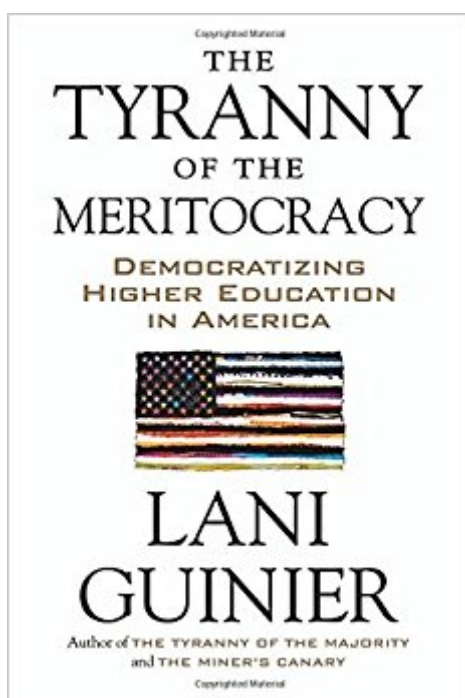


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# The Tyranny Of The Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education In America



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Drawing on academic research and anecdotal evidence, the book makes a strong pedagogical case. Kirkus Reviews Lani Guinier, Harvard's first Black tenured law professor, has the gift of dazzling us in speech and on the page. . . . This one is a must-read! Essence Magazine The Tyranny of Meritocracy is a timely book. With more colleges and universities adopting test-optional admissions policies, strident criticism of the new Common Core tests emerging, and major revisions to the No Child Left Behind legislation looming on the horizon, the role that standardized testing will play in the future of American education is genuinely up for debate. Voices like Guinier's that imagine alternatives to an educational system oriented around testing are a welcome addition to the conversation. The Boston Review This little book is an answer to the big question "Why is our so-called meritocracy so blatantly unfair?" With characteristic brilliance and insight, Lani Guinier not only answers the big question but points the way toward a more just and inclusive conception of education in a democratic society. Her transformative vision offers a hopeful alternative to our modern "testocracy" which values standardized test scores (which measure little more than access to privilege) over the values and qualities that will contribute to a genuinely thriving, collaborative democracy. Tyranny of the Meritocracy is a must-read for all those who have guessed, but could not prove, that our hypercompetitive approach to higher education "which rewards those with the most wealth and privilege and blames the rest for their plight" not only makes a mockery of the term "meritocracy" but endangers our democracy. "Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow "A visitor from Mars might wonder why" in assigning opportunity to individuals and status to higher education institutions "we rely so heavily on a highly imperfect operationalization of merit" the standardized test "or at least why there is so little debate about this practice. In this compelling, beautifully written book, Lani Guinier, one of our nation's greatest legal minds, launches

this debate anew. Hear! Hear!

• “Claude Steele, executive vice chancellor and provost at the University of California Berkeley”

• Lani Guinier has written a new book that digs deep into the issue of meritocracy . . . a very powerful report on how we are to look at meritocracy and think about it in the twenty-first century. This book has something for every generation: students, professors, and business leaders. I recommend it with great enthusiasm. Read it and learn, but also be one who looks very carefully at the issue of meritocracy and what it means today.

• “Charles J. Ogletree Jr., author of *The Presumption of Guilt and All Deliberate Speed*”

• What I know is this: we used to advertise for errand boys of “good German descent” and we no longer do. We don’t because we now know that merit lies not in ethnic descent but in other places—in the ideas we have, in the work we do. It is quite clear than in another fifty years today’s systems of judging merit will seem to a new generation to be similar to our view of asking for a good German boy.

• Lani Guinier, America’s leading civil rights theorist, makes us question the notion of merit today so that we may achieve our own aspirations of an enlightened citizenry.

• “Mahzarin R. Banaji, coauthor of *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People*

In 1998, Lani Guinier became the first woman of color appointed to a tenured professorship at Harvard Law School. Before her Harvard appointment, she was a tenured professor at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Guinier has published many books, including *The Tyranny of the Majority*, *Becoming Gentlemen* (with Michelle Fine and Jane Balin), *Lift Every Voice*, and *The Miner’s Canary* (coauthored with Gerald Torres). She was a lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund during the 1980s and was the Special Assistant to the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights during the Carter Administration. In 1993 President Clinton nominated her to be the first black woman to head the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, which set off a firestorm of controversy. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Ms. Guinier makes a very strong case as to why higher education (in this country) is fast becoming something for the elites in society. She makes it very clear that in order to be fully informed, we first need to know definitions. Meritocracy is not about what one has earned, but is more about one’s (upper) economic status. And with that said, there is little to no room for those individuals that are born into a lower class. As a society, we moving more toward higher education be only for the elites. Who can pay for expensive test preparations for the ACT and SAT? Which students can be exposed to many of the activities, functions, and opportunities that catches the “eye” of the universities and colleges? Only the elite class

This is a well written and researched book that does

not come across as wonky. She makes a very good argument why and how things need to change.

I've been fortunate enough to study under Lani Guinier in law school. She is one of the most brilliant people I've ever met. Read this, search for and watch her videos on YouTube. She is a treasure and her work is invaluable.

Guinier drives the point home that standardized testing does not always tell the full story about a person's potential for academic success. Her sterling examples of the students in the Posse Foundation who have gone on to score undergraduate and graduate degrees is proof that people can succeed despite bad to mediocre test scores. I wholeheartedly endorse Guinier's position that a person's overall track record is a better indicator of competence than a one-time so-called "aptitude" test. Bravo!!!

Refreshing to read a book that demonstrates the author's grasp of what's wrong with education in America today. As Ms. Guinier emphasizes, qualitative factors do matter. We need a new narrative for the American Dream. I believe Ms. Guinier has accurately framed the challenges facing education in America today, if we want to include all members of society into that new narrative! Thank you so much.

Excellent, well thought out piece of literature. Sadly, it speaks to the need to completely shatter the current educational paradigm that we have all become accustomed to because it is neither equitable nor balanced. This book is a serious wake up call to any and all who are really committed to educational equity and social justice.

This book offers a sober look at our growing obsession with students' test scores. Professor tries to get us focused again on the best approaches to actually learning. This is a timely book and a good read.

great analysis and well written. she is profoundly persuasive. also great discussion points for any book club.

Excellent read, and very informative. Also try Tyranny of the Majority!

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