



## Harvard's Wrong Solution to America's Educational Problems

### —Asian Americans' Response to Harvard's Proposed Changes in College Admissions

On January 20, 2016, The Harvard Graduate School of Education released a [report](#)<sup>i</sup> “[Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions](#),” which proposed drastic changes in the college admissions process across America. We welcome and support some of its recommendations, such as de-emphasizing the significance of prospective students having participated in costly or high-profile extracurricular activities, and broadening the definition of community engagement to include caring for one's own family, and participating in arts, sports, political and religious activities. Nevertheless, we believe that, overall, Harvard's proposed changes actually move in the wrong direction. We are deeply concerned with their potential impact because they either fail to address or provide the wrong solutions to the education crises facing America. If implemented, Harvard's proposed changes will significantly reduce America's educational competitiveness, harm the American high-tech industry, reduce the objectivity and fairness of the college admission process, and improperly emphasize a narrowly defined “ethical engagement” admission criterion that will suffocate creativity and deny diverse ways in which citizens can contribute to society.

### A. Educational Crises in America

There are three major educational crises in America today.

- 1. Inadequate quality.** According to 2012 PISA International Student Assessment results<sup>ii</sup>, out of 65 nations and jurisdictions that participated, American students only ranked #31 in math, #24 in science and #20 in reading. Because we fail to educate enough home-grown engineers and scientists, each year, the U.S. has to grant 65,000 or more H1b visas to attract talents from all over the world to support our high-tech industry, the backbone of the U.S. economy. Today, a majority of high-tech engineers are foreign born. Numerous reports and studies have pointed out that America is having a crisis in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education. As Condoleezza Rice and other business and political leaders put it, our low-quality education—particularly in math and science—endangers our high-tech industry, economic prosperity, and national security.
- 2. Significant quality gap in America's disadvantaged communities.** According to a Washington Post report<sup>iii</sup> of [September 3, 2015](#), 42 percent of students who took the SAT

reached a score of at least 1550, a benchmark for college and career readiness. Only 16 percent of African Americans reached this level.

- 3. Student stress caused primarily by educational policy flaws and discriminatory admission practices in many American universities.** First, the inadequate academic standards in K-8 education poorly prepare students for high school education. Our low standards in K-8 education have been demonstrated by our poor performance in the PISA international 8<sup>th</sup> grade assessment. The high school curriculum, especially AP/IB classes becomes a steep mountain for many students to climb. This causes significant stress. The second is the discrimination against Asian American students by many elite universities in America. According to Daniel Golden<sup>iv</sup>, “most elite universities have maintained a triple standard in college admissions, setting the bar highest for Asians, next for whites and lowest for blacks and Hispanics.” Princeton Professor Thomas Espenshade and Alexandra Radford<sup>v</sup> statistically proved that, on the SAT exam, Asian Americans have to score approximately 140 points higher than a White student, 270 points higher than a Hispanic student, and 450 points higher than a Black student to gain admission. In 2012, [Ron Unz](#) published a study<sup>vi</sup> that indicated though the Asian American percentage of the population has doubled over the past 20 years, Harvard and other Ivy League Schools implemented a *de facto* racial quota on the enrollment of a rapidly growing and highly qualified cohort of Asian-American applicants. Faced with such widespread and severe discrimination, Asian American students have to study much harder and take more AP classes, therefore experiencing additional stress in an effort to overcome this illegal discrimination and to gain admission to these schools. As Ron Unz put it, “When a far greater volume of applicants is squeezed into a pipeline of fixed size, the pressure can grow enormously.” Much evidence has indicated that Asian American students suffer significant academic stress because of such discriminations.

## **B. Potential Negative Impacts of Harvard’s Proposed Changes on College Admissions Process**

When America cries out for solutions to address these national challenges, on January 20, 2016, the Harvard Graduate School of Education released the [report](#) that proposes radical changes to the way colleges evaluate and grant admission to prospective students. Among the proposed changes are:

- Promoting more meaningful contributions to others, community service, and engagement with the public good; and
- Redefining achievement in ways that level the playing field for economically disadvantaged students and reduce excessive achievement pressure, including making standardized tests optional.

Unfortunately, though some aspects of the proposed changes are positive, overall they will actually worsen American educational crises by creating the following negative impacts.

## **1. The proposed changes will further drive down educational quality in America, harm our high-tech industries and threaten economic prosperity**

In a nation that desperately needs to improve the quality of its education, Harvard's report recommends making standard tests optional and de-emphasizing AP/IB classes, both of which are essential measurements of a student's academic achievement and college readiness. If implemented, these recommendations will discourage K-12 students from devoting the effort necessary to excel.

If academic talents and achievements are not rewarded by American colleges, K-12 students will have no incentive to study diligently. It will surely drive down education quality in America.

If universities do not recruit top-notch students academically, they will not be able to provide highly-educated graduates to corporate America, in particular our rapidly growing high-tech industries. This will exacerbate our skilled-labor shortage in high-tech industries, harm American economic prosperity, and endanger our national security.

It is worth pointing out that, in a knowledge-based economy, many other nations such as Singapore, Korea and China regard improving education as a key strategy for advancing their economies and improving their global competitiveness. By comparison, Harvard's proposal totally ignores our national needs and will do more harm than good to our economy and the living standard of American people.

## **2. The proposed changes fail to address the educational quality gap in America's disadvantaged communities**

On the surface, the proposed change may increase the college enrollment of students from disadvantaged communities by lowering academic standards and increasing the credit for "ethical engagement." In fact, it could distract children in disadvantaged communities from spending more time in study, in particular in science and math areas, therefore, jeopardizing their chances to take high-paying jobs in STEM areas. A UCLA study<sup>vii</sup> in 2010 demonstrates that high rate of African American and Hispanic students dropping out their STEM majors after getting into college: "A third of white students and 42 percent of Asian-American students who started college as intended STEM majors graduated with STEM degrees by the end of five years. For underrepresented minorities, the five-year completion rates were much lower — 22.1 percent for Latino students, 18.4 percent for black students and 18.8 percent for Native American students." Separately, in a 2010 report<sup>viii</sup> issued by the U.S. Commissioner of Civil Rights, "Encouraging Minority Students to Pursue Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Careers," it was found that academic mismatch—one consequence of some schools' racially and ethnically preferential admission policies that admit students with large deficits in academic preparation—is an important reason for these disparities.

Contrary to what it appears, lowering academic standards will not help, but actually harm the futures of children growing up in disadvantaged communities.

### **3. The proposed changes deny the diverse ways in which citizens can contribute to society and improperly emphasize a narrowly defined “ethical engagement” admission criterion that will suffocate creativity**

As a matter of fact, America already is a model to the world with so many charity organizations and volunteer organizations such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps. By improperly over-emphasizing “ethical engagement” and increasing its weight in college admissions, the authors of the Harvard proposal fail to recognize that American exceptionalism starts with our championing of individual responsibility. In a nation suffering from a shortage of well-educated workers, high crime rates, and too much dependency on government, we should applaud those who excel academically because they are the ones who are likely to solve the most challenging problems, who will become self-reliant, have fewer social problems, and make significant social and economic contributions. There are many ways in which a person can contribute to the society. Steve Jobs was never a generous person. We could not find the “volunteering records” of the young Albert Einstein nor those of the young Isaac Newton. Nevertheless, we cannot deny their tremendous contributions to society.

We believe ethical education is important to the development of a well-rounded person and support a reasonable level of ethical engagement requirements. However, it is unreasonable and inconsistent for those who advocate diversity to propose a cookie-cutter approach, demanding that each child excels in “caring for others” in order to be admitted to an American university. It makes sense for students of public policy or politics to demonstrate excellent records in volunteering. However, science and engineering departments should choose students primarily based on academic achievement and potential, because these are the essential qualities that will make students great contributors to our society. America becomes the greatest nation in the world because we provide the liberty and opportunities for a 15-year-old programming genius to excel, for a teenage “nerd” to search for a cure for cancer, and for a 20-year-old entrepreneur to found a successful startup. It is counter-productive and a waste of talents to force these gifted kids to “undertake at least a year of sustained service or community engagement” in order to be admitted into college. We are deeply concerned about improperly emphasizing a narrowly defined “ethical engagement” admission criterion that will suffocate creativity and result in our becoming a less prosperous, less creative nation.

### **4. The proposed changes fail to address the root causes of student stress: the inadequate academic standards in K-8 education and discrimination against Asian- American students**

Since Asian Americans students suffer the most from undue academic pressure, we sincerely welcome any meaningful changes to reduce our children’s load, in particular number of AP classes. However, none of Harvard’s proposal addresses the two root causes of students’ academic stress.

- a) Inadequate academic standards in K-8 education poorly prepare students for high school education, and
- b) Discriminatory admission practices against Asian American students, including higher admission standards and *de facto* racial quotas. If this illegal discrimination is eliminated,

Asian American students will not have to devote even more time to study and take more AP classes in an attempt to compensate for it.

We believe any proposed changes should address the above issues instead of lowering academic standards because, in comparison with students in other countries such as India and China, American students already spend much less time studying, and having to devote additional time to volunteer activities will reduce that time even more.

#### **5. The proposed changes will further reduce the objectivity and fairness of the college admission process and create more opportunities for discrimination**

By making standardized tests optional, adding the weight of subjective “ethical engagement” elements, Harvard’s proposed changes will add more subjectivity and opacity to the college admissions process. This will further undermine the meritocracy, which is vital to ensure upward mobility for those who are willing to work hard. Back in the 1920’s, in order to curb the enrollment of hardworking Jewish students, Harvard invented the “holistic evaluation” process. It significantly increased the subjectivity of college admission process, allowing Harvard to admit fewer Jews. Today, when Harvard proposes another drastic change in college admissions, millions of parents are wary. Asian American parents are extremely concerned that their hardworking Asian-American children will become the victims of such changes.

#### **6. The proposed changes are likely to transform American universities away from being educational institutions and towards becoming charity organizations**

In a nation suffering from low quality education but praised throughout the world for our charity and volunteer endeavors, Harvard’s proposal improperly recommends de-emphasizing academic qualifications and bolstering a narrowly-defined contribution to society as “caring for others.” If implemented, it will send a wrong signal to students across nation: academics no longer matter. What matters more is “caring for others.” This raises a fundamental question about our college education: Is college an educational institution whose mission is to prepare individuals for careers and to advance the American economy, or a charity organization whose mission is to help others?

There are lessons that can be learned from world history. In 1970, during the height of Cultural Revolution, in order to enable workers, peasants and soldiers to get a college education, the Chinese government abolished the academic tests for college admissions, replacing them with recommendations based on the student’s “contribution to socialism.” In 1975, China released a politically-charged movie “Break” in which intellectuals were demonized and college entrance tests were criticized. The movie even proposed that the qualification for admission to college should be calluses on the applicant’s hands, not test scores! During the same period, the government banned an individual’s rights to pursue happiness through hard working, and glorified a few role models in the hope that selfless volunteering can help the nation solve its challenges. What was the result of such anti-intellectual and anti-individualism social engineering? China’s workers, peasants and soldiers did not advance, but the economy was ruined. It left 800 million Chinese people living in extreme poverty. Clearly, this is a failing path that America should not follow.

## C. Our suggestions to improve the American college admissions processes

We strongly believe that American college admissions process should be reformed and be guided by the following principles:

- Restore colleges' mission to prepare individuals' careers and advance the American economy;
- Help enhance America's educational competitiveness while reducing undue stress on students;
- Be objective, fair, transparent and emphasize merits for all applicants of different racial backgrounds;
- Include reasonable programs to provide targeted help for students from disadvantaged communities.

Based on the above principles, we recommend the following changes:

1. Improve standardized tests to fit our educational needs, but don't to abolish them, because standardized tests are important measures of college readiness and are objective, fair to every applicant;
2. Recognize the diverse nature of students and their potential contributions to the society and abolish cookie-cutter criteria in judging personal characters. The only criterion of a person's character should be his/her potential contribution to society, which cannot be measured by a cookie-cutter approach. A great contributor could be an outspoken leader who has done a lot volunteer work, but could also be an introvert nerd who is obsessed with making a scientific discovery. To help close our nation's education gap, the definition of "community engagement" should be further broadened to include scientific discoveries, research projects, entrepreneurship activities and learning computer sciences, as President Obama recently emphasized. We support holistic evaluation including a reasonable level of ethical engagement for all students but the ethical requirement should not be overly emphasized. Exceptions should be considered for gifted children who devote to and excel in scientific and technological discoveries, arts and other areas contributing to society.
3. Apply fair, transparent admission criteria to all applicants regardless of their racial background. Totally eliminate the racial discrimination against Asian-American students or students of any other race. This will greatly help reduce academic stress among Asian-American students and the resulting pressure on other students as a result of peer competition.
4. Fundamentally improve the education quality in disadvantaged communities by conducting meaningful education reform, providing adequate funding and instilling proven parenting practices. As a supplement, colleges should convert racial preference programs to a properly-sized targeted admission programs to admit students growing up in disadvantaged communities. As a concrete suggestion, Harvard and other elite

universities should convert all of their legacy admission slots to be used to admit students growing up in poor neighborhoods. This targeted program will work better than the racial preferences currently being implemented by many American colleges. According to Harvard Professors Lani Guinier and Henry Louis Gates Jr.<sup>ix</sup>, perhaps as many as two-thirds of African American students admitted into Harvard were West Indian and African immigrants or their children or, to a lesser extent, children of biracial couples. Only about a third of the students were descendants of slaves, who were intended as the principal beneficiaries of the racial preference policies that have obviously failed.

5. Improve educational quality of American public schools, in particular K-8 education. This will better prepare students to take high school and AP/IB classes, therefore, reducing their academic stresses.

Finally, we believe that college admission policies matter to America's future and each American family. Any changes should be debated thoroughly and agreed upon among our educators, business, political and technology leaders, as well as community leaders. Only this balanced approach can help advance American education, and prevent America from making similar mistakes that China and other nations made. For this reason, the Asian American Coalition for Education plans to circulate our response to authors of Harvard's proposal, and more importantly to business, political, and technology leaders throughout the nation to start a thorough and healthy debate on this issue.

## **Asian American Coalition for Education**

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### **References:**

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<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/sat-scores-at-lowest-level-in-10-years-fueling-worries-about-high-schools/2015/09/02/6b73ec66-5190-11e5-9812-92d5948a40f8\\_story.htm](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/sat-scores-at-lowest-level-in-10-years-fueling-worries-about-high-schools/2015/09/02/6b73ec66-5190-11e5-9812-92d5948a40f8_story.htm) 1

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<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/02/17/stem>

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