



POLITICS

California bans legacy admissions for Stanford, other private universities

By Nanette Asimov, Higher Education Reporter
Updated Sep 30, 2024 12:05 p.m.



Stanford University, like other private colleges in California, would be barred from favoring relatives of donors under a law signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom on Sunday.

California has become the second state to prohibit private colleges and universities from giving extra consideration to applicants who are related to alumni or donors.

AB1780, signed into law by Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday, bans so-called legacy admissions at private campuses that benefit from state funding, such as the Cal Grants used by thousands of students. Stanford University and the University of Southern California will be among the impacted campuses.

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"In California, everyone should be able to get ahead through merit, skill, and hard work," Newsom said in a statement. "The California Dream shouldn't be accessible to just a lucky few, which is why we're opening the door to higher education wide enough for everyone, fairly."

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Maryland, which approved a similar ban this year, is the only other state to outlaw legacy admissions at private institutions. Virginia, Illinois and Colorado have banned legacy admissions at public universities only.

As of Sept. 1, 2025, private institutions in California will no longer be allowed to consider whether applicants are connected to alumni or donors when deciding to admit them. The first class affected will be students entering in fall 2026. The penalty for violating the law is detailed disclosures related to the favoritism, without disclosing the admitted students' names.

"Hard work, good grades and a well-rounded background should earn you a spot in the incoming class — not the size of the check your family can write or who you're related to," said Assembly Member Phil Ting, D-San Francisco, the bill's author, who has called legacy admissions "affirmative action for the wealthiest Americans."

Former first lady Michelle Obama referenced that idea in her speech at this summer's Democratic National Convention, noting that most people "will never benefit from the affirmative action of generational wealth."

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While there's no state prohibition on such preferences at California's public campuses, the University of California and California State University have policies against them. Even so, a 2020 state audit found that UC Berkeley had admitted at least 55 underqualified students based on connections and donations, sometimes with the help of a regent.

With hundreds of private colleges and universities in California — nonprofit and for-profit alike — it isn't immediately clear how many accept public money and would be subject to penalties if they give preferential treatment to alumni and donor relatives after the ban takes effect.

Six private universities in California reported this summer that they gave legacy admission preferences for the class that enrolled in fall 2023. Annual disclosures had been required for the past five years under another state law, also by Ting, that expired this year.

One of the six was Stanford, which admitted 295 children of alumni last fall, or 13.6% of freshmen — all of whom met admissions standards, the university said.

Stanford, asked to respond to the new law and whether university officials will comply, said only that "the legislation does not take effect until September 2025. During that time, Stanford will be continuing to review its admissions policies."

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The University of Southern California reported giving preference to 1,791 alumni relatives in admission last fall, while Santa Clara University reported 38. Claremont McKenna and Harvey Mudd, both in Claremont (Los Angeles County), each admitted 15 legacies. Northeastern University Oakland, on the former Mills College campus, admitted fewer than 10.

Critics of AB1780, including the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities, were able to soften the bill this year by eliminating what would have been hefty financial penalties on violators.

Instead, the penalty for practicing legacy preferences will be public exposure.

Schools will have to post details annually about who benefited from the preferential treatment, though without identifying individual students.

The public will learn, in the aggregate, about the wealth of the students' families, their ethnicity, their county of residence and their athletic status. Those details — plus admission rates for legacy versus non-legacy students — will appear on the California Justice Department's website.

Anti-legacy efforts picked up steam after the U.S. Supreme Court made it illegal in 2023 for colleges to consider race or ethnicity in admissions.

"Students spoke up and California lawmakers listened," said Ryan Gieslikowski, a recent Stanford graduate and lead organizer for Class Action, a nonprofit that has been pushing for similar bans across the country. "This is a victory for aspiring students who can't rely on family connections and net-worth to get them into college."

Sophie Callcott, a legacy admit to Stanford who graduated this spring, has worked with Class Action for more than a year.

"I'm so happy to see California take a step in what feels like the clearly and objectively right direction," Callcott said. "Our state's wealth of exceptional colleges and universities shouldn't be gatekept behind a student's parent's privilege."

Jessie Ryan, president of the nonprofit Campaign for College Opportunity, said that legacy and donor preferences disproportionately disadvantage underrepresented minority applicants.

"In light of last year's Supreme Court ruling on race-conscious admissions, we have had to double down on removing systemic barriers" that prevent Black, Latino, Native and other students of color from accessing higher education, Ryan said.

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She described two other higher education bills signed by Newsom as also beneficial to underrepresented students:

- SB1348 establishes a "Black-Serving Institution" designation in California to recognize colleges and universities that enroll transfer and graduate large numbers of Black students, as well as provide "comprehensive support." The bill was introduced by Sen. Steven Bradford, D-Gardena.
AB2057 streamlines the community college-to-university transfer process and prioritizes science, technology, engineering and math programs for transfer. The bill was authored by Assembly Member Marc Berman, D-Menlo Park.

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Sep 30, 2024 | Updated Sep 30, 2024 12:05 p.m.

Author bio for Nanette Asimov, Higher Education Reporter, with social media icons.

Nanette covers California's public universities — the University of California and California State University — as well as community colleges and private universities. She's written about sexual misconduct at UC and Stanford, the precarious state of accreditation at City College of San Francisco, and what happens when the UC Berkeley student government discovers a gay rights opponent in its midst.

But writing about higher education also means getting a look at the brainy creations of students and faculty. And robotic suits that help paralyzed people walk. Online collections of folk songs going back hundreds of years. And innovations touching on everything from virtual reality to baseball.

Nanette is also covering the COVID-19 pandemic as health editor during the first six months of the crisis, which quickly ended her brief tenure as interim investigations editor.

Previously, Nanette covered K-12 education. Her stories led to changes in charter school laws, prompted a ban on Scientology in California public schools, and exposed cheating and censorship in testing.

A past president of the Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California chapter, Nanette has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and a B.A. in sociology from Queens College. She speaks English and Spanish.

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