

Improving College Teaching, Discrimination Against Asian Americans in Admissions
What Happens Next – 9.19.2021
Kenny Xu QA

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Kenny. The reason I think that the African-Americans are given a leg up is the historical discrimination. How should we consider historical discrimination in the context of this?

Kenny Xu:

You shouldn't consider it up to the point where it actually impedes upon the progress of a student. When a black American is admitted based on Affirmative Action into a school like Harvard University, you are admitting, largely speaking, black Americans with SAT scores in the 600s. And of course, there are exceptions. There are some black Americans whose SAT scores are in the 700s or 750s, but those are comparatively fewer. You're admitting black Americans whose scores are in the 600s, or maybe even high 500s in the same place where they're Asian-Americans and whites with scores of 750 and higher. If you're an Asian-American and you score less than a 700 on an SAT, you're not getting into Harvard. You're not getting into Princeton. You're not getting into any of these schools. Your chances are basically zero.

So, what happens within a system of Affirmative Action, you're creating an environment where these black Americans are viewed, and consequentially view themselves on the lower end of the spectrum. This is called a mismatch effect. And this mismatch effect is so strong that if you look at law school data, you see black Americans mostly in the bottom 25th percentile. Not only is the average salary coming out of law school correlated to the prestige of your law school, but it's also correlated with where you graduate, your class rank within your law school. The prestige factor of getting into Harvard Law School compared to getting into a second tier law school gives you a salary bump of about 25% on average. But then the factor of graduating in the bottom 25% of your class gives you a 25% to 33% downgrade in your starting salary on average, canceling out whatever benefit that you got for attending a more prestigious law school.

Kenny Xu:

So the reality of Affirmative Action for black Americans is that it's actually not doing what it's intended to do, which is to uplift the black community. And even worse, it's causing actual discrimination to be legitimized in our country.

Larry Bernstein:

How does it impact the Asian-American community to know that they're being actively discriminated against?

Kenny Xu:

It increases the competition culture up to like 120%, 130%. I lived in a pretty highly educated community, and lots of Asians, lots of whites, some blacks, some Hispanics. But the Asians in

my high school, when it came down to application time, you saw it in their faces. They weren't talking with their best friends anymore. They were talking with their competitors. Because they knew and they were correct that they were going to be judged at their school not in relation to the general people in their school. They're going to be judged compared to the other Asians at their school. So what it does is it creates a biting hyper-competitive competition culture, causes high rates of depression, high rates of social anxiety. Asian-Americans sometimes never recover from this level of hyper-competition and the distrust that forms between them and their own pair bonds on the race to get into elite schools.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me try a different topic. There are certain schools that do not discriminate. When my father went to college in the mid 50s. He got a full scholarship to both Caltech and MIT, and ended up going to Caltech. Today Caltech, I don't believe discriminates on the basis of race, and it is a predominantly Asian school. Is that what you want? Do you want the schools like Caltech where the cream of the crop, the best engineering schools will be predominantly Asian?

And why doesn't Harvard do this? What are their motives as to why they want to discriminate against Asians?

Kenny Xu:

I'll answer the second question first. Why does Harvard do this? Harvard does this because there are strong financial donor-related and virtue-related incentives to do this. So Harvard really believes that they're at the top of the food chain. That's what you need to know about Harvard. Harvard people and administrators really believe cosmically that they're in charge of determining society at large. Their motto says it all. "We build the next citizen leaders of society." That's what they call it. And they look around the world and they see, "Well, we don't want our leaders to be 40% Asian. These are the people that are going to conquer the world." So of course, they feel strongly like that they need to balance out the races in order to accomplish their cosmic mission.

Now, this is based on an entirely arrogant view of themselves, but it's also based on a very warped view of progressivism where they actually think that Asians are more privileged than black Americans in this country. Privilege is the key word there. Privilege means unmerited benefit. If you earn something based on your hard work, your effort, your skills, you're not privileged for getting it. You're doing it because of your hard work. But they think that Asians are more privileged than black Americans because Asians tend to be more successful socioeconomically than black Americans in this country. But that's not true, because Asian-Americans come to this country facing sometimes even greater disadvantages than black Americans in this country. A lot of Asian immigrants come here; they don't even know English. That's the first thing. The Vietnamese population in this country, 80% of the first-generation immigrants didn't know English before they came here. And within one generation, they were able to build themselves through hard work into achieving the prerequisite test scores, English language skills, and assimilative capacity to be able to achieve middle-class success. That's not privilege. That's merit.

Harvard believes that Asians got this way because of privilege, or white adjacency, or whatever you want to call it, but it's an untrue phenomenon. But that's what's influencing them. So that answers your second question, I think.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of the citizens of California's decision to stop discrimination in the state system?

Kenny Xu:

I support it. I talk about it in my book, *An Inconvenient Minority*. The reason why Asian-Americans are an inconvenient minority is because they show that hard work, effort, and making good life choices actually pays huge dividends in this country, regardless of your minority status, regardless of so-called white privilege, regardless of so-called systemic racism. The majority of your life and the majority of where you end up is largely dictated by your commitment, your effort, and your choices.

And in terms of Berkeley and Caltech, that's what I want an admission system to be. Berkeley, the UC system, especially the elite colleges that you're not allowed to discriminate on the basis of race in California. That was because of a 1994 resolution called Proposition 209, which banned using race as a factor in any of these considerations. And as a result, Berkeley has a pretty high percentage of Asians, so does Caltech. Caltech is almost 50% Asian. But all the while, Latino students, black students have been increasing as well, surprisingly. You know why?

Because there are many smart Latino and black students in this country who know that they're getting into these colleges because of merit and not because of their race, making it more likely that they want to actually choose these colleges and acclimate into these colleges. So since 1996, when Proposition 209 passed, banning race discrimination, the black population, the Hispanic population has been increasing. Now in 1996, the black population in UC Berkeley did go down by half. But that's the necessary consequence of eliminating Affirmative Action. But since then, it has been increasing and increasing, and now it's at 10%. And all props to them, because they know that they're getting in because of merit.

Larry Bernstein:

Harvard has this quality they're trying to evaluate, which is some sort of psychological personality test. And the Asian-Americans have done quite poorly on that test. Do you feel like that whole metric is just bullshit?

Kenny Xu:

So it's not a psychological evaluation. If the personality score that Harvard uses to grade applicants was a psychological measurement, I think Asian-Americans would probably do better, and I would be more fine with it. One of the three things that Harvard uses to evaluate applicants, according to Harvard's own academic public release data, because of this court lawsuit, Harvard was forced by Students For Fair Admissions against Harvard, suing on behalf of

Asian-Americans. Harvard was forced to release their 90,000 pages of alumni admissions data. And they grade people on three things. Grades or academics, extracurriculars, and personality. And Asian-Americans score highest in academics at Harvard. They score highest on extracurriculars. And they score lowest on this personality score. Now, what is personality score? How do they measure it? The answer is they don't really, because they say it's based on your leadership characteristics, your humor, that kind of thing, everything like that.

But the way to measure those kinds of things, if you could measure that at all, would be through an alumni interview or teacher recommendations. Well, it turns out Asian-Americans kill both of those things. They score just as high as whites on alumni interviews. They score a little lower than whites on teacher recommendations, but higher than blacks and Hispanics, and yet Harvard ranks Asian-Americans lowest on the personality score out of all of the races. Below whites, below blacks, and below Hispanics. What that suggests to me is that there is no objective basis for how Harvard evaluates personality score. Either they're using the stereotypes of Asian-Americans' test taking personalities, test taking robots with no personality. Either they're using that stereotype against Asian-Americans or they're just using personality score as a proxy for race.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about the lawsuit. I understand you lost in District Court. It's headed for appeals. What are the next steps? And what do you think is going to happen?

Kenny Xu:

It's not just headed for appeals now. It's headed for the Supreme Court. The lawsuit *Students For Fair Admissions versus Harvard* was filed in 2014 by a group of Asian-American applicants who sued Harvard for this discrimination. This longstanding discrimination against Asian-Americans has been happening over the past 30 years. Harvard says, "No, we don't discriminate against Asians." But it was forced to reveal its data. And the data reveals that Harvard places huge penalties on Asian-Americans specifically with regards to personality. And that's how they justify not discriminating against Asian-Americans. They say, "We don't discriminate against Asian-Americans because Asian-Americans are just worse personalities." And unfortunately the District Court bought Harvard's explanation for that. But now it's going to the Supreme Court.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do you think the District Court came up with their conclusion?

Kenny Xu:

Well, I read through the whole ruling. I read through Judge Allison Burrough's ruling, who's the Massachusetts District Court judge. I recount both sides of the argument in my book *An Inconvenient Minority* before ultimately siding with the plaintiffs.

But there are two economic data sets that were revealed before the court that the court analyzed. Sorry, that the plaintiffs and the defendants analyze. And the court sided with the defendant's analysis. One, because the court is chained to original Supreme Court precedents.

If your listeners remember, in 1979 the Supreme Court ruled that colleges could use race in admissions, so long as it was narrowly tailored and it wasn't the only thing that you use. But they could use race in admissions.

So the District Court had to go with the Supreme Court's original standard, which is that you can use race in admission. So under that higher standard, it was already going to be difficult for the plaintiffs to win. But then this court sided with the defendant's analysis of Harvard's admissions data, which the defendant's analysis says that Harvard doesn't discriminate against Asian-Americans. It's just discriminating against people with lower personalities. It's discriminating against people who are reciting in certain areas, who are choosing certain majors.

Harvard tried to say holistically that the Asian penalty wasn't it, it was the personality penalty that was harming Asians. But the personality score at the root of this had no objective basis on it. So that's why I disagree with the defendant's analysis, the claim, because where was the objective data that this personality score, that it hurt Asians rested on? There was none.

Patrick Allitt:

Patrick Allitt here. If I can ask you a question, Kenny. Do you favor American universities going over to a system where academic criteria are the only criteria for admission?

Kenny Xu:

Well, to my understanding... Is that how the elite British universities do it, Oxford and Cambridge?

Patrick Allitt:

Yes.

Kenny Xu:

Yeah. Then I support it. That's what I see in other systems across the world. It's worked perfectly fine there and I think it can work perfectly fine here.

Patrick Allitt:

So presumably it would be the death of things like Division I sports.

Kenny Xu:

So athletics is a little tricky in terms of using that as a factor for admissions, because athletics, it's genuinely meritorious. That's how I want to put it. I believe in a meritocracy. I believe that people should be evaluated on the basis of merit. But if colleges are now defined not just as academic centers of excellence, but athletic centers of excellence, then obviously you'd want to admit based on athletic merit. So I'm okay with athletics-based recruitment and admissions and everything like that. What I'm not okay with is admissions based on race, admissions based on backgrounds, admissions based on your last name, or characteristics that are ultimately irrelevant from the standpoint of merit.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Kenny, how about if your mom or dad went there?

Kenny Xu:

I'm not okay with legacy admissions either. This could be certainly a more controversial take, but no, I think admissions should strictly be based on merit. The issue with legacy admissions is that you're basing it on some kind of family line or family hierarchy, and that's irrelevant from the standpoint of merit. Your family line does not really define you from a meritorious perspective.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, I agree with that completely. And that's why I was surprised by your question about Affirmative Action for athletes. Because let's face it, that's what we have, Affirmative Action for athletes. At most of the small schools, that boost is much greater than the boost that minorities get. Because think of a place like Williams College. Tiny little place. You need 60 guys for the football team. Think of the fraction of the kids at Williams, the male kids that are football players. Do the math. It's extraordinary.

Earlier you were talking about the need to base all our decisions on academics. So what's with the sports thing? Yeah, that's a form of merit, but why is it a form of merit that these universities should credit?

Kenny Xu:

Wait, when did I say we need to base all our decisions on academics?

I said we should base our decisions on merit.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Which would seem to be defining in academic terms, right? I mean, all the stuff about the SATs and scores and grades and hard work. And I'm totally down with that. And that's why I'm confused by your comments about the athletes.

Kenny Xu:

There's a reasonable case that suggest that colleges these days are now not just academic recruitment centers, but also athletic recruitment centers. So if you're an athletic recruitment center, then you should admit people based on athletic merit. So that's what I think. Meritocracy is not just about, "Are you the smartest or most intelligent?" It's, "Are you genuinely the most meritorious for whatever you are trying to get into?" And if you're trying to get into an athletic recruitment center, whoever plays the best tennis game should get into the athletic recruitment center. Whoever plays the best football should get into the athletic recruitment center. That's what I mean.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

How about then two tennis players, one of whom is marginally better than the other, but in the first case, that guy, when he was six was sent down to one of those tennis academies in Florida. The other kid in my thought experiment, he's not quite as good at tennis as the first guy, although he's pretty good. And he just came from a poor circumstance and just started hitting on a court. If we're going to do this purely by merit, as you're describing it, Kenny, we'd have to take the guy who went to the tennis academy in Florida. Would we not?

Kenny Xu:

Right.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

How fair is that?

Kenny Xu:

Yes.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I mean, how fair is that?

Kenny Xu:

So I would say that that's fair. From the mismatch effect, you wouldn't want the kid playing significantly worse tennis on the same team as kids who are playing at the US Open. That kid would just get crushed. He would get demolished. It doesn't matter if he comes from a poor background.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

No, but Kenny, all these kids are great tennis players. He's only marginally worse in the example. But if you want only to reward the skill in the way that you're describing, it seems to me you have to ignore the very real inequalities about how people acquire certain skills.

Kenny, I agree with much of what you're saying, but I think it also ignores certain really important realities. You're taking people's skill and merit as sort of settled. They just exist. And what that ignores are circumstances that promote certain skills and inhibit others. That's the point of the tennis example. It's true that the first kid is a little bit better in tennis, but that's not because necessarily his "merit", this sort of mystical inner substance. It's because he had all these coaching advantages. That matters. That's going to improve his tennis game. But it doesn't strike me as particularly fair to give that guy the nod when there's this other kid who didn't have all those advantages, could in fact turn out to be a better tennis player. It's quite possible. Maybe there's more potential because he didn't have all that coaching. But your merit model seems to ignore all of that.

Kenny Xu:

Well, no, because you're ignoring the fact that there are other schools. Say Vanderbilt University's tennis program is number one in the nation. And then say, Penn State's tennis program is number 10 in the nation. Vanderbilt's going to recruit the best athletes. Let's say under my merit model, they exclude the guy who was marginally worse, but raised in a much poorer circumstance. He's still going to have the opportunity to go to Penn State, the number 10 tennis program in the nation, and maybe be the leader at Penn State. And you know what? After a year at Penn State, he realizes, "I'm the best guy on the team by a pretty wide margin. I'm improving just like you said I was going to improve." Then he has the opportunity to transfer into Vanderbilt and actually get in based on his actual merit and qualifications. So we're really not just talking about you're either included or excluded. I think there's room for including under a meritorious model based on merit in all of these circumstances.

Larry Bernstein:

Jon, this is Larry. Just following off of that example. Why not leave it to the tennis coach? The coach can evaluate the potential for the kid.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

That is the argument for affirmative action, is "Let the institution decide the potential, and in the course of that, they're going to have to build in the circumstances from which this kid came." So I-

Kenny Xu:

Okay, well, the more... Yeah, go ahead.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yeah, right? That's part of the judgment-

Kenny Xu:

The more you let an institution decide, the more you're allowing human error ultimately to decide. That's the issue with giving institutions too much leverage over this entire process, is because institutions and people are prone to the same sort of errors that you and I are prone to. Let's not assume that there's this mystical college admissions officer who is the Platonic guardian state who can make effectively the most rational and best decisions for other people. We know that, for example, what we call holistic admissions processes benefit the wealthy and privileged more than objective meritocratic admissions process based solely on SAT scores.

How do we know this? Because in the New York City system, you have these specialized high schools in New York City where the gifted and talented programs, like Stuyvesant High School, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, where kids are admitted only on the basis of a test score. That's it, one test score. And the guys admitted into Stuyvesant High School and Bronx Science High School, 50% of them are on free and reduced lunch.

And you have this entire separate system in New York City, by the way, that admits based on holistic admissions, I'm talking about things like Hunter College, some of the more charter

private schools, they say they admit on holistic. Their student body is much richer. Their student body is much richer, and the conclusion I've come to realize why their student body comes that way is because richer people know how to play the game that poor people don't know how to play. They know how to curry up to the counselor, they know how to write the essays, they know how to make your kid look good and holistic and extracurricular and gifted, they know how to pile on the extracurriculars. Poor kids don't have access to all of that thing, they bet their things on the test. Ultimately, that's what matters, and that's why I think that things should be based on objective meritocracy as much as possible.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

You know, I'm friendly to that, in principle. The only thing I'd add is, it also allows them to game the system in illegal ways, like bribing the polo coach to say that your kid plays polo, which again, raises the question for me of why the kids playing polo should have anything to do with whether you go to Stanford. I don't believe it should.

Patrick Allitt:

There's also this factor, the NCAA itself acts in bad faith all the time by pretending that student athletes are real students, whereas in fact, they're really gladiators. What they want to be is athletes, and they know that, especially in the case of football and basketball, they've got to go through the colleges, whether they want to or not. But to them, the academic life is a distraction. Surely the solution there is the division three model, where students are admitted for academic reasons, and then if they can play tennis, they go up for the tennis team, and if they can't, they don't.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yeah, but I think there's a little bit of myth-making in that, Patrick, because at the division three places, actually they get an enormous boost from their athletic ability. In fact, they get the biggest boost of all, because those places are so small. The coaches at Williams exert an enormous influence over the admissions process, and they do benefit people. It's affirmative action for sport scouts. That's literally what it is. And again, we can debate whether it should be that, but there's no denying that it is.

Kenny Xu:

Jon, do you think that college should just be an academic institution?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

No. I think there are many factors that should go into it. But of course, I think that one of those factors should have to do with the background of the student, not the racial or ethnic background. And on that score, I agree with you. The social class background, which incidentally is not a term that's come up in this discussion thus far, which I think is extremely indicative of the problem. Americans don't know how to talk about social class. I absolutely agree with Kenny that race is not a good proxy for opportunity or ability. You know who else agrees with him? President Obama. President Obama famously said that when his daughter was applying to

college, this is the first daughter when he was still in the White House, that she should not receive any sort of preference from Harvard or any other place by virtue of her race, because she, this is Malia, had had what Obama, in his inimitable way, described as, quote, "A pretty good deal."

And I think Obama's right. But the problem with this whole debate is that the difference between somebody like Malia Obama, who had enormous advantages growing up, and the great bulk of African-Americans in this country who haven't had the same sort of advantage. I do not think it's fair to ignore those advantages and disadvantages when we think about who we want to admit, I think we should focus on them. We could not think about them in racial terms, we could think about them in class terms.

Kenny Xu:

Yeah. You give a reasonable defense of the socioeconomic-based affirmative action, which I've also considered. You actually make two points I want to address. One is about Obama. Yes, Obama said that, but you know what he did during his administration? His Department of Justice instructed colleges to implement race-based affirmative action equity plans and to set diversity goals. So he can talk with one side of the mouth and do something with other sides of the mouth. That was classic Obama.

But secondly, the socioeconomic affirmative action. I'm more sympathetic to it. I get it. First of all, we know race-based affirmative action is particularly egregious, because there are a lot of black rich people in this country today, and the people getting into Harvard who are black, actually half of them are from black immigrants. The other half, I think 50% of them, come from private schools. 71% of them come from upper-middle class or higher backgrounds. It's just totally unfair.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

There are Asian rich people too.

Kenny Xu:

Harvard is a college for a lot of rich people. So even among rich people, there are gradations of merit. I'm more sympathetic to socioeconomic class, but it still assumes a certain arrogance of the superstructure. It still assumes that it's Harvard's responsibility to right these inequalities. It's Harvard's responsibility to train these kids. And more importantly, only Harvard can do it. You send these socioeconomic kids to Penn State, God forbid, they're going to do so bad in society. And I think... What we've already discussed, what you and Patrick have already discussed is that the prestige of the school doesn't even really matter. If you're a smart guy, you'll be able to accomplish your way out of it, you'll be able to do fine in life. So I still don't really see a true reason why you need to compromise a strictly merit-based system.

Larry Bernstein:

Jonathan, I have a question for you. Let's imagine that you're an admissions officer and it is Obama's child who's applying. It seems it would bring great prestige to the university, to have

Obama's child attend your school. And also there's another benefit, that the child has been exposed to unique experiences, having grown up in the White House. That child will have met some of the world leaders, and been involved in some of the world's biggest decisions. And then that child could inform the rest of the students in his or her class what that was like.

When I was working at Salomon Brothers as a financial analyst, I had the opportunity to interview Helmut Kohl's son for a job to work at Salomon. And so my boss said to me, "What do you think?" I said, "Oh my God, it's Helmut Kohl's son. How do we not hire the guy? Who knows what doors that kid can open? He's fine. Let's take him." So I wonder, how should we consider social class and the benefit that social class brings to an institution?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Well, look, I mean, the Malia example is right on point, because Larry, you're articulating the diversity rationale. In some ways, this entire argument is a little bit irrelevant, because of the way that we've constitutionally defined affirmative action. So Kenny said that the Bakke case was in '78. And the Bakke case is the most, to this day, the most misunderstood case in all of American law, as best I can tell. Most of my students, before they read the Bakke case, having listened to a discussion like this one, they think what Bakke is going to say is, "If you've come from a group that has suffered some sort of historical contemporary discrimination, we can give you a leg up on that ground."

Not only does Bakke not say that, but it says you can't do that. So in a way, this discussion is academic in the worst sense, because what we're talking about, believe it or not, you're not allowed to do. What it says, the Bakke decision says, it says you can't actually do admissions that way, because A, we can't measure the degree of discrimination that the group or individual has suffered, and B, we could never devise an appropriate remedy. So if you can't admit on that basis, and again, the basis being historical contemporary discrimination, on what basis can you use this as a plus factor?

That's where the diversity rationale comes in. And what they say is, you can use it as a plus factor, not the only one, because we believe that if you bring in a wider array of people from a wide array of backgrounds, that everyone will learn more. And I have to say that I agree with that, deeply and profoundly. My trouble is just with the way we've defined that diversity, because it's entirely in terms of racial and ethnic phenotype. And what that's going to do is create situations where everybody looks different, but is mostly from the same place. And, I should add, the same political party. If we thought about diversity more widely, we would bring in a wider array, not just of races, but of social class, of religion, of geography, and I do believe that that would educate all of us much more than if we were all from the same place.

Kenny Xu:

Jon and I are in agree about the benefits of diversity. Not of diversity of race, because what does race really mean except as a proxy, and a pretty weak proxy at that, of certain intellectual paradigms? But yes, diversity of intellect matters. Diversity of the way that you view the world. I would say intellectual diversity is much more important than racial diversity. I mean, that's the subject of Jonathan Haidt's work, and that's why I think you do need more conservative,

libertarian perspectives. Conservative perspectives at universities for sure, just because of the nature of how complete liberal-dominated it is, but let's also talk about the costs of diversity.

Diversity without unity leads to dissension. It causes empires to fall. It leads to crises, and even within groups. I did basic organizational communication studies, and even within a group of four or five people, one, there is no firm goal in mind that all four people are unified on, number one, and number two, if those four people do not respect each other as equals, then the net positive value of diversity becomes a net negative value.

So, diversity becomes a value under certain assumptions. The premise is that the goals are the same, and that people are on equal footing and respect each other. But what racial preferences has eliminated that second premise. It's created a place where people are not at equal footing. And at this point, diversity loses its luster. It loses the rationale. And so the whole premise of Bakke, which is that diversity is helpful to a university, is being challenged right now. And this is why this case is so interesting. It's why we need to talk about it. And this is why I'm more skeptical of the value of benefits of diversity, per se, if it's not implemented in the right environment,

Patrick Allitt:

That's a very good point. I was thinking about this in the context of the earlier discussion of teaching, that when I'm in my class, no matter who's in the room, I don't want them to be diverse in their learning of the things I've got to teach them. That is, I want them to learn what I've got to teach them, and as much as possible, I want them to learn it so that they all come to the same understanding of it in the end. Whether or not diversity is a virtue to the people coming in, I'm trying to diminish their diversity in the process of teaching them a certain history, which requires a lot of very particular qualities, which are the presuppositions of their being able to learn it by the time the course is finished. So in that way, I'm also skeptical of the idea that diversity in and of itself is a good thing.

Larry Bernstein:

In these top universities, we have a substantial number of foreign students, and a lot of them are from Asia. What distinguishes many foreign students is, they don't have access to financial aid, they've got to pay full freight. How do you think about the importance of foreign students, its role, and whether or not discrimination is appropriate or not?

Kenny Xu:

It depends on your worldview. If you are "America first," then yeah, you should have a preference for American students, because ultimately, why is meritocracy valuable? Meritocracy valuable is in the sense that it strengthens your country. You don't want meritocracy for the sake of strengthening the world or strengthening your competitors. You want meritocracy for the strength of strengthening your country. So yeah, I mean, if you want to have a preference for American students, I can understand it. If you're one of a more globalist mindset and you think that strengthening the world strengthens America, or maybe on a matter of principle, you're just against the whole concept of "America first," then sure, admit

international students with the same preference skills that you're admitting regular Asian-American students.

The only, the only other issue that I see with regards to international students is the issue of espionage, especially with rising rivalries with China and everything like that. I am of the belief that the vast majority of international students come here just to study and learn American culture and transfer into American history, and it's an exercise of our soft power, which is great. Even the majority of Chinese international students. But in the cases where there's espionage, yeah. Get rid of them, weed them out. This is why we have an FBI. This is why we have a CIA. That's not the role of the university to police it. But one thing you shouldn't do is that you shouldn't racially profile. You shouldn't say, "Because this person is of a certain race or from a certain country, they must be an espionage, or they must be treated with that characteristic."

Jonathan Zimmerman:

I agree with everything that Kenny just said, and it's certainly not the job of universities to try to police espionage, which has been radically overstated, although of course, it happens and it's real. However, it is the job of the university to attend to academic freedom and free speech, and I think that's an area that often gets short shrift in this discussion. I have had students in my own classroom from China and other countries tell me they do not feel at liberty to speak about certain issues in my classroom because they don't know who's listening. And I think this is a real issue that hasn't gotten nearly enough play. If we believe in what we're doing, we must create circumstances where everybody feels at liberty to say what they think, but because some of our students come from places where you are not at liberty to do that, they don't feel safe in our own classrooms, and we need to take that much more seriously than, than we have up until now.

Larry Bernstein:

Jon, are you saying that it could get back to the secret police in the relevant country that the child has said something?

Jonathan Zimmerman:

It already has. There's a guy in jail in China right now for something he Tweeted when he was a student at the University of Minnesota. Larry, it's already happened.

Kenny Xu:

Wow.

Larry Bernstein:

I didn't know that.

Jonathan Zimmerman:

Yeah. Everyone should know it. It's just, we don't care enough about it, is the problem. We want their tuition dollars, of course, but we're not willing to take the other steps to make sure

that they get the full benefit of what we're doing. And I should also add that other people get the benefits of their presence. It's back to the diversity thing. If these kids are biting their tongues, we're not leveraging what they can bring to us. It's not good for us either.

Larry Bernstein:

I was looking through the Penn graduate students per department, and particularly in the math and sciences, it's almost exclusively Asian. Kenny, are you getting what you want in the graduate program? And what is it about the graduate programs that minimizes discrimination? Or do you think what it is, is that the general American, if it skews foreign, finds that there are better employment opportunities outside of the workplace and don't find the same value add of the graduate program?

Kenny Xu:

I don't know what to say in terms of, am I getting what I want? What I want is a merit-based system. I don't really care about what they look like, if they were 10 black kids, if they were 10 white kids. Doesn't really matter to me so much, necessarily, as long as the elite programs are getting the elite graduates.:

I'll tell you something that too often happens with regards to graduate programs. You have Princeton's math PhD program, which is the number one math program in the entire world, and they've recently been conducting racial preferences and admissions. They recently admitted this black woman... I recount this in my book *An Inconvenient Minority*, by the way... And admitted for... She told a really good story about herself. However, her math credentials were not necessarily up to par, but they admitted her anyway. They were moved by her story.

And the professor who recounted this to me, his name is Sergiu Klainerman, you can look him up, Princeton math professor, he tells me that this woman, soon as she gets into this elite math program, is confronted with the reality of other students who were the 10 or 20 brightest math students in the entire world. And this woman was not bad at math. She was merely great at math, whereas the other people were world-class elite. She fell behind very quickly, and had to drop out of the program and grew very bitter and resentful towards her alma mater for it. This is the kind of thing that doesn't help anybody. It does not help the kids that are put in before they're ready. It does not help the brand or reputation of a college. The only way that they're able to paper over this is simply to suppress it, to not tell that story. But I do.

Larry Bernstein:

This is the part of the show where you get to end in a note of optimism. Kenny, what are you optimistic about?

Kenny Xu:

I'm optimistic based on the conversation that Jon and Patrick were having before I appeared on the show, which is that even if you don't get into an elite university, you still have a great chance at life, assuming you're sufficiently merited to it, and that hard work and skill and learning, there's no substitute for that, which is a note of optimism. Society, isn't necessarily a

game about which university you get into, and that's something when I speak to Asian-Americans, I tell them a lot, because Asian-American parents are so obsessed with getting their kids into these elite universities, because unfortunately in countries like China, you have such a scarcity of top universities, that if you don't get into one of the top universities, your opportunities are dramatically limited. But in America, that's not the case. We have the best higher education infrastructure in the entire world. And you'll be fine regardless of where you attend. This optimism is partially the reason why I don't support preferences, and this optimism is a reason why I imagine things will fix themselves out in the future.