

Guinier, L. (2015). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. 176 pp.

## Review by Megan S. Segoshi and OiYan A. Poon

Lani Guinier's *Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* (2015) offers a critique of current measures of merit frequently used in selective college admissions and challenges the way we define merit as a society. Guinier demonstrates the incongruence between the mission statements of many colleges and universities, with their use of phrases like "preparation to enter a diverse workforce" and "diverse citizenry," and the criteria by which these institutions actually evaluate their students in admissions processes and pedagogical practices. If institutions of higher education are indeed to serve the purpose of producing informed and engaged citizens, Guinier suggests that a reexamination of how they define merit is warranted.

Guinier borrows her definition of *merit* from Amartya Sen, stating that merit "is an incentive system that rewards the actions a society values" (p. xi). Ergo, measures like SAT scores, which are used as one highly valued marker of student merit in admissions processes, reflect a misguided emphasis on individual accomplishment rather than the potential for learning the skills and talents needed to address collective problems in our democracy. Guinier implies that by relying heavily on criteria that supposedly reflect individual achievement, institutions of higher education are engaging in social reproduction, or the perpetuation of social inequality through the valuing of measures more readily accessible to and easily achieved by the wealthy.

Further problematizing the overreliance on SAT scores, which she names the "testocracy," Guinier presents the now commonly accepted argument that such scores have proven to be poor predictors of student potential. In fact, they are more accurate reflections of student wealth (*Bowen & Bok, 1998*). Hiss and Franks (2014) found that there was no significant difference in the academic success of students who submitted standardized test scores to their colleges and those who opted not to—most of whom were women and students of color—suggesting that these scores are not valid predictors of student academic success.

Guinier nicely sets the stage for proposing a more comprehensive way in which admissions offices can fulfill the promise of advancing their institutions' democratic and diverse missions but

then falls short of actually advocating such an arrangement. She attributes our obsession with SAT scores to the reliance of many higher education institutions on their rankings in the *U.S. News & World Report*, which uses average student SAT scores as a strong measure of college quality. Because the *U.S. News* serves as a determinant of prestige for colleges and universities, many institutions depend on its rankings to maintain their status in the increasingly competitive, market-driven field of higher education. Guinier explicitly states the issue: that we need to “rethink our meritocracy and our definition of ‘merit’ altogether” (p. 42). However, rather than focus on challenging institutional dependency on such reports and external prestige brokers, Guinier places the burden on high schools and recruitment programs to ameliorate society’s reliance on false measures of student merit. By naming these organizations “solutions,” as Part 2 of *Tyranny* is titled, Guinier shifts attention away from the need to reform admissions processes, suggesting instead that external programs offer the most promising means to reconceptualize merit as democratic.

Guinier presents two organizational initiatives as examples of “solutions,” University Park Campus School and the Posse Foundation, and then delves into innovative, collaborative teaching techniques implemented at colleges and universities. University Park is a public charter high school created in collaboration with Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, with the goal of emphasizing collaboration, service, and an equitable education. Its students come from the surrounding underserved, low-income neighborhood. Students who graduate from University Park are granted full scholarships to attend Clark University if they are accepted through the standard university admissions process. The Posse Foundation is a well-known race-blind, need-blind college program that recruits students from various urban areas based on their potential for collaborative community leadership and sends them to colleges and universities across the country along with their “posse,” or cohort of other Foundation-supported students. Both of these organizations are redefining merit by assessing students based on their leadership skills and potential rather than strictly on quantifiable measures of achievement. Despite the advances these organizations have made in their attempts to redefine merit, they are still operating within a larger system that does not value those same qualities. This is evidenced by the surprisingly low persistence rates of University Park graduates, despite their very high attendance and high school graduation rates. For example, in 2012, none of the University Park students who attended the University

of Massachusetts Amherst or Clark University persisted to earn their undergraduate degrees. Since then, University Park has taken on the new challenge of incorporating college readiness into its curriculum.

Finally, Guinier challenges the notion that merit should be based on individual ability to do well on high-stakes tests by examining the innovative pedagogical methods being implemented by college professors at the University of California Berkeley and the California Institute of Technology. Eric Mazur and Uri Treisman encourage their students to value the process of learning rather than their performance on tests and quizzes. They also embrace a Freirian view of teaching, which values both students and instructors as equal participants in a collaborative learning process. Guinier's support of these methods is informed by other authors (*Page, 2007; Woolley & Malone, 2011*) whose work supports the notion that the future of our country—not just education, but other fields such as law and health care—is dependent on our ability to educate students in how to work collaboratively and innovatively to solve challenging world problems. She echoes other authors (*Rae-Dupree, 2008; Yeager & Dweck, 2012*) in her assertion that real learning takes place when students view intelligence as something that can be cultivated rather than an innate characteristic, and academic success as a matter of effort rather than something predetermined and fixed. Citing recent studies (*Boaler, 2008; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hong & Page, 2004; Page, 2007*), she further argues that more learning happens when diverse groups of individuals are working together. Guinier redefines merit as democratic instead of something that only a few at the top-tier institutions can access and define; thus, merit ought to be understood as achievable by anyone, with learning opportunities more equitably distributed in society. She posits that the concept of merit should concern qualities such as leadership, collaboration, resiliency, and a drive to learn rather than simply being defined by dubious test-based measures.

Guinier offers a compelling critique of generally accepted notions of merit adopted by those colleges and universities that often lament the challenges they encounter in enrolling racially diverse students. However, Guinier does not follow her critique with a direct call on colleges and universities to reconsider and transform their criteria for admissions review and selection. Rather, she offers programmatic examples of solutions to the problematic ways of defining merit that absolve colleges and universities of any responsibility to reconsider their admissions systems. Although it is important to acknowledge and give credit to the many efforts by

organizations like the Posse Foundation and unique high schools like University Park, it also should be noted that they are not actually challenging the use of SAT scores in admissions; rather, they are finding ways around it. In order to truly challenge the testocracy, higher education institutions must be willing to take a stand against the flawed measures of success touted in the *U.S. News & World Report*. Given the evidence that SAT scores are poor predictors of overall college success, selective postsecondary institutions are actively contributing to the perpetuation of the wealth gap in the United States by relying so heavily upon them.

Guinier's critique of our meritocracy is incredibly timely. The U.S. Supreme Court will soon announce a decision in the rehearing of *Fisher vs. University of Texas*, a case in which a White female applicant filed a lawsuit against the University of Texas after being denied admission, claiming that the consideration of race unfairly privileged Black and Latino applicants. Additionally, more than 100 Asian American organizations have jointly filed a federal complaint against Brown, Yale, and Dartmouth universities, attacking affirmative action and holistic admission review processes for allegedly discriminating against Asian Americans. Central to these attacks is the testocracy and its overreliance on quantifiable measures of achievement, like the SAT, in determining who deserves admission at elite institutions. It is troubling that the use of race in admissions processes is being targeted as the culprit for inequities in college access, especially given the extensive research suggesting that racial diversity offers many benefits to all students (*Gurin et al., 2004*).

Guinier makes a compelling case for the importance of reconsidering admissions policies and processes in light of conversations about reconceptualizing merit. Leaders in higher education must accept responsibility for tailoring admissions criteria to create more diverse student bodies. *Turning the Tide*, a report by Harvard's Making Caring Common Project (2016), is a representative indication that elite universities are beginning to do just that. By redefining merit in the classroom, colleges and universities embrace the possibility of shaping a more collaborative, democratic, and equitable workforce. However, institutions of higher education must be willing to take the risk and make the investment in admissions criteria that will actually determine which students will be the most successful in and after college, rather than relying on external organizations to do so.

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