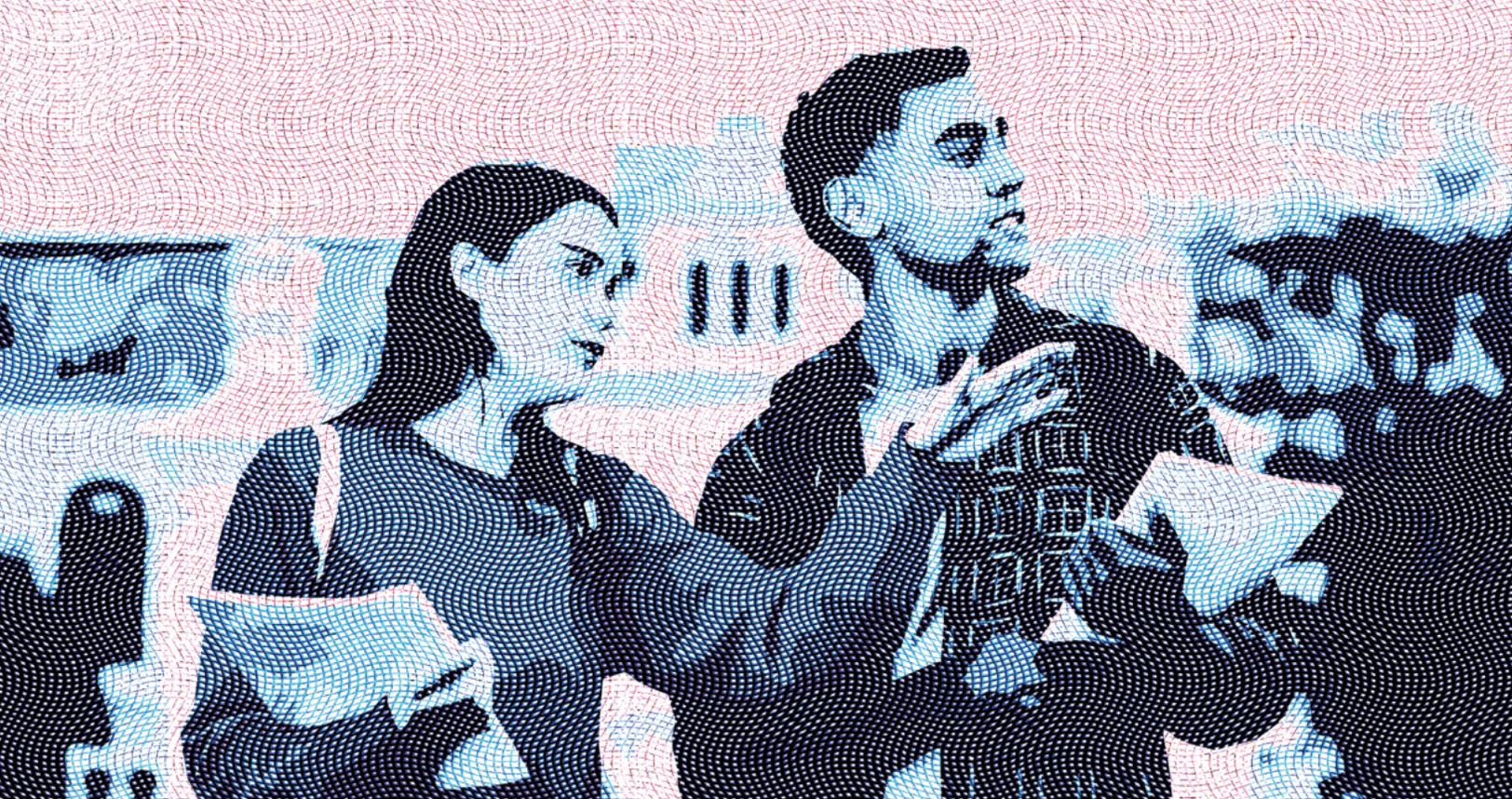


Policy Recommendations

To promote equitable college access, institutions should only consider demonstrated interest when making admissions decisions if the practice is paired with deliberate, equity-minded recruitment strategies, including those discussed earlier in the brief. Doing so would level the playing field, as would extensive training for admissions staff members to teach them how to appropriately contextualize applicants' interests in attending the institution.

If using demonstrated interest policies, institutions should:

- ✓ Ensure all students understand showing interest is an expectation for applicants, and that they understand how they can engage with the institution during the admissions process.
- ✓ Stop prioritizing prospective students' on-campus engagement with the institution.
- ✓ Recruit from diverse locations.
- ✓ Increase transparency for prospective students about how demonstrated interest works and is calculated and considered.



Eliminate Binding Early Decision Deadlines And Reassess Early Action Policies

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of private colleges and 43% of public universities with highly selective admissions offer multiple deadlines for submitting applications, including “early decision” or “early action” deadlines.¹⁹ Such policies create a tiered approach to the admissions process that advantages applicants who are already most likely to attend and benefit from these schools.²⁰ At many institutions, students who submit early applications receive a boost in their admissions chances simply because they were able to apply early in the admissions cycle²¹ — a luxury many students from low-income backgrounds don’t have because they typically must wait to hear from multiple schools in order to compare financial aid offers.²² In fact, research demonstrates that applying early to a selective institution is equivalent to an increase of 100 points on the SAT in admissions decisions.²³

Early decision deadlines are binding and require admitted students to commit to attending before knowing their out-of-pocket costs and without being able to compare their financial awards across the institutions they’re interested in attending. Since financial aid packages play a critical role in enrollment decisions for students from low-income backgrounds, applying early decision is often an unrealistic option. For

example, students with high test scores — meaning SAT or ACT scores at the 90th percentile or above — and a family income of more than \$250,000 apply and meet early decision deadlines 29% of the time; students with similar scores, but with a family income of less than \$50,000, apply early just 16% of the time.²⁴

Early action deadlines allow a student to apply to multiple schools and compare financial aid offers, and thus are less problematic than binding early decision deadlines. However, even early action deadlines can have pernicious effects on chances of admission for historically marginalized students. Students learn about early decision and early action deadlines in several ways, including through family members with college experience, expensive test-prep courses, private college admissions coaches, or well-resourced high schools with adequate school counseling.²⁵ Many of these information sources are available only to privileged students, effectively limiting access for their underprivileged peers to the benefits of early admission. For example, students from low-income backgrounds may need the full application period to find the funds to visit one or more college campuses or to cover standardized test or application fees.²⁶



Policy Recommendations: End Early Decision Deadlines

Even when historically marginalized students are made aware of early deadlines and of how applying by these deadlines can boost their chances of admission, they may be unable to take advantage of this option at the same rate as higher income families. Colleges and universities should:

- ✓ End the use of binding early decision deadlines to provide students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students a more equitable shot at admission.
- ✓ Institutions should use internal data to examine who applies and is admitted via early action deadlines to uncover the inequities that these campus practices exacerbate.
- ✓ Enrollment managers should assess how many applicants are admitted through early action policies, as well as through regular applicant pools, to ensure diversity across all groups.

End Legacy Admission

Legacy admission policies are designed to give preference to applicants based on their familial relationship to a particular school's alumni. These practices typically benefit white and wealthy students.²⁷ These policies perpetuate the racism of decades past when our higher education system was closed to Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN people.²⁸ When choosing to consider legacy status in admissions decisions, institutions perpetuate privilege, giving students with the most resources a boost in their chance of admission.



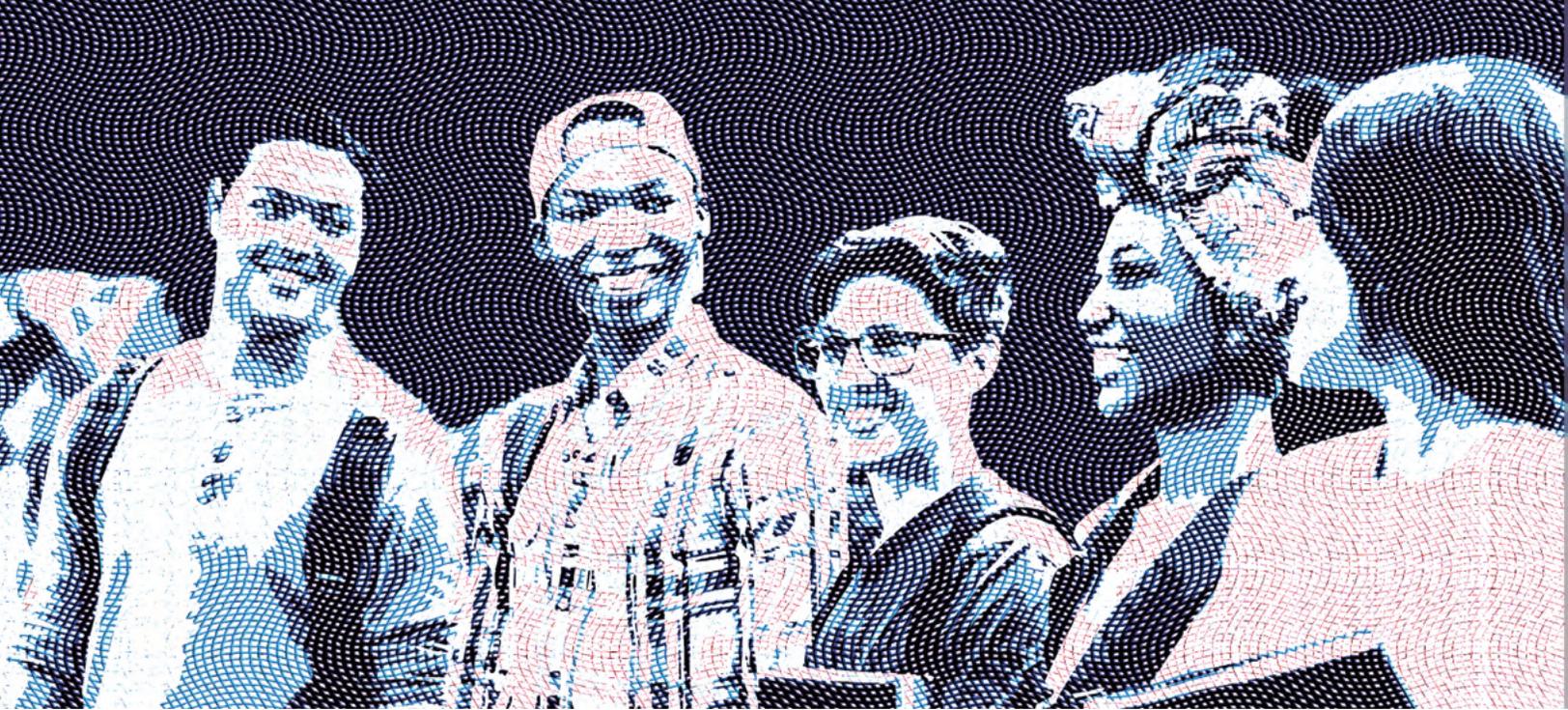
One study found that legacy applicants were 45 percentage points more likely to gain admission to a selective institution than equally qualified, non-legacy candidates, after controlling for other factors.²⁹

Institutions with legacy admission policies may also give legacy applicants special treatment during the admissions process, as well as financial resources — support that marginalized students need most. For example, at some institutions, admissions offices provide an alternate admissions process for legacy applicants, including special interviews, consultations, and advice.³⁰ Institutions may also have legacy financial aid policies, like tuition reductions or the granting of in-state status to out-of-state legacy applicants.³¹ These practices direct dollars to students from privileged backgrounds rather than to students with financial need.³²



Policy Recommendations

To combat racial and socioeconomic injustice, institutional leaders should stop considering legacy status when making admissions decisions. To do so would provide Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds with a more equitable shot at admittance. In recent years, schools such as the University of California have eliminated legacy admission.³³ Others should follow suit.



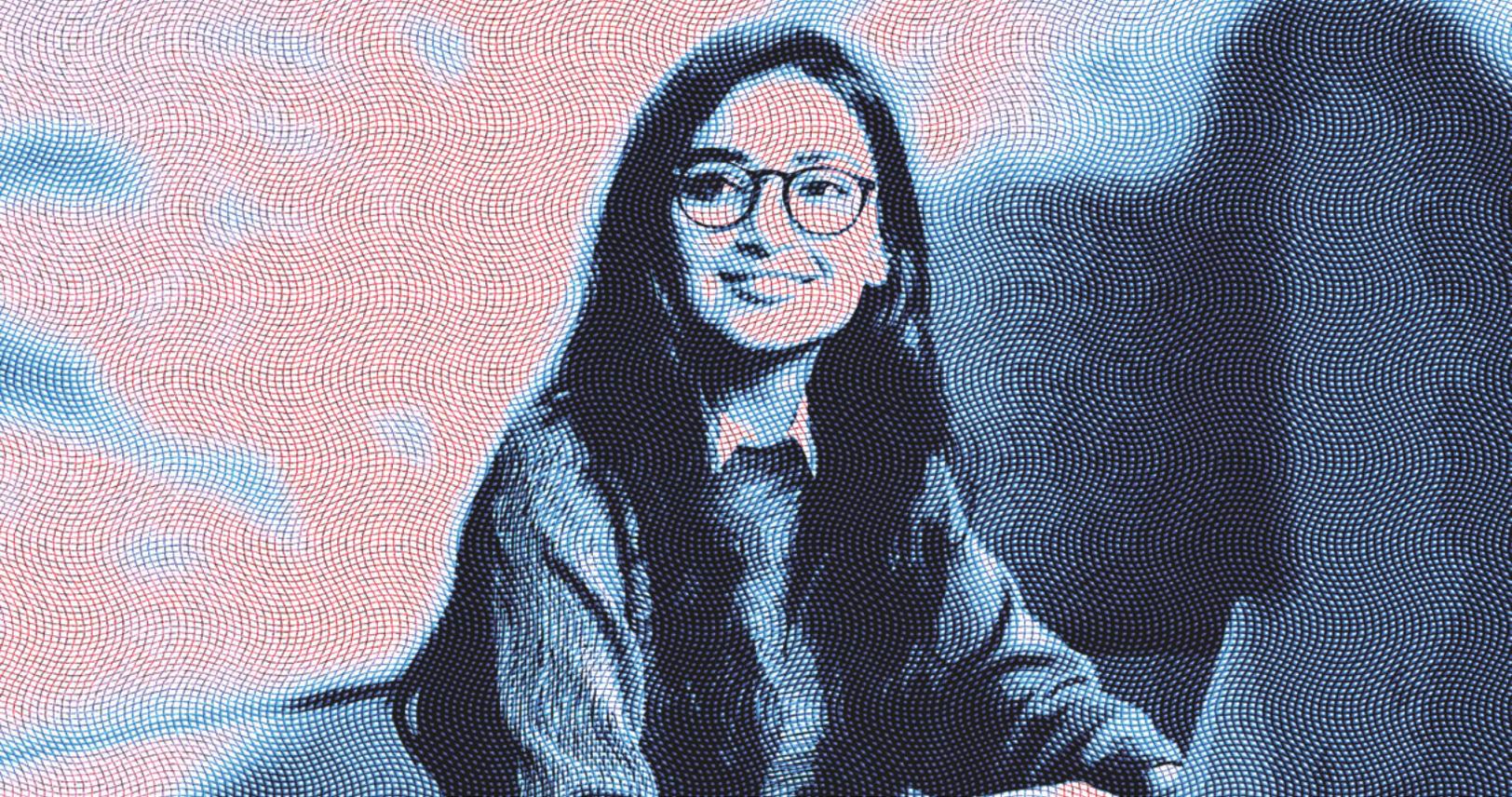
Conclusion

Recruitment practices such as demonstrated interest policies, early admission deadlines, and the consideration of legacy status coalesce to limit postsecondary opportunities for students who have been historically marginalized by our higher education system. While the college admissions process has the potential to interrupt racial and socioeconomic inequity, it too often serves as a barrier to the economic mobility that earning a college degree can offer. Ensuring all students have access to a valuable postsecondary credential will require institutional leaders to review all aspects of their schools' recruitment, admissions, and enrollment pipelines and then adjust their policies and practices to prioritize equity.

No single policy or practice can make admissions equitable — institutions must rework recruitment and admissions strategies in a comprehensive way to transform opportunities for students, their families, and their communities.

Institutions must rethink whether these policies and practices — in isolation and together — promote opportunity, egalitarianism, and economic competitiveness, regardless of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on race-conscious admissions practices. However, with the Supreme Court barring the use of race in college admissions, the need to redesign recruitment and admissions strategies will become all the more urgent. Institutional leaders — alongside state and federal policymakers — hold great influence in shaping the future of individual students' life trajectories, as well as the composition of our college-educated workforce. Institutions should use that power to level the playing field and truly open the door to higher education for all students, regardless of race, income, background, or circumstance.

To learn more about recruitment, demonstrated interest, early admissions, and legacy admission, read ["The Most Important Door"](#) a report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP).



Prioritizing equity starts with enrollment managers, admissions and financial aid officers, college presidents, policymakers, and advocates asking and answering these questions:

- Do my institution's recruitment practices explicitly or implicitly exclude any groups of prospective students (e.g., students from low-income backgrounds, Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, first-generation students, justice-impacted students, rural/urban/suburban students)? Do they favor certain students?
- Does placing a high value on certain criteria when deciding who is admitted promote campus diversity? Who is harmed by the focus on such criteria?
- Do my institution's admissions policies favor high-income, high-wealth, white, or non-first-generation students?
- Does my institution provide access for any prospective students to extra admissions resources and information or specialized opportunities? If so, on what basis?
- How often does my institution review enrollment data to assess the impact of recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies and practices on racial and socioeconomic diversity?

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