

Don't Check That Box!

During the 2017-2018 school year, 40,000 prospective college students did not disclose their race on the CommonApp application- 3.7% of the total.¹ This so-called “race box,” which lists options such as Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White, reflects colleges’ growing interest in applicants’ race as a factor in university admissions. The box is used for The College Board’s (the organization which owns the CommonApp in addition to both the ACT and the SAT standardized test systems) own research purposes. While designed to evaluate applicant pools and increase diversity at college institutions, the box raises controversy on racial discrimination allegations and privacy concerns.

Proponents of race-blind admissions believe that such factors are limiting and may result in discrimination and stereotyping against certain groups. For instance, organizations like Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), the group that sued Harvard University for alleged discrimination against Asian-American applications, believe that race boxes limit talented students and reflect the “explicit bias” Universities hold against certain applicant groups.² Research from the National Study of College Experience conducted in 1997 demonstrates that Asian-Americans have to score 140 points higher on the SAT to receive an equal chance of admission compared with a Caucasian applicant score, adjusting for factors like sex, citizenship status, AP tests taken, and many more.³ Such boxes also exemplify how quotas are used in racial balancing, where colleges “seek out a specified racial composition of a class rather than using race merely as a ‘plus factor’ in evaluating an individual.”⁴ In addition, such race boxes only allow for one selection. For students who are mixed-race or who do not identify with any of the given options, these boxes can be stifling and unrepresentative of their identity.

However, race does remain intrinsic to many peoples’ identities. Race boxes allow for applicants to further express themselves and their individuality. Additionally, race boxes can help Universities better understand their applicant pools. Race as a factor in college admissions may illuminate unique challenges applicants face, and provide context for the rest of the application, including essays and personal questions. For historically and systemically marginalized groups, understanding an applicant’s race may provide important background needed to understand the applicant’s cultural upbringing and access to resources. Not only this, data collected from race boxes can help colleges better accommodate underrepresented minorities. Affirmative action, a process that admits minority students with equal qualifications over a student of a majority group, is designed to provide minority groups with equitable access to education while promoting diversity. At its best, affirmative action and factoring race into college admissions takes into account the unique struggles faced by minorities and people of color, factors ignored by “colorblind” approaches.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should racial identity be a considered factor in college admissions? Why or why not?
2. What is the goal of affirmative action programs? Are these programs successful at meeting those goals?

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/which-boxes-to-check-college-hopefuls-weigh-race-identity-and-affirmative-action/2018/12/23/d8458af0-f7d9-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html

² <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-many-sins-of-college-admissions?verso=true>

³ <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/28/17031460/affirmative-action-asian-discrimination-admissions>

⁴ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-many-sins-of-college-admissions?verso=true>

