

Legacy admissions no longer

Legacy policy reflects the real world

Legacy admissions aren't merit-based

In a perfect world, college admissions would be based solely on an applicant's academic ability and his ability to contribute to the university community. Admissions staffs would be oblivious to pressure from outsiders seeking racial quotas and immune to the desire of administrators to recruit students exclusively based on non-academic criteria.



SARA FOLEY

In actuality, students aren't recruited or admitted based only on their abilities, but are often targeted based on how well their demographics will diversify statistics. Texas A&M uses a list of factors when considering applicants, including extra-curricular activities, adversity overcome, uneducated parents and, until recently, relatives who were alumni.

On Jan. 9, in an attempt to reform these policies and after intense pressure from state legislators, University President Robert M. Gates eliminated a 15-year-old "legacy" policy that gave a slight advantage to children, grandchildren and siblings of alumni. This decision seems like a step toward equal opportunity, but in reality, it is a step toward an increasingly skewed admissions policy.

The A&M admissions policy groups those not admitted immediately under the top 10 percent rule and scores them on a 100-point scale, with different categories for test scores, class rank and even one giving up to six points if the applicant's parents did not graduate high school, according to The Houston Chronicle. Applicants received four points for legacies. The removal of the legacy policy punishes alumni and their children as well as applicants who come from an educated home. Until all inequality is removed, the legacy policy should remain.

Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to remove all bias from admissions procedures. Students recruited for athletic scholarships and given preference based on prospective membership in the Corps of Cadets are just as much a product of favoritism in the admissions process as relatives of alumni.

A driving force behind legacy admissions is an alum's potential financial support if their children are given an edge in the admissions process. With the recent cut in state budgets, universities statewide are leaning more on donations as a resource for funding.

Gates made it clear that no student was admitted completely based on a legacy, but the four points awarded to the student for legacy made the difference for 353 students in 2003 and 349 students in 2002, according to The Chronicle. Eliminating the potential advantage communicates to alumni and current students alike that while A&M wants their donations, it doesn't want their children, regardless if that is the intent of the ruling or not.

A&M offers about 10,000 acceptance letters every year, but many of the applicants decline their acceptance. What admissions staffs must determine when deciding between two candidates is which one is more likely to choose to attend A&M. Not only does the declination of a qualified child of an alum upset the parent and threaten their financial support, but also weakens the Aggie community and potentially crushes a child's lifelong dreams. While there is no way to measure an applicant's genuine desire to attend A&M compared to the

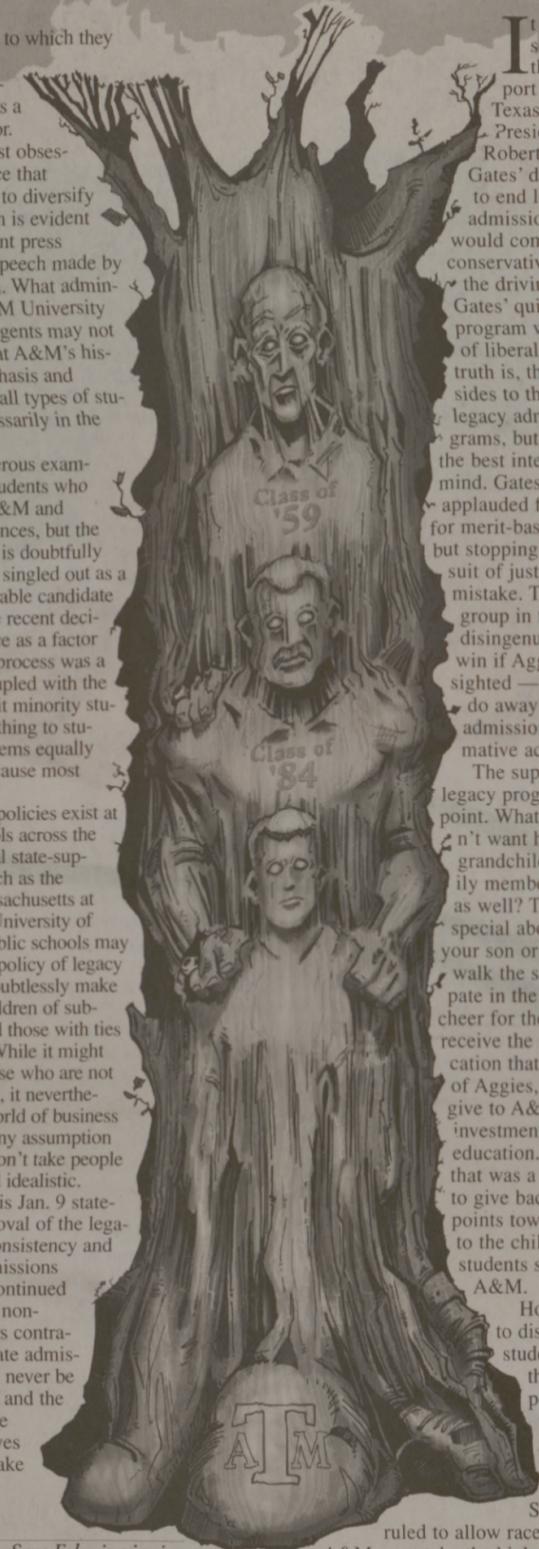
other schools to which they applied, the legacy admissions policy is a good indicator.

The almost obsessive insistence that A&M wants to diversify its population is evident in every recent press release and speech made by A&M administration. What administrators and the A&M University System Board of Regents may not want to accept is that A&M's history, academic emphasis and social setting draw all types of students, but not necessarily in the same numbers.

There are numerous examples of minority students who feel welcome at A&M and enjoy their experiences, but the reason behind this is doubtfully because they were singled out as a minority as a desirable candidate for admission. The recent decision to exclude race as a factor in the admissions process was a sound one, but coupled with the insistence to recruit minority students and offer nothing to students of alumni seems equally discriminatory because most alums are white.

Similar legacy policies exist at most private schools across the country and several state-supported schools, such as the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the University of Virginia. Other public schools may not have a formal policy of legacy admissions, but doubtlessly make allowances for children of substantial donors and those with ties to the university. While it might seem unjust to those who are not children of alumni, it nevertheless reflects the world of business and politics, and any assumption that connections don't take people places is naive and idealistic.

Gates said in his Jan. 9 statement that the removal of the legacy points adds "consistency and equity" to the admissions policies, but the continued existence of other non-merit-based factors contradicts this. Collegiate admissions policies will never be entirely impartial, and the decision to remove benefits for relatives of alumni only make the process more unbalanced.



Sara Foley is a junior journalism major.

It might seem odd that support for Texas A&M President Robert M. Gates' decision to end legacy admissions would come from a conservative, considering the driving force behind Gates' quick end to the program was the whining of liberal legislators. The truth is, there are three sides to the debate over legacy admissions programs, but only two have the best interests of A&M in mind. Gates should be applauded for taking a stand for merit-based admissions, but stopping now in the pursuit of justice would be a mistake. There is another group in the debate that is disingenuous and could win if Aggies are too short-sighted — those seeking to do away with legacy admissions to foster affirmative action.

The supporters of the legacy program have a good point. What loyal Aggie doesn't want his children, grandchildren or other family members to go to A&M as well? There is something special about knowing that your son or daughter will walk the same halls, participate in the same traditions, cheer for the same team and receive the same quality education that you did. To a lot of Aggies, the best reason to give to A&M is that it's an investment in their child's education. And for 15 years, that was a reason for A&M to give back — up to four points toward admission — to the children of former students seeking entry into A&M.

However, it is wrong to discriminate against students for something that they have no power over, such as whether they were born into an Aggie family or not. Now that the U.S. Supreme Court has



MATTHEW MADDOX

ruled to allow race in admissions, A&M must take the high road of meritocracy to avoid falling into the trap of affirmative action. Proponents of merit-based admissions have welcomed the end of the legacy policy. Aggies should remember that the deciding factor determining why a legacy student is here may only be because someone else in his family tree was a first-generation Aggie. Considering that prior to 1989, legacies did not receive extra consideration, numerous legacies were the result of strong personal merit only.

"A&M's decision is good news for those of us who believe in merit-based university admissions," said Edward Blum, a senior fellow with the Center for Equal Opportunity, which opposes affirmative action. However, those seeking the end of legacy admissions were not the supporters of merit-based admissions, but quite the opposite.

Gates' announcement occurred quickly on the heels of a barrage of attacks by affirmative action proponents in the Texas Legislature, calling the legacy program racist. This assertion is only a ploy for those upset that A&M has not returned to race-conscious admissions. As former A&M President Ray Bowen told The Associated Press, his administration determined that ending the legacy program would have lowered the number of minorities gaining entrance into A&M. The research just doesn't support the assertion that the legacy program significantly changed the demographics for A&M. But for those who make their living playing the race card, it was easier to point a finger at the legacy program and demand a return to affirmative action than to address the failing K-through-12th-grade education system that has ill-prepared generations of minorities. Don't expect the proponents of affirmative action to be touting school vouchers or reform of the Texas Education Agency any time soon.

Now that legacy no longer plays a role in the admissions process, there is an even greater wrong that must be corrected. Currently, applicants can gain up to six points toward admissions if their parents did not attend college or complete high school. According to Frank Ashley, A&M's acting assistant provost for enrollment, the four points for legacy admissions helped offset the six for lack of parental academic achievement. Now, however, the six-point policy actually places legacy students at a direct disadvantage compared to their peers, as applicants who receive their legacy status from their parents are not eligible for the program. Just as points for parental success are not merit-based, neither are points for the opposite.

Despite pressure from affirmative action proponents, race-based admissions must never return to A&M. Point systems that put the children of former students at a distinct advantage must go. While Gates has taken a bold step in the direction of merit-based admissions that places A&M on the moral high ground, this has to be only the beginning of changes to come.

Matthew Maddox is a senior journalism major. Graphic by Ruben DeLuna

O'Neill offers revealing look at Bush's agenda

The stakes in the 2004 election just got higher. For years, Republicans have downplayed Democratic critics of President George W. Bush as whiners whose complaints are grounded in ideological bias of the neo-conservative generation can easily overcome. But now, the Democrats have the allegations of a cabinet member — ousted for his moral convictions — on their side.



SOMMER HAMILTON

As the frenzied election orchestras gear up for the Iowa send-off, one book hitting the market this month has sent shockwaves through the tainted political heart of America. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ron Suskind exposes a deep vein of horse-in-blinders, one-track-mind thinking inherent in the Republican presidency in his book "The Price of Loyalty," a left-leaning look at Bush and his administration told like a true D.C. drama: through the eyes of a fired party member.

Former Treasury Secretary Paul H. O'Neill was removed in late 2002 from his role in Bush's cabinet and on the pivotal National Security Council after he refused to publicly support Bush's second round of cuts, claiming the cuts would widen the deficit and endanger social programs.

In Suskind's book, O'Neill says the president's first security council meeting centered on Saddam Hussein and how to affect a regime change in Iraq. O'Neill, citing hundreds of documents he made available to Suskind, claims Bush's leadership allowed for no free flow of ideas.

The president was like "a blind man in a roomful of deaf people," O'Neill says in the book. But even more telling for Democrats as the primaries polarize their constituencies around ideals, O'Neill says Saddam was topic "A" on the president's conservative laundry list. The game plan for ousting the leader with a peacekeeping force, tribunals for war crimes and a plan for dividing Iraq's oil, were items on the table by the second security council meeting in February 2001 — seven months before Sept. 11.

If this is true, the war in Iraq, which the public should realize by now wasn't based on a search for weapons of mass destruction, is rendered entirely groundless. It wasn't to find non-existent weapons and it had nothing to do with hunting down terrorists that in early 2001 had yet to fully manifest themselves. Following the president's nominal win under the auspices of nine Supreme Court justices, many had it that Bush

would beat up on his father's aggressor. The lack of a clearly-defined reason for war hinders Bush's ability to be frank with his public.

The airwaves emanating from 24-hour news networks were jammed last week with the voices of Democrats explaining their newfound vindication for their long-maligned opposition to the war and to naive tax cuts in the face of a mounting national deficit. Republicans sounded out just as often, but with the muted tones of people accustomed to defending their party's leadership. The Crossfire-types and their Fox News compatriots have adopted the ne'er-do-well, disgruntled former employee argument: of course O'Neill would back talk the president who had him fired, the Republican refrain goes. But that's as far as the response makes sense.

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O'Neill paints the picture of a president gunning for aggression against Saddam long before the time warp that has catapulted the country to blind acceptance of war and infringed civil liberties since Sept. 11. The war in Iraq is a botched misuse of the U.S. military might and an arrow through the heart of peace-loving Americans. Iraq is a turning point that drew most Democrats and liberals out of the closet and into the blinking reality that their president was leading them into a misplaced war of revenge, though on who, for what and why remains noticeably absent from pro-war arguments.

O'Neill tells about his and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's opposition to the tax cuts that most easily benefited wealthy Americans, explaining that when he voiced his concerns about another round of cuts, Vice President Dick Cheney quieted his complaints with an off-handed insult to the American voting public. "We

won the mid-term elections, this is our due," Suskind reported Cheney as saying. Shortly after the conversation, Cheney fired O'Neill.

It is this thinking, that the Republicans have taken from their election a mandate to lead the country at will, that forms the basis of Democratic front-runner and former Vermont Governor Howard Dean's campaign. When Dean expressed doubts in December that the capture of Saddam would make America a safer place, a conservative outcry predicted doom for Dean's presidential hopes. But as the security threat assessed by Homeland Security and the Pentagon was upgraded to orange just in time for Christmas, Dean was sitting pretty. Fellow Democratic contenders carry the ball further with the O'Neill revelations. Retired Gen. Wesley Clark said Suskind's book "just confirms my worst suspicions." The Washington Post reported, Sen. John Kerry, D-MA, stubs his toe coming up against the hardest fact of O'Neill's claims: "It would mean they were dead set on going to war alone since almost the day they took office and deliberately lied to the American people, Congress and the world."

Both sides have a point. But in the court of public opinion, apathy reigns. As when Bush's government finally admitted it could not find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and liberals were cheered that they had been right to question the country's leadership, the loudest voice in this equally important matter will be the suffocating refrain heard then: who cares?

Americans have too long pushed the politics that guide them out of sight and out of mind. The founding fathers questioned the legitimacy of those in a position of authority over them and from that conflict birthed an American spirit of debate and an unalterable concept of the rights of the governed.

But in the 21st century, that spirit is flagging. Instead of facing the gun down the barrel, Republicans are side-stepping their way to power and using simple-minded arguments to keep their hegemonic hold on the country.

"Who cares" is not the average American's response to allegations of abuse of power in the upper tiers of government, but rather the answer ideological Republicans have provided. One may decide he does not care, but in the battleground that is the United States in the year of an election, one better be sure.

Sommer Hamilton is a senior journalism major.