

Elizabeth Mikus and her family are threatening to sue Cornell University because the admissions office sent Elizabeth what she took to be an early acceptance letter and then told her it had been a mistake. This past fall Elizabeth applied for an early decision on admission to Cornell. In December she received an envelope containing a reply card, return envelope, and form letter bearing the greeting "Welcome to Cornell! We are holding a place for you." In accordance with the letter's instructions, Elizabeth withdrew her applications to other colleges and sent a \$200 check to Cornell. A week later Cornell called to say there had been a mistake. Elizabeth had been among forty four early decision applicants mistakenly sent the acceptance form letter. The Mikus family has hired a lawyer who says the family will sue Cornell if Elizabeth is not admitted.

Is Cornell morally obligated to accept Elizabeth in virtue of its error? If so, why? If not, why not?
(reported in the New York times, 3/14/95)

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Cornell is not morally obligated to admit Elizabeth. The University's moral obligation in connection with admissions policy is to make meticulously careful decisions impartially in accordance with fair admissions criteria. Were it the case that Elizabeth's record clearly would not even get her placed on a waiting list then admitting her would be unfair to the large number of other, highly qualified students who want to attend Cornell. The University owes Elizabeth and her family a tactful and sensitive apology, extensive assistance to Elizabeth in efforts to reinstate her applications to other schools, and a firm assurance to review her application at the earliest possible time.

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