

David duKor-Jackson

I read a recent [NY Times piece](#), dealing with multiracial students and the dilemma of racial identification on college application forms, with great interest.

In my role as the Director of Minority Recruitment, I have fielded numerous calls and emails soliciting advice on how to complete the race and ethnicity section of the MIT admission application. When the questions began, I will admit to being a little perplexed by what seemed to be widespread confusion.

When I was a kid, I recall having to identify my race on all kinds of forms, including standardized tests, long before I contemplated completing an application for college admission. From my perspective, checking the box, or boxes to indicate one's race should be as automatic as providing one's name. As [Chris Peterson, once put it](#), "If you have to pause, for more than a second or two, to pick your race or ethnicity, you're doing it wrong."

If anything, the ability to check multiple boxes should make it easier to identify one's race. In my experience, individuals from multiracial backgrounds resented having to choose one race over another, and now they no longer have to.

While I try to avoid being overly cynical, it has been my sense that very little of the confusion is actually about racial identity and identification. In reality, most of the confusion is about how to best leverage a dimension of one's personal background to maximize the likelihood of admission in a highly selective college admissions process. Instinctively, I knew this to be true, but most students are unwilling to [state this outright](#). In that respect, I appreciate the spotlight that is now shining brightly on this issue. My concern is that the spotlight is focused on the wrong area.

Many colleges and universities value multiple forms of diversity in their student populations. This diversity may include students that are first-generation to college, students from a variety of geographical regions, students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds or any number of other qualities and characteristics.

While one's race can certainly come into play in a college admissions decision, the actual impact bears no resemblance to the common perception that checking a single box

somehow guarantees a pathway to admission. What most people either fail to recognize or appreciate, is that amongst a host of factors ranging from academic preparation to institutional priorities, the factor that is both most salient, and most likely to swing an admission decision in a highly selective process, is what an applicant makes of the opportunities that are available to them. While I acknowledge that this may seem like an oversimplification, it takes into account both the disadvantages that one may have to cope with as a function of coming from a low-income family or attending an under-resourced school, as well as the advantages that one might experience living in a highly educated household or attending an affluent suburban high school.

Regardless of one's background, if an applicant maximizes the opportunities that are available to them, they should be a viable candidate for admission to a highly selective college or university because they are likely to both take advantage of the myriad opportunities that exist in those settings and have a positive impact on the campus community. If an applicant has to create their own opportunities because none are available to them, admissions officers typically get excited about the prospect of such a student stepping foot onto a resource and opportunity rich campus. Conversely, if an applicant has abundant opportunities and chooses to pass on them, they are likely increasing the chances that an admissions committee at a highly selective institution is going to choose to pass on their application.

Most institutions that place a premium on diversity utilize a much broader definition of diversity than what can be captured or satisfied by a simple check box. The most selective institutions scrutinize applications with sufficient rigor to easily differentiate between disingenuous applicants, who are simply looking for an edge in the admissions process, and the authentic applicants that are the most likely to truly enrich the incoming class and the greater campus community.