

The application for admission to [St. John's University](#) takes 12 pages to get to the question, but when it arises, it is hard to miss. Set off by a border of bold red, as if to warn of dangerous contents, it asks, "Have you ever been arrested or convicted of a felony?"

On paper, the inquiry seems straightforward enough. But [critics](#), noting the racial imbalances in how some crimes are processed, have argued that asking it can amount to a form of unintended discrimination.

Responding to those concerns, as raised by the advocacy group Center for Community Alternatives, New York State Attorney General [Eric T. Schneiderman](#) has reached an agreement with St. John's and two other institutions under which the schools will drop such questions from their standard application process.

"An arrest or police stop that did not result in a conviction, or a criminal record that was sealed or expunged, should not – indeed must not – be a standard question on a college application," Mr. Schneiderman said in a statement. "Such a question can serve only to discourage New Yorkers from seeking a higher education."

In addition to St. John's, a private Roman Catholic university with 20,000 students on four New York campuses, the schools in question are Five Towns College, a tiny [for-profit school](#) located in Dix Hills, Long Island; and Dowling College, which is primarily situated in a former Vanderbilt estate in Oakdale, Long Island. They had been the only three institutions, out of 70 colleges and universities reviewed by Mr. Schneiderman's office, that took such a broad approach to seeking criminal justice information.

Susan Barr, the interim president of Five Towns, said the inquiry by the attorney general's office had come as a surprise.

"We received a letter regarding a statement that was on the application that someone must have complained about — I really don't know who — and we removed it," Ms. Barr said, adding that the letter did not allege that Five Towns had broken any laws, but instead couched the issue in terms of basic fairness. (Mr. Schneiderman's office confirmed that none of these policies violated the law.)

Ms. Barr said that she did not object to the requested change: "We haven't disqualified anyone because of a minor

infraction with the law. Sometimes kids do things they regret. We want to give them a chance.”

The agreements with the colleges say that criminal history may be used to disqualify applicants only in the narrow circumstance that a conviction “indicates that the individual poses a threat to public safety or property, or if the convictions are relevant to some aspect of the academic program or student responsibilities.”

The Center for Community Alternatives promotes alternative approaches to criminal justice. It published a study in 2010 that found that students with criminal records were no more likely to pose a risk to campus safety, and that lowering barriers to education could be a powerful way to reduce recidivism.