

Philosophical Inquiry in Education

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN EDUCATION
The Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

University Admissions, Justice, and Virtue

David P. Burns

Volume 29, numéro 3, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094134ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094134ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Burns, D. P. (2022). University Admissions, Justice, and Virtue. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 29(3), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094134ar>

Résumé de l'article

This analysis will argue that university educators have an ethical obligation to advocate for admission policies that are not exclusively competitive in nature – what will be referred to later as levelling and remedy approaches. This argument will be detailed in four stages. First, it will use an anecdote and an appeal to virtue to argue that educators in universities should feel an ethical obligation to level the playing field of competitive admissions. Second, it will draw on the work of a Chris Martin and Ben Kotzee to provide a philosophical framework for my argument. Third, it will discuss examples from Scotland, Ontario, and British Columbia to consider the ways in which the status quo fails to meet our ethical commitments as educators. Fourth, and finally, it will posit the virtue-ethical argument that university educators should live out their commitment to being virtuous and philosophy of education by supporting admission policies that are not exclusively competitive.

University Admissions, Justice, and Virtue

DAVID P. BURNS

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

This analysis will argue that university educators have an ethical obligation to advocate for admission policies that are not exclusively competitive in nature – what will be referred to later as levelling and remedy approaches. This argument will be detailed in four stages. First, it will use an anecdote and an appeal to virtue to argue that educators in universities should feel an ethical obligation to level the playing field of competitive admissions. Second, it will draw on the work of a Chris Martin and Ben Kotzee to provide a philosophical framework for my argument. Third, it will discuss examples from Scotland, Ontario, and British Columbia to consider the ways in which the status quo fails to meet our ethical commitments as educators. Fourth, and finally, it will posit the virtue-ethical argument that university educators should live out their commitment to being virtuous and philosophy of education by supporting admission policies that are not exclusively competitive.

An Anecdote and an Appeal to Virtue

To begin this analysis, and to provide contextual examples for later use, we will begin with an anecdote from a recent policy debate. This anecdote will serve, additionally, as an opportunity to emphasize that one's philosophy of education should be demonstrated in the academic policies one supports.

An Anecdote

In the province of British Columbia admission policies are set by the senate of a given university, a body that includes a number of faculty members that represent either a *majority* (as is the case at the University of British Columbia) or a *plurality* (as in special purpose teaching universities like Kwantlen Polytechnic University). This means that, at any university in British Columbia, admission standards are set largely by the educators who teach in those institutions – or, more specifically, their elected university senators. This is, of course, not the case in all postsecondary systems. This argument will, accordingly, apply to those scholars in a position to influence admission policy either through established governance systems (as in British Columbia) or through their particular roles.

Take, for instance, a recent debate on admission standards in one such institution, in which the given senate considered and passed a motion to lower the high school grade needed to access an undergraduate course. The central objection to this change was, predictably, twofold. First, it was asserted that less-qualified students would fail the course in large numbers and that allowing them to do so would be ethically suspect. Second, it was asserted that lowering standards (for students, not faculty) would be detrimental to the image of the university. In the two years after that change was enacted, about 75% of the students now able to access the course (who would not have had access under the previous standard) passed. While there are, to be sure, competing empirical explanations for this result – and this is relayed here as illustrative anecdote rather than empirical justification – it is fair to conclude from this data that the previous threshold excluded a nontrivial number of people who would have succeeded if given the chance. This context is, clearly, a terrific premise for future thought experiments and seminars in

philosophy of education – it raises questions of public access, trade-offs between institutional imperatives and broader values of social justice, and competing forms of justification. In institutions with academic senates that set admission standards, these questions are concretely in the hands of the educators who teach in them. In institutions with more exclusively administrative processes for admissions, similar arguments present themselves to the limited number of scholars in leadership roles.

From the perspective of philosophy of education this example raises, at the very least, two concerns. First, the predictive validity of the high school grade on which institutions often rely can be dubious. To deny citizens access to a publicly funded institution, one should be able to demonstrate with fairly high confidence that they have good reason to do so. Weak predictive validity undermines the use of grades as a justification for admissions decisions (Edwards et al., 2013) and renders this use of grades potentially unjust. This represents a notable empirical shortcoming in our discourse.

There are also important ethical and philosophical critiques of grading, most prominently including the work of Alfie Kohn (as in Kohn, 2013). While this line of analysis is a productive one, this argument will focus on a second, narrower concern: to what extent does the admission policy a scholar supports reflect their philosophy of education? What might a philosopher of education say, for example, about the more fundamental question of who, in the first instance, *ought to be admitted*? What does it mean to admit *suitable students*?

An Appeal to Virtue

Pring (2004), in his discussion of education as a moral practice, argues that education can be impoverished by a division between its means and ends. Working from the perspective of neo-Stoic philosophy (see Burns, 2011; Burns et al., 2010), this paper argues that the virtuous agent takes this one step further.

It is not merely the case that education should be practised in ways that align with educational values – that its means ought to be closely connected to its ends. The educator, as a moral agent, also has a positive obligation to engage in the life of their political community in ways that embody virtue. This is, to the Stoics, a central component of the virtuous exercise of one's station in life (Burns, 2011). One cannot merely retreat to contemplate (or even practice) virtue in the classroom – one must virtuously act in fulfillment of one's responsibilities. For many university educators, this action takes place, in part, in their university senate (not unlike the Roman Stoics). One need not, however, rely on the philosophy of Roman or neo-Stoicism to draw this conclusion. The core of the underlying ethical proposition is merely that when one has levers with which to influence systems that impact the public, they pull those levers to the extent that they hold meaningful convictions about the issues they are addressing. One may not be successful in changing large and complex systems, but it is a basic requirement of moral living that one, at the very least, try to find viable ways to advance one's stated values. In environments in which one is a participant in a democratic governance system – like a university senate – it seems clear that personal excellence (whether strictly virtue-ethical or not) is linked to how one employs their democratic agency.

In this way the Stoics can be said merely to encourage one to see a connection between one's participation in the greater polity and one's commitment to personal virtue. Since the levers of university policy are relatively close to many scholars, it is, to the Stoics, a characteristic of their station (a duty, to use different terms) to employ those levers in virtuous ways. In an indirect sense, then, a university's policies are reflective of how virtuous the people who can help to determine those policies are.¹

This raises interesting questions about academic standards, including those invoked in the anecdote detailed above. When an institution “raises standards,” this is often meant to refer to increasing the grades or competitiveness of admission. If an entry grade is raised, an institution is thought to have raised its standards by admitting only the most elite applicants. This argument is, from a virtue-ethical perspective,

¹ This raises a related argument that, while fruitful, can't be address here – namely, that academic senates can and should be employed to empower the expression of academic values in the broader strategy of the university.

notably directed away from the institution and towards the people who might use it. It doesn't address the institution's standards for itself – whether in teaching, organization, or learning support. It is, to use a more skeptical framing, making the life of the institution more comfortable by excluding access to it for persons who might need it most to improve their life outcomes or educational experiences.

This presents a significant virtue-ethical concern for those scholars who wish to advance social justice – particularly as it relates to distributive justice and empowerment of the marginalized – and who have some mechanism (such as a university senate) to affect admission policy. This disjunction is common. It is not unusual to find a teacher educator lecturing on good pedagogical practice to theatres of hundreds of students – few of whom they will ever know, let alone transform. Student centrism and diversity are highly valued and yet institutions often engage with students through the practical mechanism of a student ID number. Radical egalitarianism, liberation, and empowerment are often advanced in pockets of wealth and privilege.

These tensions are understandable. Large institutions have practical imperatives with which to wrestle, and privilege does not prevent one from seeing and acting against the oppression of others. Scholars, furthermore, do not *directly* control their institutions – which are complex political communities comprised of overlapping authorities across many spheres of activity.

This reality, though, impacts all large political communities. Any argument that one cannot change a university because of its political complexity or competing authorities would, in principle, apply to a greater extent in municipal, provincial, or federal polities. In more concrete terms, if we cannot bring our own universities into closer agreement with our value commitments, it is unreasonable to suggest that others do so on a larger scale. This is not to say that universities are homogenous polities, or even that the body of scholars who work at them are homogenous in their value commitments. What this does mean, though, is that there is good reason to argue that the policies those communities enact are reflective of the character of the agents that comprise them. Something like an admission policy reflects, however indirectly, the value commitments of the university community. These commitments are negotiated through the practical imperatives that institution faces – but they are there, nonetheless. Unless one is entirely powerless to influence university policy, helping to change those policies is an important component of one's academic station. To understand what this means in the specific context of admission policy, though, we will now turn to recent philosophy of education in this area.

Building on Martin and Kotzee

Liberal democracies, according to Martin (2017), have important political reasons to support higher education. Speaking broadly, he argues that “citizens should support higher education, not only in the interests of socioeconomic equality, but because all citizens of a democracy benefit from the production of able thinkers (where ‘able’ is construed widely)” (p. 41). Since higher education also impacts a person's life-chances, access to higher education implicates significant questions of justice (Kotzee & Martin, 2013). This is why, in part, Kotzee and Martin conclude that “the problem of admission to university parallels the problem of inequality in schools” (p. 623).

The discussion of access to university, though, poses a potentially more significant question of justice precisely because it is entirely normal for universities to deny many applicants access altogether. So while public schools and public universities share many characteristic inequalities, universities (because of their selectivity) pose additional concerns. Is it just to exclude certain persons from university study? If so, on what grounds? One must, following Martin and Kotzee's suggestion, begin with a discussion of the purpose of universities themselves.

Kotzee and Martin (2013) argue that the distinct purpose of a university is to support the “acquisition of knowledge of, or the development of, forms of understanding derived from some scholarly field or collection of fields” (p. 635). A program in mathematics would exist under this account to support persons in their acquisition or creation of knowledge and understanding derived from the

scholarly field of mathematics. Admission policy would, therefore, serve to admit those students who will be good scholars of mathematics. We will, for the sake of convenience, call this a *scholarly potential* argument.

Kotzee and Martin's particular version of the scholarly potential argument is based on an important distinction: that having the formal right to a university education is not meaningful if one is unable to exercise that right. If a person, to use their example, is admitted to a math program for which they are ill prepared, it is possible that the person will not only fail to gain whatever benefit that program offers, but also be "confused and demoralised" (p. 637). Justice, on this account, consists in "admitting people who are ready for a learning opportunity and who can benefit from it in the sense of learning most" (p. 637).

This position makes good sense, and this analysis will draw upon another helpful conceptual structure from the same analysis. In addition to arguing that the good of universities is this particular kind of knowledge development, and that it follows from this that they should admit those who can best take up that opportunity, Kotzee and Martin (2013) also identify five conceptualizations of the question of who should attend university:

1. Tournament: In which it is just for the applicant with the highest score (such as on a test) to be admitted.
2. Trial: Admission to university is a tournament, but the competition is considered part of the educational process and of public life more broadly.
3. Levelling: Admission policies should ensure that no one is unfairly advantaged.
4. Remedy: Admission policies should be used to rectify broader justice concerns (to empower the disempowered).
5. Job interview: Admission policies should screen students, like employers do, in a simulated job competition.

The two conceptualizations most relevant to social justice outcomes of the sort discussed here are the levelling and remedy approaches – pointing as they do toward making competitions more fair and using admissions policies to remedy injustices, respectively.

The tournament and trial conceptions are similar to one another, with the single difference being the motivation attached to the competition. They encourage, for present purposes, the same policy outcome: that students be placed in primarily grade-based admission competitions. This paper will for this reason refer merely to the tournament conception. It is also worth noting that it will always be tempting for institutions to claim that the tournament they employ has educational or preparatory value – and so the distinction between tournament and trial may (in the minds of decision-making agents) be generally indistinguishable. While Kotzee and Martin provide a good conceptual structure, therefore, it may be that a revised framework should use only four.

The final conception, the job interview, is most appropriately limited to smaller programs such as those found in medical education. Applicants to medical training programs are typically interviewed and assessed on a range of measures beyond grades (though grades are a component of this process). This level of assessment is not practical for large, open-registration undergraduate programming, and even if this level of admission assessment was deemed viable, it would nonetheless involve a process similar in intent to the tournament conception.

This means that, for present purposes, there are three normative options: tournament, levelling, and remedy. The tournament approach allocates university seats through relatively unrestricted competition. The levelling approach also involves competition but crucially includes positive action to make that competition fair. The remedy approach seeks to use admission actively to produce socially just outcomes. This approach might involve competition but would certainly place less emphasis on competition than the preceding approaches.

If a person accepts the scholarly potential argument, it would seem at first glance that they would thus necessarily support the tournament conception of admissions on the grounds that the tournament

approach would distinguish between more- and less-prepared students, whereas the levelling and remedy approaches draw into consideration things not obviously directly related to scholarly potential.

Indeed, Kotzee and Martin warn against the use of university admissions in pursuing the social justice objectives intrinsic to the remedy and levelling conceptions. These objectives are, they argue, secondary to the core mission of the university: the promotion of knowledge and understanding. This is surely true. Universities have important social justice responsibilities, but these responsibilities are not the central purpose of universities. If they were, universities would function more like social programs in which learning may or may not take place – they don't. Kotzee and Martin warn, in particular, that:

In extremis, one may hold that the least intelligent, poorest applicants with the worst upbringing and the worst schooling should be the ones admitted to university; after all, if anyone is deserving of the best educational opportunities that society can offer – such as that provided by studying for three years at the best universities – in order to counteract their earlier educational misfortune, it is these students. The others will be fine anyway. (Kotzee and Martin, 2013, p. 630)

The appropriate response, from their perspective, is to emphasize scholarly potential (so as to appropriately connect to the university's central purpose) but to also consider possibilities for modest forms of levelling or remedying such as the offering of remedial courses of instruction. This position is, as will be argued later, only partly correct.

In their concluding remarks, Kotzee and Martin concede that their position is likely to lead to charges of elitism. In response they note (as areas for future consideration) that their arguments might support the broadening of admissions through the inclusion of excluded groups, or the provision of additional remediation courses. This is an important point – to the extent that the scholarly potential argument underpins much admission policy it is useful to ask to what extent that policy produces elitist outcomes. We should, in at least a cursory way, consider available examples.

Scholarly Potential in Practice

Perhaps the most applicable recent example comes from Scotland, where Boliver et al. (2018) identify a “growing recognition among policy makers that the barrier to widening access caused by socioeconomic disparities in school attainment is exacerbated by the admissions policies of universities” (p. 2). Elitism is, in other words, entrenched by conventional admission policies. Living in one of Scotland's wealthiest neighbourhoods makes a student over three times as likely to be accepted to undergraduate study, and five times as likely to gain access to a highly selective institution, compared to students from Scotland's poorest neighbourhoods. Similar outcomes, they note, have been established in England and the United States.

While little research exists on the Canadian manifestations of this problem (see Sweet et al., 2017), helpful studies in Ontario and British Columbia are available. Davies et al. (2014), in their discussion of the Ontario context, provide a useful starting point. Much like Kotzee and Martin, Davies et al. observe that Canadian schools suffer inequalities similar to those seen in our universities. Private and independent schooling in Canada is growing, they note, and schools of choice have fragmented the public sector.

Despite being less stratified than the American university system, Canada's system is stratifying over time (Davies et al., 2014). Rankings, such as those produced by *Maclean's* magazine, have come to exert significant power over the postsecondary sector, with students consulting rankings, and institutions being consequently incentivized to improve their competitive position. Most important to this analysis, Davies et al. found that (much like the case in Scotland) students from affluent areas attended schools higher in public rankings. The expansion of higher education in Toronto, for instance, has led not only to increased opportunity, but also to new ways for the affluent to exercise their privilege. Which Toronto

university you attend, they found, is linked to the neighbourhood from which you are coming (to say nothing of stratification in and through international education).

Very much the same phenomenon was found in British Columbia, where expansion and differentiation have marched hand in hand (Sweet et al., 2017). Competition in BC, much like competition in Ontario, results in “prestige hierarchies” (p. 498) in which families press their children to attend universities with the highest, most prestigious ranking. It is thus unsurprising that “youth from affluent families typically predominate in high value institutions” (p. 498).

Unlike in Ontario, which maintains a two-tier college and university system, British Columbia’s system expanded to add an additional tier. In the 1990s a middle category was created between universities and colleges: university colleges (Sweet et al., 2017). These university colleges were eventually turned into teaching-intensive universities (TIUs), which sit apart both from colleges and research-intensive universities (RIUs). In the conventional hierarchy of prestige, then, BC offers RIUs, TIUs, and colleges. Sweet et al. (2017) found that in this system, “SES, gender, and ethnicity [are] significant predictors of RIU attendance, even after controlling for academic performance and other factors relevant to university program admissions” (p. 510–511).

Each of the three examples noted here support two conclusions of interest to the present analysis. First, that persons from privileged areas gain access to privileged institutions in greater numbers in part because their recorded academic performance is higher when they leave grade 12. Second, that even if academic performance is controlled for, broader social variables still impact access.

In sum, then, admissions policies in Scotland, Ontario, and British Columbia seem to reward persons with high socioeconomic status (SES) and persons with high levels of academic achievement (which is itself mediated by SES). The tournament, with whatever levelling and efforts at remedy are currently in play, produces at least some outcomes that don’t narrowly reward scholarly potential.

Understanding the Good in Universities

To understand the root problem to which these examples point, one must look not only to the public goods universities support (such as an informed and capable citizenry) but also to their more private goods of social and economic advancement. These goods are, in many cases, positional – that is, they are valuable to the extent that they are scarce (Sweet et al., 2017). Degrees were more “valuable” 50 years ago because far fewer people had them.

As access to higher education expanded in the second half of the 20th century, a parallel process took place in which the positional value of a degree needed to be stored in some other way (from the perspective of those seeking to maintain privilege intergenerationally). A parent graduating with a bachelor of arts in 1982, for instance, would have been atypical of her generation. Her job market and social mobility outcomes would, on average, reflect this advantage. Her child born in the following year, though, would belong to a generation in which *most* people completed higher education. In order to maintain her child’s intergenerational privilege, the mother would need to not only send that child to status-conferring K–12 schools, but now also to a status-conferring university. Since bachelor’s degrees no longer assure privilege in the way they once did, she would also need to encourage her child to pursue higher credentials (such as a graduate degree) at a more “elite” institution. These two mechanisms – the stratifying of both universities and university credentials – are considered by higher education researchers to represent forms of *maximally maintained inequality* (Davies et al., 2014). As the basis for a given form of inequality erodes (in this case, degree scarcity) persons who want to retain their status need to find new ways to express that status and thereby maintain the original inequality.

This stratification has important effects on the behaviour of disadvantaged persons, who – while they may experience social mobility through the higher education system (Davies et al., 2014) – are also more likely to self-select into universities with less competitive admission policies (Smith et al., 2013), and less expensive programs (Howell & Pender, 2015). They are, as noted previously, also more likely to have had poorer K–12 schooling and, thus, poorer K–12 outcomes (Boliver et al., 2018).

These effects have institutional corollaries that will be familiar to many practicing scholars. The institutional imperative to become more prestigious becomes tied to institutional rankings – rankings which are, according to Davies et al. (2014), correlated to the resources to which a university has access. Younger institutions are incentivized to target students not able to access more prestigious, higher “ranked” universities and the gap between universities begins to reinforce itself. In the Scottish example (Boliver et al., 2018), this takes the form of a three-tier system: first, prestigious research-intensive universities with highly selective admissions policies; second, nationally selective universities with selective admissions policies; and, third, locally transformative universities with a focus on teaching. While the terms might vary, this tripartite division is quite similar to British Columbia’s system of research universities, teaching universities, and colleges.

These identities exert a strong normative influence on internal discussion of university admission policy (Boliver et al., 2018). Decreasing the selectivity at a research university is, for example, often construed as analogous to the lowering of standards, failing to foster excellence, and so forth. A teaching university, on the other hand, might seek to *become* prestigious by employing these same tools of selectivity.

An Argument from Virtue

If one were to take the entirety of this discussion – from the analysis by Kotzee and Martin (2013) to the cases in Scotland, Ontario, and BC – it is clear that admission policy discourse is premised on the assumption that there are two groups of agents to discuss: students, whose background and attributes either entitle them to university study or not; and institutions, which exercise a kind of collective identity that is reflected in, and is reflective of, their admission policies. Educators themselves, when present in this discourse, are subsumed by the broader category of the institution. This is, from a virtue-ethical perspective, a mistake.

One can accept entirely that it is the primary purpose of the university to foster knowledge and understanding, that scholarly potential is therefore the central principle of admissions policy, and that using admission policy to pursue distributive justice objectives can lead one astray of the central purpose of universities – but also that none of these premises speaks to the ethical obligations of persons (particularly those who can impact these policies) inside these systems.

To return to the quote from Kotzee and Martin, one need not argue that less privileged persons should be admitted to universities because more privileged persons *will be fine*. This may be true but it is a difficult argument to sustain without asserting a complex counterfactual condition – how those persons would have performed in their education were they to have lived in a world in which admissions were differently handled. It is, on the other hand, more straightforwardly plausible to argue that those with a commitment to justice and a station that permits them influence over admissions should seek to embody justice in their policy arguments and votes. If institutions are, in other words, bound to sustain admissions tournaments, a virtuous agent would seek to build into those tournaments more opportunity for levelling and remedy. But this runs into the central problem Kotzee and Martin identify – that diluting scholarly potential as a guiding principle leads one astray from the purpose of university. This is partly true. Scholarly potential should be at the centre of these conversations – but it isn’t a single justification. It is comprised of at least two, and the difference between them offers a way forward.

The first justification is the form of scholarly potential that speaks to the *academic qualification* a student requires to have a defensible chance of succeeding in an institution’s programs of study. A student seeking to study advanced mathematics would, surely, require some fundamental level of mathematical knowledge to access the most basic levels of study offered by the institution. That institution must either teach students this fundamental level of mathematics or select students who already possess it. Since teaching a fundamental level of mathematics can be costly and may require different pedagogical expertise than is available, there is a natural inclination for institutions to select students ready for academic

programming. This is the root of the “qualified” student concept seen in the Ontario system (see Fallis, 2013).

This kind of scholarly potential is, importantly, not a way of explaining all discrimination between levels of prior achievement. If one were to assert that students need a certain level of mathematics to succeed, it does not necessarily follow that further gains produce more than a marginal improvement.

Above this level, though, institutions often employ a second method of adjudication: competitive achievement comparisons. Since the number of qualified persons exceeds the number of seats available, universities “require students to demonstrate levels of prior academic performance that far exceed the pedagogically necessary minimum” (Boliver et al., 2018, p. 2). While this may be a generally accepted way to allocate scarce seats, it also seems clear that this justification is most compelling when viewed from the perspective of the institution and the scholars teaching in it. The good being served is intrinsic to the orderly functioning of the institution rather than the learning of its students (which are related but distinct) or their educators.

This second justification also poses risks to how virtuous the educator is. Most worryingly for the educator herself, it legitimates a tempting justification for pedagogical failure (see Boliver et al., 2018). When outcomes in a particular course or program are poor, one can always raise the “standard” for admission and then achieve better outcomes. This circular argument (that we need to seek out successful students so that they are more likely to succeed) allows one to avoid difficult but potentially more meaningful questions about the curriculum, learning activities, assessments, and so forth. It is not the service we offer to the public that is inadequate – it is the public itself.

It can thusly become difficult to disentangle legitimate selection of the most hopeful cases from the selection of cases merely most convenient to the institution. This convenience takes two shapes. First, it presents the administrative convenience of easily selecting students (those with a higher grade) in a way that is broadly, if unknowingly, accepted by the public as legitimate (grade competition). Second, it allows institutions to select for scholars the most convenient of students to teach: those with long records of success in the culture of schooling. These are, in economic terms, perverse incentives. Scholarly potential is thus potentially understood both as a minimum threshold (which is ethically justifiable) and as a convenient sorting mechanism between students likely to be successful (which is much less so).

This reflects, in a sense, the Occam’s razor of admissions. Institutions select those most likely to succeed because they are less troublesome to educate, because they are the cheapest to assess at the point of admission, and because the public accepts the underlying logic of this system. Privileged people, after all, tend to be convinced that their privilege is earned and just.

As agents within this system, though, the ethical obligation to temper this inequality is very strong indeed. In general virtue-ethical terms it is important to ask what opportunities for virtuous exercise present themselves, and from the Stoic position one asks even more ambitiously what aspects of one’s station permit virtuous engagement with the polity. The neo-Stoic agent is called to engage with their university senate, or exercise their administrative influence or authority, to enact the moral commitments they hold. That agent’s character is, to the extent that they have some opportunity to impact those policies, tied up with the question of whether they try.

This risks the self-blame attributed to much Stoic discourse – the idea that one is always too attached, too imperfect, and too emotional. This is a misreading of contemporary thought on Stoicism, which, among other goals, seeks to moderate the uncompromising nature of ancient Stoic thought (Burns, 2011). The modern Stoic, though, holds in common with their ancient counterpart the understanding that one does not control the world around oneself and that it is therefore irrational to hold oneself accountable for outcomes in deliberative bodies like a senate. This understanding, however, does not absolve the agent from the obligation to act virtuously, to live out their values, in the contributions they make to those bodies. The temptation to privilege personal convenience (whether in the classroom or in an administrative office) over more fairly serving others is, to the Stoics, an invitation to vice. Giving in to vice, under general virtue-ethical understanding, becomes, over time, a habit. One

may become, over time, accustomed to one's role in an institution that, while it can't do *everything*, may very well be able to do *more* to temper the competition between the privileged and the disempowered.

Given that the countervailing force before this agent is entrenched intergenerational privilege, it seems fair to argue that it will persist irrespective of even concerted levelling or remedial action. While it is likely correct that tournaments are the most practical way to allocate most seats, this argument loses some of its justification as we move beyond minimum, pedagogically necessary thresholds. What we do beyond that can come to reflect our institutional convenience, our desire not to disrupt large systems, and our tacit or explicit elitism. It is useful, therefore, to ask to what extent one is acting virtuously within one's station by leaving these systems unchallenged, some of these tournaments unlevelled, and some of these ills unremedied. To do these things risks dragging us away from the core mission of the university as an institution, but failing to do so is a failure to act in light of the justice these institutions are often said to promote. If one is able to seek, and sometimes bring about, change in the face of these systems of privilege and exclusion, one cannot fail to try without sacrificing a certain claim to virtue.

One's day is surely more comfortable when their institution raises its "standards" (for students, not teaching) – when it excludes those with chronically poor educational experiences and those who do not fit neatly into the cultural milieu of the university. It is easy, to be sure, to draw tremendous satisfaction from working with the very "best" students. This surely does not, however, make one a good educator in the ethical sense of the term. To the extent that there is consensus on the goals of empowerment, decolonization, and liberation, there are levers of change close at hand. Using them is inconvenient, and sometimes onerously so, but pulling those levers now and then is part and parcel of the obligation to be good educators, and in so doing, good people.

Acknowledgments

This paper was presented as the 2019 Early Career Invited Lecture for the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society.

References

- Boliver, V., Powell, M., & Moreira, T. (2018). Organizational identity as a barrier to widening access in Scottish universities. *Social Sciences*, 7(151), 1–16.
- Burns, D. P. (2011). *Stoicism, moral education and material goods*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta, Canada.
- Burns, D. P., Chinnery, A., Ruitenberg, C. W., & Waddington, D. I. (2010). Taking on the traditions in philosophy of education: A symposium. *Paidensis: International Journal in Philosophy of Education*, 18(2), 3–18.
- Davies, S., Maldonado, V., & Zarifa, D. (2014). Effectively maintaining inequality in Toronto: Predicting students' destinations in Ontario universities. *Canadian Sociological Association*, 51(1), 22–53.
- Edwards, D., Friedman, T., & Pearce, J. (2013). Same admission tools, different outcomes: A critical perspective on validity in three undergraduate medical schools. *BMC Medical Education*, 13(173), 1–7.
- Fallis, G. (2013). *Rethinking higher education: Participation, research and differentiation*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Howell, S. J., & Pender, M. (2015). The cost and benefits of enrolling in an academically matched college. *Economics of Educational Review*, 51, 152–168.
- Kohn, A. (2013). De-testing and de-grading schools: Authentic alternatives to accountability and standardization. *Counterpoints*, 451, 143–153.

- Kotzee, B., & Martin, C. (2013). Who should go to university? Justice in university admission. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 47(4), 623–641.
- Martin, C. (2017). Should the public pay for higher education? Equality, liberty, and educational debt. *Theory and Research in Education*, 15(1), 38–52.
- Pring, R. (2004). *Philosophy of education: Aims, theory, common sense and research*. London: Continuum.
- Smith, J., Pender, M., & Howell J. (2013). The full extent of student-college academic undermatch. *Economics of Education Review*, 32(c), 246–61.
- Sweet, R., Robson, K., & Adamuti-Trache, M. (2017). Ethically and effectively maintained inequality in BC universities. *Canadian Sociological Association*, 54(4), 487–518.

About the Author

David P. Burns is a scholar of education policy and philosophy, and is the current associate vice-president, academic at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.