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## Book Review: Rethinking College Admissions: Research-Based Practice and Policy

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# Book Review:

## *Rethinking College Admissions: Research-Based Practice and Policy*



Authored by  
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When this book arrived, I could not put it down. And then I started telling my admissions and enrollment colleagues all about it. Let me tell you why this is a must-read for those working in college access, admissions, or enrollment management. Yes, the title might not tell you that this is a book for college access folks, but it is. A skim of the table of contents is very revealing as you see access-related terms such as: repressive legalism, equitable practice, holistic review, potential of lotteries, direct admissions, and advancing equity.

Poon and Bastedo have assembled 22 authors to describe in three parts how to “rethink” college admissions and facilitate a conversation on research, practice, and policy. In the preface, they state the book’s goal is “to present research to generate new ideas and considerations for practice and policy in admissions...” (p. xiii).

I will use a compelling passage from each chapter to introduce you to this stellar read and to demonstrate how access is embedded in each chapter’s message.

### **PART I** **Questioning Current Practices**

#### Chapter 1

*“The law has direct implications for higher education’s capacity to admit and support historically marginalized students on campus”* (p. 18).



Fernandez and Garces introduce the concept of “repressive legalism” and provide three bold questions for each campus to ask themselves as they consider how laws and legal actions are stifling progress on making admission to college more accessible.

#### Chapter 2

*“Although researchers, lawmakers, and education leaders have paid significant attention to making postsecondary education and rigorous courses more accessible for historically marginalized groups, we are a long way from an equitable praxis that will actually begin to dress and ameliorate the historical barriers and resultant gaps”* (p. 37-38).

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There is so much embedded in that one sentence by Rodriguez, Lebioda, Skiles and Bindiganavile. This chapter chronicles inequality among Advanced Placement. The authors presented three key issues that impact equitable admission practices and then offer two primary recommendations.

### Chapter 3

*“Racism and other forms of oppression undoubtedly continue to undermine the ability of racially minoritized students to prepare for and actively pursue their college aspirations” (p. 49-50).*

This chapter offers five recommended practices for improving the college admissions review process. Comeaux introduces the concept of “community cultural wealth framework” that I found compelling.

### Chapter 4

*“As we forge ahead, continued creativity, courage, and innovation are needed to redesign and reimagine admissions structures and processes to ensure that medicine attracts and retains a talented, dynamic, and diverse physician workforce” (p. 66).*

Nakae’s chapter is solely focused on medical school admission. They hone in on the holistic review process for medical schools, offering a historical perspective, current setting and end with future directions about discontinuing use of the MCAT and creating more HBCU medical schools. Despite not having ever worked in medical school admission, I still

found Nakae’s work beneficial and applicable to my work in admissions and college access.

### Chapter 5

*“...Institutions would do well to eradicate standardized testing altogether and to take a deep look into the college application preparation industrial complex and what it does to exacerbate inequality” (p. 80).*

Park provides an overview of the test prep industry, test prep in general, and advocates for a need for change. Admissions is really at a pivotal point in perceptions and realities of the role of standardized testing in decision-making. This chapter is timely and could become a book of its own.

As you have read, Part 1 really set the stage to a variety of current admission practices that are not facilitating positive change in equity nor equality for students historically underrepresented in American higher education.

## **Part II. Considering Different Approaches to the Work in Admissions Offices**

### Chapter 6

*“Equity-minded change requires purpose, attention, and the courage to acknowledge and address the multiple manifestations of racism” (p. 100).*

Posselt and Desir address the elephant in the room (calling it the “uncomfortable truth”) immediately with their first sentence that

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describes admissions as the paradox of exclusion and access. They then discuss and define racialization and equity, which I appreciated. Their chapter concludes with a set of four thought-provoking questions for possible action at the organizational and individual level.

### Chapter 7

*“For the 70 percent of colleges that request criminal history information on their application forms, it is perhaps time to reconsider these practices, with particular attention to how they might conflict with other institutional goals such as diversity, equity and inclusion” (p. 112).*

This chapter is another very specific topic, similar to Chapter 4. For those readers not familiar with the topic of criminal conduct questions embedded in the college admission process, Stewart takes you on a thorough and effective journey.

### Chapter 8

*“By adopting grittier interpretations of leadership, colleges and universities can begin to strengthen ethics in admissions and repair public confidence in higher education” (p. 132).*

Harris’ chapter is all about the ethics of college admission, plain and simple. Of course, I expected a reference to the 2019 Operation Varsity Blues “scandal.” Harris does well in identifying three “ethical hazard practices” that need reform. After reading this chapter, it gave me pause on what I could do to affect that type of change.

### Chapter 9

*“The admissions profession employs many who believe in the power of higher education to transform lives and express deep commitments to values of diversity and equity” (p. 148).*

This chapters’ five authors analyzed interviews with 50 admissions professionals to describe the two barriers to professional development that embraces equity and diversity. Their chapter concludes with offering four recommendations for improving professional development practices.

### Part III.

#### Considering New Models for Admissions Practice and Research

### Chapter 10

*“Proponents of lotteries for the purposes of increasing diversity may take pause at the findings” (p. 155).*

This short chapter Baker, Bastedo and Addison describes the past practices and thinking related to admission lotteries. The authors provide a historical overview, share one of the newest studies on admission lotteries and conclude with implications for policymakers and practitioners. Having not been familiar with lotteries, I found this chapter fascinating.

### Chapter 11

*“College access in the United States is best characterized as an ‘unequal opportunity,’ where wide gaps in college enrollment and attainment by income, race, and geography have persisted for as much of the twenty-first century” (p. 165).*

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Delaney and Odle's chapter is 100% about direct admissions, known as "DA." They introduce the seven core principles of DA and then highlight this work in action in Idaho, South Dakota and the Common App HBCU Pilot. The chapter is also rich in the various impacts of direct admission. I also learned much from this chapter.

### Chapter 12

*"The college students we are educating today are more diverse than ever before" (p. 203).*

Slay and Glasener dedicate their entire chapter to examples of "institutional promise programs" with most attention to the University of Michigan's HAIL Scholars. This chapter is about a longitudinal study with focus groups that was conducted. Chapter 12 was the last chapter that introduced new content.

### Chapter 13

*"We have offered three ideas for building bridges and partnerships between practitioners and researchers, to bring critical and collaborative systemic analysis to bear on practice and offer new systemic innovations for equity" (p. 224).*

This chapter took a unique approach by sharing excerpts of a transcript from a recorded conversation among the three authors. While some may feel this chapter was like watching a television talk show conversation, it really dives deep into the intersection among practice, research and policy. The most important part of this chapter was their three suggestions for

continuing the conversation and taking action.

### Concluding Thoughts

The entire book is a shorter read than you might think. While it appears to be nearly 300 pages, 50 of those pages are the citations, which I found myself consulting frequently as I read chapter after chapter. The bios of the authors and editors were also incredibly helpful as I worked to understand the context of where this work and opinions rested for them.

My only criticism of the book does not have to do with its content, but the title. Given the equity-focus and mindset and a commitment to access among the various chapters, the title of the book should have included "equity" and "access" to further attract readers. The college admissions field cannot accomplish their recommendations and changes in practice alone – they will need the support of advocates of access and equity.

After reading this book, it gave me another reason to think critically about college admissions, specifically related to access and equity. I promise it will do the same for you. After you read this review, I know you will pick up the book, read it and then you will join me in this quest to "rethink college admissions." Let's get going! We've got work to do! 