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AMHERST COLLEGE DROPS ADMISSIONS ADVANTAGE FOR CHILDREN OF ALUMNI

The Massachusetts school is among the first highly selective colleges to stop legacy preferences

By Melissa Korn
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Amherst College is abandoning its policy of giving preference to applicants whose parents attended the Massachusetts liberal-arts school, placing it among the first elite private colleges to ditch legacy admissions.

Selective schools like Amherst have been under intense scrutiny in recent years for putting a thumb on the scale for legacy applicants, with critics arguing the programs do little more than cement the privilege of students, and leave fewer slots for applicants from less-represented backgrounds.

"We're doing what we can to examine where the barriers are and change what we can change" as the school pushes forward on efforts to broaden access, said Amherst President Biddy Martin.

The school, which this year had an 8.5% acceptance rate, historically gave preference to any children of graduates who were academically qualified. Dr. Martin said legacies are often among the top applicants, so many may still be admitted without considering their familial ties.

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He said the move was a "a natural extension" of the school's prior efforts to increase access, like enrolling more community college students and military veterans, and eliminating loans from its financial-aid packages. In recent years roughly 11% of Amherst's admitted students were legacies; this year, 18% of freshmen are first-generation college students.

Few other schools have acted on the recent public pressure.

Supporters of legacy policies say that the favor given to children of alumni helps with fundraising and keeping graduates engaged in the school, and say those admitted as legacies are often as qualified as others who get in. At some universities, legacies outnumber those who are first-generation college students and are admitted at a rate at least two to three times higher than the rest of the applicant pool.

Forty-three percent of private, nonprofit colleges and 14% of public universities consider legacy status in admissions, according to a 2019 study by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Seventy-three percent of highly selective schools—those that admit less than one-quarter of applicants—consider legacy status.

Amherst, which has around 1,850 undergraduates, likely won't single-handedly change the state of selective college admissions. But its policy shift on legacy admissions preferences could help accelerate a burgeoning movement.

Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 2014 began phasing out legacy preference, formally announcing the shift in 2019. Its share of accepted students who had parents attend the school has fallen to 3.7% this year from 8.5% in 2013, while the proportion of first-generation college students more than doubled, to 17.8%.

And in May, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, signed a bill banning legacy admissions preference in that state's public colleges and universities.

The California Institute of Technology and Massachusetts Institute of Technology also don't consider legacy status.

The extent of the advantage that legacies may get was highlighted in a 2018 civil trial against Harvard University, in which plaintiffs argued the school discriminated against Asian American applicants. In voluminous data reports entered into the court record, an economist hired by the plaintiffs found children of Harvard College graduates got in at more than five times the rate of those who weren't legacies.

A Harvard spokeswoman said legacy status is "one factor among many in our admissions process," and declined to comment further.

Dr. Martin said she wasn't concerned about alumni backlash against the school's new policy.

"There is a risk that there will be some who feel offended by it. But I believe over time that the great majority of Amherst alumni are so focused on fairness and opportunity that it will work out," she said. "And it's a risk that is important to take at this point."

Corrections & Amplifications

Eighteen percent of this year's freshman class at Amherst College are first-generation students. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said 18.5% of Amherst's first-year class are first-generation college students. (Corrected on Oct. 20.)