

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/filings-provide-look-at-how-harvard-uses-race-in-admissions-1529068477>

## EDUCATION

# Court Filings Detail Role of Race in Harvard Undergraduate Admissions

Nonprofit says the Ivy League school penalizes Asian-Americans by giving them lower ratings on personal traits during admissions process



A lawsuit claims Harvard's admissions process is unconstitutional and illegal under federal civil rights law because it intentionally discriminates against Asian-American applicants and relies too heavily on race.

PHOTO: CHARLES KRUPA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Nicole Hong](#) and [Melissa Korn](#)

Updated June 15, 2018 4:22 pm ET

Harvard University and the organization accusing it of discriminating against Asian-American applicants each say race plays a role in the school's admissions decisions, but sharply disagree about whether that constitutes evidence of illegal bias, according to court documents filed on Friday.

The filings are part of a lawsuit in Boston federal court brought against the Ivy League school in 2014 by Students for Fair Admissions, a nonprofit whose members include Asian-Americans who were denied admission to Harvard. The motions are effectively a preview for the trial in the case, which begins in October.

The lawsuit claims Harvard's admissions process is unconstitutional and illegal under federal civil rights law because it intentionally discriminates against Asian-American applicants and holds them to a higher standard. The plaintiffs have said their goal is to reach the Supreme Court.

The filings, which contain hundreds of pages and rely on data for individual applicants to the classes that entered Harvard between 2010 and 2015, give the public the most detailed look ever at Harvard's method for selecting its incoming undergraduate class.

## WSJ NEWSLETTER

### Notes on the News

The news of the week in context, with  
Tyler Blint-Welsh.



☒ I would also like to receive updates and special offers from Dow Jones and affiliates. I can unsubscribe at any time.

☐ I agree to the [Privacy Policy](#) and [Cookie Notice](#).

Enter your email

SIGN UP

Each Harvard applicant is given four component ratings—academic, extracurricular, athletic and “personal”—and an overall score that is assigned by taking all factors into account. Within each category, applicants are scored on a scale from 1 to 6, with 1 being the best. Admissions decisions are made by a 40-person committee vote.

The plaintiffs found in their analysis that Asian-American applicants have higher academic and extracurricular scores than any other racial group, as well as the highest overall rating from alumni interviewers. However, Harvard's admissions officers assign Asian-Americans the lowest score of any racial group on the personal rating, which includes a subjective assessment of character traits such as whether the student has a “positive personality,” the plaintiffs said.

“Asian-Americans are described as smart and hardworking yet uninteresting and indistinguishable from other Asian-American applicants,” the plaintiffs said, after reviewing a sample of documents provided by Harvard with admissions officers' comments on applicants.

Harvard said in its court filing that while perceived personality is a factor, the personal rating is based on a variety of elements, including teacher recommendations, personal essays and admissions interviews. The plaintiffs' data analysis oversimplifies a complex process and paints a "dangerously inaccurate picture," Harvard said.

The nonprofit suing Harvard is led by Edward Blum, a conservative legal activist who has spearheaded other legal challenges to the use of race in college admissions. The Harvard case has been closely watched as a possible candidate for the Supreme Court, which has repeatedly allowed universities to consider race as a factor in admissions to obtain the benefits of a diverse student body.

Mr. Blum said Friday's filings expose "the startling magnitude of Harvard's discrimination against Asian-American applicants."

In the filings, the plaintiffs highlight a 2013 analysis by Harvard's Office of Institutional Research that found Asian-Americans would make up 43% of the admitted class if based on academic credentials alone, and that being Asian-American decreases the chances of admission. Instead of probing further, Harvard "killed the investigation and buried the reports," the plaintiffs allege.

The percentage of Asian-Americans in Harvard's admitted class has stayed close to 20% year over year, the plaintiffs say.

Lawyers for Harvard said that internal analysis was described as "incomplete" and "preliminary" by the university, as it didn't take into account nonacademic factors—which is why the report wasn't shared more widely. There is "no negative effect of Asian-American ethnicity in the admissions process," Harvard said, adding that the share of the admitted class that self-identifies as Asian-American has grown by 29% over the last decade.

Peter Arcidiacono, a Duke University economics professor who analyzed data for the plaintiffs, said in his report that an Asian-American male applicant with a 25% chance of admission would increase his chance of admission to 36% if treated as a white applicant, 75% as a Hispanic applicant and 95% as an African-American applicant.

But David Card, an economics professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who served as an expert for Harvard, called this a misleading way to measure the relative importance of race, saying Dr. Arcidiacono selected the combination of applicant

characteristics “for which the effect of race is largest.” He said while African-American, Hispanic and other non-Asian minority ethnicities are associated with a “significantly higher” likelihood of admission, the importance of race is much smaller than that of many other factors.

Mr. Card said in his report that for the generic applicant—excluding recruited athletes, legacies and other special categories—the university accepted Asian-American applicants at a higher rate than it did white students in four of the six years reviewed. Over all six years, he said, those combined acceptance rates were 5.15% and 4.91%, respectively.

For the vast majority of African-American applicants, race plays nearly no role, Dr. Card found. Race only factors in for the strongest candidates and is never a “determinative” factor, he said, adding that applicants with top ratings in more than one of the four categories are much more likely to be admitted than those with a top rating in a single category, regardless of race.

The plaintiffs said Harvard’s legacy and athlete preferences also hurt Asian-American applicants. More than 21% of white admitted students are legacies and more than 16% are athletes, while 6.6% of Asian-American admits are legacies and 4.1% athletes, according to Dr. Arcidiacono’s analysis.

According to Harvard’s filing, out of the roughly 26,000 domestic applicants for the class that will graduate Harvard in 2019, more than 8,000 had perfect GPAs, and about 3,500 had perfect SAT math scores.

“In that pool, having strong academic credentials is not sufficient to make an applicant a strong candidate for admission,” Dr. Card said.

Harvard admitted 4.6% of its 42,749 applicants for the first-year undergraduate class entering this fall. Of those who accepted their admission offers, 22.7% self-reported as Asian-American, 14.5% as African-Americans, 10.8% as Latino and 2.3% as Native American and Native Hawaiian.

Last summer, the Justice Department’s civil rights division launched its own investigation into whether Harvard’s admissions policies discriminate against Asian-American applicants.

## RELATED

[New Oklahoma Law Sparks Debate Over Teaching About Tulsa Massacre](#) May 29, 2021

[Teachers Clear Back-to-School Hurdle for the Fall: They Want to Come Back](#) May 27, 2021

[Iowa Bans Face-Mask Mandates in Schools, Joining Texas](#) May 20, 2021

[Some Schools Struggle to Get Students to Return](#) May 20, 2021

[New Jersey Schools Won't Offer Remote Learning in Fall](#) May 17, 2021

Write to Nicole Hong at [nicole.hong@wsj.com](mailto:nicole.hong@wsj.com) and Melissa Korn at [melissa.korn@wsj.com](mailto:melissa.korn@wsj.com)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

June

9

2021

9:00 AM - 4:00 PM EDT

WSJ Tech Health

June

17

2021

12:00 PM - 1:45 PM EDT

WSJ Women In: Intelligent Investing

June

24

2021

11:00 AM - 5:00 PM EDT

Global Food Forum

## ADD TO CALENDAR

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>.