

Competition for College Admissions Perpetuates Class Divide in Higher Education

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Increased competition for college admissions combined with the heightened emphasis on test scores in recent decades has fueled the growth of class inequality in American higher education, according to sociologist Sigal Alon of Tel-Aviv University.

Using data from three nationally representative surveys (National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, High School and Beyond, National Education Longitudinal Survey), Alon examines how social class affects college admissions of the high school graduating classes of 1972, 1982 and 1992.

Students from low socioeconomic strata in all three graduating classes were at a marked disadvantage in access to postsecondary education, and this disadvantage increased with college selectivity. Alon finds that the class divide grows during times of high competition in college admissions because privileged [high school](#) students are able to adapt to the tightening admissions requirements (i.e., the greater emphasis on test scores), while their underprivileged counterparts are unable to follow suit. This leads to a class-based polarization of test scores, restricting the opportunities of talented underprivileged seniors the most. During periods of declining competition in admissions, Alon finds a convergence in test scores among students of various socioeconomic statuses, leading to a smaller class divide in college enrollment.

"Strides toward equal opportunity in [higher education](#) will only be made when the screening tool used in college admissions becomes impervious to training or preparation," said Alon. She predicts that the momentum for going SAT-optional among liberal arts colleges will fall short of equalizing opportunity as long as privileged youth can adapt to the new screening tool used by institutions to sort the influx of applicants. She suggests that class-based affirmative action is one solution to reduce inequality in admissions to four-year colleges.

More information: "The Evolution of Class Inequality in Higher Education: Competition, Exclusion, and Adaptation," by Sigal Alon, Tel-Aviv University, in the *American Sociological Review*, October 2009

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