Controversial Issue Lesson Plan Template

**Lesson Title:** Who Gets In?

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**Appropriate for Grade Level(s):** 9-12

**Social Studies Standard(s):**

*H3.[9-12].9* Identify and describe the major issues, events, and people of minority rights movements, i.e., **Civil Rights** Act of 1964, Black Power Movement, United Farm Workers, American Indian Movement, Viva La Raza, and Women’s Rights Movement.

Social Studies Skills Standards/Content Literacy:

* Read articles by using reading strategies (i.e., prior knowledge, identify key vocabulary words, context clues, main ideas, supporting details, and text features: pictures, maps, text boxes).
* Read for a specific purpose (i.e., detect cause & effect relationships, compare & contrast information, identify fact v. opinion, and author bias).
* Respond to historical texts and various types of social studies literature by inferring, drawing conclusions, making predictions, and formulating historic, geographic, economic, and civic questions.
* Process or synthesize information through writing using note taking, graphic organizers, summaries, proper sequencing of events, and/or formulating thesis statements that examine why as well as how.

**Objective(s): At the end of this lesson, students will be able to…**

* Critically analyze various articles, websites, responses and discussion by identifying main ideas, compare/contrast, fact vs opinion, author bias and synthesizing that information into a thoughtful, well-constructed essay
* Identify and defend categories that drive college admissions, including race & diversity
* Articulate their personal experience as a “faux” college admissions counselor in class discussion

**Rationale: Why teach a lesson using these documents? (50-100 words)**

Most students face the issue or race while applying for college. What box should I check? What do colleges really look for? By engaging in this lesson, students will **gain a greater appreciation for the complexities of college admissions.**

**Student Readings (list):**

“President Issues Statement on Diversity and Admissions,” Harvard Gazette Archives, April 4, 1996

“Scholars debate use of race in college admissions,” Cornell Chronicle, October 30, 1997

“Student Diversity,” University of Nevada, Reno website

“Race and College Admissions,” Mark Montgomery, Educational Consultant and College Planner, July 22, 2008

“You Decide: Who Should be Admitted?” Angela Orr, TAHP Summer Institute, June 2011

**Total Time Needed:** approximately 4--45 minute classes

**Historical Background & Context (+/- 250 words):**

By the late 1960s, it became clear that African Americans, while winning many court and legislative battles, were still being shut out of the economic opportunities this country had to offer. The solution became known as “affirmative action,” the idea that businesses and universities would create opportunities for people of color to join their venture. President Lyndon B. Johnson established the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC) in the Department of Labor to monitor entities that accepted federal money in regards to minority acceptance. As a result of enforcement challenges, affirmative action became a numbers game. If a business or university hired/admitted “x” number of minorities, then they were following the law. By 1978, affirmative action had made some inroads for people of color (and women) to advance in business and in the university system, but it also created a backlash: many white Americans believed “their” job or “their” spot in a university was being given to a less qualified person of color. The Bakke case exemplified these feelings. In the Bakke decision, the Supreme Court decided that, while specific “set aside” numbers were unconstitutional, the quest for diversity allowed factoring race into admissions decisions.

This somewhat ambivalent decision has created angst for both business & universities as well as the people who seek to join them as employees as students. How much is race a factor? This lesson is designed to help students explore the complexity of choosing college students when diversity is a key goal.

Sources:

De, Jong Greta. "Chapter 5: To See or Not to See: Debates over Affirmative Action." *Invisible Enemy: the African American Freedom Struggle after 1965*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 100-23. Print.

TAHP Summer Institute Lecture, Tuesday June 14, 2011

**Detailed Steps of Lesson :**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Time Frame****(e.g. 15 minutes)** | **What is the teacher doing?**  | **What are students doing?** |
| 10 min | Ask students to list the most important things universities should consider when accepting students. Have students share with someone near them. Then, brainstorm student ideas on to the board. | Listing, sharing and brainstorming what they think should be the most important things universities should consider when accepting students. |
| 5 min | Discuss the list with students. What broad categories came up? Is diversity one of them? Why or why not? Discuss further | Discuss the broad categories for admissions, including diversity. Should diversity be a goal? Why or why not? |
| 15 min | Hand out and monitor students as they read the Harvard Gazette, Cornell Chronicle & UNR articles. Students should read and be able to answer: is diversity a goal for these universities? Why or why not? Be specific. Students should write their answer to these questions in their notes. | Read the Harvard Gazette, Cornell Chronicle & UNR articles. Be able to answer: is diversity a goal for these universities? Why or why not? Be specific. Students should write their answer to these questions in their notes. |
| 10 min | Discuss readings and student answers.  | Discuss reading and student answers. |
| 10 min | Hand out and monitor students as they review “You Decide: Who Should Be Admitted?” Students may only choose 3 candidates and they MUST explain why they chose each candidate. Individually first. | Review the handout “You Decide: Who Should be Admitted?” Students will choose only 3 candidates and explain why they chose each candidate. |
| 10 min | Place students in small groups and find consensus on three candidates to admit. Each group must explain why they chose each of their candidates. | In a small group, students will find consensus on three candidates to admit. Each group will plan on explaining why they chose each of their candidates. |
| 5 min | In their notes, have students identify what made this process challenging and what made the process easy. Was diversity, in fact, a goal? Why or why not? | In their notes, students will identify what made this process challenging and what made the process easy. Was diversity, in fact, a goal? Why or why not? |
| 10 min | Discuss above question with class. | Discuss above question with class. Take notes on what everybody says. |
| 5 min | Ask class a new question: What does this debate look like in a personal, what-about-when-I-apply-for-college way? | Think about and answer: What does this debate look like in a personal, what-about-when-I-apply-for-college way? |
| 5 min | Have students read “Race and College Admissions” by Mark Montgomery. Students should think about: What is Mr. Montgomery’s position on diversity and how high school seniors should handle “the boxes?” Offer specific support from the reading. (Students should not read ahead to the comments section.) | Read “Race and College Admissions” by Mark Montgomery. Answer in notes: What is Mr. Montgomery’s position on diversity and how high school seniors should handle “the boxes?” Offer specific support from the reading.  |
| 10 min | Discuss above question with class. | Discuss above question with class, taking notes on what everybody says. |
| 5 min | In their notes, have students write a response to what Mr. Montgomery wrote (a la posting a comment on a news site or blog). | In their notes, students will write a thoughtful, well-constructed response to what Mr. Montgomery wrote, a la posting a comment on a news site or blog. |
| 15 min | Hand out and have students read the comments posted regarding Mr. Montgomery’s article. Monitor students as they respond in their notes to at least three comments. | Read the comments posted to Mr. Montgomery’s article. In your notes, respond to at least three of them. |
| 5 min | Discuss what posts students responded to and why. | Discuss what posts students responded to and why. Take notes on what everybody says. |
| 5 min | Hand out and have students read the letters to the NY Times regarding race and college admissions. Have students compare and contrast what these writers say versus what the respondents to Mr. Montgomery said. This should go in their notes. | Read the letters to the NY Times regarding race and college admissions. In your notes, compare and contrast these responses to the responses posted to Mr. Montgomery’s article. |
| 10 min | Discuss the similarities & differences between Mr. Montgomery’s respondents and the NY Times letters. | Discuss the similarities & differences between Mr. Montgomery’s respondents and the NY Times letters. Take notes on what everybody says. |
| 15 min | Have students write a thoughtful, well-constructed essay regarding their opinion of the role of race & diversity in college admissions. | In a thoughtful, well-constructed essay regarding their opinion of the role of race & diversity in college admissions. Cite specific ideas, examples, quotes from all the articles |

**How will students reflect on their learning & understanding?:**  Students will reflect on their learning and understanding through journaling in their notes, class discussion and small group discussion.

**Description of Lesson Assessment Tied to Objective/Standards:** The assessment for this lesson is an essay. After using personal reading strategies to identify main ideas, compare facts versus opinions, and compare/contrast, students will draw their own conclusions, create a thesis and write an essay that synthesizes all they’ve learned from the readings and discussion on race, diversity and college admissions, a major civil rights issue of the last several decades.

**Attached to the following pages are all readings, primary sources, guided questions, worksheets, assignment guidelines, rubrics, etc.**

**Scholars debate use of race in college admissions**

**By Casey Morse '00**

Should it be illegal for universities to consider the race of student applicants in their efforts to produce a diverse student body?

Cornell faculty member Jeremy Rabkin and Harvard faculty member Gary Orfield sounded off on that question Oct. 21 before a Barnes Hall audience.

"Affirmative action is certainly imperfect, but until we think of something better, it's very necessary," contended Orfield, a professor of education and social policy and chairman of the Harvard Civil Rights Project.

Orfield, who argued in favor of using race as part of the admissions formula, opened his remarks by declaring that America is currently in a crisis.

"We have inequalities in our society," Orfield said. "The races are deeply segregated by educational inequality."

He then went on to endorse the use of affirmative action in college admissions formulas. "Affirmative action is not concerned with quotas," he said. "It's simply designed to be one of the circumstances used to measure a student for acceptance into a college or university."

Rabkin, an associate professor of government and a member of the board of directors of the Center for Individual Rights, believes it should be illegal to use race as a condition for college acceptance. He argued that race was special and that it could not easily be regulated by certain admissions policies, such as affirmative action.

"Americans do not make an effort to regulate many things today," Rabkin said, "so why should we try to regulate race?"

Rabkin argued that "universities don't have a lot of credibility anymore, especially concerning the issue of race." He warned college and university officials against playing with race issues.

"Race is explosive -- highly flammable -- toxic. It's social dynamite," he said. "Race is dangerous -- especially when people treat it the wrong way."

Sophomore Kate Keifer credited both sides with presenting an invigorating debate. "Although I may not have agreed with much of what [Rabkin] said, I think he managed to stir up a good debate," she said.

Matt Wexler, president of the Cornell Political Forum and Debate Society, which presented the event, said he thought the debate was quite successful.

"One goal of the forum is to foster debate on campus," he said. "I think this event managed to do that."

The debate was moderated by John Ford, the Robert W. and Elizabeth C. Staley Dean of Students, who introduced the participants. It was co-sponsored by a number of campus organizations.

http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicle/97/10.30.97/debate.html

**HARVARD GAZETTE ARCHIVES**

**President Issues Statement on Diversity and Admissions**

**President Neil L. Rudenstine issued the following statement this week regarding a recent court decision about university admissions:**

As you may know, a federal appeals court recently issued a major decision concerning diversity and university admissions. In *Hopwood v. Texas*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled that the University of Texas may not use race as a factor in its law school admissions, despite the university's assertion of a compelling interest in fostering student diversity. Although the *Hopwood* decision does not apply directly to Harvard (or other institutions outside the Fifth Circuit's jurisdiction, which includes Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana), I have received a number of questions about its implications, and I want to offer a brief comment.

I believe that student diversity contributes powerfully and directly to the quality of education in colleges and universities. For more than a century, Harvard has placed a very high value on the creation of a residential community that brings together people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The breadth of views and voices in our university challenges each of us to think harder, to see the different sides of any issue, to confront our own assumptions and preconceptions, and to develop the kind of understanding that can come only when we are willing to test our ideas and arguments in the company of people with very different perspectives. It also gives us the chance to come to know, understand, and respect a remarkable variety of men and women whom we might not otherwise have the opportunity to learn from or even to meet.

The educational importance of student diversity has informed our admissions process for many decades, as I suggested in my recent report to the Board of Overseers. In choosing from among a pool of well-qualified applicants far larger than the number of available places, we take great care not to view people simply as the sum of their grades and test scores, however helpful those measures may be. We view applicants as individual human beings with a complex set of talents, qualities, interests, backgrounds, and experiences -- all of which bear on their record of achievement and their future promise, as well as their capacity to contribute to the educational experience of their class as a whole.

Race and ethnicity are among the many factors that our admissions officers and faculty members may take into account as part of the selection process. Harvard's policies in this regard antedated the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Supreme Court's 1978 decision in the *Bakke* case. The federal appeals court in *Hopwood*, taking a position contrary to that of Justice Powell's pivotal opinion in *Bakke*, has now expressed the view that the consideration of race as a factor in the admissions process "is no more rational on its own terms" than considering "the physical size or blood type of applicants." I respectfully and strongly disagree. To my mind, race has historically been, and still remains, a significant factor that influences the process of growing up and living in the United States -- one that helps to shape the outlooks, experiences, and opportunities of millions of people.

I do not believe we can solve the persistent dilemma of race or ethnicity in American life simply by stating that we live -- or ought to live -- in a society where these characteristics have ceased to be significant. Our hope for progress lies in gradually narrowing the real gaps that continue to exist among many people of different races. That can be done only by creating fruitful ways of bringing people together -- at the very best, by educating them together.

To say that factors such as race and ethnicity may be taken into account in the admissions process does not mean that they should be elevated above all others. It does not imply efforts to achieve specific numerical targets through quotas. It means that a person's race or ethnicity may be considered as a potential "plus" factor among the many considerations that go into assessing each individual as a whole person: as someone whose "merit" cannot be measured purely in terms of numbers; as someone who has the potential to bring something distinctive and important to Harvard and to society.

Over many decades, this approach has made Harvard stronger both as an academic institution and as a human community. Progress has come slowly yet steadily -- not without interruption, not without friction and strain, but with impressive results. Now is a time to reaffirm our commitment to building upon that progress, and to sustaining an inclusive vision of higher education that I believe has been essential to our university and to the nation.

<http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/1996/04.04/PresidentIssues.html>

# Student Diversity

**4.5 Student Diversity**. **Stated application, admission, and degree-granting requirements and regulations shall be applied equitably to individual applicants and students regardless of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion or national origin.**
**4.5.a. Description of policies, procedures and plans to achieve a diverse student population.**
The MPH program values diversity within its students, faculty, and staff. The program seeks to recruit, retain, and serve diverse populations and to contribute to a climate of tolerance, inclusion, and collaboration within the program, the university, and the community. We believe that diversity supports and creates a rich learning environment, more effective public health professionals and initiatives. Key program values - professionalism, integrity, diversity, community/collaboration and, building knowledge and learners - were collectively established by faculty, staff, and students and reflect a culture of inclusion.
Diversity issues are interspersed throughout the curriculum - addressing the majority of the ASPH competencies in diversity and culture (60% of the competencies in the MPH core and 100% in the Social and Behavioral Health specialty area).  Many courses focus on diversity issues, including world health, cultural diversity, rural health issues, HIV/AIDS, and most recently, a course on health care systems in other countries that will include course activities conducted in Toronto, Canada is planned for summer 2011.
The University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate against faculty, students or staff on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation in any program or activity it operates. (<http://www.unr.edu/eoaa/ada.html>).  The University’s Division of Student Services’ (<http://www.unr.edu/stsv/vpstsv/>) policy statement includes a commitment to diversity with seventeen objectives to foster and support diversity in the areas of student learning and success; hiring, training, and professional development; and collaboration and outreach.

**4.5.b. Description of recruitment efforts used to attract a diverse student body, along with information about how these efforts are evaluated and refined over time.**
Specific efforts to recruit a diverse student body have included efforts to personally encourage diverse undergraduate students to apply to the program, to recruit from diverse groups affiliated with UNR, and graduate school diversity `recruitment fairs. Students who express an interest in the program are contacted and provided with information about the program and the field.
The program expects and fosters student success. The graduate director and the graduate committee oversee program efforts to recruit and retain a diverse student body.  The MPH Student Affairs Committee assesses student progress, identifies potential student difficulties, and supports students and faculty to promote student success. These committees meet monthly and at least three times a semester, respectively, in order to review activities and revise strategies as needed. The entire faculty serves a crucial role in advising and mentoring students as they investigate career options and interests, during their graduate school application process, and throughout the program. The program is aware of the need to help students transition as they begin a new academic program and move to a new geographical or cultural location. The program actively seeks to assist students in this transition; for example, the program often facilitates social networking for students with similar backgrounds/cultural experiences.

<http://www.unr.edu/public-health/4_4_StudDiv.html>

# Race and College Admissions

Posted July 22, 2008 at 3:37 pm in [Admission](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/content/admission/), [Blog](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/content/blog/), [Educational Consulting](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/content/educational-consulting/) [Comment](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/race-and-college-admissions/#comments)

I received an interesting question today from a friend and colleague who does tutoring and test prep for the ACT and the SAT. Here’s what she wrote:

Hi, Mark. I have a quick question. I have a student who is interested in applying to Stanford. She asked whether she would be able to classify herself as “Hispanic” given that her dad’s family is from Spain. I am not sure what the definition of “Hispanic” is. She did tell me that she’s always marked Hispanic before, but wanted to make sure that this would be proper for her college applications.

Race is such a sticky issue. On the one hand, kids have an incentive to declare themselves members of “minority” groups, simply because colleges have an incentive to admit larger numbers of minorities to demonstrate their “commitment to diversity.”

So since the admissions game tends to give those of different racial or cultural backgrounds an edge, isn’t it best to play the game by ticking off that “Hispanic” category? Since there is no single definition of what it means to be Hispanic, then by all means, the student should identify herself as Hispanic.

On the other hand, this student is asking the question precisely because she understands that to claim to be a “minority” is, in a sense, to claim that she is somehow underprivileged. Or that she is a victim of discrimination. She knows, in her heart of hearts, that her Spanish surname is the only thing she has in common with a girl with a similar last name who grew up in Queens of a single mother who cleans hotel rooms for a living.

Personally, I loathe these racial categorizations. They seem to contravene everything that Martin Luther King stood for:  a world in which kids are judged “not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Race is not a biological fact: it is a social construct. “Race” is whatever we say it is. “Race” is whatever society says it is.

(I had a professor in graduate school who told us he was “pink.” Indeed, his skin was very pink. A veteran of the civil rights movement and Lyndon Johnson’s administration, he grew tired of America’s obsession with skin color–and surnames).

This student’s question is an indicator of how complicated race has become in our country today, in which both Tiger Woods and Barack Obama and others have begun to modulate the way we talk and think about race.

Confronted with the shifting definitions of racial categories, this young student is troubled by her claim of “Hispanic” heritage. She understands the game that privileges those with Spanish surnames in this country. Yet she does not want to leave the wrong impression that she is disadvantaged.

My advice to this young woman was to go with her conscience. To my mind, there is no clear moral or ethical line here. She can either claim “Hispanic” on her application or not. But she must be comfortable with her decision. A good admissions officer at Stanford will be able to read between the lines. The Spanish surname or the checked “Hispanic” box will not likely sway an admissions decision at such a competitive school where 11.3% of the students identify themselves as Hispanic.

(Unlike many colleges, Stanford already does a great job of enrolling minorities. In addition to its Hispanics, Stanford’s undergraduate student body is 24% Asian, 10% black, 2.4% American Indian, 6% “international” of undetermined “race”, 41% white, and 5.3% unreported).

I have no qualms, morally speaking, about this student claiming Hispanic heritage. It won’t make much difference in her particular case.

But part of me yearns for the day when this question is no longer asked.

[Mark Montgomery
College Admissions Consultant
Former Member, Interracial Concerns Committee, Dartmouth College](http://greatcollegeadvice.com)

Technorati Tags: [Hispanic,](http://www.technorati.com/tag/Hispanic%2C) [race,](http://www.technorati.com/tag/race%2C) [college,](http://www.technorati.com/tag/college%2C) [admission,](http://www.technorati.com/tag/admission%2C) [application,](http://www.technorati.com/tag/application%2C) [Stanford,](http://www.technorati.com/tag/Stanford%2C) [Dartmouth](http://www.technorati.com/tag/Dartmouth) Del.icio.us Tags: [Hispanic,](http://del.icio.us/tag/Hispanic%2C) [race,](http://del.icio.us/tag/race%2C) [college,](http://del.icio.us/tag/college%2C) [admission,](http://del.icio.us/tag/admission%2C) [application,](http://del.icio.us/tag/application%2C) [Stanford,](http://del.icio.us/tag/Stanford%2C) [Dartmouth](http://del.icio.us/tag/Dartmouth)

Tags: [Race](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/tag/race/), [Stanford](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/tag/stanford/)

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#### About the Author



### [Mark Montgomery](http://greatcollegeadvice.com/author/mark/)

As a former professor, administrator, and high school teacher, Mark has the knowledge and skills to counsel students as they make the transition from high school to college.

### 21 Responses to “Race and College Admissions”

1. July 22, 2008 at 18:24

[*SAT test prep*](http://IQTestTraining.com) says:

Hello, Mark.

I share your feelings. Would that it wasn’t necessary for such questions to be asked. I’m sure that this is true today in some circumstances; but the country still suffers inequity — it is after all still very recently that America had laws supporting racial discrimination. These things take time to be leveled out.

You and your readers might be interested in Susanne Jaeggi and Martin Buschkuehl’s study on [Improving Fluid Intelligence by Training Working Memory](http://iqtesttraining.com/brain-exercises-for-brain-fitness.htm) (PNAS April 2008) which recorded increases in mental agility (fluid intelligence) of more than 40% after 19 days of focused training with a progressive dual n-back training method. It seems to be the kind of affordable tool that can help level the playing field by substituting for more expensive test prep.

Martin

1. July 23, 2008 at 23:10

[*markm*](http://greatcollegeadvice.com) says:

Hello, Martin.
Thanks so much for your response and for visiting my site.
I agree that historical inequities take time to sort out, and I’m more than willing to be patient.
And, as I say, I have not qualms about the student in this example claiming to be Hispanic, even though her claim violates the spirit of the question
I have a friend who once asked me, rhetorically, about when to end psychotherapy. How do we know when we’re “cured”?
I think the same question will have to be asked–in the not too distant future–about racial categorizations in this country. When will we know when we’ve moved beyond them, as a society? For how long into the future may we expect to see questions about our race on various applications and forms?
When will we know when King’s dream will have been achieved?
Again, thank you for asking provocative questions and raising important points.

1. October 19, 2008 at 10:51

Erica says:

Dear Mark,

While I applaud your desire to rid the world of racial “boxes,” I am surprised by your generalization that only Hispanics with single parents, who work in the service industry, have a right to check off the Hispanic box on college applications.

My husband, by definition, is Hispanic, makes a very good salary and is well respected in his industry. Should my children deny their culture and not check off the appropriate box on their college applications because their father is a successful Hispanic?

1. October 19, 2008 at 12:48

[*markm*](http://greatcollegeadvice.com) says:

Dear Erica,

I didn’t mean to imply that you–or anyone else–does not have a right to check off boxes that identify you with one ethnic group or another. Checking a box that indicates a fact is neither a celebration or a denial of that fact. It just is.

If you or your daughter want to self-identify your Hispanic heritage on a form, that’s fine. But in my view, your daughter should reap no particular advantage based on that culture. We can all celebrate our diversity without conferring any special advantages (or disadvantages).

In my view, the financial aid advantage should go to those who are unable to afford a college education–for whom economic opportunities are harder to come by. Clearly one can have successful (i.e. wealthy) parents and be brown, orange, pink, or blue, or speak Urdu or Tagalog or Athabaskan. And one can clearly be dirt poor and white.

Just as I believe we should be judged not by the color of our skin–or our culture or ethnic heritage–no one skin tone or culture or heritage should be given preference in the admissions or financial aid process. The real litmus, in my view, should be one’s individual merit and a family’s ability to pay.

I know that the admissions and financial aid systems, despite our ideals, do not really work that way. Most colleges do take ethnicity into account in the admissions process–despite whatever the Supreme Court might say about the practice. So I do not begrudge anyone who takes advantage of whatever opportunities are offered by our flawed system by checking a box.

But it’s hard for me to believe in Dr. King’s ideals and turn a blind eye when those ideals are not upheld.

And on a personal note, I have to say that I hate checking that “white/Caucasian” box. Is there a white culture, really? The only people I know who assert the existence of a “white culture” are members of Aryan Nation or some other supremacist group. Where is the box for “Italian” or “Welsh” or “Ukrainian”? I do not identify myself as “white”. I find no box to check that reflects my “culture,” and no application form that “celebrates” my heritage, background, or upbringing. So I no longer answer the question.

Thanks for visiting my blog and engaging in the discussion. This is a very tough issue, and one that we as a society do not usually talk about in a respectful, dispassionate, and thoughtful way. Thanks for your very thoughtful comments.

1. April 24, 2009 at 00:14

jay says:

“And on a personal note, I have to say that I hate checking that â€œwhite/Caucasianâ€ box. Is there a white culture, really?”

Is there a Hispanic culture, or a black culture, really? I assure you that a Brazilian is just as different from an Argentinian as a Spaniard is from a Russian. Likewise for a Moroccan and a Namibian. And I can tell you from personal experience that Japanese and Filipinos are worlds apart as well.

These “check-boxes” are just a ham-fisted effort to make the student body look a certain way. They do little to advance the cause of those who really need help – children from poor and poorly educated backgrounds.

1. April 24, 2009 at 22:18

[*Mark*](http://greatcollegeadvice.com) says:

Thanks for visiting the blog, Jay, and for reminding us that skin color is not a not synonymous with “culture.” It’s very complex, isn’t it?

1. July 2, 2009 at 11:37

Natalie says:

Dear Mark,

You may find this story interesting.
After hearing so many stories about how white students who have better scores, grades, community service, sport participation, etc… are being excluded from fine institutions over “minority” classmates, I decided to do a little personal research.

There has been a long-standing rumor in my husband’s family of Cherokee Nation heritage, so I asked my mother-in-law about it specifically to nail down the heritage of our two children who are rapidly approaching college age. I admit that I would rather not check the “White Box” because I am afraid my children will lose opportunities if I do. She sent me some kind of Cherokee Nation certificate on a distant relative and suggested that rather than digging up all those old birth certificates, I get a DNA cheek-swab test, so that’s exactly what I did!

The results were rather astonishing (and very pleasing to me) that my two British-Islander children have strong DNA markers from TUNISIA and MOROCCO! This means that though they appear to be white, they are in fact African American in their DNA. The test also marked them as Alaska Native, German, and French. I have all the documents to prove this and the test is backed by one of this country’s most respected DNA labs.

I will probably end up checking almost all the boxes!

1. July 6, 2009 at 23:45

[*Mark*](http://greatcollegeadvice.com) says:

Dear Natalie,

I have heard of this DNA service, and I listened to a radio story in which an African-American man had his DNA examined, and it turned out he had very little African DNA at all. So this information created something of an identifty crisis for him: was he really African-American? Or not? What does the term “African-American” mean?

The fact is that race is a social construct, not a genetic one. It is a very complicated factor in modern life. The Supreme Court will continue to wrestle with it, just as the electorate will wrestle with it now and in the future. Perhaps if we were all tested, we’d learn how goofy this whole racial construct really is, and we’d begin to abandon it completely.

That said, why are you afraid to check “white”? I don’t agree that your children will “lose opportunities.” In fact, if they game the system, claiming to be African, wouldn’t that be something of a fib, or at least an admission that you are, yourself, falling into the race trap. Why is it “pleasing” that your kids have North African DNA? Does it impel you to teach your kids Arabic? Or does this new information, in your mind, entitle them to special treatment of some kind?

I’d rather see your kids (because this is your kids’ application–they will be checking the boxes, not you) write an interesting story about race and identity, and explain their mixed genetic markers, and narrate how they feel about racial politics in America. That would be a sign of maturity and thoughtfulness. Checking all the boxes and brandishing “proof” would make them look silly, small, and could possibly be self-destructive. Why not encourage your kids to do what significant numbers of kids their age are now doing: refusing to disclose their race on their applications by simply not reporting? To me, that is more mature than “proving” that your kids are actually “minorities”.

No, Natalie: don’t do it. Don’t fall in the race trap. Set an example for your kids that race really doesn’t mean anything. Use this new knowledge to talk to them about the meaninglessness of skin color: we are all humans and human history is actually darned short, and people have migrated all over the planet for millennia.

The DNA test is remarkable and interesting and thought provoking. But personally, if I were your kid, I’d find it embarrassing to pretend I was black on an application form when clearly everyone can see that my skin is pink and I grew up in a European/Causasian/American/monolingual household in suburbia.

Do you really want to teach your kids to game the system? Or to rise above it?

Perhaps this is not the response you anticipated, but I do appreciate the conversation. Thanks for visiting my blog.

1. July 10, 2009 at 21:23

Natalie says:

Dear Mark,

I am so very appreciative of your response and agree with you on every count!

I certainly don’t want to fall into a race trap and the reason I was “pleased” with the outcome of my child’s DNA test was because I believe that race classifications for preferential treatment are ridiculous. I want to start a new discussion on what race REALLY is and whether or not it is important at all. I am very pleased to prove that we are all part of a big melting pot and because of that, see no reason that anyone should get preferential treatment based on race.

“Gaming the system” is not my thing. My husband is on the admissions committee for one of the UC Medical Schools and he sees people do this all the time. After hearing all the stories about how the admissions committee members see this stuff a mile away, I would not try to fool anyone, nor would I want to.

Ultimately, the point I am trying to make is purely in the hope that on any application, selection is based upon an individual’s merits and not because of race, gender, religious or sexual preferences. The only way positive changes can be made in this direction is for us to open fair discussions (such as this one) on the matter. I feel that my investment in a DNA test was a great way to get some FACTS on the table, especially since discussions on racial issues tend to get very emotional.

I will take your advice and advise my kids (because I will not be filling the aps out for them, but will be helping out as most parents do) to opt out of racial box checking. This is at the very least a small step in the right direction.

Again, thank you for your thoughtful response and your time!

1. December 10, 2009 at 01:28

Jordan Stoleru says:

Question: My father considers himself Columbian. He is a Holocaust survivor born in Romania, who was “in arms” when he was given entrance into Cali, South American. He was raised, educated and continued through medical school there. He later became an American citizen after marrying the American sister of his medical school classmate. I have applied and been accepted to college but my good friend and I are in disagreement on my status. Am I 1/2 Hispanic? My good friend says I am not and my parents say I am. Who is right? JS

1. December 24, 2009 at 14:17

[*Mark*](http://greatcollegeadvice.com) says:

Hello, Jordan.

This is a complicated question. Your “status” is that you are an American citizen of Romanian/American descent, whose father happened to live a good portion of his life in Colombia. “Hispanic” is not a gift of geography, it is one of language and culture. your last name is not “hispanic” in the least.

My question is this: why does it matter?

1. March 3, 2010 at 09:34

julia marker says:

My son plays tennis, and it is quite an expensvie sport! He does well, but we can’t afford to send him to all of the fancy private coaches and camps like his friends, even though my husband & I have good jobs. Still, our son is very talented. There are grants and scholarships for minority pplayers, but none based on merit alone. My husband is one half Spanish, as his mother and grandparents came from spain – we are considering applying for a grant based on my husband’s hispanic heritage, but are a little uncomfortable about it bc our name is not spanish-sounding. We also do not really culturally identify ourselves as “hispanic” – BUT if this funding is available for other players and our son qualifies, technically, is it proper to apply for the funding?

1. March 3, 2010 at 10:06

[*Mark*](http://greatcollegeadvice.com) says:

Hello, Julia.

Thanks for the message. I’m not sure how to help you, other than to sing Jiminy Cricket’s famous little ditty: “Always let your conscience be your guide.”

In addition, let me restate I often ask parents who are shelling out thousands of dollars for their kids to play sports at the elite level. “Why?”

Some parents do it out of the hope that their kid will win scholarships. However, if you are spending $7000 or more a year for the sport (as many families do, including travel to national tournaments, extra uniforms, hotel rooms, etc.) and you do that for 5 or 6 years, we’re talking about a total investment of (say) $42,000. Full ride scholarships for tennis are available, but given that your son will have to attend whatever college gives him the money (IF they give him the money), is this a good investment? What if he gets only $5000 per year for four years? You’re now $22k in the hole.

Some parents justify the expense by thinking that their kid will someday play in the US Open or Wimbledon. We just witnessed the Olympics, with all those “up close and personal” stories of parents who made enormous sacrifices so that their kids could pursue their dream. (I was amazed by the Japanese figure skater who renounced her citizenship and became Russian in order to win a gold–and then won nothing).

So my question is this: “what’s the goal?” Why are you spending so much money on tennis? Sure, it’s fun and all, and your son sounds talented. But what is the investment? What’s the sport worth to you? To him?

Figure out the answers to those questions first, and then think about what sacrifices (in terms of both money and self-respect) you are willing to make.

I hope this is helpful, and thanks again for writing in.

1. July 14, 2010 at 13:25

kelle rodrigues says:

Hi! Thank you for this very informative blog. My daughter is 25% Spanish, we
have a Spanish surname. I feel that in the very least she should be able to check the hispanic box when you consider the obstacles she has and will continue to encounter due to prejudice against hispanics-of any descent. I have personally encounter this prejudice and I am not hispanic.
Thank you!

1. July 24, 2010 at 22:36

Mark Montgomery says:

Dear Kelle,
Your daughter is welcome to check any box she feels fits her own identity. The politics of ethnicity are such that we are not race-blind in the admissions process. Perhaps we will get there some day (and I really hope we do). As Martin Luther King once dreamt, our children should be judged not by the color of their skin (or their last name or their first language or their country of origin), but by the content of their character.
Thanks for visiting.

1. October 21, 2010 at 09:40

Michelle says:

Quick question: My mother is 100% Egyptian and I myself am pretty dark. Can I check the “african american” box when applying to grad schools?

1. November 4, 2010 at 05:08

Mark Montgomery says:

Michelle,
This application question is one that I clearly dislike. However, the answer to your question is simple: identify yourself however you wish to be identified. From a technical viewpoint, your claim to be “African American” is true enough. Of course, the definition of who is (or is not) African-American is subject to great debate from both inside and outside that community. But colleges ask you to apply your own definition. So feel free to define yourself however you find both truthful and reflective of your own identity.
Best,
Mark

1. December 12, 2010 at 18:39

Puertorican Teen says:

Let me say that while all this government labeling of race and categorizing is a very flawed system, I’m glad they do have it. A few people posting here mention wanting to take advantage of the system to give them an added boost. this is dishonest in my opinion and very nearly deplorable.
I’m approaching my time for college applications, and live in a very, very affluent town. yet I’m Hispanic and my family struggles every day with living paycheck to paycheck. without college assistance, my sister (a senior) and I would be unable to even entertain the notion of college education. even with help, we will be attempting miracles to do it, as an under 30k income just isn’t enough. and for people to want to take people similar to me and deprive them of chances to succeed for their own benefit? terrible.
checking Hispanic gives a good idea of what a large part of the Hispanic population is like these days- struggling to live in a privileged society. many of us are first generation students, grasping at whatever chance we get to escape the route many of our counterparts take in engaging in crime or just merely “settling” for a difficult life making due with a job at walmart.
just something to think about, the perspective of a stereotypical Hispanic as opposed to those white men in robes playing with our futures.

1. December 25, 2010 at 16:21

Mark Montgomery says:

Hello. I understand your struggles. However, you are falling into stereotypes yourself, painting “white men in robes playing with your future” as the underlying problem. Is the problem really white people? Or is the problem equality of opportunity?

While I do know that racism exists in this country, I also know that opportunities do exist for students with low income. Ivy League schools, for example, are free to students whose families make less than about $60k per year. Most private universities will also offer free rides to capable students from low income families–regardless of race. Being Hispanic should not be the litmus: there are many rich families with Hispanic surnames. Should they get an advantage simply because their last name is Gutierrez or Peña? Dr. Martin Luther King dreamed of a day when kids would be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. Are you asking to be judged by the color of your skin? I believe strongly in providing students without financial wherewithal to attend college. For this reason I donate to my alma mater’s scholarship fund to ensure that poor people are able to attend. But I care not if that poor, deserving teen is white, black, brown, red, yellow, or purple. I care about that teen’s character. That the poor should have opportunity I wholeheartedly endorse. But granting advantages (or disadvantages) based on skin color or national origin or religion or sexual preference or anything other than character is frankly abhorrent to me. That said, I encourage you to seek out every opportunity available to you. Best of luck to you.

1. February 15, 2011 at 12:52

Kaitlyn Jackson says:

Mark,

I came upon your blog while researching some information on which box to check (or not check) on my law school application in regards to my ethnicity. I was researching if, by checking the hispanic box or the native american box, I would be given an advantage in the application process.

My grandmother on my mother’s side is half-hispanic, but grew up in a Catholic Orphanage in Ohio with her 13 siblings. My grandfather on my father’s side is at least half Cherokee Indian (but he has passed and there is no information to find out how much, etc). My grandfather on my mother’s side is Scottish. He came from a very poor Scottish family that migrated to Canada just before he was born. I identify myself more with that part of my heritage than any other part. Not because of my red hair or my freckles, but because I know the most about my bloodline on that side of my family.

After reading your blog, I an not going to check any boxes. I was inspired by your passion and realized after examining my motives how unethical it would be to claim to be anything I didn’t strongly identify with. In truth, I have decided that it is in fact, unethical to have those boxes at all. I feel like it would be more appropriate to have boxes that indicate what your parents’ jobs are, how many siblings you have, what the average income was within the household was growing up, etc. Even though I feel like even these questions are inappropriate, they would paint of clearer image of who is applying to the school. I feel like finding those students who have had obvious economic disadvantages, but have overcome those obstacles would make for a stronger student body, and in the long run, a better school.

Thank you for your inspiration. Let’s hope Seattle University wants one more student who chooses not to identify herself with any ethnicity. Maybe if I get in, I’ll have a chance to take this new-found, inspired passion further in the legal realm.

Kaitlyn Jackson

1. February 23, 2011 at 04:30

Mark Montgomery says:

Hi, Kaitlyn,

It is you, not I, who is the inspiration here. You are the one having to check the box.

If Seattle Pacific is silly enough not to accept you, let me know. I’ll write them a letter and point them to your post here.

Thanks for writing in!

<http://greatcollegeadvice.com/race-and-college-admissions/>

###### Letters

# Race as a Factor in College Admissions

###### Published: June 19, 2011

###### Lenny Naar

Re “[On College Forms, a Question of Race, or Races, Can Perplex](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/14/us/14students.html)” (“Race Remixed” series, front page, June 14):

It is very, very sad that so many universities make admission decisions based on an applicant’s skin color and what country his or her ancestors came from. Our nation’s latest census tells us that we are increasingly a multiracial, multiethnic society — and, as the article notes, more and more individuals are themselves likely to be multiracial and multiethnic. In such a society, it is untenable for our institutions to be sorting people and treating some better and others worse, depending on which silly little box is checked.

As for the complaint that some students are “gaming” this system: The real problem is that the system itself is disgustingly discriminatory.

ROGER CLEGG
President and General Counsel
Center for Equal Opportunity
Falls Church, Va., June 14, 2011

**To the Editor:**

Fifty years ago, Congress and federal regulators redefined how the nation would deal with blatant and latent racism. Two generations have passed. Today, more minority families have succeeded in careers once closed to them because of inequities in higher education. We are a better nation, but also a different nation, and therefore we need an improved approach to the remaining inequities.

The solution is simple. Tailor affirmative action by making a family’s means the most important criterion. For example, why should the minority children of someone with the financial means of a Michael Jordan be given the same affirmative action weight as the average minority high school senior?

Many people fear that tinkering with the laws surrounding affirmative action would render the still needed corrections ineffective. I believe that we as a nation have moved beyond such silliness.

But if I am wrong and if legislators destroy a mandate that has improved this nation, we can turn to the courts yet again.

JOSEPH CONLIN
Fairfield, Conn., June 14, 2011

**To the Editor:**

It is not obvious to me that diversity will provide students with “rich opportunities to learn from peers who bring various backgrounds to campus.” Can the proximity of students with different backgrounds better help one to learn calculus or molecular biology or antitrust law?

Even if the diversity hypothesis were valid, I think that the Common Application has erred by choosing race, rather than ethnicity, as a surrogate for diversity. Race is merely a genetic attribute, whereas ethnicity gives us an insight into manners and cultural history.

The so-called white race, ranging, for example, from the United States to Norway, Germany, Italy, Greece, the Middle East, Russia and Armenia, offers an astounding array of cultural diversity. The Common Application, by limiting its diversity categories to five ill-defined races, would necessarily diminish the range of ethnic diversity on the campus.

RAYMOND L. DUJACK
Tewksbury, N.J., June 15, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/20/opinion/l20race.html

YOU DECIDE: Who Should be Admitted?

**Candidate A**

White Female, 4.0 GPA, 1560 SAT score

* Captain of the swim team
* Competes in horseback riding at local club

**Candidate B**

African American Female, 3.7. GPA, 1380 SAT score

* Captain of her school’s cheerleading squad
* All-state in Forensics (public speaking group)
* Takes dance lessons and performs in recitals
* Tutors elementary school children for one hour each Saturday

**Candidate C**

African Male, 3.4 GPA, 1150 SAT score

* Runs track; his relay team placed second in the state last year
* Member of Students for Global Responsibility, an organization that works for a better environment by recycling, cleaning up streams, and performing other service projects
* Moved to US three years ago from a war-torn country where his education was interrupted; his father and brothers were killed in that war
* Volunteers in a neighborhood literacy program after school and during the summer

**Candidate D**

Latina Female, 3.5 GPA, 1200 SAT score

* President of her school’s Hispanic Club
* Sings in her school and church choir
* Has lived in the US for 5 years
* English is her second language; her family speaks Spanish at home
* Works 20 hours per week at her parents store and cares for her younger siblings

**Candidate E**

Asian Male, 3.8 GPA, 1350 SAT score

* Editor of his school’s newspaper
* Member of the football team
* Treasurer of the Vietnamese club
* Has been in the US for 8 years; English is his second language
* Coaches a neighborhood Little League baseball team

**Candidate F**

White Male, 3.8 GPA, 1400 SAT score

* Class president of his senior class
* Member of Students Against Drunk Driving
* Member of his school band
* Captain of his school’s debate team
* Helps care for his younger brother, who is severely mentally and emotionally disabled

**Candidate G**

White Male, 3.5 GPA, 1200 SAT score

* All-State Wrestler
* Captain of his school’s soccer team
* His father and grandfather both graduated from the university
* His family donates $10,000 a year to the university

**Candidate H**

White Female, 3.7 GPA, 1380 SAT scores

* President of her school’s Student Government Association
* Plays three varsity sports; captain of one
* Volunteer tutor for disabled students at lunch and after school
* Active in her church’s youth group
* Prom Queen
* Her mother died of cancer when she was 14