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The Chancellor of Rutgers on Admissions and the Meritocracy

The growing diversity of today's educational cohort prompts the question, "Whose talents do we as a nation need to cultivate?"

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF JUL 1, 2016 **IDEAS 2016**

Asked what ought to be subject to wider or more rigorous debate, Nancy Cantor, the Chancellor of Rutgers University, suggested a focus on the idea of meritocracy.

She wrote:

One of the pivotal questions of our time that merits debating is merit itself. In the context of higher education, this translates into questions such as: Who merits admission? Whose talents do we as a nation need to cultivate?



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Crucial in this debate would be addressing the perfect storm of conditions that constrict the pathways to educational opportunity for large and growing swaths of our nation. According to recent reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, one of those conditions is that socioeconomic class is stickier in the U.S. across generations than in just about any other economically prosperous nation.

Another is that prosperity in America is highly correlated with race. Still another is that we are experiencing what Brookings Institution's demographer Bill Frey calls a "diversity explosion;" already, the referents for the term "minority" are in the process of being flipped, as white children are no longer in the majority in early childhood education nationally.

If leaving the growing majority of our nation's talent pool on the side-lines of education in a knowledge economy were not enough of a recipe for catastrophe, we also are finally coming to the realization—based on mountains of good social science—that the measures of merit that colleges and universities have been using for decades to determine who gets in were never that good in the first place. The College Board's own validity studies show that even when you combine SAT scores and high school GPA, you don't have a very good chance of predicting which students will do well in their first year of college—and those correlations are worse for the very groups that are becoming our new majority.

We are long overdue for a clear-eyed debate about what we need to do to improve our ability to find and to cultivate talent broadly and equitably in the increasingly diverse generations that already are growing up.

We in higher education need to be prepared to answer a whole set of questions that will cascade out of this discussion: What does all of this say about the culture of ranking colleges according to how few students we admit? Who merits being labelled as an excellent prospect for educational attainment, especially as it leads to personal advancement and collective prosperity? Whose knowledge and experience of American life do we need at the table for higher education to remain a legitimate public good? And how do we put our minds to the task of welcoming that talent into what has grown over generations into a rather selective club? Can we recapture the moniker of a "land of opportunity"?

Cantor is a speaker this year at the Aspen Ideas Festival, co-hosted by the Aspen Institute and *The Atlantic*.

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