

Application Essays and the Performance of Merit in US Selective Admissions

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The role **SAT scores** and **high school preparation** in college admissions has received significant attention.

Essay requirements lack a sufficient social science research literature.

Our lab is taking up this work.

How is social class related to essay content?

Data

State U - A large multi-campus, public university system

Significant metadata - but with some limitations

55,016 applications - US applicants in 2017 with reported household income

4 essays per applicant - prompts selected out of eight possible choices

220,062 individual essays - written by applicants in this sample

Data: Personal insight questions

1. Leadership experience	Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. Creative side	Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
3. Talent or skill	What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Educational barrier or opportunity	Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
5. Significant challenge	Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
6. Academic inspiration	Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
7. School & community service	What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
8. Why I stand out	Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to <i>State U</i> ?

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Analysis 1: Within-prompt variation

5. Significant Challenge (34,328 applicant essays):

“Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?”

Read and coded 3,519 individual essays

Analysis 1: Significant challenge responses

*“The most significant challenge I have faced was **being to shy** to [sic] ask for help in school.”*

*“**Women belong in the kitchen**’ is one of the most stereotypical phrases heard when people speak about a woman’s place in the world.”*

*“When I came to the United States I was fifteen years old, **the most significant challenge I faced was not knowing English.**”*

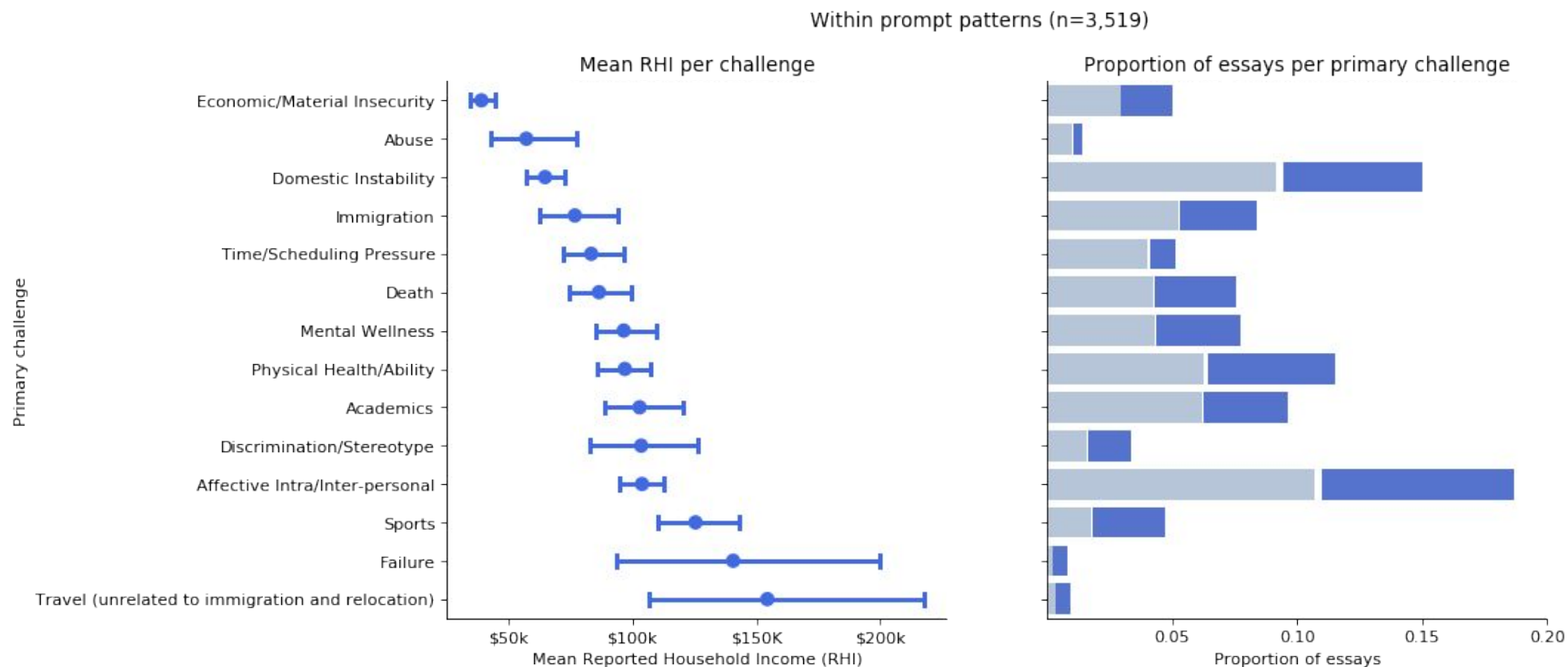
*“Not knowing if you will live to see the next day can be hard. **During the years of my depression,** I woke up everyday wondering just that.”*

*“**Whoosh**’ was the sound of the wind as I had kicked the soccer ball to win the game, but it **unfortunately went straight to the goalkeeper’s hands.** My confident world came tumbling down as if it had never existed.”*

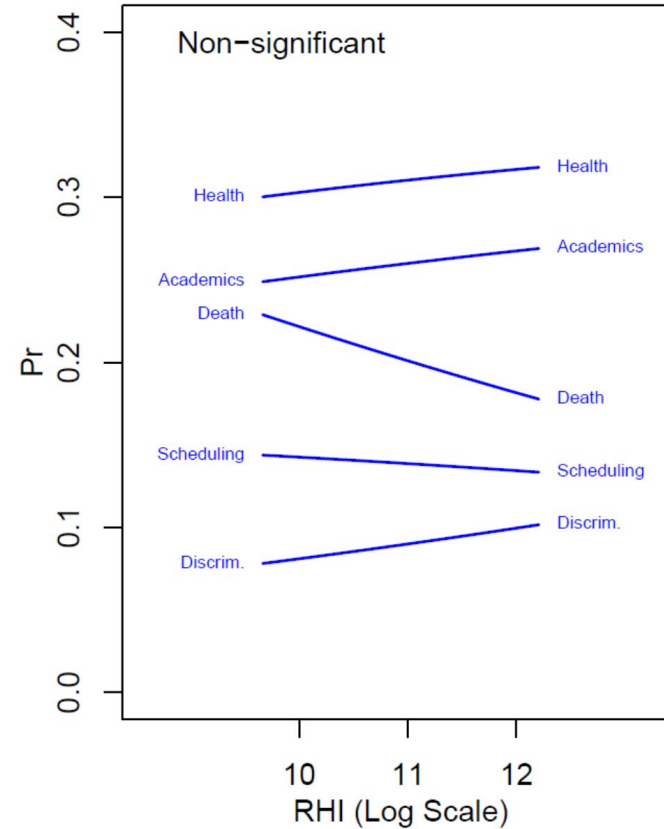
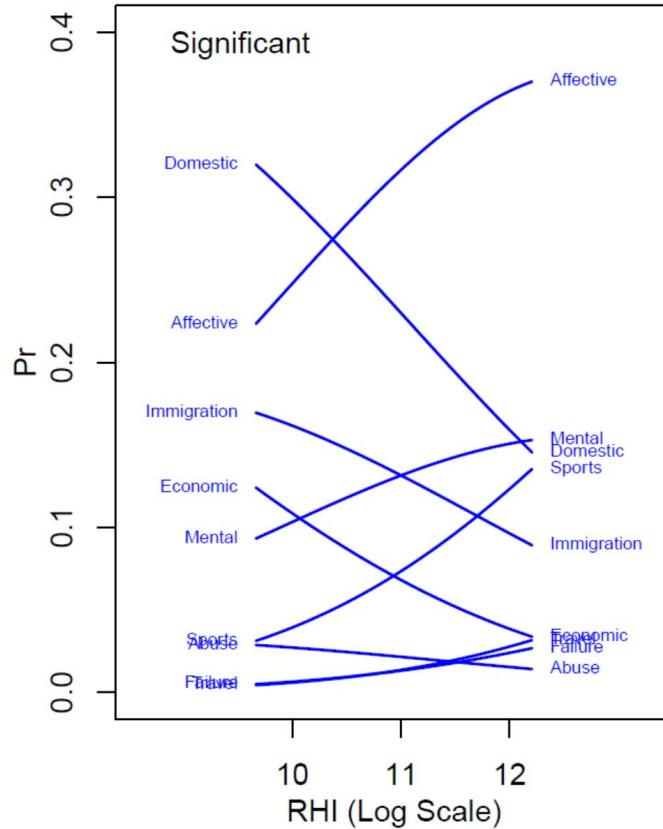
Analysis 1: Significant challenge codes

	Time/Scheduling Pressures	Physical Health/Ability	
Academics	Domestic Instability	Affective Intra/Inter-personal	Mental Wellness
Death	Failure	Sports	Immigration
Abuse	Economic/Material Insecurity	Travel (unrelated to immigration/relocation)	Discrimination/ Stereotype

Analysis 1: Significant challenge and income (n=3,519)



Analysis: Significant challenge and income (n=3,519)

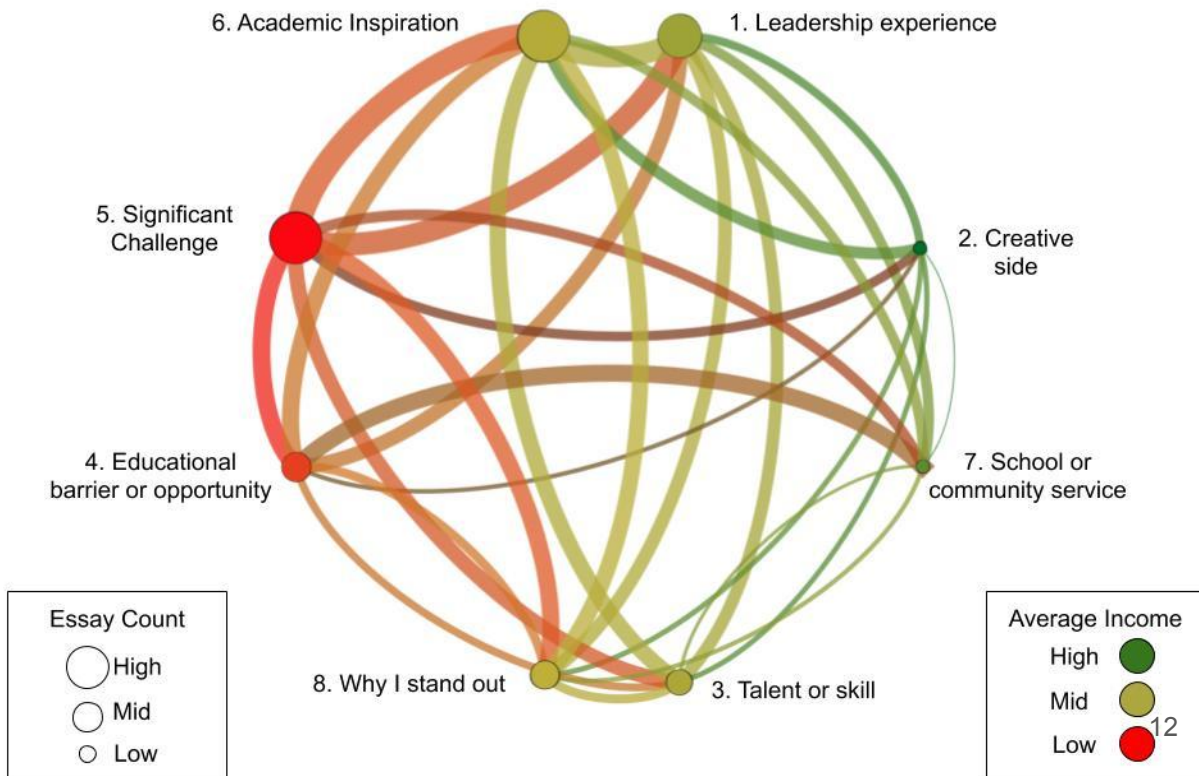


Analysis 2: Prompt choice patterns (55,016 applicants & 220,062 essays)

Prompt Selection Network Graph

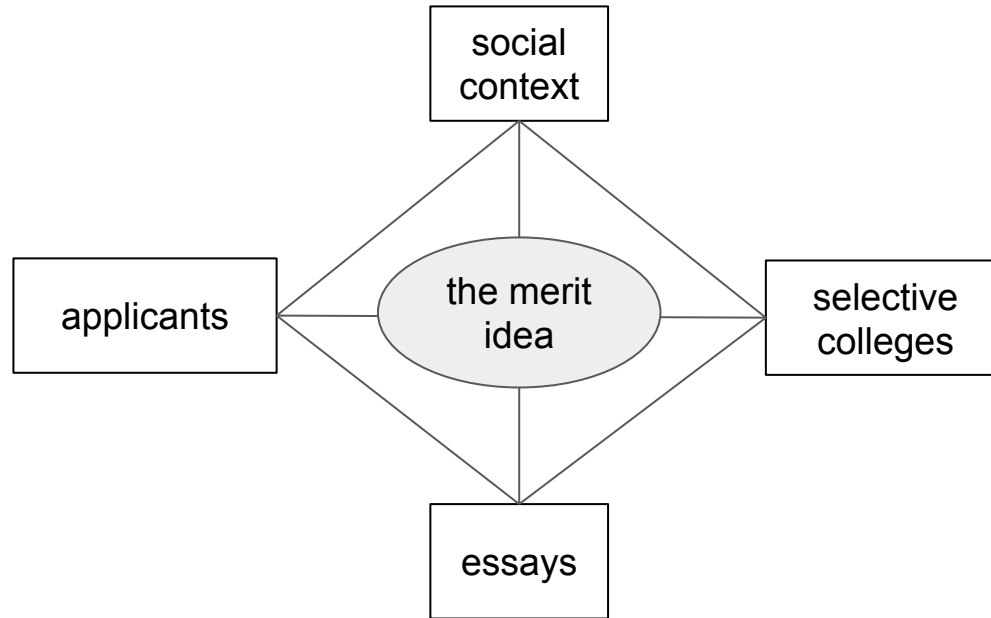
(220,062 essays from 55,016 applications)

- **Hardship narratives**
- Earnest hard work
- Abstract citizenship



Sustaining the *merit idea*

Theory: The Performative Production of Merit



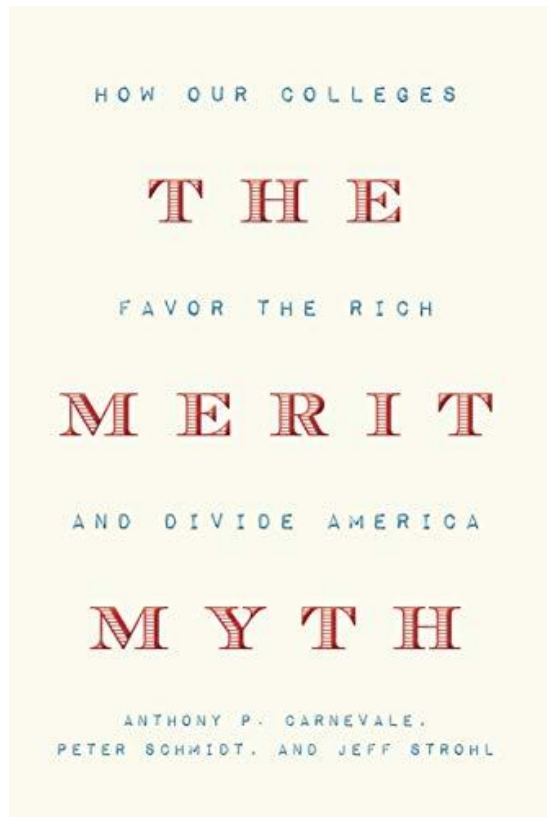
(Griswold 1987; cf McKenzie 2006)

Conclusion

Merit is *an idea* whose legitimacy needs to be sustained.

Whatever their evaluative function, essays serve an important ceremonial function, legitimating the idea of merit as broad and complex -- and, in fact, requiring human reading. *At least for now...*

We suspect growing social-science scrutiny of application essays as controversy over the meaning and measurement of merit grows.



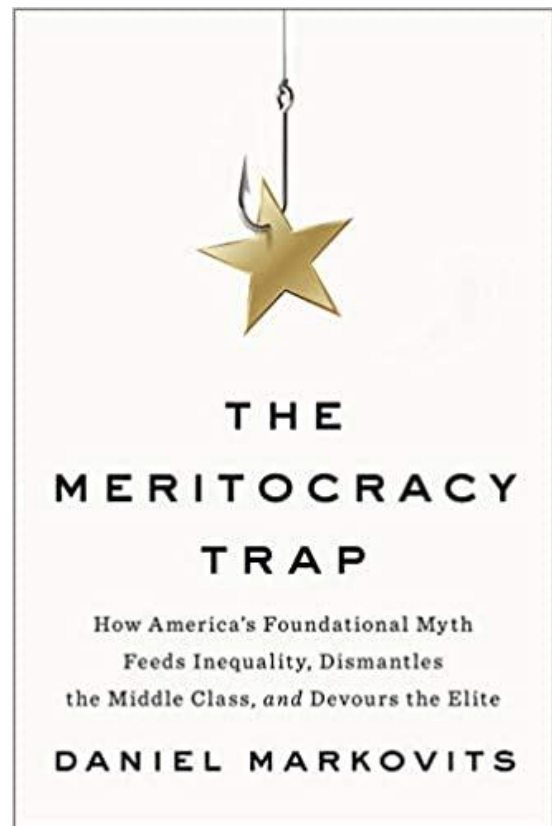
THE
TYRANNY
OF THE
MERITOCRACY

DEMOCRATIZING
HIGHER EDUCATION
IN AMERICA



LANI
GUINIER

Author of *THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY*
and *THE MINER'S CANARY*



But what *is* merit?