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Medical Schools Bail on Academic Merit and Intellectual Rigor

Some refuse to be ranked by U.S. News, which weighs test scores and grades rather than diversity.

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To see how the diversity, equity and inclusion mania is colliding with meritocracy in American higher education, pay attention to the flap over graduate schools pulling out of the U.S. News rankings. Readers who aren't applying to medical school may have missed the controversy. But anyone who plans on seeing a doctor or benefiting from research or treatment at an academic medical center has an interest in the outcome.

So far, U.S. News has resisted demands from the graduate schools to base the rankings on equity rather than on the grades and test scores of incoming students. U.S. News has been transparent about the method it uses for its rankings, including factors such as a reputation survey, MCAT scores and grade point averages of incoming students.

The medical schools have been similarly clear about why they disagree with the U.S. News method and will stop participating. The Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, in a Jan. 24 statement, said the U.S. News rankings undermine the school's "commitment to anti-racism" and "outreach to diverse communities."

"Diversity, equity and inclusion are important factors in our decision," the school's deans, Dennis Charney and David Muller, said. "We believe that the quality of medical students and future physicians is reflected in their lived experiences, intersecting identities, research accomplishments, commitment to social and racial justice, and a set of core values that are aligned with those of our school."

The statement went on, "The U.S. News rankings reduce us to a number that does not do justice to these profoundly important attributes, instead perpetuating a narrow focus on

achievement that is linked to reputation and is driven by legacy and privilege.”

The dean of Stanford Medical School, Lloyd Minor, made a similar claim, announcing that instead of participating in the U.S. News rankings, the school would start issuing its own data “emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

A Jan. 24 statement from the dean of the medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, J. Larry Jameson, complained that the U.S. News rankings “measure the wrong things” and “encourage the acceptance of students based upon the highest grades and test scores.” He then went on to say that “the Perelman School of Medicine aims to serve the needs of a changing world, including diverse communities and stakeholders.”

The dean of the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University, Katrina Armstrong, explained her medical school’s decision to pull out of the rankings, saying that the “focus on standardized test scores comes at a time when it is widely understood that prioritizing these scores rewards well-resourced applicants without regard for selecting the individuals who can best serve the future needs of a diverse and changing world.”

The context of this is a Supreme Court majority that appears skeptical of the claim that test scores and grades may be downplayed in admissions in the name of diversity without unlawfully discriminating against Asian-Americans, who tend to do better on the tests.

U.S. News already does provide a list ranking universities that have the most racial and ethnic diversity among students. The medical school deans and the activists pushing them, however, apparently won’t be satisfied until test scores and grades are totally eliminated from the rankings, replaced by a commitment to anti-racism and diversity, equity and inclusion, which are less easily quantified.

When colleges started making the SAT optional, some of us shrugged and said, well, that’s fine, so long as they don’t eliminate the tests for would-be brain surgeons. Now the battle lines have shifted in the meritocracy wars so that it’s precisely would-be brain surgeons whose test scores the medical schools want to conceal.

The businessmen for whom these medical schools are named—Carl Icahn, Raymond Perelman, P. Roy Vagelos—could never have amassed the fortunes they did if they ran their companies based on vague diversity commitments rather than quantifiable financial results.

Not everyone wants to be ranked: Producers of Hollywood bombs sometimes decide not to hold press screenings. Book publishers have declined to provide early review copies. Chefs

have withdrawn from the Michelin guide for restaurants.

But the U.S. News fight goes beyond that. It exemplifies a debate about the definition of excellence. Is the measure of quality doing better in school and on tests? Or is it having the correct representation of skin color, suitably impoverished background and ideological commitment?

Sure, being a good doctor is more complicated than a test score. Softer skills, such as empathy, listening and relationship-building, matter. But advances in health and high-quality care also depend on measurable intellectual rigor. If that is abandoned in favor of trendy ideological conformity, the consequences for higher education, for patients and for the nation could be deadly.

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A graduate student at the Perelman School of Medicine in Philadelphia, Dec. 16, 2021.

PHOTO: HANNAH BEIER/REUTERS

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