# Dismantling the Hunger Games:
## Exploring a Match System in Selective Admissions

**By OiYan Poon, Ph.D.**
**Colorado State University**

## HACK THE GATES
### RADICALLY REIMAGINE ADMISSIONS

*The Hunger Games*—a popular young adult series of books and film adaptations—is set in a society rife with deeply inhumane inequalities. In the dystopia of Panem, young people are randomly chosen from each caste and forced to compete in a ritualistic duel to the death. The cultural spectacle of the Games in the world Suzanne Collins created is a form of reality television entertainment that reinforces its societal systems of political hierarchy and class conflict.[1] Readers may find the Games to be absurd, but the narrative's popularity may stem from the existence of similarly illogical competitions college hopefuls in our world and reality confront. In this policy and practice brief, I draw from research to question the ways selective college admissions works as an annual cultural spectacle to reinforce race and class inequalities. I suggest and explore an alternative system of college matching that could be publicly managed with public oversight by the U.S. Department of Education. The goal in this brief is to stimulate dialogue about a transformative idea.[2]

## QUESTIONING THE HUNGER GAMES OF SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS

Why is there such a high-pressure annual Hunger Games-like culture around selective college admissions, when there are over 4,000 two- and four-year colleges and universities in the U.S.? Why do high achieving, and often economically privileged, high school seniors and their families' emotions and behaviors suggest there is a shortage of high quality postsecondary educational opportunities? Although such behaviors suggest a belief that competition among high school graduates is on the rise, the reality is that the high school aged population is precipitously in decline.[3] Since the 1980s, the growing cultural prevalence of the US News & World Report college rankings has partly contributed toward a culture of manufactured prestige[4], hyper

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[1] Sasani, S., & Darayee, M. (2015). Suzanne Collins' Hunger Games and the society of the spectacle. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 48, 31-40.

[2] It is outside the scope of this short brief to offer specific details of alternative of college admissions processes. Rather, my hope is that readers will think outside of the box to generate new ideas for undermining unhealthy elements of selective college admissions cultures.

[3] Barshay, J. (2018, November 26). The number of public school students could fall by more than 8% in a decade. *The Hechinger Report.* https://hechingerreport.org/the-number-of-public-school-students-could-fall-by-more-than-8-in-a-decade/

education[5], and opportunity hoarding among the privileged.[6]

Perhaps nothing embodies the corrupt foundations of this hyper-competitive ethos more than the 2019 Varsity Blues scandal. This spectacle partially unveiled pervasive inequalities embedded in selective college admissions systems. In this scheme, wealthy parents engaged illegal means—paying to cheat on the SAT, fabricating recruited athlete files, and bribing athletic administrators—to secure brand name college attendance bragging rights. They chose to manipulate current systems that are often presumed by the public to be fair, going above and beyond their existing circumstances of racial and economic privileges of vast social capital that already positioned them well in the selective admissions structures.[7]

Varsity Blues, and even the COVID pandemic's near-universal ending of test score requirements in admissions, have thrown into question the necessity of major aspects of selective admissions systems, not to mention how current systems maintain a race for prestige, which can be harmful to prospective college students, their families, schools, and communities. Rather than edit the troublingly greedy culture that encourages opportunity hoarding[8], how can we radically undermine and transform it to focus on the holistic education and growth of students more centrally?

Since the Varsity Blues scandal broke, some have discussed ways to strengthen preventative measures against illegal activities.[9] But the corruption is a logical outcome of the way the current systems of selective admissions

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[4] Volkwein, J. F., & Sweitzer, K. V. (2006). Institutional prestige and reputation among research universities and liberal arts colleges. Research in Higher Education, 47(2), 129-148.

[5] Dhingra, P. (2020). *Hyper education: Why good schools, good grades, and good behavior are not enough.* New York: NYU Press.

[6] Hamilton, L., Roksa, J., & Nielsen, K. (2018). Providing a "leg up": Parental involvement and opportunity hoarding in college. *Sociology of Education,* 91 (2), 111-131.

[7] Jenks, A. (Host). (2019 April). *Gangster capitalism* [Audio podcast]. https://shows.cadence13.com/tag/College%20Admissions%20Scandal

[8] Tilly, C. (1998). *Durable inequality.* Berkeley: University of California Press

[9] See for example, Rosen, P. (2019, March 19). Varsity Blues: How universities can protect themselves in the wake of the admissions scandal. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulrosen/2019/03/19/varsity-blues-how-universities-can-protect-themselves-in-the-wake-of-the-admissions-scandal/#afa828b5a9bb

are constructed. What is needed, instead of reform, is a radical reimagining and massive redesign of college access structures. In the remainder of this brief, I present research on the current system of selective admissions, to question the status quo. I then explore and consider matchmaking as a possibility for systemic change, particularly in selective college access. The brief ends with ideas for the creation of an undergraduate matchmaking system.

# THE NEED TO DISRUPT THE STATUS QUO

In my current research on how race-conscious holistic admissions works at highly selective colleges and universities, I have been troubled by what I am learning. First, academic talent and deservingness is an unhealthy mythical narrative surrounding selective admissions. Once the applicant pool is whittled down to the most academically strong, enrollment management professionals shape their desired incoming cohorts of students guided by a process of evaluation that centers institutional priorities.[10] These organizational directives are somewhat shaped by specious metrics used by the prestige manufacturing sector (i.e., US News & World Report rankings). Except for applicants and their families, most players in the admissions evaluation and selection game are aware that financial and market-driven logics can be central in selective admissions decisions,

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[10] In this study, I interviewed 51 admissions professionals who had worked in highly selective (35% admission rate or lower) colleges and universities that practiced race-conscious holistic review procedures, in 2019. The study participants generously offered responses and reflections to questions about how they entered the professional field, the criteria used to evaluate applicants, activities incorporated into the admission cycle (from recruitment through enrollment) with special attention to how reading and shaping occurred, professional development and training. Throughout the interview, I asked specifically about how race-consciousness was incorporated in the activities during each stage of the admissions cycle. At the time of publication of this brief, my research team and I are in the first stage of coding all 51 interview transcripts. I am very grateful to the study participants. I would also be remiss not to acknowledge the critical contributions to this study of my research team members. This study would not be possible without the critical analytical eyes of future Drs. Douglas Lee, Eileen Galvez, Nikki Kāhealani Chun, Bri Serrano, Ali Raza, Joanne Song Engler, and Jessica Hurtado—Ph.D. students in Higher Education Leadership at Colorado State University.

According to my research, the central questions for enrollment managers and admissions professionals at many selective colleges and universities[11] after determining which applicants are academically qualified, are:

- Can we afford this class? How much can we spend on a class? Will this class require us to outspend our allotment for financial aid? How much are we willing to invest in this class?
- How will these students contribute toward advancing our priorities and organizational character and/or institutional mission (i.e., market brand)?

These institutional priorities can include:

- The balance between full-pay and students requiring financial assistance—to maintain institutional budgets and financial stability, which inevitably privileges the wealthy.
- How well students are predicted to fit into various cultural niches, corners, and the teaching and learning expectations (e.g., how might they do in a residential college with small seminars?) on campus.
- A cohort's geographic diversity—does the class hail from all 50 states and dozens of international destinations?
- Whether there are enough students for specific academic departments to maintain viability.
- The proportion of students in the class who are first-generation college-goers and/or Pell eligible.
- A gender-binary balance between men and women, which usually privileges cis-gender men, who are often low in numbers at private liberal arts colleges.

While the public assumes that colleges are picking the "most academically qualified," based on narrow metrics—academic transcripts and test scores—the truth is that brand-name colleges have an over-abundance of academically qualified applicants, who were at the top of their high school classes, took the

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[11] These questions and priorities were more common among participants who had worked at less selective institutions with 20-35% admission rates. These institutions were more commonly tuition-reliant in their organizational budgeting and finances.

most rigorous courses available to them, and scored high on standardized tests. These selective institutions understand that such limiting criteria are not capable of helping their admissions staff offer a full and complete assessment of individual applicants' academic and intellectual strengths and qualities. There is no universally accepted assessment metric of "merit" across colleges and universities. The most selective institutions have placed themselves in the position of selecting students for their own priorities. This process never really centers students' interests, or even the educational process. As Lani Guinier has asked, shouldn't institutions of higher education center the educational process and students themselves, and less with creaming the crop of high school graduates each year?[12]

## EXISTING MATCHMAKING IDEAS

The marketplace for higher education is vast. Most prospective college students have a multitude of options for postsecondary education in the U.S., in general proximity[13] to their homes, in their home states, across the country, or via online platforms. However, structures facilitating access to information about the range of opportunities are deeply inequitable. While many low-income students of color are at a systemic disadvantage in learning about and navigating the wide array of college possibilities, many predominantly white and economically privileged students can be culturally pressured into thinking in very narrow ways about higher education and prestige.[14,15,16] Such behaviors

[12] Guinier, L. (2015). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America.* Beacon Press. Guinier argued that the most elitist postsecondary institutions seek to enroll students who have already proven they have mastered schooling—many of them have many socioeconomic advantages. As such, Guinier suggested that the most selective colleges and universities have become finishing schools offering rather than educational institutions that seek to invest in the educational growth of students. See Dr. Frederick Ngo's Hack the Gates brief "The Equity Rankings: An Alternative Assessment of U.S. Higher Education" for more discussion on the lack of connection between institutional prestige and educational quality.
[13] There are also many prospective students who reside in places where higher education is scarce.
[14] Iloh, C. (2018). Toward a new model of college "choice" for a twenty-first-century context. *Harvard Educational Review*, 88(2), 227-244.
[15] Hartocollis, A. (2016, April 20). Greater competition for college places means higher anxiety, too. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/us/greater-competition-for-college-places-means-higher-anxiety-too.html
[16] Bastedo, M. N., & Jaquette, O. (2011). Running in place: Low-income students and the dynamics of higher education stratification. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(3), 318–339.

can perpetuate a Hunger Games outlook on postsecondary education and unhealthy outcomes.[17,18]

A system of college matchmatching is a provocative possibility for selective college admissions, to disrupt the unnecessary Hunger Games culture. More importantly, it could potentially facilitate the enrollment of more talented prospective college students from low-income and/or racially minoritized backgrounds at selective (and highly resourced) four-year colleges and universities. As research suggests, low-income and students of color can experience college pathways that present barriers to information on the full array of college opportunities, sometimes resulting in their enrollment in postsecondary institutions with less resources.[19,20,21]

College matching is not necessarily a new idea. We can turn to the National Resident Matching Program for one model to explore.

**What can we learn from the National Resident Matching Program?**
In this section, I explore the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), which matches medical school graduates with teaching hospitals seeking to enroll recent medical school graduates for their postgraduate training programs, or residency programs. Through a brief review of research on the NRMP, I draw lessons for how an undergraduate education match system could be designed.

Each year, medical school graduates participate in the NRMP, or "The Match," to be placed in residency (i.e., graduate medical education) programs at teaching hospitals.[22]

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[17] Dhingra (2020).

[18] Bound, J., Hershbein, B., & Long, B. T. (2009). Playing the admissions game: Student reactions to increasing college competition. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 23 (4), 119-146.

[19] Venezia, A., & Jaeger, L. (2013). Transitions from high school to college. *The Future of Children*, 23 (1), 117-136.

[20] McDonough, P. M. (1997). Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity. SUNY Press. Education. DOI: 10.1177/0042085920934854

[21] Engberg, M. E., & Gilbert, A. J. (2014). The counseling opportunity structure: Examining correlates of four-year college-going rates. *Research in Higher Education*, 55, 219-244.

[22] http://www.nrmp.org/the-match-process-video/

In this process, graduating medical school students or recent graduates identify programs of interest to them; and residency programs identify graduates of interest to them based on information they have about prospective residents. The NRMP—an independent organization—notifies both parties of a complimentary match, theoretically producing a strong alignment between both parties' interests and needs. In theory, the process facilitates a match between the institutional priorities of the teaching hospital's program and the educational interests and dispositions of the prospective Resident.

Unlike undergraduate college attendance, graduate medical education program residents are paid stipends and benefits as hospital workers and trainees. Interestingly, The Match process required an act of Congress in 2004 to allow an exception to antitrust laws, because the terms of employment for residents are not negotiable, exempting teaching hospitals from allowing medical school graduates an opportunity to negotiate labor terms or choose from residency options.[23]

Although the process is very different from selective undergraduate admissions systems, there remains some troubling similarities. Gliatto and Karani (2016) pointed out three problems—an information imbalance among students struggling to access accurate and reliable information, the personal financial expense (not eligible for federal financial aid) of participating in required interviews, and the time and pressure felt by fourth year medical students participating in The Match, which can take away from possible coursework and a more meaningful career discernment process. Such inequalities must be addressed and prevented in the design of an undergraduate matchmaking process.

## MATCHMAKING: REVISITING AN OLD IDEA

Although college attendance options are not the same as employment offers, there is still a consumer choice involved in the theoretical market of college

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[23] Weinmeyer, R. (2015). Challenging the medical residency matching system through antitrust litigation. *AMA Journal of Ethics*, 17 (2), 147-151.

options. As such, previous conversations about undergraduate matchmaking have run into questions of antitrust laws.[24] Jon Boeckenstedt, a well-known national leader in enrollment management has suggested having a for-profit entity like Google facilitate a match system.[25] A private facilitation of undergraduate matchmaking would surely confront important antitrust legal questions. However, could an act of Congress create a publicly designed, implemented, and managed match system, improving upon lessons learned from analyses of the Medical Match? Could this hypothetical undergraduate match system innovate and center making robust alignments between student interests and learning dispositions with curriculum offerings, which can't be quickly discerned through institutional brand names? Exploring the legalities surrounding the creation of an undergraduate matchmaking system is outside of the scope of this brief, but should be further examined by education law scholars and enrollment management practitioners.

At minimum, a match process requires a centralized repository of information on prospective college students, like the University and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS) in the UK or even universal participation in The Common App in the US. However, as Boeckenstedt has pointed out, any organization existentially (i.e., financially) beholden to colleges and universities will not have the freedom to lead necessary structural changes and complete organizational overhaul. He has more recently suggested that the federal government could serve the function of a central database for facilitating college matchmaking and enrollment choices.[26] Perhaps the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the US Department of Education, which houses the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), could serve the function of a central database, independent from postsecondary corporations. A public

[24] Selingo, J. (2018, April 27). The best ways to fix college admissions are probably illegal. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/college-admissions-antitrust/559088/
[25] Boeckenstedt, J. (2014, February 20). What if Google ran the college application process. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/02/20/what-if-google-ran-the-college-application-process/
[26] https://twitter.com/JonBoeckenstedt/status/1168886759431606272?s=20

matchmaking structure would be beholden to public interests and oversight, rather than to private profit goals.

# CENTERING STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL INTERESTS THROUGH UNDERGRADUATE MATCHMAKING CLEARINGHOUSE

A new system of college enrollment can center multiple pathways that focus on matching student educational interests and their learning dispositions with places of postsecondary education. It should be designed in a way that is mindful of avoiding the pitfalls of inequalities researchers have identified in the NRMP process. Specifically, the design must disrupt the unhealthy culture of hyper-competition and brand mystique by prioritizing students in the matchmaking process. It should cost nothing for college applicants to participate, beyond their tax dollars[27] that go into funding the proposed publicly managed matchmaking system that should logically be housed within the U.S. Department Education. Because there is an unevenness in information access for prospective college students that can produce an under-matching for talented, low-income and under-represented students of color, the proposed clearinghouse system can also serve as a central location for students and families to learn about college opportunities in multiple languages (discernment stage) in preparation for the matching stage, without institutional brand names muddying the process.

## Educational Discernment Stage
To learn about higher education, prospective students can access information at any time about higher education opportunities through the public central clearinghouse, rather than relying on potentially unreliable information sources, the marketing websites of myriad colleges and universities, or overworked high school counselors. In this centralized public clearinghouse, they can learn about the benefits of college, the various types

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[27] To be clear, undocumented immigrant students should be able to participate in the matchmaking process for free as well, because like their U.S. citizen peers, they and their families contribute toward the tax base.
[28] https://twitter.com/JonBoeckenstedt/status/1168886759431606272?s=20

of postsecondary degrees, access self-assessment tools to reflect on their learning dispositions to understand what kinds of pedagogical approaches might support them best, to identify and articulate their intellectual and vocational interests, and even understand and assess information about differences in racial and social campus climates. Moreover, the clearinghouse could offer tools for students and families to understand the range of expenses, costs, and investments associated with attending different types of institutions, financial aid prospects, and options for financing their education.

Never once would the discernment stage mention college or university brand names. Instead, this stage of matchmaking would focus on self-awareness and supporting student development in becoming clear on what they want and need in pursuing postsecondary education. By the time they decide they're ready to enroll in college or transfer from a two-year college to a four-year institution, students would hypothetically have access to a range of resources for self-discernment and reflection, to better understand what they want in college, and out of a postsecondary educational experience.

## Matching Stage

A year before they want to enroll in postsecondary education, prospective college students, including transfer students, will submit a simple form to the central clearinghouse, with information like their academic, intellectual, artistic, athletic, social and other interests, desired geography, and pedagogical-curricular program interests. Using information about each student's interests and academic records, and on each postsecondary institution, the clearinghouse would produce 5-10 offers for college enrollment per student, centering the student's educational interests. No legacy, donor, faculty/staff benefits, or athletic admission priorities would be included.

Each match would include an institutional financial package offering, like when a home buyer requests mortgage offers from multiple lending institutions, and receives multiple deal proposals from which to compare and choose.[28] In this arrangement, colleges would compete in a market

for students, potentially avoiding antitrust violations which the NRMP Medical Residency Match confronted.[29] The balance of power in the college admissions process would generally be taken away from postsecondary institutions and placed in the trust of a public program with public oversight that would center students' educational interests and a public interest in increasing college participation for all.

# CONCLUSION

As Jon Boeckenstedt stated in 2014:

> now may be the perfect time for dramatic change in college admissions: Shrinking populations of high school graduates; falling family incomes; and less certainty about the value of a college degree. Even colleges are beginning to wonder if the long, hard-fought race for artificial measures of prestige and its trappings have been worth it.[30]

Add all this to a pandemic forcing changes to how things are done and a revolutionary dynamism for racial justice, 2020 may be a more perfect time for radical change to center students' education in the college enrollment process. Young people are rising up in unprecedented numbers today to reject absurd social and structural arrangements that reproduce inhumane inequalities. It's time to reject and rebel against the cultural and structural norms of domination and oppression in the current systems of selective college admissions. Let's reconsider instituting a public matchmaking system, and seriously consider new possibilities in doing away with the status quo.

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[29] Weinmeyer (2015) documented the antitrust concerns in The Match. Whether an arrangement in which postsecondary institutions compete for students, who then have the choice to enroll in one of their competing matched institutions, would pass antitrust law muster is a question for legal experts.
[30] Boeckenstedt (2014).

## Acknowledgements