**HED: Affirmative Action for the Wealthy? Inside the Growing Movement Against Legacy Admissions**

**SEO/SOCIAL HED:** The Rise of the Anti-Legacy Admissions Movement

**DEK:** After California banned legacy admissions, activists tell *Teen Vogue* other states and universities may follow.

By Elliott Hyon / *Teen Vogue*

WASHINGTON — When the Supreme Court [ended](https://www.teenvogue.com/story/supreme-court-ends-race-conscious-affirmative-action) race-conscious college admissions, Jonathan Lam was at a bridge program for students of underrepresented backgrounds at Cornell University.

The groundbreaking decision came at a stark contrast to the program, which was designed to help first-generation students and students of color transition into the highly selective Ivy League university. Devastated by the impact of this decision, Lam began to mobilize with other student activists against the practice of legacy admissions.

Legacy preferences describe the boost to a prospective student’s chances of admission if they are related to an alumnus, often a parent or grandparent. The origin of legacy admissions stems from an antisemitic backlash to [rising Jewish enrollment within elite higher education institutions in the 1920s](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/legacy-admissions-college-anti-semitism-united-states). Advocacy groups have [criticized the exclusionary practice](https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/how-ending-legacy-admissions-can-help-achieve-greater-education-equity) for favoring white and wealthy students over students of color and first-generation students. A [recent study](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CollegeAdmissions_Paper.pdf) found that legacy students are far more likely to come from families in the 1% and five times more likely to be admitted to elite, highly selective universities than a comparable non-legacy applicant with similar test scores.

Yet the practice never fell under scrutiny until the Supreme Court decision to ban the use of race in college admissions. Many universities have since [reported](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2024/09/06/early-look-racial-diversity-post-affirmative-action) a decline in the racial diversity of their incoming classes.

Steve Stemler, a professor of education and psychology at Wesleyan University, describes this backlash as inevitable. “If legacy status, which is more or less a proxy to race, is a factor that you’re able to count, but race is not, people will start to say there’s a logical inconsistency here,” Stemler says.

Most of the American public is skeptical that legacy status should continue to exist within college admissions. A [2022 Pew Research Center survey](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/26/u-s-public-continues-to-view-grades-test-scores-as-top-factors-in-college-admissions/) found that nearly 75% of Americans believe that legacy status should not be a factor in college admissions. Ending legacy preferences in college admissions also [has](https://www.npr.org/2023/12/27/1218285566/this-bipartisan-senate-duo-wants-to-end-legacy-college-admissions) bipartisan support.

“There’s a strong consensus from every political point of view. It doesn’t make much sense to have legacy admissions in 2024,” Stemler tells *Teen Vogue*.

While some [university](https://www.cga.ct.gov/2022/HEDdata/Tmy/2022HB-05034-R000217-Quinlan%2C%20Jeremiah%2C%20Dean%20of%20Admissions-Yale%20University-TMY.PDF) [administrators](https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2022/03/duke-university-academic-council-centennial-2024-legacy-admissions-early-decision-russia-ukraine-sciences-humanities#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe're%20an%20institution%20that,a%20consideration%2C%20is%20troublesome.%E2%80%9D) have defended the use of legacy admissions, other higher education institutions ended the practice following the Supreme Court decision. Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, formally [ended](https://roth.blogs.wesleyan.edu/2023/07/19/wesleyan-university-to-end-legacy-admission/) the practice and wrote, “an applicant’s connection to a Wesleyan graduate indicates little about that applicant’s ability to succeed at the University.”

For its part, Johns Hopkins University reported an increase in first-generation, low-income students after it eliminated legacy admissions. “Since 2013, the percentage of students in our incoming classes who have a family connection has decreased from 8.5% to 1.7%. During the same period, the percentage of first-generation or limited-income students rose from 16.7% to 30.8%,” Ronald Daniels, the university’s president, [said on LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ron-daniels-johns-hopkins_why-we-ended-legacy-admissions-at-johns-hopkins-activity-7085725561028780032-fnXP).

Earlier this year, Daniels also [co-authored an op-ed](https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/09/25/ending-legacy-admissions-key-repairing-trust-opinion) with Tom Stritikus, the president of Occidental College, where the two urged other universities to eliminate the practice. They argued that ending legacy admissions will expand opportunities for all students, a move they say is increasingly urgent in the wake of affirmative action’s demise.

“Our institutions both ended legacy preferences as a first step to remediating these glaring inequities and repairing rapidly crumbling levels of trust,” the two wrote. “Others should not simply wait for the government to take the initiative, especially when an overwhelming majority of state legislatures have not acted on the issue and federal efforts have languished time and again.”

Motivated by the Supreme Court ban on race-conscious admissions, the Lawyers for Civil Rights along with other advocacy groups [filed](https://lawyersforcivilrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Federal-Civil-Rights-Complaint-Against-Harvard.pdf) a Title VI complaint against Harvard University for its use of legacy admissions. They argue that since nearly 70% of legacy and donor applicants are white, the practice discriminates against students of color, and last year, the Education Department also [opened](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/harvards-legacy-admissions-federal-investigation-civil-rights-concerns-rcna96265) a civil rights investigation into this claim.

“We’ve been in ongoing contact with the federal government since so we know that they are actively investigating the matter. No conclusion has been reached to date, however,” says Oren Sellstrom, litigation director of the Lawyers for Civil Rights.

As universities and legal groups litigate the future of the practice, some state legislatures have taken direct action. California recently [became](https://www.gov.ca.gov/2024/09/30/california-bans-legacy-and-donor-preferences-in-admissions-at-private-nonprofit-universities/) the second state after Maryland to pass legislation banning legacy preferences at both private and public universities. Advocates of the bill are excited about the implications of the bill for underrepresented students applying to college.

Valerie Johnson, the legislative affairs manager at the Campaign for College Opportunity, says, “Our young population is hugely diverse. When they’re able to go to college, they don’t just represent themselves. This bill is opening doors for them, for their families, for their communities, and that’s something I’m personally excited about as an impact of our work.”

California’s groundbreaking decision may signal a growing movement by state legislatures and institutions to ban the practice of legacy admissions. [Stanford University](https://law.stanford.edu/2024/10/02/stanfords-rick-banks-on-californias-college-legacy-admissions-ban/#:~:text=Approximately%2014%20percent%20of%20Stanford's,said%20in%20a%20press%20release.) and [University of Southern California](https://admission.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/first-year-student-profile.pdf) are two highly selective universities that will be affected by the new law decision. Roughly 14% of their student body are legacy students, according to the [latest](https://law.stanford.edu/2024/10/02/stanfords-rick-banks-on-californias-college-legacy-admissions-ban/#:~:text=Approximately%2014%20percent%20of%20Stanford's,said%20in%20a%20press%20release.) [available](https://admission.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/first-year-student-profile.pdf) data.

“The California legislation is certainly one more step in the right direction, which frankly the trend line has been clear for several years now and particularly since the Supreme Court's affirmative action decision, where more and more institutions voluntarily recognized that donor and legacy preferences are unfair and undeserved,” Sellstrom says.

Legislators in other states are hopeful that California’s decision will galvanize the movement against legacy preferences. New York State Senator Andrew Gounardes, a Democrat and sponsor of a bill that would end legacy admissions in the state, says, “New York has by our account the greatest number of exclusionary college admissions practices. Seeing California take this step is helpful to our cause.”

The bill has been introduced several times before in Albany, but the end of race as a factor in college admissions has reanimated its urgency. The New York Civil Liberty Union has been in talks with the Campaign for College Opportunity in the hopes of replicating their legislative success. Jake Martinez, deputy director of the Education Policy Center at NYCLU, said public outrage is growing as the consequences of affirmative action’s demise become clear.

“People are outraged by this, and they want to do something about it, and the way to do that is to eliminate these unfair practices like legacy admissions, which are counterproductive to ensuring we have these diverse classes,” Martinez tells *Teen Vogue*.

At Cornell University, Jonathan Lam is organizing with NYCLU through the student chapter and advocating for the Fair College Admissions bill by educating other students and lobbying legislators. “What’s made this bill very different in comparison to a lot of other state legislation is our bill has a penalty. If schools continue to use legacy admissions, a certain percentage of their finances would go into the TAP program, which is a tuition assistance program that would mostly help low-income students be able to attend college,” Lam says.

For Lam, the movement to end legacy admissions is personal. The son of Vietnamese refugees, he emphasizes the ways in which the Southeast Asian community is harmed by exclusionary practices within the college admissions process. “Institutions like MIT and Cornell are seeing how the end of affirmative action has impacted their demographics. I think personally that’s why I feel very connected to this, especially coming from the Southeast Asian American community. A lot of people in our community have not been able to attend college,” he says.

He is optimistic that the bill will reverse the decline in racial and socioeconomic diversity if it becomes law. Beyond the preliminary step of ending legacy admissions, Lam says he’s excited about the growing conversation to increase accessibility for higher education.

Lam recalls not having access to SAT and ACT test preparation and private college counseling, which made it more difficult for him to understand the university process. While many universities did [suspend their standardized testing requirements](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2023/03/02/sat-act-test-optional-policies-covid-become-permanent/11385454002/) during the pandemic, some have since reversed this policy.

Other experts are also hopeful about the future of college admissions and more comprehensive methods of assessment. Stemler, who focuses on assessment in college admissions in his research, explains that traditional admission tests have historically favored students with the resources to prepare for them and that university admissions should use other metrics to measure their potential for success.

“When you measure broader things such as creativity and practical intelligence, you reduce the differences in achievement that you see on traditional tests,” he says.

Lam hopes that his own community will become more visible in the greater conversation on inequity. “The most frustrating part is when people are just viewing me as a woke Asian student advocating against legacy admissions when there’s a bigger picture and a bigger community that I’m part of that is not part of this higher education process,” he says.

Whether those efforts will pay off remains to be seen in Albany, but he is hopeful.

“In the last legislative cycle, there were a lot of talking points that I feel like weren’t developed,” Lam says. “Once we bring the facts to the table and have these conversations, I believe there will hopefully be a different outcome this next time around.”

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