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## Student Records: Criminal checks in college admissions carry risks

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By **The Post-Standard Editorial Board**

“Juan,” a young man with a criminal record, didn’t have to disclose it to get into a two-year institution. But he did for the four-year school of his choice. Placed on probation that limited his on-campus opportunities, Juan graduated with honors and entered an MBA program at the same school. Probation continued, however, until a determined Juan successfully appealed.

“Kanye” fell in with the wrong crowd in high school and ended up charged with felony armed robbery. As a youthful offender, he completed high school and got into college — without having to disclose his record. He graduated, and now directs a national program combating school violence.



The Associated Press

ELITE GROUP: A view of members of the Class of 2011 during commencement at Princeton University Tuesday.

“Alfreda” was convicted of a felony and enrolled in community college. A dean’s list student, she was discouraged by her first rejection letter from a four-year school. Another college asked for more information on her record, which she said felt humiliating. She complied — and was promptly rejected. Alfreda remains proud that she found work in the mental health field.

These case studies are in an important new report on criminal records and college admissions from the Center for Community Alternatives, a pioneering agency with offices in Syracuse and New York City that seeks alternatives to incarceration and helps inmates rejoin society. CCA director Marsha Weissman and co-author Alan Rosenthal already have briefed staffers from the Federal Interagency Re-entry Council in Washington, D.C., which is considering a warning to institutions of higher learning about the risks of using criminal records in admissions.

The study found little consistency in treating criminal records in college admissions. Nearly 40 percent of institutions do not use the information. Campuses that do background checks do not appear safer than others.

CCA uncovered a haphazard pattern of policies and procedures. Some schools seek information but don’t use it. Others don’t collect it, but use it if it’s there. Some scrutinize every student, others act only if a record is disclosed, while still others pick and choose. Most sex offenders are rejected, along with three-quarters of drug offenders and 35 percent of those with misdemeanors. Background checks are handled by an array of school officials. Less than half

the schools that check have written policies; only 40 percent train staff to interpret records.

The CCA study recommends ending criminal record checks in admissions. If schools continue the practice, CCA says, ask applicants who are already conditionally accepted; focus on recent felonies; develop expertise; be transparent and consistent; and offer on-campus support for students with records.

"This is a civil rights issue," the report argues, quoting Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren's opinion in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954: "(Education) is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms."

As many as 100 million Americans carry some kind of criminal baggage. More black men have been jailed than have earned college degrees. Education offers a reliable route out of recidivism and toward rehabilitation, so colleges have a key role to play. The higher education community would do well to consider CCA's groundbreaking study.

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