

The Myth of Meritocracy

By Robert Fuller

America is a meritocracy in name only. While opportunity is more equal than in aristocracies, it is still far from merit-based. The last half-century has seen an assault on race, gender, and age-based barriers to equal opportunity, but the playing field upon which Americans compete is still a steep hill, not a level playing field.

Though merit is presumably based on rank, rank is hardly the neutral arbiter we like to think it is. Paradoxically, it is rank itself that now poses the greatest obstacle to basing rewards solely on merit.

Consider a footrace. Presuming a fair start, the blue ribbon goes to the fastest runner. But was the race open to all? Did the runners stay in lanes? Were the competitors drug-free? Even if these questions are answered in the negative, is today's winner, tomorrow's? Rank changes depending on eligibility, fairness, and from one day to the next.

In a true meritocracy, rank would have to be precisely defined, and rewards would reflect current rank within a large and growing number of narrowly defined niches. Individuals' talents, abilities, and skills vary markedly from niche to niche. Composite, overall rankings that ignore variations from specialty to specialty result in spurious rankings. We don't simply declare the winner of the mile the best runner, because that would overlook the fact that there are sprinters and marathoners who, in their events, can outdo the fastest miler. Merit has no significance beyond the precise realm wherein it is assessed. From this perspective, IQ measures not the amorphous trait "Intelligence"-now recognized to assume a myriad of specialized forms, each of which could no doubt be further differentiated-but rather the ability to do well on a particular kind of test. Similarly, ranking schools by their students' average test scores is a measure of how students average on those tests, not the schools' educational merit.

In a real meritocracy, high rank in one specialty, as determined on one occasion, would not signify merit in general or indefinitely. Achievers of high rank may use their position to disadvantage those who would challenge them, or to hang on to rewards they may once have earned but have since ceased to merit. An aura of social rank-a vestige of aristocratic class-attaches itself to winners (who are seen as somebodies), and eludes runners-up (who are seen as nobodies).

This discriminatory potential of rank can be seen in hierarchies of all kinds: schools and universities; firms, corporations, and businesses; labor unions; medical, religious and non-profit organizations; the police and military; governments and bureaucracies.

All these institutions are susceptible to a malady that is profoundly at odds with honest meritocracy. As indicated, the malady arises because, within any hierarchy, rank signifies authority, and the power vested in rank-holders can be turned to provide non-merit-based

advantages over those of lower rank. This same power of position then shields them from the consequences of having victimized their subordinates.

By analogy with race or gender-based abuse and discrimination, rank-based discrimination can be called "rankism." Like racism and sexism, rankism is a source of indignities and inequity that befall the less powerful. In the presence of rankism, meritocracy is a myth because past rank, not present merit, determines rewards.

Like racism, rankism takes two forms, interpersonal and institutional. The former includes condescension and bad manners; the latter includes racism and sexism; monopolistic business practices; aristocracy and theocracy; educational and spiritual rankism; and governmental, non-profit, and other forms of bureaucratic corruption.

Hierarchies often contract rankism within years of being established. Like a parasitical disease, it subverts their original purpose to the narrower goal of advancing the well-being of the ranking members. Immunizing institutions against the dysfunction of rankism requires full disclosure, open budgets, and multi-directional accountability.

The Founding Fathers showed the way. The Constitution they devised gives citizens a recourse against civic rankism. Democracy consists of a set of procedures-separation of powers, a Bill of Rights, trial by jury, the vote-that, taken together, foster and protect individual responsibility and mutual accountability. These procedures constitute our defense against tyranny.

Since no hierarchy is immune from rankism, every hierarchy needs an immune system. To keep hierarchies from falling prey to rankism, we must erect explicit accountability procedures analogous to those erected against rankism in our civic institutions. Otherwise, the high ranking will inevitably yield to the temptation to substitute self-aggrandizement for service.

What this means is that every hierarchy needs two-way accountability procedures-upwards and downwards. It is worth remembering that accountability can be undercut in both directions. If ranking officials do not have authority commensurate with their responsibility-if their offices are stripped of decision-making authority and made merely ceremonial-they cannot serve the larger, group purpose. The tyranny of the majority and the tyranny of structurelessness are as incompatible with effective governance as the tyranny of the tyrant.

Another component of every hierarchy's immune system against rankism is a Bill of Rights. Analogous to the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, there should be a Patient Bill of Rights, a Student Bill of Rights, an Employee Bill of Rights, and a Children's Bill of Rights.

Just as HIV attacks the immune system, so too the immune system we establish to prevent rankism in one hierarchy is vulnerable to the threat of rankism from another. An example is the current system of campaign contributions, which undercuts the democratic

principle of one person, one vote in civic affairs. Politicians become accountable to the special interests who pay for their reelection rather than to the citizens they are supposed to serve. Absent the accountability provided by an informed electorate, democratic government reverts to its rankist predecessor-oligarchy. Senators and Representatives become fund-raisers, beholden to their patrons. Government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" perishes from the earth.

Meritocracy can only be a myth in the presence of rankism. Until there are effective procedures that provide a recourse against rankism in the schools and the workplace, American meritocracy is unworthy of the American dream.