

Asian storm in Ivy League

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



A BIG CONTROVERSY in US higher education is a lawsuit against Harvard University alleging that it discriminates against Asian-Americans in its admission policy.

The plaintiff is Students for Fair Admissions that is led by a non-Asian. Harvard is only the tip of the iceberg as the claims against it probably apply to most elite US universities. The facts that have emerged are disturbing, the emotions strong, and the issues go to the very essence of what American values are.

Harvard admits students based on five categories: academic, extracurricular activity, athletics, personal, and overall. The plaintiff claims that Harvard gives special advantages to five groups: racial/ethnic minorities, legacies, donor relatives, recruited athletes, and staff children. The personality score is the most controversial, as the plaintiffs claim that Harvard judges Asian-Americans "lower than others on traits like positive personality, likability, courage, kindness,

and being widely respected" – and often without interviewing the applicants.

Harvard denies these claims. These give credence to many news stories about Asians with perfect SAT scores being ejected by Ivy League universities.

Both sides have used as evidence different statistical analysis of years of admission data, including an internal 2013 Harvard report. According to *The Economist*, the report admits that "Asian-Americans rank higher than white applicants in both academic prowess and the quality of their extracurricular activity. Yet their admission rates are much lower."

This claim is supported by figures in the report: for applicants in the top academic deciles, roughly 13 percent of Asian-Americans are admitted, versus 19 percent for whites, 35 percent for Hispanics and 60 percent for blacks. The plaintiff's statistician estimates that "a male, non-poor Asian-American applicant with the qualifications to have a 25 percent chance of admission to Harvard would have a 36 percent chance if he were white. If he were Hispanic, that would be 77 percent; if black, it would rise to 95 percent."

Harvard's statistician uses a different model, which includes the quality of the applicant's high school, parent's occupations, etc, and claims that Asian-Americans are not disadvantaged. As Mark Twain said: "Facts are stubborn things, but statistics are pliable."

What is not pliable is the fact that most Ivy League universities have about 20 percent undergraduates

who are Asian. This percentage has remained stable even as the Asian-American population has ballooned.

In contrast, Caltech (my alma mater), which uses a much more academic-centric admission policy, has 43 percent Asians.

University admission controversies are not new. A hundred years ago, a Harvard president felt that it admitted too many Jews and proposed a quota of 15 percent. When that became controversial, Harvard used a more "holistic" approach of using "character and fitness" to judge applicants.

Plaintiff supporters claim that it is *deja vu*. Harvard supporters claim that the ultimate goal of Edward



Tony Chan next to a statue of Harvard university founder John Harvard.

Blum (the leader of Students for Fair Admissions) is to dismantle affirmative action in the United States.

I have personally experienced other subtle forms of admission management. Women were not admitted to most US universities until

about 1970 – I graduated with the first class of women (four) at Caltech.

California passed Proposition 209 in 1996, which amended the state constitution to prohibit state governmental institutions from considering race, sex or ethnicity, including in public education. The University of California, under tremendous political pressure from minority groups to increase their representation, tried several controversial "holistic" admission systems, but without much success. The running joke is that "UCLA" stands for "University of Caucasians Lost among Asians." UC Irvine is over 50 percent Asian.

The issues are complex and go to the heart of what American values are. Private institutions like Harvard enjoy more autonomy than public ones but are still bounded by the US constitution of equality.

Every society has to decide the right balance between individual rights and public good. I am sympathetic to diversity in education, at least regarding athletic and artistic talent. A campus with such diversity benefits every student. But the criteria should be transparent. I am much less sympathetic regarding legacy (something you can't change) and race (an upper-class minority may not add more "diversity" than a poor Asian). Race is enough of a lightning rod in the US to need another spark in higher education. And "personality" is so insidious and unAmerican.

We have it much simpler in Hong Kong, with just the Diploma of Secondary Education.