

In 1995 Harvard University granted early admission acceptance to a student named Gina Grant. In her application, Gina described herself as an orphan, and her account of the adversity she had overcome was an important factor in Harvard's decision to admit her. After granting Gina early admission, Harvard received an anonymous mailing of press clippings which indicated that at age 14 Gina had served six months in juvenile detention after pleading no-contest to the voluntary manslaughter of her mother. Shortly after receiving the news clippings, Harvard withdrew its early admission acceptance of Gina. At the time a Harvard spokesperson issued a public statement announcing Harvard's decision, but did not specify the exact reasons for it. Harvard's application, which Gina filled out, contained no questions specifically requesting information about whether or not applicants had ever been in trouble with the law, and Gina volunteered no information about her role in her mother's death.

Was the action Harvard took in Gina's case morally justified? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Harvard was unjustified in withdrawing its early admission acceptance of Gina. Given that Harvard's application did not explicitly request information from students concerning problems with the law, Gina was under no obligation to inform Harvard of her conviction. Nor does it appear that anything she stated in her application was untruthful or even misleading. If information about Gina's conviction had come to light prior to the decision to admit her, Harvard could have justifiably taken it into account as one among several factors to be considered. After having decided to admit Gina, however, it was unjustifiable to withdraw the acceptance on the basis of this information. Concern, on Harvard's part that accepting Gina might make the university "look bad" could not justify withdrawing the application. If every organization violated its own rules for this reason whenever it wished, the consequences would be a disaster. Had there been reasons to view Gina's presence at Harvard as a threat to the safety of others then Harvard would have been justified in withdrawing the acceptance, but this does not seem to have been a factor.

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