

Harvard Admissions Case: Frequently Asked Questions

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Harvard's Admissions Process

Does Harvard discriminate against Asian Americans?

No. Harvard does not discriminate against applicants from any group in its admissions process. A [comprehensive analysis](#) prepared by Dr. David Card, a leading economist, shows that SFFA's claims of discrimination are simply unfounded.

Does Harvard have a racial quota in its admissions?

No. Harvard does not use quotas or seek any fixed number of Asian Americans or any other students. Race is one of many factors that Harvard considers in evaluating each applicant as a whole person. Harvard also uses many race-neutral means to pursue diversity—including extensive recruiting and one of the most generous [financial aid](#) policies in the country—and it has carefully [studied](#) other potential race-neutral measures, ultimately concluding that the consideration of race remains necessary to attain an exceptional class that is diverse on many dimensions.

How do you explain the seemingly consistent proportion of admitted applicants who are of Asian-American descent?

It is incorrect to say that the proportion of admitted applicants who self-identify as Asian American is seemingly consistent. In fact, data show that there is significant variation in the racial composition of Harvard College's admitted class year-over-year. The percentage of Asian Americans admitted fluctuates from year-to-year and has grown by 27% since 2010. For example, the admitted class of 2016 had 16.3% more Asian-American students than the admitted class of 2015, while the admitted class of 2017 had 3.9% fewer Asian-American students than the admitted class of 2016. Asian Americans comprise nearly 23% of the admitted class of 2022. SFFA has cherry-picked data to try to tell a particular story, but that story is false. Even SFFA's own expert was completely unable to support its allegation with statistical analysis.

What does Harvard have to say about its history of systemic racism, stemming from the 1920s with Jewish applicants?

These unfortunate events from 100 years ago are a dark chapter in Harvard's history. For many years, we have been committed to evaluating the whole person and we consider each applicant's unique background and experiences, alongside grades and test scores, to find applicants of exceptional ability and character, who can help create a campus community that is diverse on multiple dimensions, including academic and extracurricular interests, racial and ethnic background, and life experiences.

Do Asian-American applicants have to score higher on tests than applicants of other races to be admitted to Harvard?

No. A [comprehensive analysis](#) prepared by Dr. David Card, a leading economist, shows that SFFA's allegation that Asian-American applicants are less likely to be admitted relative to other applicants who have similar test scores is incorrect.

Harvard's expert economist Dr. David Card constructed a [model](#) of Harvard's admissions process that accounts for as much information as possible about the admissions process and finds no evidence of bias or disadvantage to Asian-American applicants.

This allegation is often based on a 2009 study by Thomas Espenshade and Alexandra Radford—but in an [interview](#) when their book came out, Espenshade, a sociologist at Princeton University and co-author of the book, said he did not think his data established bias against Asian-American applicants because he did not have access to "softer variables," such as teacher and high school counselor recommendations, essays, and lists of extracurricular activities.

Why aren't applicants evaluated solely based on their standardized SAT / ACT scores?

Harvard College seeks to bring together a class that is excellent and diverse on many dimensions, and standardized test scores are only one aspect of a whole-person review.

What are the admissions one-pagers?

They are snapshots of the progress of the admissions cycle writ large, with a range of information, including gender, geographic location, and whether an applicant is socioeconomically disadvantaged. They provide a numerical picture of the applicant pool as a whole.

What's the racial composition of the admissions office?

The decision to admit, waitlist, or reject an applicant is made by a diverse committee of approximately 40 admissions officers.

Expert Analysis

You claim that SFFA's case is based on a faulty statistical model. What does this mean?

Mr. Blum's case hinges on a statistical model that deliberately ignores essential factors, such as personal essay or teacher recommendations, and omits entire swaths of the applicant pool (such as recruited athletes or applicants whose parents attended Harvard) to achieve a deliberate and pre-assumed outcome. Months of investigation failed to produce any documentary or testimonial support for SFFA's accusation that Harvard intentionally seeks to limit the number of Asian-Americans or discriminates against them.

To the contrary, the evidence forcefully demonstrates that Harvard values the diversity and myriad contributions that Asian-American students—like students of all other backgrounds—bring to its campus, and that Harvard seeks and succeeds in recruiting and enrolling exceptional Asian-American students as well as students of all other backgrounds.

What is the personal rating?

Harvard admissions officers evaluate each applicant individually and assign ratings on a variety of metrics based on a whole person review. The personal rating reflects the wide range of information in the application, such as the applicant's personal essays, responses to short answer questions, recommendations from teachers and guidance counselors, alumni interview reports, staff interviews, and any additional letters about the applicant. Harvard considers this information in seeking to understand the applicant's full life story, for example, where the student grew up, what opportunities or challenges they faced in their families, communities, and secondary school, and what impact they might have both here at Harvard and after they graduate, as citizens and citizen-leaders of our society.

Harvard does not analyze the distribution of ratings across racial or ethnic groups as part of the admissions process. When viewed in the aggregate during the years of data examined in the litigation, Asian-Americans received slightly higher scores overall on the academic and extracurricular ratings assigned by admissions officers, and slightly lower scores overall on the personal rating assigned by admissions officers. Because the personal rating incorporates a broad array of qualitative information, it cannot be reliably modeled as a statistical matter, as Dr. Card explains.

Why do the personal ratings given by Harvard alumni interviewer and admissions officers vary?

Alumni interviewer and admissions officer personal ratings, although similar in name, vary widely because they are based on different information. Thousands of Harvard alumni perform an extremely valuable service as volunteers interviewing applicants to Harvard College from their communities. The alumni interviewer personal rating reflects what the interviewer has learned about the applicant during the interview, while the admissions officer rating considers the full range of information in the application (listed above). Any alumni interviewer also sees only a tiny percentage of the applicants in the pool. They evaluate these applicants in comparison to those few other applicants they have interviewed, while the admissions committee has before it a much fuller range of the talented applicants Harvard is fortunate enough to attract.

Office of Institutional Research

What is Harvard's Office of Institutional Research (OIR)?

OIR is a centralized reporting office that collects, synthesizes, and analyzes institutional data to fulfill mandatory federal reporting requirements and support University decision-making.

What are the OIR documents referenced in summary-judgment filings?

The OIR documents represent a preliminary analysis Harvard's OIR was conducting without the benefit of the full admissions database or an understanding of the admissions process. The OIR documents themselves directly acknowledge various missing data and aspects of the admissions process that are not taken into account, and the OIR staff have confirmed that the work was preliminary and incomplete. This work was not part of any "internal investigation," and none of the documents cited in the summary judgment papers was created at the request of Harvard's Office of the General Counsel. Again, SFFA attempts to distort and mislead in its suggestions that

the analysis showed discrimination or was somehow improperly stopped. As Dr. Card's [analysis](#) shows, when all the data and information are included and analyzed, no evidence of discrimination exists.

Information Filed Under Seal

Why is Harvard insisting that certain information be filed under seal?

We have an obligation to protect student and applicant privacy and will continue to do so. Sensitive student information has been produced in this litigation, subject to a judicial protective order. While names and directly identifying information have been redacted, other student information has not, and we feel strongly about protecting the extensive personal information applicants submit to us in the admissions process.

Second, there is a narrow category of documents that provide proprietary information about how Harvard conducts its admissions process—for example, documents detailing internal office procedures for reviewing applications and making admissions decisions. Disclosing these documents would place some applicants at a disadvantage and would impair Harvard's ability to recruit and admit an excellent class each year.