The Academy Can Do Better

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This past spring, I found myself swimming even deeper than usual in papers from midshipmen that muddled about with no clear point, ended somewhere else from where they began, jerked from topic to topic and sentence to sentence, mangled the English language, and misused punctuation to the extent nobody could get the point. Put their future commanding officers. When I pulled their records, almost all these students were from one of our three set-aside groups.

Such midshipmen are admitted “direct,” which means they do not have to be the winner on the list of up to ten African American, Hispanic, and Native American. They are considered as their own group and admitted using different criteria than nonminorities. We often guarantee midshipmen seats to many of these applicants, who normally have lower scores and grades than candidates who must compete further.

Athletes also bypass the nomination competition (between 15% and 20% of any given class). These “blue-chip” are the young men and women “needed” for particular slots on teams.

Finally, there are admissions from the fleet, who typically enlisted in the Navy or Marine Corps out of high school and serve in many cases for as little as a year. We like to say we are taking a chance on these risky candidates. At the same time, it means that we are turning away better quality students.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial admissions policies are illegal—yet the Naval Academy’s remain in place. Everyone agrees competition and sports are good for midshipmen, but setting out to fill teams is the tail wagging the dog. The usual argument is that playing a sport shows leadership. But how is this so unless you are the team captain or quarterback? All our applicants are athletic in one way or another. So we should take the best midshipmen and configure the teams later.

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people who, say, a congressman can nominate. Those who do not win their slate—as many as nine “academically qualified” applicants—are turned away. This is what gives us our competitive reputation. Almost all these candidates are academically more qualified than the set-asides. As a rule, we send set-asides to the Naval Academy Preparatory School (NAPS) for a year of remedial work. If they maintain a C average at NAPS—a much lower average than we demand from high school students—they come to the Naval Academy the following year.

Set-asides are in three groups. First are applicants who identify themselves as one of three specific racial minorities;