

IDEAS

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Moments with...

We offer a roundup of books chronicling the life and times of Marilyn Monroe.

Books. B6

Down with brown

The color is back and better than ever.

Life. B12



Different bosses:

Theory x leadership in a theory y culture.

Opinion. B3

Time to color

What used to be known as a simple, fun activity for kids now is a tool for practicing good mental health.

Life. B9



UNCG professor Maria Sanchez at her office at UNCG.

WOODY MARSHALL, NEWS & RECORD

WHO'S MORE 'DESERVING'?

Exhibit A: My own admission into Harvard. Twice.

It's our senior year of college, and my roommate Silvia keeps getting into arguments about whether we belong at our school. To be precise, she argues with one person repeatedly: our friend John's roommate, whose brother was rejected by our college and thus had to go elsewhere.



MARIA SANCHEZ

along with my other roomies Nancy and Dolores, John and I are trying to watch TV. But Silvia and the roomie with the brother are in full swing, just like they were last week, and the week before that.

The roommate always prefaces his complaint by saying that he doesn't mean us specifically, but that "unqualified minorities" took his brother's spot at our college. His brother had a good GPA and high test scores, just as he did. He should have been admitted.

Silvia, who will earn her law degree from the University of California, Berkeley, a few years later, debates every single point with him: What do you mean by "unqualified"? How do you know this to be true? Our applications contain far more than a GPA and test scores; do you know for certain that all the components of your brother's application were truly competitive? How do you know those components were not competitive, even compelling, for minority students? How or why was your brother entitled to a spot here?

"Everybody knows" that the college routinely lets in minori-

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ties who don't have GPAs or test scores as high as the white students, the roommate says. That's what affirmative action is: advancing unqualified minorities at the expense of always-better-qualified whites. His brother deserved a spot here, and a minority — though not one of us, of course; we're apparently good minorities! — was given that place instead. It's reverse discrimination.

I know you're wondering; let's fill in some blanks: the "here" is Harvard University. The time, the late 1980s. And the personae of this piece, and part of the reason for the weekly jousting? Silvia, Dolores, Nancy, John and

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LYNN HEY, NEWS & RECORD

UNCG College Republicans held a bake sale March 22, 2004. They sold cookies, but not just any cookies: specially priced cookies. White males paid a dollar for theirs, if you were white female or Asian, it's 75 cents and on a sliding scale for other classes of people, all to bring attention to affirmative action. Kristen Robinson, a junior at UNCG and a member of the International Socialist Organization, debates Travis Billingsley, chairman of the College Republican Club, on issues pertaining to affirmative action.

Memories of school days

And there it was. Back again. The phsst sound of the compressed air braking system on the school bus lulled me from a slumber



ROBIN ADAMS CHEELEY

I should have arisen from 30 minutes earlier. I heard the car engines hum as they idled behind and in front of the bus while the students crossed the street and boarded for the first day of the new school year. It's been a couple of generations since I first got on a bus headed to school, but that sound transported me into the head of a 6-year-old with new paper and pencil, eager to collect Blue Horse Heads and get a free prize.

I was the oldest child and the first to go to school. Mrs. Davis, my first grade teacher who'd also taught both of my parents,



ROBIN ADAMS CHEELEY, PROVIDED

Robin Adams Cheeley in first grade

had sent the primary reader home months earlier for me to get a head start since there was no Headstart or More at Four program. And my aunt, who was eight years older, felt it her duty to teach me to read.

So, I went to first grade, having already read "My Little Red

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Story Book." Over the summer, I'd met Dick and Jane and saw Spot run. While the rest of the class focused on the first reader, I went ahead to the blue and green books in the series.

My major fear in first grade was that I might go blind. I'm not sure who told me so, but I feared that if I accidentally went into the boys' bathroom, side-by-side with the girls, I might lose my eyesight. I shuddered at that thought, but I wondered what was in that room that would compel me to a life without light.

My other memories of first grade are sparse, as are those from other elementary school

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Break up to make up with parents

Although North Carolina continues to be one of the nation's fastest-growing states, the number of students in our district-run public



JOHN HOOD

schools has been shrinking. Total enrollment in the 2021-22 school year was about 4% lower than a decade earlier, translating into roughly 60,000 fewer students. Districts enrolled 77% of all school-aged children in our state last year, down from 87% in 2011-12.

The increasing propensity of North Carolina families to choose charter, private or home schools has many district superintendents, board members and other public officials

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greatly concerned. They worry that as school districts lose market share, their political and financial support will wither. Some are even worried that applying terms such as "market share" in this context is wrong-headed and dangerous.

I think their concerns are overblown. Competition generally improves performance. That's true in business, sports, electoral politics and the performing arts. It's also true in sectors such as road

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Sanchez

From B1

I are all Mexican-American. John's roommate and his brother are white. The roommate clearly holds a grudge, despite his overtures at good manners. There's a limit to how much insult I'm willing to stomach, even if it's hapless, just to watch shows I like on a better TV than the tiny one we have back in our room.

I don't remember how long we consent to letting Sils hone her questioning skills, or listening for the umpteenth time to the lame excuse that, of course, he doesn't mean us. But by the time Dolores and I get anxious about the looming spring deadlines for our honors theses, we've all re-committed to looking at our own petite TV. I tell John that if he needs a break from, you know, he's more than welcome to join us.

Who is 'qualified'?

Who is entitled to a place at this nation's most prestigious colleges? A recent column in this paper offered one view (John Hood, Aug. 14), prefaced with the clickbait title that Gov. Roy Cooper "defends racial discrimination." Cooper, along with several other state governors and a very long list of interested parties ranging from NCAA officials and coaches to the Anti-Defamation League, signed amicus briefs in support of two universities being sued by an organization called Students for Fair Admission (SFFA). The plaintiffs allege that discriminatory practices deprived them of admission to two prestigious institutions: UNC-Chapel Hill and Harvard University.

I read the column because I am an interested party when it comes to the issue of college admissions: for two decades, I've had the great joy of following my heart, and making my living as a professor of U.S. literature, mostly recently at UNCG. College faculty know a lot about undergraduate admissions processes, and often serve on departmental admissions committees for graduate programs. Thus we have informed ideas regarding what helps a prospective student get into college, and more important, what helps them to succeed once they arrive on campus. I saw nothing in that column that reflected what my own years of experience have shown me matters most in preparing for, getting into and thriving at a university.

But when it comes to these court cases and opinions about them, I'm not just interested, I'm implicated.

I am one of the persons identified in the column as unworthy, taking a place away from



TED SOQUI, SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

In 1996, two states rejected affirmative action, legally opposing the policy. In California, Proposition 209 — a referendum aiming to prohibit state government institutions from considering race, sex or ethnicity in employment and public education — passed with 55% of the vote.

someone else who purportedly deserved it more. I'm a Latina Harvard alumna: not long after the encounters above, I earned my BA magna cum laude there. While Silvia and Dolores set off for Berkeley and Nancy did volunteer work in Central America, I came back to Cambridge to get my doctorate. Altogether, I spent a decade of my life as a Harvard student.

Since then, in my role as an alumna, I've sometimes interviewed prospective students for the college. (Interviews with alumni are an important part of the undergraduate application — one of those other components, besides the GPA and test scores, that Silvia referred to all those years ago.) I've been fortunate to spend a fellowship year at Harvard's Hutchins Center, which is devoted to research in African and African American studies. I generally keep up with news regarding the university, either through alumni publications or through friends who teach and work there.

In other words, I know my alma mater. After two decades, I also know higher education; it's been my whole adult life. I dislike seeing either misrepresented. It is very easy to speak in generalities about "favored students with lower GPAs and test scores (who) are routinely admitted over unfavored students with higher GPAs and test scores" ("Cooper defends..."). I guess I was in the "favored" category; after all, I got in. So allow me to put a face on the question of affirmative action at Harvard: mine.

Harvard's policies

First, I don't know of any undergraduate institution that bases its decisions on an applicant's GPA and test scores (SAT or ACT) alone. (Perhaps there are some, but none with which I've been affiliated.) Harvard considers letters of recommendation;

awards and prizes; extracurricular activities, such as sports or debate; work experience; anything that might be considered "leadership" experience, like being a camp counselor or organizing volunteer activities; interviews with college alumni; your college essay; and racial or ethnic identity. If you have a special talent, especially one you're intent on pursuing, like writing or some form of visual art, you may also submit a limited quantity to be considered as part of your application.

A few of those components I've listed are optional. That includes the alumni interview, though personally I do not advise giving it a miss. Starting this year, submitting SAT and ACT scores is also optional. Many colleges and universities nationwide are stepping away from using these standardized tests in admissions. They are costly, both in money and time spent preparing for them. There also are longstanding concerns about the tests' ability to predict student success. After two decades in higher ed, I have strong doubts about the utility of these tests. Too many variables determine how students might perform on them, and these tests have too little connection to what I've learned helps someone to do the work once they're admitted.

Other parts of the list are not optional: They are hugely important, and your application will not be considered without them. The college essay and recommendation letters are personal: They speak to whom a prospective student is in a way that no test score ever can. The same can be said for other categories, like extracurriculars. Anything that makes a student's personality come into focus matters deeply in any selective admissions process.

A GPA is important, but it can be imperfect. When I take part in

graduate program admissions, if I see improvement in GPA — say, a rocky first year but a better second and a strong finish in the third, fourth and sometimes fifth — that impresses me just as much as a perfect GPA. That upward trajectory, combined with other parts of the application, often tells me something crucial: that someone was tested, and got their act together. That someone failed, but didn't quit.

Life is hard, and we all fail at something. I don't penalize someone for learning from their mistakes and getting better, and neither does my alma mater.

All of these factors are considered, and GPA and test scores — integral to SFFA's suit, and the only application elements mentioned in John Hood's column — never act alone. There are other ways in which a prospective student might be advantaged: legacy admissions are such a sensitive issue that Harvard won't divulge the numbers. Harvard believes it can consider race as part of that bevy of factors, and can do so in a way that is not discriminatory. SFFA believes it cannot, and does not; hence, the lawsuit.

Why I got in

I've never seen any official record of how Harvard admissions officers reacted to my application. But I have an idea of what made me attractive to them. Because here's the thing: One part of my application to Harvard I know to have been less-than-stellar. Despite earning good grades in math and science classes, I never scored higher than the 75th percentile on those sections of the SAT or ACT. Theorems, methods: I could remember them in the moment, but a semester or two later, they were gone. Nothing felt instinctual about trigonometry, algebra or chemistry. My teachers liked me, and I was close to a couple of them. But science was not where my heart was. And apparently, not where my memory was, either.

Where I excelled, and what I imagine won the day for me, was my love of the written word. I love studying languages and literature, and for me, writing is nonnegotiable, as necessary as breathing. My family did not have much money, but they made sure I always had a library card, plenty of paper and a quiet place to scribble.

Second, I'm not intimidated by strangers. I can gab, hobnob, mingle, chat sports or "Jeopardy!" and as a high schooler, I talked. Goodness, did I talk! My hand was always raised, asking questions and making comments. My interview for Harvard was with a professor at a local university. I talked his ears off about books and music and art; about all the things I was study-

ing at school that I loved, and all the things I wanted to study — more books, music and art — that my woefully underfunded high school did not have the resources to offer me. We had a grand old time! I remember lots of laughter, and questions about why I liked Hemingway's "Nick Adams Stories" so much. There was even some suggestion that having expressed an abiding love for him, Albert Camus, and Thomas Hardy, that perhaps I should — and this was expressed politely — lighten up.

The following spring, at a party for local admits, this same alumnus professor told my mother that he knew from that half hour that I could not only do the work at Harvard, but that he had every expectation that I would thrive there. The college wants people who acknowledge their nerves, but forge ahead anyway; who someday might walk into a boardroom, a theater, a United Nations meeting, a classroom or some such, and lead. Be listened to, not talked over. Be respected, not dismissed out of hand.

Many apply ...

There is no perfect solution to admissions, at least not for those who want to attend Harvard. The college accepts about 2,000 students each year, hoping that a number closer to 1,600 will actually come. But for this fall's incoming class, the college received more than 60,000 applications, and the acceptance rate was a paltry 3%. Students with perfect SATs and GPAs, maybe even with budding theater careers or dedication to life-changing scientific research, will be rejected. If you're applying to any Ivy League school, the numbers are probably against you. It's entirely possible that I could have applied the year before, or a year later, and been rejected. The stars lined up for me, and I am grateful.

But that does not mean that those for whom fortune smiled did not earn their spot, or deserve their fate. I don't say this lightly, even as I write from a privileged place. In academia, faculty teach graduate students an important lesson early, and often: You will be rejected. I've been turned down by journals, grant and fellowship programs and hiring committees, and I was rejected by Yale for grad school. (Should I sue? Is it too late?) But another reader might like your article, so you try again; another committee might think your project is wonderful, even if last year's groaned and said no. Sometimes you do everything right, and still things go wrong. But they will go right another day.

That's life, and no lawsuit will change it.

Cheeley

From B1

years. I remember having to stand before the class in third grade and recite my times tables. Mrs. Hazel didn't suffer fools. If you missed one answer, you started over. Her plan was that we would all be able to go from our ones to the 12s without any errors.

It wasn't until sixth grade, when schools were integrated in Alamance County, where we lived then, that my memories are more vivid.

My sixth grade teacher was from Australia and every day read portions of "The Diary of a Young Girl," also known as "The Diary of Anne Frank." The story of Anne Frank and her family hiding in an old office annex to escape Hitler's atrocities and

even death drew me in. I'm not sure if it was the teacher's Aussie accent, being read to, the story itself, or all of the former that hooked me. This tome that enchanted me is now banned in some school districts. It seems that parents and some lawmakers shudder at Anne's thoughts about becoming a woman.

For about 50 minutes every day, I forgot the chaos of integration and the fact that for the first time, I was sitting next to a white person in the class and instead focused on another time and place, watching 13-year-old Anne and her family as they tried to survive and avoid being discovered.

As the bus pulled off, I shook myself awake and wondered what memories these young people might have of their school days.

Will they remember missing

almost two years of in-person learning and having to wear a mask and all of the commotion over that?

Will they remember the angst of teachers afraid to teach for fear of sharing a new idea, opening minds to opportunities or helping young people form thoughts and opinions outside of those their parents have?

Will they remember classrooms physically falling apart because those charged with allocating funds have shunned their responsibility to provide a quality education in a safe and secure environment?

Will they have thoughts of their first walk-through body scanners because the gun lobby has used its fortunes in such a way that lawmakers would rather fortify the schools like prisons than pass sensible gun legislation?

Hood

From B1

construction, medical care and education in which government may play a major or even dominant role in financing services but need not necessarily play as large a role in providing them.

You don't have to believe all public hospitals should be privatized to believe it is a good idea for them to have to compete for patients. Similarly, you don't have to favor the abolition of public schools to believe it is a good idea for them to have to compete for students.

I'm no public-school abolitionist myself. I happen to believe that fostering competition tends to improve public schools over time. I've often cited studies that lend empirical

support to my belief. One recent paper, published last year in the journal Applied Economics, looked at education markets and outcomes in Mississippi. In places where public schools face significant competition from private ones, students in the former tended to learn more. "Policymakers should consider competition-based school reform policies to increase public school outcomes," the authors concluded.

If I were a North Carolina policymaker deeply concerned about declining district enrollment, I'd be thinking hard about how to become more competitive and thus attract disenfranchised families back to my schools. In particular, if I were in a high-enrollment district such as Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford, Durham or Cumber-

land, I'd be thinking hard about deconsolidation.

These districts are simply far too large for their own good. Merging tiny rural districts with sparse populations into larger systems probably makes them more cost-effective. But for a variety of reasons, some understandable and some puzzling, North Carolina has blundered far past the point of diminishing returns in consolidating our school districts.

While there is scholarly debate about the precise tipping point, the fiscal and educational benefits of merging districts tend to fade out when the resulting enrollments exceed a few thousand students. When those enrollments rise into the tens of thousands of students, consolidation can actually become a net negative, both in

expense (economies of scale turn into diseconomies of scale) and educational outcomes. A famous 2003 study of California's school systems concluded, for example, that, when system enrollments exceed 40,000 students, "district size has a negative effect on student performance."

After the tumultuous events of the past three years, school districts now have another good reason to deconsolidate: it will make it easier for public schools to accommodate parents' widely divergent preferences with regard to curriculum, safety, health and other potentially hot-button issues.

During the height of the pandemic, for example, some urban and suburban parents were furious that their public schools stayed shut down for

how much money their parents have, can have the opportunity to learn, explore and master a variety of subjects — common and rare.

So instead of comparing and contrasting, let's pray for a safe school year for all. Let's pray that students won't have to worry that the quiet student might be a killer, that the bus stop is a haven for child abductors or that something they post or see on social media might harm them.

I pray that teachers and other school administrators will be respected, relevant, resilient, razor-sharp, resourceful risk takers who will reassure, reinforce, renew, rejuvenate and restore young minds.

And that the rest of us will provide the support they need. Class is in session.

many months. Other parents were subsequently furious when school systems resumed in-person learning as the default mode and deemphasized or eliminated virtual options. In retrospect, more North Carolina families would have gotten the type and level of educational services they desired — and fewer would have left public schools entirely — if populous counties contained multiple districts with differing COVID policies.

For big districts looking to rekindle a relationship with departed families, here's my advice: Break up to make up.

John Hood is a John Locke Foundation board member. His latest book, "Mountain Folk and Forest Folk," combine epic fantasy with early American history (FolkloreCycle.com).