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EDUCATION

Breakdown of the Harvard Admissions Process

Trial documents reveal how the elite school chooses its students

By Jessica Wang, Nicole Hong, and Melissa Korn Oct. 23, 2018 5:30 am ET



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Harvard, like many selective universities, employs a holistic review of applicants that assesses their grades and test scores, extracurricular activities, athletic achievement and personal qualities.

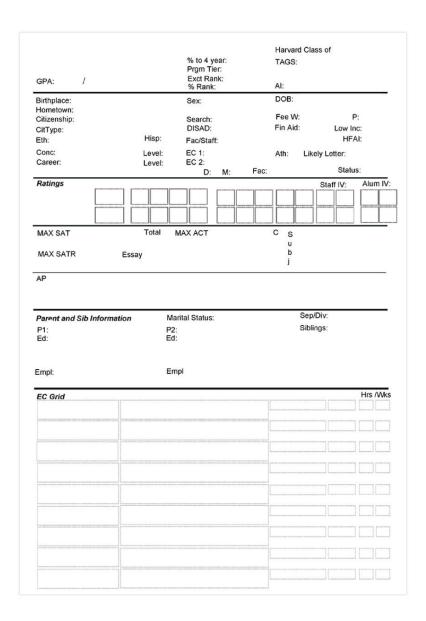
As Harvard <u>defends itself in federal court</u> against <u>allegations that it intentionally</u> discriminates against Asian-American applicants, trial exhibits offer new details about who it admits, and why.

Summary Sheets

Harvard's admissions readers use a summary sheet to rate applicants and write comments about them. The sheet includes information about an applicant's race, gender, location and academic background. It tracks the numerical ratings given to the students by admissions officers.

Harvard's method includes boiling down objective and subjective assessments into numerical ratings, which help guide discussions among a 40-person admissions committee about who should be admitted. These ratings are filled out in the boxes on the summary sheet.

A sample summary sheet provided by Harvard:



Numerical Ratings

Applicants generally receive a score from one (best) through four, and some carry a plus or minus as well. Harvard <u>provides admissions officers a rubric</u> to help assign scores. For example, a 1 in the academic rating means someone has "summa cum laude potential," with "near perfect scores and grades" and "unusual creativity."

In the <u>personal rating</u>, which assesses an applicant's personal qualities, a 1 is defined as "outstanding," while a 4 indicates "bland or somewhat negative or immature."

Harvard says the only rating that considers an applicant's race is the overall rating, which captures the admission reader's total impression of an applicant and isn't just an average of the other ratings.

200 Variables

Harvard says there is no strict formula to its admissions process. An economist hired by Harvard ahead of trial to analyze its admissions data considered roughly 200 variables that play a role in admission decisions, including ethnicity, intended major, <u>parental</u> <u>background</u> and geography.

The school's admit rates vary for each of those factors.

All of these factors are considered to <u>assess candidates in a holistic manner</u>, Harvard says, with the goal of creating a student body comprising people who are different enough from one another to provide a rich educational experience.



A page from an exhibit provided by Harvard University in the opening statement.

Location Matters

Harvard says on its website that domestic students hail from all 50 U.S. states.

When Harvard sends <u>special recruitment letters to students</u> with strong standardized test scores, the score cutoffs vary depending on, among other things, whether the student lives in "sparse country," an internal Harvard reference to 20 states that send relatively few students to the school.

In a recent admissions year, white students in "sparse country" states <u>received a recruitment letter if they scored 1310 or higher</u> out of a possible 1600 on the combined verbal and math components of the PSAT. White females in other states had to score at least 1350 to receive a letter, while white males needed 1380.

'Distinguishing Excellences'

Admissions officers look for what Harvard calls "distinguishing excellences." For example, according to an interviewer handbook from the 2013-14 admissions cycle, the school seeks "unusual intelligence" or creative ability as evidenced by recordings of a musical or dance performance. They also look for <u>recommendations</u>, essays and interview reports that testify to an applicant's "unusual effervescence, charity, maturity, or strength of character."

High numerical scores in the ratings don't guarantee admission to Harvard, and low numbers don't automatically result in rejection. In determining whether an applicant will contribute to Harvard's campus, admissions officers evaluate characteristics that are often difficult to quantify, like a student's intellectual curiosity or ability to overcome personal struggle.

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