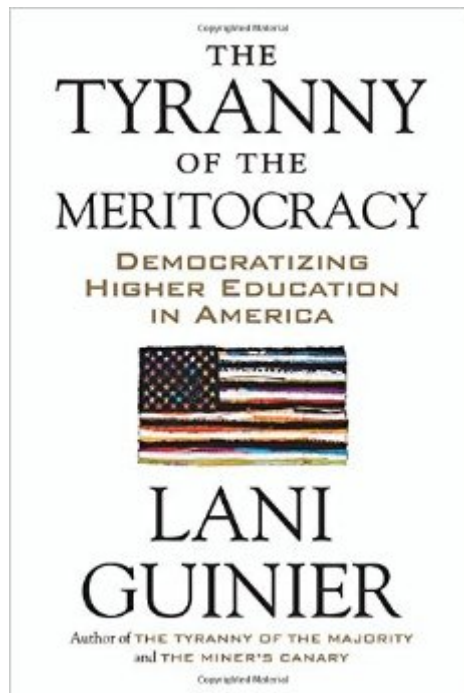


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The Tyranny Of The Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education In America



Synopsis

A fresh and bold argument for revamping our standards of merit and a clear blueprint for creating collaborative education models that strengthen our democracy rather than privileging individual elites. Standing on the foundations of America's promise of equal opportunity, our universities purport to serve as engines of social mobility and practitioners of democracy. But as acclaimed scholar and pioneering civil rights advocate Lani Guinier argues, the merit systems that dictate the admissions practices of these institutions are functioning to select and privilege elite individuals rather than create learning communities geared to advance democratic societies. Having studied and taught at schools such as Harvard University, Yale Law School, and the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Guinier has spent years examining the experiences of ethnic minorities and of women at the nation's top institutions of higher education, and here she lays bare the practices that impede the stated missions of these schools. Goaded on by a contemporary culture that establishes value through ranking and sorting, universities assess applicants using the vocabulary of private, highly individualized merit. As a result of private merit standards and ever-increasing tuitions, our colleges and universities increasingly are failing in their mission to provide educational opportunity and to prepare students for productive and engaged citizenship. To reclaim higher education as a cornerstone of democracy, Guinier argues that institutions of higher learning must focus on admitting and educating a class of students who will be critical thinkers, active citizens, and publicly spirited leaders. Guinier presents a plan for considering democratic merit, a system that measures the success of higher education not by the personal qualities of the students who enter but by the work and service performed by the graduates who leave. Guinier goes on to offer vivid examples of communities that have developed effective learning strategies based not on an individual's merit but on the collaborative strength of a group, learning and working together, supporting members, and evolving into powerful collectives. Examples are taken from across the country and include a wide range of approaches, each innovative and effective. Guinier argues for reformation, not only of the very premises of admissions practices but of the shape of higher education itself.

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Customer Reviews

The Tyranny of the Meritocracy is written by Lani Guinier, professor of law at Harvard University. She has written a persuasive argument against the prevalence of high-stakes testing (particularly the SAT) as the primary way of evaluating and predicting student achievement. Her argument, however, is not only against the inaccuracy of the testing process but of the very purpose of education in general and colleges in particular. Instead of merely a means of accessing more powerful and lucrative employment, Guinier focuses on the function of education as a means of creating thinking, participatory citizens who work collaboratively with others and leave school prepared (and willing) to contribute to society and to become leaders. I found the first part of the book the most interesting. Guinier demonstrates how the current "meritocracy" (or, as she also calls it, "testocracy") replicates current socio-economic status and create individualists who compete with others at the expense of public policy and a healthy society. Students who score well on the SATs are usually those who have been taught how to take a test successfully, not necessarily those who think most creatively or effectively and certainly not those who consider the welfare of others, or the group as a whole. By focusing intensively on test success, we create a society of takers rather than givers. We also exclude most of the society from access to institutions that, Guinier argues, should function as shapers of society not merely gateways to (a narrowly defined) success.

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