

What gives you an edge in Harvard admissions? Check the trial evidence.

By [Nick Anderson](#)

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BOSTON — Nearly everyone seeking to get into Harvard University craves to know what kind of test scores they need to be a serious contender. An internal Harvard document, disclosed this week in federal court, provides an answer: mid-to-high 700s, out of a possible 800 on each part of the SAT. Or at least 33 out of a maximum 36 on the ACT.

Those were benchmarks Harvard suggested in 2014 for admission officers to rate an applicant with superb grades as having “Magna” academic potential — a 2 on a scale of 1 to 4. The highest rating, reserved for special cases with near-perfect scores and grades, was 1 or “Summa.” Applicants rated a 3 or 4 have lower chances of admission.

But the man who has been Harvard’s chief gatekeeper for more than three decades sought to play down the import of the revelation in the document presented as evidence in a trial that scrutinizes his team’s work.

William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid, testified in federal court here that “it’s a bit of an oversimplification” to focus on standardized tests.

“We’re actually asking our readers to go through everything on that application and to try also to think about growth and the future potential,” Fitzsimmons said Tuesday. He added: “We’re looking at people not simply by a rigid, formulaic kind of thing such as a test score.”

[As the trial’s first witness](#), and one of the most influential voices in college admissions, Fitzsimmons underscored that more is at stake for Harvard than defending itself against allegations that it discriminates against Asian Americans. The university, historically a bastion of exclusivity and privilege, wants to be seen as an institution that gives everyone a fair shot. The trial is challenging that image.

Because of a lawsuit [filed in 2014](#) by opponents of affirmative action, the private university’s admissions process is undergoing a rare and exhaustive public examination. In the trial that started Monday, Fitzsimmons and other officials are being forced to answer under oath detailed questions about how the university recruits and admits a class and how it takes race and other factors into

account — including the clout of alumni and donors.

[Students for Fair Admissions, the plaintiff](#) on behalf of rejected Asian American applicants, obtained raw data on more than 160,000 applications in a recent six-year span. It also reviewed 480 application files and a trove of emails and other records.

[Revelations from the suit this year](#) have fueled skepticism of Harvard. A crowd of Asian Americans gathered here in Copley Square over the weekend to [protest what they believe is unequal treatment](#). They held up signs that read “No more racial stereotyping” and “Harvard: Stop Asian Quota.” Such criticism takes a toll, even though many Asian Americans support Harvard’s race-conscious admissions policy.

College officials across the nation are tracking the case, mindful of its potential impact on their own work. Charles A. Deacon, dean of admissions at Georgetown University, said Harvard and Fitzsimmons are “carrying the weight of the profession on their shoulders.” “There’s nobody better to do this defense than him.”

The University of Virginia’s dean of admission, Greg W. Roberts, called Fitzsimmons “the dean of deans.” On campus in nearby Cambridge, he is known as Dean Fitz.

Harvard is famously selective, [turning down 19 out of every 20](#) applicants to the nation’s oldest undergraduate college. But it is also more diverse than in generations past. Seventeen percent of nearly 2,000 admitted this year are among the first in their families to go to college, and 20 percent come from families with enough need to qualify for federal Pell Grants. More than half of students receive financial aid.

Those are the statistics Fitzsimmons hopes to highlight.

But the lawsuit has revealed less rosy data.

As a rule, Harvard does not disclose how many children of alumni apply and what share is accepted. But court documents reveal that 4,644 of these “legacy” applicants from the United States applied from 2009 through 2015, and 34 percent were admitted. That was far higher than the 6 percent admission rate for non-legacy applicants.

In addition, 2,501 applicants were designated in that time for “interest lists” kept by Fitzsimmons and the director of admissions. These cases deemed worthy of special handling included children of donors. Their admission rate was 42 percent. On Wednesday, the plaintiff introduced evidence that Harvard gives special attention to such cases. It provided an implicit contrast to the penalty the plaintiff alleges Harvard imposes on Asian American applicants.

In June 2013, David T. Ellwood, then dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, sent

Fitzsimmons an email declaring that he was “simply thrilled about all the folks you were able to admit.” Ellwood indicated some were children of donors and called them “superb additions to the class.”

In October 2014, Harvard tennis coach David Fish thanked Fitzsimmons in an email for meeting with a prospective student whose family had apparently donated more than \$1 million. “We rolled out the red carpet,” Fish wrote.

Fitzsimmons said Wednesday that paying attention to children of donors and alumni helps the university as a whole. But he said those admitted are just as qualified as the rest of the class. “A very large percentage of them would have gotten in without the ‘tip,’ ” he said, using Harvard’s lingo for an extra plus factor in the review.

Data uncovered through the suit also showed admission rates by race and ethnicity, which Harvard does not typically disclose. An economist the plaintiff hired found that for the class entering in fall 2015 — excluding international students — those rates were 8.2 percent for African Americans, 6.8 percent for white applicants, 6.4 percent for Hispanic applicants and 5.7 percent for Asian Americans.

The [plaintiff says Harvard discriminates](#) against Asian Americans in multiple ways. The university denies those claims, saying it considers race as one factor among many, following Supreme Court guidance.

A Harvard-retained expert found that if race were subtracted from admission decisions, the African American share of an admitted class would fall eight percentage points, to 6 percent. The Hispanic share would fall five points, to 9 percent.

John M. Hughes, a plaintiff’s attorney, said those numbers appear to show a racial divide. “As a group, African Americans receive more of a benefit based on race in the Harvard admissions process than Hispanics, correct?” he asked Fitzsimmons.

“Yes,” the dean replied.

At another point, Hughes asked Fitzsimmons about a federal civil rights investigation that found evidence in 1990 that some Harvard admission officers described Asian American applicants as being “quiet, shy, science/math oriented, and hard workers.”

“Are those comments consistent with the way Harvard wants race used in its admissions process?” Hughes asked.

“We do not endorse — we abhor stereotypical comments,” Fitzsimmons said. “This is not part of our process. This is not who I am, and it’s not who our admissions committee members are.”


Throughout his testimony, Fitzsimmons sought to push back against the plaintiff's claims of bias while acknowledging the flurry of numbers presented to him. "You were probably a math major," he teased Hughes.

Fitzsimmons, who graduated from Harvard in 1967, started working in the admissions office in 1972 and was named dean in 1986. In his position, he has promoted the expansion of need-based financial aid and of recruiting more students who, like himself, were first in their families to go to college.

Fitzsimmons portrays himself as just one of 40 members of the committee that votes on who gets in. Of course, everyone knows he is the most senior member.



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