

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/mediocrity-is-now-mandatory-11612724198>

OPINION | INSIDE VIEW

Mediocrity Is Now Mandatory

From stimulus to school admissions, leaders act as if ease is the only worthy goal.



By

[Andy Kessler](#)

Feb. 7, 2021 1:56 pm ET



PHOTO: PAUL VERNON/ASSOCIATED PRESS



Listen to this article

6 minutes

Has an era of American mediocrity begun? In January the College Board announced it would eliminate the essay portion of the SAT, as well as all of the separate SAT subject tests. Their stated purpose was “reducing and simplifying demands on students.” Such a burden.

One high school near me just dropped freshman advanced-standing (honors) English “to combat the effects of academic ‘tracking’” because

it “ultimately separates students of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.” It turns out that middle schools from lower-income areas aren’t adequately preparing their students for high school. So rather than fix that problem, they dumbed down high school.

Then again, when the University of California system did away with racial preferences in 1996, it moved to holistic admissions. What does holistic mean? Anything you want. The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities defines it as “assessing an applicant’s unique experiences alongside traditional measures of academic readiness.” Grades are only a suggestion—and SAT scores are biased, supposedly. And here you thought smart students got into good colleges. Yes, mediocrity has crept into our self-proclaimed elite colleges. Job recruiters understand this.

READ MORE INSIDE VIEW

[Behind the Bitcoin Bubble](#) January 31, 2021

[Online Speech Wars Are Here to Stay](#) January 24, 2021

[Once Trump Leaves, Who’s Left to Blame?](#) January 10, 2021

[How the Fed Stifles Lending](#) January 3, 2021

[Beat the Blues With Music Flicks](#) December 27, 2020

Virtually all universities and now many companies have D&I departments, for diversity and inclusion. Sounds worthy. But as far as I can tell, the No. 1 job of a D&I department is to hire more people into the D&I department. No one ever mentions excellence.

Many schools, like Hampshire College, Antioch University and Reed College, don’t even

bother with meaningful grades—feelings might get hurt. Yes, the same Reed College [Apple](#) co-founder Steve Jobs attended for six months. He took courses in calligraphy, dance and Shakespeare. Reed students do receive a loosey-goosey grade-point average, but “papers and exams are generally returned to students with lengthy comments but without grades affixed.” Out in real life, Jobs was graded every day by customers, employees and investors.

And why push students to think? Preferring to mold students’ politics, teachers ban books—from Homer’s “Odyssey” to “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” and “The Scarlet Letter”—even Dr. Seuss. Oh, the places you’ll *not* go! And for as long as I can remember, Brown University has touted its Open Curriculum—students have the “freedom to study what they choose and the flexibility to discover what they love.” That sounds like summer camp, not college.

Government too. Joe Biden is likable enough, but let's face it, during the primaries he was the compromise, the consolation prize. And now he's quickly perpetuating mediocrity by proposing \$15 minimum wages, \$1,400 stimulus checks, and \$400 weekly unemployment-check boosts. Yes, the Covid recession requires assistance, but these programs are too broad and will likely lead to permanent welfare-state expansions. Why work when Uncle Sam provides table stakes for mob-trading GameStop and dogecoin?

Redistribution, by definition anti-merit, is about to pick up steam by way of higher tax rates, ending the special rate for capital gains, and maybe adding a wealth tax. Similarly, climate "science" is stealing productive funding. An avowed socialist, mittens and all, is now chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, in whose hands merit will burn while mediocrity flourishes.

The Biden administration constantly points out "firsts"—its gender and racially selected cabinet, vice president and other appointments. Great, but why not say "best" rather than first? And, Obama-like, shouldn't Mr. Biden be receiving his Nobel Peace Prize this year? Another watered-down accolade. About the only time you hear "great" anymore is with the overused superlative "GOAT"—greatest of all time—applied to athletes to sell overpriced sneakers.

Even with "stakeholder capitalism," when you actually do well, you're the problem. Yale law professor Daniel Markovits calls it the "Meritocracy Trap." He suggests merit widens class divides. Privilege is inherited. Merit is "a pretense, constructed to rationalize an unjust distribution of advantage." Ah, tuition dollars at work. Now you're evil for inventing the future.

You're hardly allowed to mention American exceptionalism anymore, but I will anyway. Silicon Valley has made innovation look too easy: A bunch of geeks sitting in front of big screens—how hard is that? But innovation is difficult. Most startups fail. It requires smart people of all genders, colors and nationalities, often with expensive but focused educations, to forgo many pleasures of life and burden themselves by working long hours to bring the rest of us life-enhancing devices and services. It mostly happens in the U.S. because we have families, communities and religious groups that drive and demand excellence. Markets reward it. Excellence, like Covid vaccines, doesn't come from luck or laziness but from hard work and perseverance.

But now it seems, in the name of “equity,” it’s better to be mediocre than manifest merit. Don’t stand for this because when everyone gets a trophy, no one gets a trophy. Push for excellence—hey, maybe that’s a good SAT essay.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

Appeared in the February 8, 2021, print edition.

Would you like more stories like this?

YES

NO

Copyright © 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.