

Black History

Should High School Punishments Go On College Applications?

Groups say questions about discipline unfairly single out African American applicants

By Carolyn Thompson
Associated Press

They are basic yes-no questions that ask whether a college applicant ever got into trouble in high school. Yet they're anything but simple, say some who want run-ins at school or with the law taken out of the college admissions equation.

Advocates, school districts and even some colleges share concerns about youthful mistakes haunting students into adulthood, especially minority students, who federal statistics show are suspended and arrested at disproportionately higher rates than their white peers.

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law last week called for the removal of discipline questions from the

issued similar appeals, saying that while most colleges collect the information, few have formal policies guiding its use.

"So long as racial disparities persist at every stage of our criminal justice system, we fully expect that these kinds of questions will unfairly deny educational opportunity to, or have a chilling effect on, African Americans and other minority groups," wrote Kristen Clarke, Lawyers' Committee president and executive director, in a letter to the Common Application.

At a time of heightened vigilance against campus shootings and terrorism, admissions officials say questions about student discipline are seen as a necessary piece of a much larger picture.

"College admissions is trying to take educated



In this Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2016 photo, Miaija Jawara poses for a portrait in New York. Jawara's approach when it came time to disclose on a college application a one-day suspension for a schoolyard fight that happened in 10th grade was to describe using the experience to work toward in-school restorative justice in her New York City school. The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law on Thursday, Feb. 17, 2016, is calling for the removal of discipline questions from the Common Application used by more than 620 colleges and universities.

lege and a board member of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling.

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are going to come along with it," he said.

At Marist, the questions have turned up everything from private

in context.

The Common Application, completed by 860,000 students last year, added the discipline questions at the request of participating universities in 2006-07. Colleges using their own applications often include them, as well.

New York University in January asked the Common Application to review whether the queries do anything to make campuses safer or discourage minority applicants. The university, which uses the application, this year began ignoring whether the criminal conviction box had been checked until after an initial screening.

The Common App is looking at the issues, said Aba Blankson, senior director at the not-for-profit group. In the meantime, applicants who check yes have room to elaborate.

"A student can say in ninth grade, I was expelled or suspended and because of that incident, the alcohol thing I did, I became interested in (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) or became a volunteer," she said.

That was high school senior Miaija Jawara's approach when it came

time to disclose a one-day suspension for a schoolyard fight that happened in 10th grade. She described using the experience to work toward in-school restorative justice in her New York City school.

Even so, "It made me feel like I'm lessening my chances of being admitted," said Jawara.

"It was, like, two years ago. I'm definitely not the same person I was then," she said. "So I think they shouldn't judge me on something I did when I was so naive and so immature. I've grown since that experience."

There were weeks of worry until acceptance letters from Iona College and others arrived. She still wonders, though, what to blame for two rejections.

The school board in Syracuse, New York, voted to no longer share disciplinary information with colleges when asked on the Common Application or elsewhere.

"How many times should a student pay? You make a mistake when you're a ninth grader and it hurts you when you are applying to college?" asked Sharon Contreras, superintendent in Syracuse.

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Common Application used by more than 620 colleges and universities. The Center for Community Alternatives in Syracuse, New York, has

risks, whether it be academic risks or students that have had indiscretions in their past," said Kent Rinehart, dean of admission at Marist Col-

lege and a board member of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling. "After the Virginia Tech

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