

The Ethics of Favoring Donor Families in College Admissions

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On September 30, 2024, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill prohibiting private colleges and universities in his state from giving admission preferences to relatives of donors. The governor explained that “the California Dream shouldn’t be accessible to just a lucky few, which is why we’re opening the door to higher education wide enough for everyone, fairly.” This decision has prompted a national debate on whether giving donor families’ children an advantage in college admission is ethically justifiable.

Proponents of giving preference to applicants from donor families argue that it greatly contributes to a university’s budget, allowing it to provide higher-quality education for all of its students. A well-funded institution, for instance, can build and maintain better facilities, attract talented faculty, and offer a range of campus programs. It can also maintain greater autonomy in running its programs, safeguard academic freedom, and reduce reliance on external funding sources such as the federal government. Perhaps most importantly, accepting students from donor families encourages donors to contribute generously to the school, making possible generous scholarships, grants, or, in many cases, free tuition to students from families with lower incomes.

Opponents of this practice argue that admitting donors’ children preferentially discriminates against more qualified and deserving applicants. Moreover, such a policy perpetuates class divisions by bestowing advantages on already-privileged students and restricting the socioeconomic mobility of less-privileged students. Critics also claim that the practice undermines campus diversity, reducing the range of backgrounds and perspectives that would support critical and open discourse. Further, once donor family students are enrolled, institutions may feel compelled to be more lenient about legacy admittees’ grades and/or behavior, which could undermine the school’s credibility and involve further discriminatory treatment of less-privileged students. While such policies may offer immediate financial benefits to the institution, they ultimately risk eroding the core values and purpose of higher education.

Discussion Questions

1. Are colleges compromising equality and fairness by admitting more donor-related students?
2. Can prioritizing donor families be justified if the practice helps less privileged students through scholarships and other benefits?
3. Should colleges have an obligation to admit students solely on academic merit?