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California Bans Legacy Admissions at Private Universities

The change will affect Stanford University, the University of Southern California and other private colleges in the state.

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Gov. Gavin Newsom of California signed legislation banning legacy admissions at private colleges in the state. Kenny Holston/The New York Times

By Shawn Hubler and Soumya Karlamangla
Shawn Hubler reported from Sacramento, and Soumya Karlamangla from San Francisco.

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California will ban private colleges and universities, including some of the nation's most selective institutions, from giving special consideration to applicants who have family or other connections to the schools, a practice known as legacy admissions.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed legislation on Monday that will prohibit the practice starting in the fall of 2025.

The prohibition, which will affect Stanford University, the University of Southern California and others, comes at a time when institutions nationwide have been rewriting their admissions rules to reflect a Supreme Court ruling last summer that banned race-based considerations in the college admissions process. That case, which focused on affirmative action, revealed the extent to which legacy status has played a role in selection at elite schools.

The University of California, the California State University System and other public California campuses have banned legacy admissions for decades. But private colleges continued to give some preference to the descendants of alumni or major donors.

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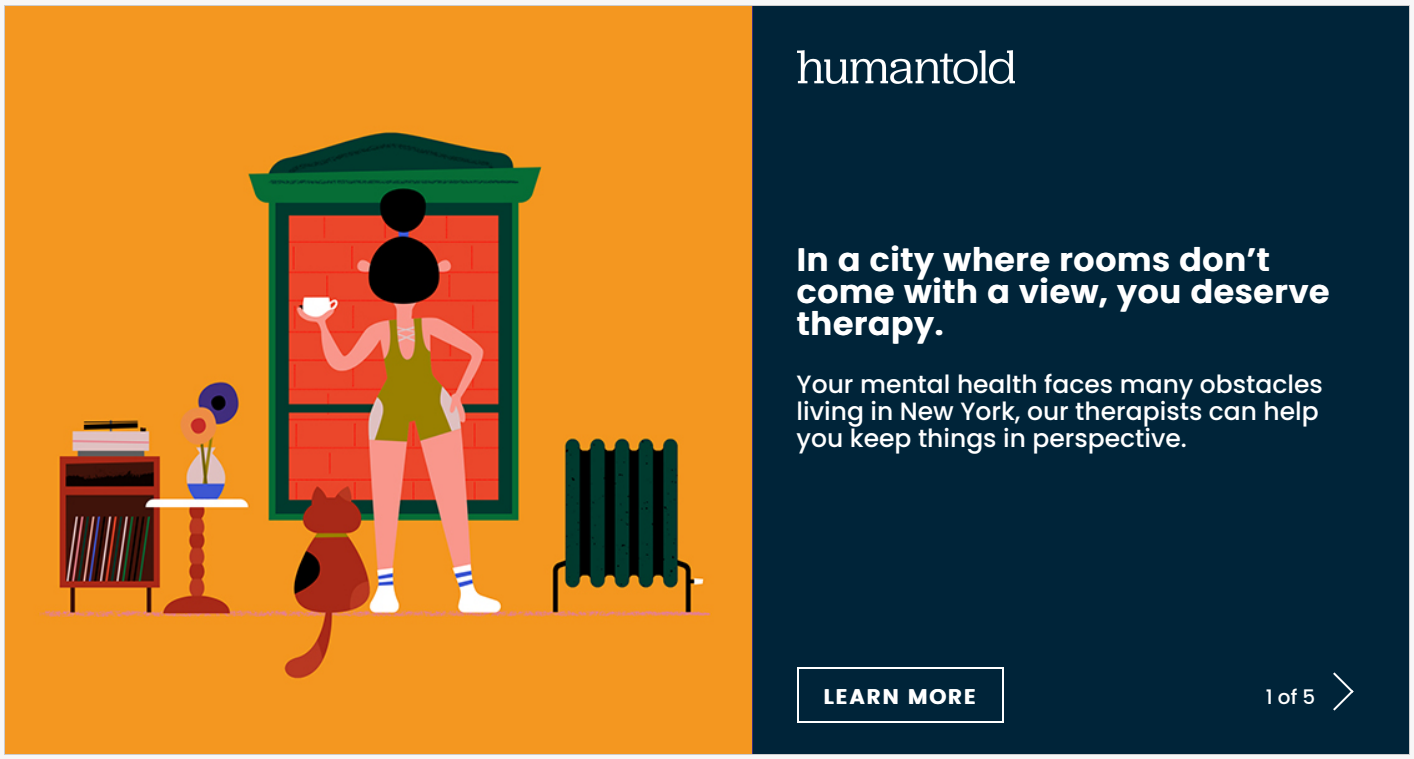

In a statement, Mr. Newsom said that "merit, skill and hard work" should determine college admissions. "The California Dream shouldn't be accessible to just a lucky few," he said, "which is why we're opening the door to higher education wide enough for everyone, fairly."

Many selective colleges have historically offered special consideration for the children or grandchildren of alumni, in part to reinforce endowments that pay for a host of campus programs and subsidize tuition for students of lesser financial means.

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Students who are admitted with legacy preferences are much more likely to be white and wealthy than other applicants, and the practice has never been particularly popular with the broader public. In a 2022 poll by Pew Research Center, 75 percent of American adults said that university admissions should not hinge on whether someone's relative attended the school.

"If we value diversity in higher education, we must level the playing field," Assemblyman Phil Ting, a San Francisco Democrat who wrote the bill, said in a statement. "That means making the college application process more fair and equitable. 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."

Only one other state, Maryland, bans legacy preferences at both private and public institutions. Illinois, Virginia and Colorado ban legacy admissions, but only at public universities and colleges.

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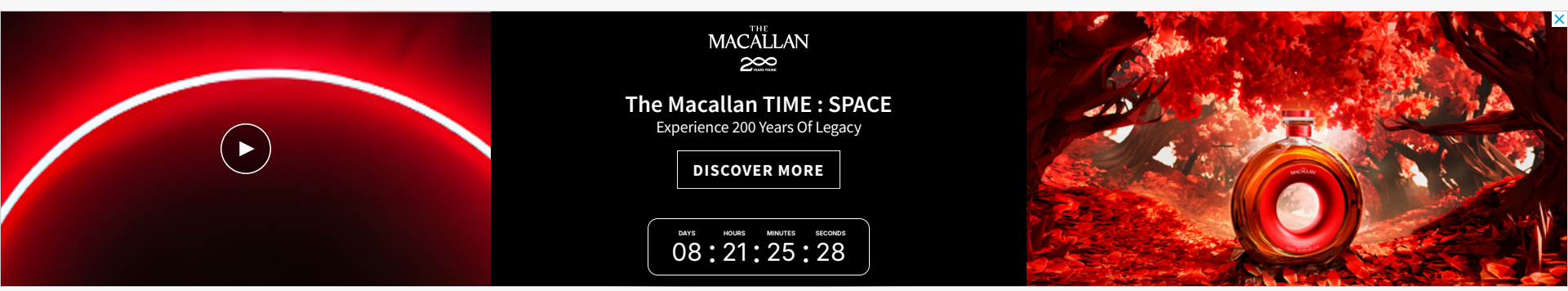

After the Varsity Blues scandal in 2019, in which parents seeking to win spots in top-ranked schools for their children were found to have paid bribes and falsified their children's credentials, Mr. Ting tried to push through a bill banning legacy preferences in California. That effort fell short.

But he did succeed with a measure requiring private colleges to report to the Legislature how many students they admit because of ties to alumni or donors. Those reports showed that the practice was most widespread at Stanford and U.S.C., where, at both schools, about 14 percent of students who were admitted in the fall of 2022 had legacy or donor connections. At Santa Clara University, Mr. Newsom's alma mater, 13 percent of admissions had such ties.

Republicans as well as Democrats in the California Legislature voted for Mr. Ting's latest proposal, which will punish institutions that flout the law by publishing their names on a California Department of Justice website. An earlier version had proposed that schools face civil penalties for violating the law, but that provision was removed in the State Senate.

The new rules will take effect Sept. 1, 2025, with the new process expected to be reflected in admissions to the entering class in the fall of 2026.

Nazli Dakad, 22, a Stanford student, said that when she arrived on campus, she was surprised to learn how many fellow students had parents who also attended Stanford, giving them a leg up in navigating their new environment.

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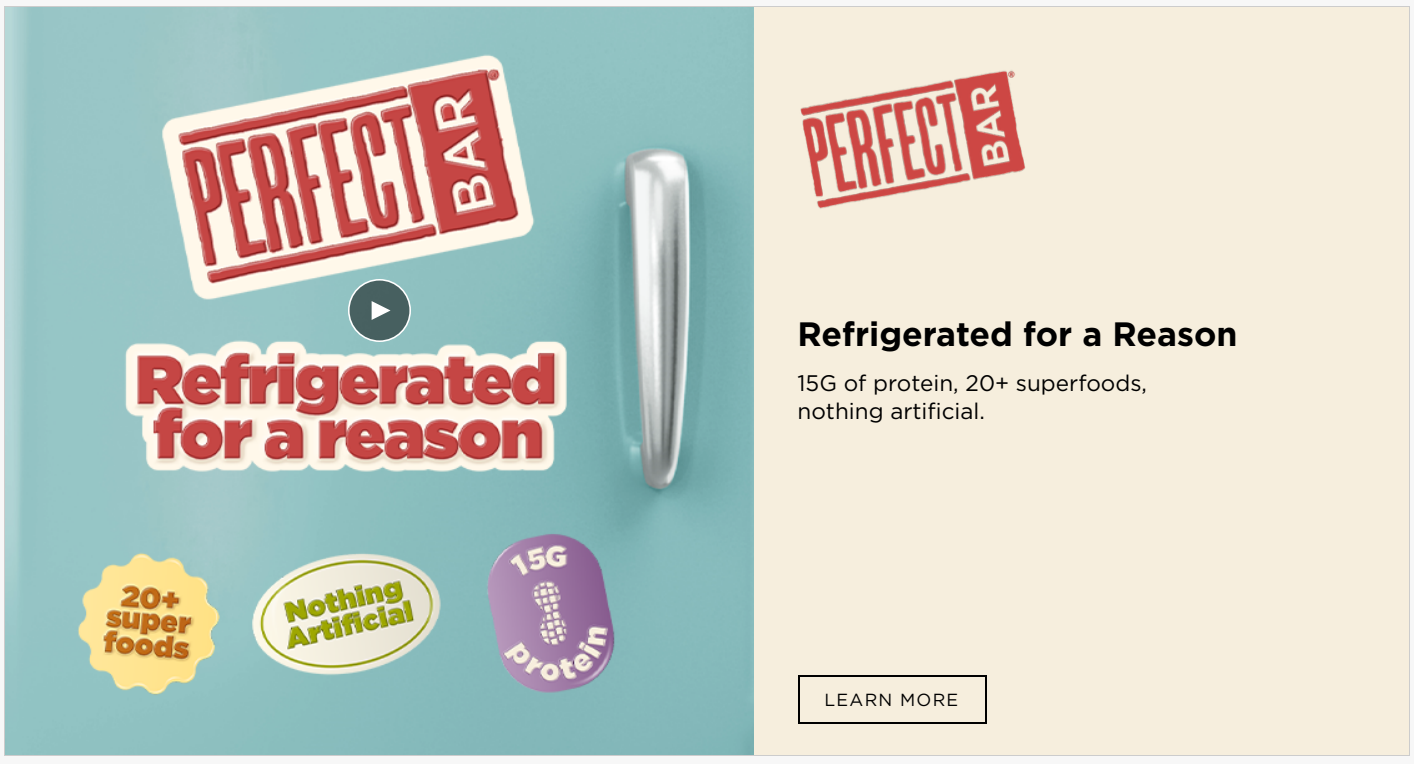

Ms. Dakad, a fifth-year student in a combined undergraduate-masters program, helped push for the bill's passage as an organizer with Class Action, a student-led group to end legacy admissions. "I would feel prouder of my institution if they didn't practice legacy or donor preference," she said.

The preferences given to legacy students began to seem especially unfair to her after the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action, Ms. Dakad said, because affirmative action tended to helped students who lacked other advantages, while legacy admissions tend to help those who already have them.

State data submitted in June suggested that at least a half dozen private colleges and universities in the state continued to give preferential treatment to relatives of graduates and donors, according to Mr. Ting's office.

For the fall of 2023, U.S.C. led the pack, admitting 1,791 such students, slightly more than the 1,740 admitted the previous year, the reports showed. Stanford had 295 legacy admissions, compared with 266 the prior year. Santa Clara University reported just 38, compared with 1,133 the prior year. Claremont McKenna and Harvey Mudd each had 15 legacy students.

Shawn Hubler is based in Sacramento and covers California news, policy trends and personalities. She has been a journalist for more than four decades. More about Shawn Hubler

Soumya Karlamangla is a Times reporter who covers California. She is based in the Bay Area. More about Soumya Karlamangla

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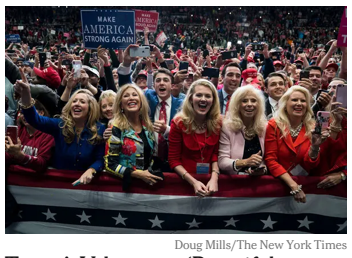

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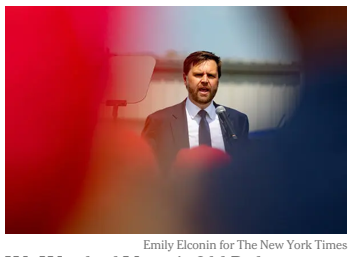

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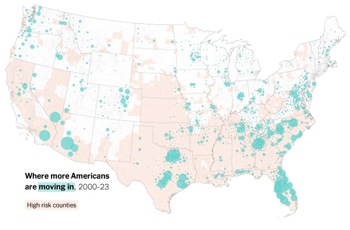

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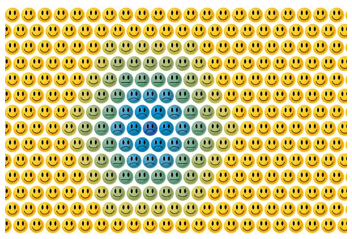

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