

Of Myth, Merit, and Desert

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In my professional and academic roles, I question many things about merit. I question whether increasingly popular test-optional admissions policies actually allow for more nuance in admissions decisions, or if institutions are creatively upholding old meritocratic standards.¹ I question “merit” scholarship practices.² I question whether merit is an individual attribute at all, or whether it is simply something that “The Institution” has designed and reproduced for its own purposes.³ Yet, if there is one thing I have *not* questioned in many years as a university administrator and higher education scholar, it is whether or not “merit” is real, material, and consequential for how students are brought into and moved through the university system. In this response to Charles Bingham’s paper, I will not, therefore, argue against the author’s central tenet that meritocracy is material. Rather, I will suggest that perhaps a clarification of terms may be helpful in distinguishing the so-called myth of merit from the material system that is meritocracy. I will discuss Bingham’s treatment of the concepts of “merit,” “meritocracy,” and “myth,” paying particular attention to where claims need substantiation and what terms require nuanced definitions. Then, drawing on the tensions that are highlighted (but not explicitly named) in Bingham’s work, I will suggest a more explicit way to think and talk about these ideas that may allow for a clearer understanding of the system versus the myth of merit.

Bingham makes several major claims that I will address here: first, that merit and meritocracy are largely understood by educational theorists as “myth”; second, that, while merit is a myth, it is *also* a system or apparatus with material consequences; and, third, that “merit blindness” has a direct link to color-blindness, and both are firmly rooted in Whiteness. There are many insightful and thoughtful ideas in this paper. The highlighting of Barbara Applebaum’s work to show merit as working in tandem with colorblind mentality to create a world where White people can believe that their successes are purely attributable to their own achievements is particularly helpful to my own thinking about meritocracy. Similarly, Bingham’s warning that such an illusion is dangerous and has real-life,

material consequences is crucial for educational scholars and practitioners alike. And yet it is in this space—the space that assumes a common understanding that meritocracy is myth—that I would like to point out a need for caution, clarification, and substantiation around terms and big claims.

Throughout the article, Bingham uses the terms “merit” and “meritocracy” frequently and interchangeably. I would venture to suggest that many educational scholars are at least vaguely familiar with these terms, but given the boldness of the claims made regarding these ideas, it is important to specifically define what is meant by each. In fact, defining these ideas may help both to clarify and to support the arguments made about them. Meritocracy, for example, is commonly understood as a system for awarding or allocating coveted social goods.⁵ Its very definition indicates that it is systemic and material in nature. Even scholars and practitioners who spend a great deal of time thinking about merit and meritocracy may struggle to follow an argument that these ideas are both myth and system without first understanding how exactly merit and meritocracy are defined in this context. “Merit” is a term that perhaps means different things to different people. Conservatives tend to believe that merit is reflected by supposedly neutral metrics like test scores and grade point averages, whereas progressives may view merit as leadership and overcoming obstacles.⁶ Scholars, too, understand merit in varying ways. Lani Guinier, for example, makes a differentiation between testocratic merit and democratic merit.⁷ Benjamin Baez views merit not as an individual attribute but as an institutional construct meant to help universities attend to their own goals.⁸ Defining just what is meant by “merit” in this context is crucial: objecting to merit as simply the *idea* that individual attributes are used to divvy out social goods is very different from objecting to the specific qualities assumed to denote such merit.

In a similar vein, Bingham builds his arguments about the systematicity of merit and meritocracy in contrast to a claim that merit and meritocracy are commonly viewed as a myth that has been “debunked as a false belief.” Is this truly the popular consensus of scholars, theorists, and philosophers of education? If so, *what exactly is the myth?* That merit and meritocracy exist at all? That the playing field is—or ever was—equal? That meritocracy fairly distributes

societal goods? As a reader, I am left unsettled by an argument that claims to be in direct opposition to a scholarly consensus that these forces are simply myth when the author *also* claims that “meritocracy functions as an ideological myth.” This myth—whatever it is—cannot be assumed to be a shared understanding across audiences. If the point of the paper is to argue that merit is *not* simply myth, then there must be a clear counterpoint to argue against.

Why am I going on about definitions and nuance—why do these things matter? Why must we talk so carefully, explicitly, and intentionally about merit, meritocracy, and myth? Because, as Bingham notes, there is, indeed, a lot of matter to merit. “Merit” scholarships are a common recruitment technique both at the state level and among public universities.¹² “Merit” is used in the courts as an incompatible counterpoint to race-conscious admissions.¹³ “Merit” determines who is in and who is out.¹⁴ To simply say that “merit is a myth. It does not work and never has” is to gloss over the ways that merit *has* worked: worked to preserve the advantage of the elite, worked to dismantle slowly Affirmative Action, worked to hide systemic inequities behind the illusion of an even playing field. In short, “merit” is such a powerful, material force in our society that if we do not carefully explain what we mean when we talk about it or wrestle with it in a very nuanced way ourselves, we will be utterly unable to work against this force in either scholarly or practical work.

I struggle with these issues in my own work. I find myself arguing against the idea that measures like test scores can possibly denote merit only to propose as an alternative predictive metrics that actually rely on test score data as a starting point.¹⁶ I rally against meritocracy in my writing, and yet I work in my professional life to *redefine* merit instead.¹⁷ The tension I feel—and the tension I think might be driving some of the ambiguity in Bingham’s thoughtful work—is this: when we talk about merit and meritocracy, what we are often really grappling with is *desert*. “Merit” is believed to denote deservingness, but those of us who are critical of the metrics used in meritocratic systems (and of the history that brought them into being) know that the two cannot necessarily be understood synonymously. So, when “merit” is left undefined and talked about as either an ideological myth or a material system without explicit explanations

as to *how* these myths or systems are functioning as such, skeptics and enthusiasts of meritocracy alike might assume that what is being discussed is desert.

I would like to offer a clarification of terms that I believe reflects the spirit of Bingham's paper and that may offer some nuance to these ideas. Meritocracy is a system that distributes social goods, a system that was imagined to create a society where individuals could succeed based on their own individual effort and ability but that was built to reflect and reward the values and resources of a White aristocracy.¹⁸ Merit, then, is whatever attribute we determine might reflect someone's deservingness of the social good(s) in question. Generally, it has been accepted in practice that test scores can denote such deservingness.¹⁹ Neither meritocracy nor merit are myth; they are real, and they *do* distribute social goods to very specific people.

Though merit and meritocracy are real, this realm is not without myth. The myth is not that merit and meritocracy are material; the myth is that testocratic merit, in its popular form, actually has the power to identify all the individuals in our society who most deserve social goods—who have actually worked the hardest, who have the most promise, who can think in innovative ways to move our society forward.²⁰ The myth is that all people who find themselves in possession of limited social goods got there purely by way of their own deservingness, divorced from history and structural inequities that may have fallen in their favor. By making this important distinction between “merit” and deservingness, we can say with greater authority that a myth can, indeed, also be a system.

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²⁰ Guinier, *Tyranny of the Meritocracy*.