

Survey: Nearly 600 colleges use legacy as part of competitive admissions

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Legacy admissions are under scrutiny after the undoing of affirmative action in college admissions. New data shows, for the first time, how widespread the practice may be.

Nearly 600 colleges consider whether applicants' parents, siblings or other relatives attended the institution to which they are applying, according to data published Tuesday by the National Center for Education Sciences.

The 579 colleges identified by an NCES survey said that as of fall 2022, they considered whether college hopefuls had a familial link to their respective institutions. That was about a third of the more than 1,900 schools in the survey with so-called competitive admissions – colleges where students cannot simply enroll and start taking classes. NCES said it was the first time it has collected information on the practice.

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Legacy admissions are often associated with the nation's most elite universities, such as Harvard. CHARLES KRUPA/AP FILE

sities, such as the Ivy League. Though NCES didn't name which colleges responded yes, the number who did so indicates the practice extends far beyond top-tier schools.

A search of the federal database on higher education shows those that said they would consider legacy admissions – though it's unclear how often it is considered or how many students are admitted because of it – include Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida; the

State University of New York at Potsdam; and Spelman College, a historically Black private school for women in Atlanta.

"Access to data on legacy applicants is essential for colleges and universities reevaluating their admissions practices and working to build diverse student bodies in the wake of the Supreme Court's disappointing ruling on affirmative action earlier this year," Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said in response to the findings.

In that ruling, on cases filed against Harvard and the University of North Carolina, Justice Neil Gorsuch questioned Harvard's use of legacy admissions in a concurring opinion, pointing out who they are most likely to benefit.

"Its preferences for the children of donors, alumni, and faculty are no help to applicants who cannot boast of their parents' good fortune or trips to the alumni tent all their lives," Gorsuch wrote. "While race-neutral on their face, too, these preferences undoubtedly benefit white and wealthy applicants the most."