



College Admissions: Space for Moral Action

Harry Brighouse
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Can philosophy help you govern?

“My voters elected me, and I have the job of representing them. I chose to run in this district because I grew up here, my family has been here for generations, and because many of my voters are among the least-advantaged Americans; that’s who I want to represent. *Within the constraints the political situation imposes, my job is to use whatever freedom I have to nudge, cajole, push, and sometimes compromise, in the interests of the least advantaged one-third. My other job is to figure out how to break the constraints and get more freedom to act in their interests.*”

-- UW Madison Philosophy graduate now in the Wisconsin State Assembly.

What is space for moral action?

Agents act within constraints

Those constraints limit the good their actions can produce

Sometimes the constraints are all-encompassing (solitary confinement, very serious illness, lack of knowledge or skill)

Normally the constraints are *not* all-encompassing: They allow *some* space for moral action

Sometimes strategic action can expand that space

What do selective colleges do?

Admit children from relatively privileged backgrounds and prepare them to occupy relatively privileged positions in society, increasing their chances in the competition for unequally distributed social resources, using public subsidies inaccessible to children who do not attend college.

“Critics of higher education, and to some extent higher education itself, have misunderstood the core business of these institutions. Whereas most believe the task of universities and colleges is to supply quality educations at reasonable prices, their real business is to sell competitive advantage at necessarily high prices”.

-- Zemsky, Wegner, Massy, Remaking the American University

So what *should* we do?

Equip them with human capital

Incline them to put it to socially useful use

Don't damage them
(much)

Corporate morality and personal morality

Personal morality – motives, consequences and character all matter.

Corporate morality – motives are mixed, and corporations are not moral persons. *Consequences matter.*

The moral stakeholders of selective colleges

Administrators

Graduate students

Support staff

Faculty members

Parents and alumni

Undergraduate students

Prospective undergraduate students

The public

Whom and what might the admissions system affect?

Composition of the college student body

Behavior of high schools

Values of prospective students

Values of admitted students

Values of non-admitted students

Parents of prospective students

Student Composition

Those who have already learned the most or those who can learn the most from being here?

Those who could learn the most from being here if we change our behavior a little?

Those more likely to equip themselves for socially valuable work (nurses, counselors, teachers) or those more likely to become lawyers.

Behavior of high schools

Extent of focus on tests and AP

Distribution of efforts of guidance counselors and other resources between more and less privileged students

Educational process valued in itself or for its instrumental value for college admissions?

Accommodating strategic-for-admissions, over educationally-best, course choices

Values of prospective students

Is high school education seen as a means to [the only valuable] end?

Are choices about courses driven by competition for college, or educational value?

Are choices about volunteering driven by charity or self-interest?

Values and skills of admitted students

Ownership of talents, or talents as gifts?

Seeing oneself as entitled, or privileged?

Making a contribution to our common project of improving society, or seeking good for oneself?

Which skills? How many become bankers, and how many nurses?

Values of non-admitted students

Is self-worth bound up in success in process?

Will they see themselves as not-admitted rather than rejected?

Do they understand the lottery aspects?

Will they fully appreciate the experience they have at the less-preferred college?

(Mal?)formation of privileged young teenagers

S: Have you applied for the American Legion Leadership Award you were nominated for.

M: No, I haven't done any leadership, I'm only 13.

S: But you organized us all to help the Obama campaign last year

M: That wasn't leadership, I just wanted him to win. Anyway, my dad suggested it to us, instead of going to the mall, don't you remember?

S: But it will look so good on your college applications, I'd apply if I'd been nominated. Even being nominated will look good.

M: But you haven't done any leadership either.

S: Don't you care about what your college applications look like?

M: No. I'm 13.

“But there’s nothing we can do”

Our competitors will overwhelm us if we stop doing
X

“So we have *no space for moral action at all*”.

Almost always false (when said by wealthy
privileged people in a free-ish society).

Collective action problems can be addressed if not solved...

By coordinated actions among some sub-set of institutions

By actions of *individual* institutions

By *individuals within* the institutions

Coordinated actions among subsets of institutions

This space left blank on purpose
(c.f. previous presentation)

Individual Institutions

Decline to participate in US News Rankings

Schools that do well in the rankings explain why they're unreliable in brochures

Include independent studies of effectiveness using Lucido metrics in brochures

Admit more students. Expand (as Mike and Sandy suggested)

Individuals within institutions

Faculty could engage with admissions professionals, supporting them in unorthodox approaches

Faculty could casually impress on students their privilege

Faculty could learn how to teach

Using the Space and Expanding it.

“My voters elected me, and I have the job of representing them. I chose to run in this district because I grew up here, my family has been here for generations, and because many of my voters are among the least-advantaged Americans; that’s who I want to represent. Within the constraints the political situation imposes, my job is to use whatever freedom I have to nudge, cajole, push, and sometimes compromise, in the interests of the least advantaged one-third. My other job is to figure out how to break the constraints and get *more* freedom to act in their interests.”



Concluding Thoughts

Find your space for action

Act as best you can within it

Work to expand it

Act within the expanded space

Rinse and Repeat