

**COLLEGE
ADMISSIONS
FUTURES**
CO-LABORATIVE

POLICY BRIEF

INEQUALITY IN COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

**HOW RACE AND CLASS SHAPE
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY REPORTING**

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Executive Summary

In an analysis of 6 million college applications,¹ White, Asian American, more affluent, and private school students listed more activities, top-level leadership positions, and activities with awards/honors. While Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students listed fewer activities overall, they reported leadership positions at a similar rate as peers of other backgrounds. Recommendations include **reducing the number of activities that students list on applications**, as well as **training for admissions staff on how inequality affects extracurricular participation**.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. To learn more about our work and read the full paper, go to www.cafcolab.org

About the Authors

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The College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative (CAF Co-Lab) is a multi-institutional partnership of faculty, researchers, and scholar-practitioners. Our research seeks to identify ways in which institutions and college admissions can be designed to advance equity. For more information and updates on research, see www.cafcolab.org

Suggested citation: Breen, S., Park, J.J., & Kim, B.H. (2023). Inequality in college applications: *How race and class shape extracurricular reporting*. College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative. Accessible at www.cafcolab.org



¹ Park, J.J., Kim, B.H., Wong, N., Zheng, J., Breen, S., Lo, P., Baker, D.J., Rosinger, K.O., Nguyen, M.H., & Poon, O.A. (2023). Inequality beyond standardized tests: Trends in extracurricular activity reporting in college applications across race and class. (EdWorkingPaper: 23-749). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/jkcy-x822>



Why Study Inequality in Extracurricular Activities?

With many colleges and universities turning to test-optional or test-free policies, non-standardized portions of the application, like extracurricular activities, may play a more prominent role in selective college admissions. However, access to and engagement in extracurricular activities varies by race and class. Many extracurricular activities are “pay to play,” and fees for lessons, equipment, and coaching are often expensive. Other barriers include the need to work, historical exclusion² from activities, and transportation needs. Athletics has been found to be particularly important in elite college admissions; however, recruited athletes are disproportionately White and affluent at many institutions,³ raising concerns for equity.

While these problematic phenomena are well-known, we know little about whether they result in meaningful disparities in extracurricular reporting for college applications. Previous studies were limited in their ability to capture trends at a national scale due to a lack of applicant data, as well as the tools to analyze large amounts of non-standardized data. As institutions are rethinking admissions in the wake of COVID-19, more insight on how extracurricular activity reporting is related to race and class is needed.

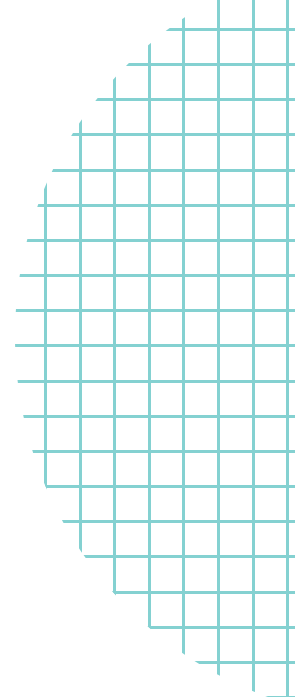
The Study and Data

We asked: How do extracurricular activities, leadership positions, and excellence/honors/awards reported by college applicants vary by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and school type?

By employing natural language processing techniques, we analyzed the activity descriptions in approximately 6 million applications submitted through the Common Application portal during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 cycles, our full paper and findings can be accessed at www.cafcolab.org. Students could report up to 10 activities, associated positions, and honors/awards, as well as timing/intensity of involvement (hours per week, weeks per year).



² Martin, R. (May 6, 2008). Racial history of American swimming pools. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2008/05/06/90213675/racial-history-of-american-swimming-pools>
³ Hextrum, K. (2021). Special admission: How college sports recruitment favors white suburban athletes. Rutgers University Press.



We were interested in the number and type of activities reported by students, as well as how students described their involvement. We created two constructs to capture how students described their involvement:

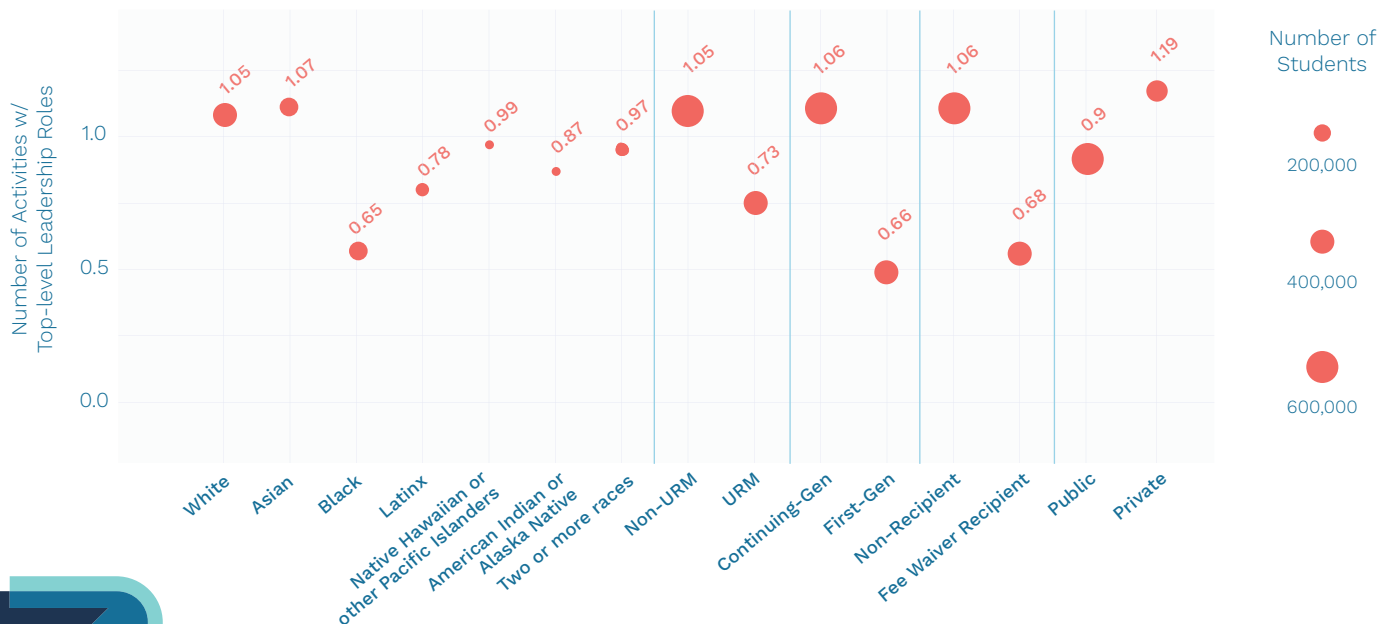
- **Top-Level Leadership:** Whether the applicant reported holding a position or title reflecting the highest level of leadership or responsibility for a given activity, e.g., president, CEO, chairwoman
- **Excellence/Honors:** Whether the applicant reported holding any position or receiving any award/honor/distinction indicating a noteworthy level of skill or accomplishment for a given activity, e.g., MVP, 1st place, all-county

Key Insights and Findings

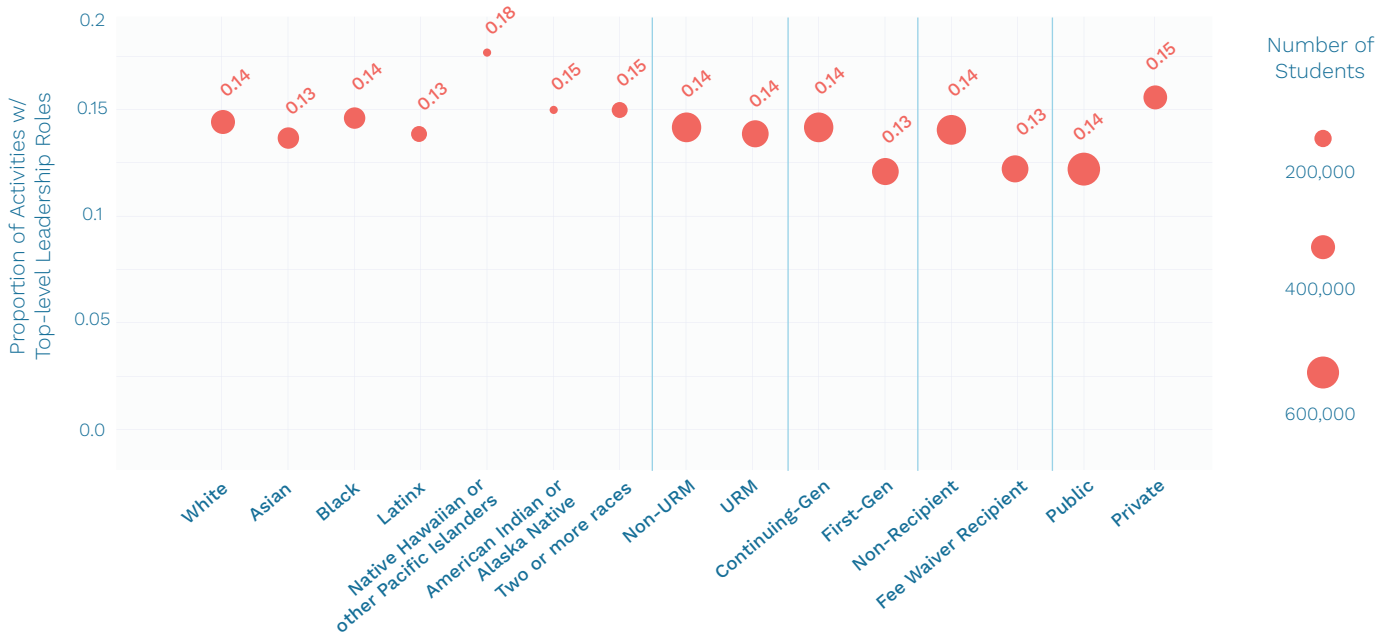
Disparities existed both in the number of activities reported and how students described accomplishments. Overall we found:

- White, Asian American, higher SES, and private school applicants reported more activities, activities with top-level leadership roles, and activities with honors/awards.

Average Number of Activities with Top-level Leadership Roles Reported



Average Proportion of Reported Activities with Top-level Leadership Roles



- However, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and lower SES students engaged in top-level leadership roles at a similar rate as White, Asian American, and high SES peers. In other words, they held a similar proportion (or percentage) of leadership roles as their peers. Similar trends exist for honors/awards.
- Disparities are driven by the higher raw number of activities reported by White, Asian American, and higher SES students, which is likely influenced by greater access to resources and finances.
- Black, Latinx, and Indigenous applicants were more likely to indicate leadership in culture and identity activities.
- Prominent disparities exist in athletics, which are often prioritized at elite institutions.
- Many disparities shrunk when we took high school context and standardized test performance into account. Still, notable disparities persisted related to race and SES, even when comparing students within the same high school, as well as for students who received high scores on the SAT-ACT.





What's Next?

Extracurricular activities (and how students report them) are certainly influenced by inequality. Still, we do not think our work merits ending extracurricular reporting, nor is it a call to return to standardized tests. Extracurricular activities may still yield helpful insights on applicants as part of the holistic review process, and students may feel that they have more agency in shaping this part of the application. Additional dialogue on how extracurricular activities should be weighed is needed, which can inform potential changes. In the meantime, we recommend several measures:

- For institutions and application platforms, reduce the number of activities that students can report on their college applications (e.g., from 8-10 to around 4-5). This change could have multiple benefits, including alleviating stress for students, encouraging quality over quantity, and mitigating the influence of disparities in extracurricular access.
- Until the aforementioned change can be made, consider that the proportion of activities for which students list leadership roles and honors may be a more equitable metric than the raw number.
- Provide ongoing training to admissions staff on how race, class, inequality, and opportunity shapes extracurricular engagement and reporting. Urge staff to fully recognize the context of student opportunity in assessing reported accomplishments, as well as structural barriers that impede participation for many students.



- Discourage admissions staff from over-emphasizing extracurricular activities, given that weighing extracurricular involvement heavily has been linked with lower enrollment of Pell Grant-eligible students in [prior research](#).
- Help admissions professionals recognize the value of student engagement apart from traditional status-oriented leadership positions (e.g., caregiving, work and employment, supporting family needs).
- Address the privileging of specific types of activities, like athletics, as well as the overall pros and cons of extracurricular activity reporting. Such dialogue is critical to informing future reform.

Our study offers crucial and new insight into how extracurriculars are reported differently across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. We document disparities in this important aspect of the college application portfolio that inform future efforts to strengthen holistic review. While there is still more to learn, these insights can drive improvements to how extracurriculars are reported and assessed in admission decisions.

