

# IDEAS 31

**International Online Teachers Society  
Debate  
Educational Materials For  
Advance and Upper Intermediate  
Students**



**International Online Teachers Society  
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## CONTENTS

### THE 31ST INTERNATIONAL ONLINE TEACHERS SOCIETY ESSAY CONTEST

MERITOCRACY I THIS JUST AND CRUEL WORLD I Kathlyn Barrozo I	2
MERITOCRACY I THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF MERITOCRACY I Kathlyn Barrozo I	3
MERITOCRACY I MUSINGS OF A MORE SENIOR NATURE I Kathlyn Barrozo I	4
MERITOCRACY I EMPLOYABILITY AND ADVANCEMENT IN THE MODERN ERA I Kathlyn Barrozo I	5
MERITOCRACY I MERITOCRACY – STANDARDIZATION I Marian Baltazar I	6
MERITOCRACY I MERITOCRACY: A DEFINITION ESSAY I Alex Badion I	7



## THIS JUST AND CRUEL WORLD

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The ideology that characterizes meritocracy is, as defined by Wikipedia, "...a system of government or other administration wherein business appointments and responsibilities are objectively assigned to individuals based upon their merits, namely intelligence, credentials and education, as determined through evaluations or examinations." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>)

To put it more plainly, one is given a position based on his abilities, career and educational background. This principle is what we have always been exposed to at school, in which our grades are determined by our performance in our tests, quizzes, practical work, and overall class standing. Institutions of learning may have differences in syllabi, curricula, enrichment programs, key objectives, and many other aspects including their grading systems, but a school grade is something students have to work hard for.

Interestingly, educational institutions use a variety of grading systems: letters, such as A, A+ and A-; ranges, such as 1.25 – 1.5; numbers garnered out of a specific total, such as 6/10; descriptors such as Average, Above Average and Below Average; percentages; and the ubiquitous Grade Point Average or GPA system commonly in use at tertiary levels of education in some nations. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grade\\_\(education\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grade_(education)) ). This writer loves how some teachers give an E for "Effort". Interestingly, some institutions assign 5.0 as the highest grade, whereas that same grade would guarantee taking either a summer class or taking that particular subject all over again. Prerequisite subjects where a failing grade is obtained means the student does not move on to the more advanced subject until the failure is transformed, no, worked on, to become a passing grade.

In the Philippines, licensure examinations for certain professions are required before one is able to practice. There are, however, "instant" careers that can start immediately after graduation, with appropriate experience and training, of course. For certain professions with practitioners who want to work in foreign countries, the specified "local" or "state" boards in the chosen country of practice still need to be hurdled over. It seems like tests are never-ending for many.

If you consider the merits of meritocracy (pun intended), they are genuinely beneficial in that employers, higher-ups, and authority figures are assured of getting the best talents from among their pool of job candidates. The system inspires people to demonstrate true determination and expertise in order to move up the ranks. The company, organization, or group is then assured of greater productivity and a much better perspective for the future.

Unfortunately, some organizations directly bypass genuine talent and hard work, with accompanying expertise, in favor of those candidates who are popular, personally known by the hiring officer, endorsed by an influential figure, or worse, more personable and attractive than others. Sadly, I have heard of such stories -the personable part, especially- from many of my own students.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. In your country, how are candidates screened for job openings?
2. Do you think the system of hiring employees is just in your country? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever experienced discrimination in the workplace? How?
4. Which do you think is a much better qualification: beauty and personality, or intelligence and skills? Why do you think so?
5. What specific jobs do you think truly require beauty and personality as qualifications? What about those that require intelligence and skills? Elaborate on your answer/s.



## THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF MERITOCRACY

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Majority of individuals place a premium on the concept of meritocracy since it can be considered a fair form of giving rewards where they are due. Operating on the premises of objectivity and standardized achievement, meritocracy can indeed be beneficial. One does not advance to any position without having certain qualifications such as education, intelligence, credentials, ability and competency. One is set apart from others because of those factors.

In the pursuit of higher education, meritocracy is the normal manner of administering a sense of organization and advancement to students. Grades are computed based on actual performance in periodic examinations, scholastic projects, practical activities and overall curricular performance. Failure to make the cut warrants lagging behind one's peers through a failing mark. Just as companies are said to be in the red when their business do not go as expected, students are under pressure to work, work, and work on their grades or otherwise risk failure. Moving upward is the key to further advancement, and students are ill-advised to dilly-dally with their time in worthless pursuits. Some say only the young are prone to such downfall, but even the supposedly older (and supposedly wiser) ones sometimes do get afflicted with those very shortcomings.

For the chosen ones, however, there may be a tendency to become at once complacent and arrogant, being set apart as they are based on their merits. Those whose credentials carry more weight than those of others can become over-confident of themselves and may eventually become victims of false pride. Take for instance a young teacher who has passed a licensure examination and has been in active service for several years. When confronted with a far more skillful but informal teacher, who, despite not having obtained the same degree and not having a license to practice, has had valuable experience and innate talent for the profession, the fully-licensed teacher would predictably refuse to acknowledge her inadequacies. Does the possession of a license indicate greater expertise all the time? It most definitely doesn't. In this case, the licensed teacher merely rides on false pride. Pedagogy gets better with age, as wisdom and good sense always do.

The concept of meritocracy, although proven to be both a qualitative and quantitative ideology, does not always guarantee that only the best and the brightest get to be posted where they need to be. The system of meritocracy may prevent corruption and favoritism, but it has a tendency to become elitist and could lead to rising stratification. Those who are gifted with charisma and genuine talent born out of experience might consistently be placed in the sidelines, while their more credentialed counterparts land the juicier roles at work and in society.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What are the merits of meritocracy? What are its negative effects?
2. What is the system of choosing public officials in your country? Are there qualifications that all candidates must meet in order to run for public office? Be specific, if needed.
3. If you owned a company, how would you hire employees? What framework or system would you specify?
4. When is meritocracy necessary? In what instances is it unnecessary?
5. Do you believe that all public officials are qualified for their specific positions? Why or why not?



## MUSINGS OF A MORE SENIOR NATURE

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I had the (un)fortunate experience of going through the Citizen's Army Training (CAT) as part of our high school curriculum back then. I must say that it was one of the most challenging parts of my high school years, and the most interesting as well. Once a week—I think it was always on a Thursday—we had to go through drills, line up under the afternoon sun in straightly-formed platoons, with each platoon having a platoon leader, a group of platoons having one battalion commander, and two or three (memory eludes me as to exactly how many) battalions under a single Corps Commander. I attended a Catholic girls' school, you see, so we never really covered the entire school quadrangle as you would expect.

Anyway, on every CAT day, we ordinary Privates were required to salute all our CAT officers from the first hour until the last hour of school. Failure to acknowledge any one officer through a smart, clipped salute guaranteed a demerit. And you couldn't really afford to amass a great number of demerits since they constituted an indirect effect on your PE grade. So we were all really careful not to forget the officers' faces, although doing so was absolutely inexcusable given the fact that we were not that many in our batch—only 4 sections with less than 40 or 50 students in each class.

Majority of us found CAT fun and exciting because we would practically be the stars in school on CAT day, lined up as we were in neat rows under the late afternoon sun, performing marching exercises and all sorts of 'soft' military drills. The great uniform helped, too, although the whole getup was too warm for comfort and chafed the neck because of its coarse material.

What we found a real bother was the perpetual saluting thing, considering that we would practically bump into the officers at every turn. If somebody was extra chummy with an officer, she could either be treated deferentially for demeritable doings or undoings, or get demerits like the rest of the privates do. That time was 1985 to 1986, our senior year in high school and the time when the EDSA revolution was brewing and eventually occurred. We were not really aggressive complaining girls—at least most of us. The injustices on CAT day were just overlooked or simply ignored, no big thing really. We were, after all, only completing our high school requirements.

Merits were also granted for jobs well done, especially when an officer was generous enough to give orders which could range from the most idiosyncratic to the most sublime—like fetching something or other\*. Earning them had a very slight effect on one's grade, nevertheless.

Yes, high school was a lot of fun in those days because there were no distractions like computer games, the internet, cellular phones and other thingamajigs to complicate our lives. There was just the CAT, handed-out merits and the much hated demerits.

\*something or other – (Idiom) something whose exact nature you do not know or have forgotten. (<http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/something+or+other>)

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How do you think the writer feels about her high school days? What made her love and hate them at the same time?
2. Is the merit and demerit system a justifiable system of earning any position? Why or why not?
3. When is the merit system helpful? When is it not?
4. How is meritocracy defined? Do you think meritocracy is the only option we should have? Justify your answer.
5. How has the concept of meritocracy affected the way things are done in the world?



## EMPLOYABILITY AND ADVANCEMENT IN THE MODERN ERA

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In today's society, we never get anywhere in our careers unless we carry credentials that make us competitive. Our professional advancement relies on the merits that we actually have. Most companies hire employees based on candidates' credentials, specific evaluation processes, and examinations among other things.

It is the same in government. The desire to advance to a higher job grade or ranking would entail taking some sort of test, some form of interview, evaluation of your service records, etc. Everything is scrutinized, down to the minutest details. You might say one would practically be 'dissected' when being considered for a higher post. This is well and good, since it all evens out the playing field for everyone. Everybody has a shot at getting to a more advanced role.

Meritocracy, when taken in its purest form, is both a quantitative and qualitative ideology. It has long been used as the concept for advancement, as it places all candidates on a platform of evaluation. There is ideally no place for corruption and favoritism, since only black-and-white proofs of qualifications are considered.

Meritocracy encourages a competitive spirit. One has to work hard to be able to earn the expertise required for a job. Talent equals promotion, theoretically.

However, the system presents some forms of disadvantages. One such negative impact is the tendency for the whole framework to become elitist. The concept of belonging to a certain class based on such factors as social status, intellect or financial resources would surely set apart the haves from the have nots. This further becomes a breeding ground for arrogance and complacency, since the gifted ones always get the better positions, while their less gifted counterparts make do with their lot. Someone who is always preferred over others might become too self-satisfied---they get by with their credentials, anyway.

The system also derives its flaws from those who set the very standards for advancement. What guarantee is there that they are objective enough to set the bar for advancement? Does graduating from a particular learning institution justify immediate acceptance to a job post? There could be other, more talented individuals still out there whose only deficiency is having graduated from a less-recognized academic institution.

Equal opportunity for all is the key, and then whoever gets hired can prove his worth further on the job. But if an applicant is turned away outright because he doesn't meet a specific qualification despite having the abilities, then the system becomes unjust. That system of meritocracy in hiring would contribute to the growing number of individuals in an ignored talent pool. So much talent can only go to waste.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Define meritocracy. Be able to talk in class about its origins.
2. Would you have chosen the same career you are in now if you had the chance? Why or why not?
3. Which institutions of learning are popular in your country? What are the factors that make them popular?
4. How should the hiring process in a company be done, in your opinion?
5. Should talent always be equated to one's academic institution? Justify your answer.



## MERITOCRACY – STANDARDIZATION

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A society adheres to a certain standard or norm and when we talk of standardization, people differ in a lot of things, especially when we speak of meritocracy. An individual can be either famous or notorious, but whatever and however you would see a person, we come up with a surmise if he is either intelligent or not. Then we start to gauge how a person fares or how he really is. Is his IQ (Intelligence Quotient) high or not, and sometimes we even wonder too if he possesses a talent, such as artistic creativity or athletic prowess or even social skills. Not to speak of the acquired skills, knowledge or experience that can also be considered. All of these things can be considered meritorious. Regardless of the status of an individual, be it a wealthy person, famous, or coming from a very prominent family, we try to decipher if we could honor and respect with great value those who really excel in a certain or specific field and give them their due right.

What then does a society as a whole deem as value and merit? As the Wikipedia puts it, in a meritocracy, the society rewards (by wealth, position and social status) those who demonstrated talent and competence, demonstrated through past actions or by competition. Unlike in democracy, a person can get into a higher position just by convincing other people about his competence. Whereas in a meritocracy, an individual doesn't have to resort to convincing people, but he would merely have to prove his competence and other skills for that matter. On the other hand, in every known human society, the non-meritocratic factors such as seniority, inheritance, favoritism, and discrimination, will actually determine who the one in charge is. Not in the case of meritocracy, for it characterizes a system wherein statuses are achieved.

People nowadays are neither naïve nor ignorant, because all of us are aware of the high standard that a system could have. Meaning we need to see a government whose leadership are being led by able and talented persons. In meritocracy, we talk about an elite group of people whose progress is based on their ability or talent rather than on class privilege or wealth. These are individuals who are chosen not because of their birth or wealth but solely because of their superior talents and intellect. Definitely, in a meritocratic society, we are not divulging the fact that people can have influence because they come from a social class, but rather because they were of influence and status according to their abilities and achievements.

We can also say that experience can be considered meritorious and can be attributed or associated with particular attitudes and values such as diligence, perseverance, and willingness to take risks and defer gratification. One can either say that these attitudes are acquired, or can be linked to achievement, or even as to how they interact with other factors in predicting outcomes. Yes, amazing results can be achieved which will bring about justice and change in our society. If this standardization be met, then it is time to arise and work on advancing human civilization by means of meritocracy.

Questions to be discussed:

1. Do you agree to the fact that a society in order to progress need to practice meritocracy? Why or why not?
2. Will people benefit from meritocracy? How?
3. At present, is meritocracy prevalent? Explain your answer.
4. Given the chance to choose would you go for a meritocratic or a non-meritocratic society? Why?
5. Can meritocracy be practiced in your country? Justify your answer.



## MERITOCRACY: A DEFINITION ESSAY

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Some people are familiar with this word – meritocracy, but some are not. The term meritocracy has existed for centuries. It was first coined by British politician and sociologist, Michael Young<sup>1</sup> in his 1958 satirical essay, “The Rise of the Meritocracy”, which pictured the United Kingdom under the rule of a government favoring intelligence and aptitude (merit) above all. The essay is written in the first-person by a fictional historical narrator in 2034, and interweaves history from the politics of pre- and post-war Britain with those of fictional future events in the short (1960 onward) and long term (2020 onward). The essay was based upon the tendency of the then-current governments in their striving towards intelligence to ignore shortcomings and upon the failure of education systems to correctly utilize gifted and talented members within their societies. Young's fictional narrator explains that, on the one hand, the greatest contributor to society is not the "stolid mass" or majority, but the "creative minority" or "restless elite". On the other hand, he claims that there are casualties of progress whose influence is underestimated and that, from such stolid adherence to natural science and intelligence, will bring arrogance and complacency. This problem is encapsulated in the phrase "Every selection of one is a rejection of many".

If we are going to consolidate the different meanings of this word contextually, it's vivid and clear that meritocracy is a kind of ideology. <sup>2</sup>Meritocracy itself is not a form of government, but rather an ideology. Government positions in a meritocracy would be given to individuals based upon possession of certain merits which could range from intelligence to morality to general aptitude to specific knowledge. Supporters of meritocracies do not necessarily agree on the nature of "merit", however they tend to agree that "merit" itself should be a primary consideration during evaluation. Meritocracy, in the first, most administrative sense, is a system of government or other administration (such as business administration) wherein appointments and responsibilities are objectively assigned to individuals based upon their "merits", namely intelligence, credentials, and education, determined through evaluations or examinations. The "most common definition of meritocracy conceptualizes merit in terms of tested competency and ability, and most likely as measured by IQ or standardized achievement tests."

Although meritocracy as a term is a relatively recent invention, the concept originates from the works of Confucius, along with other Legalist and Confucian philosophers. The first meritocracy was implemented in the 2nd century BC, by the Han Dynasty which introduced the world's first civil service exams evaluating the "merit" of officials.<sup>3</sup> Meritocracy as a concept spread from China to British India during the 17th century, and then into continental Europe and the United States.<sup>4</sup> With the translation of Confucian texts during the Enlightenment, the concept of a meritocracy reached intellectuals in the West, who saw it as an alternative to the traditional ancient regime of Europe.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, the assassination of President Garfield in 1881 prompted the replacement of the American Spoils System with a meritocracy. In 1883, The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act was passed, stipulating government jobs should be awarded on the basis of merit through competitive exams, rather than ties to politicians or political affiliation.<sup>6</sup>

Like "utilitarian" and "pragmatic", the word "meritocratic" has also developed a broader definition, used to refer to any government run by "a ruling or influential class of educated or able people."<sup>7</sup> This is in contrast to the term originally coined by Michael Young in 1958, who critically defined it as a system where "merit is equated with intelligence-plus-effort, its possessors are identified at an early age and selected for appropriate intensive education, and there is an obsession with quantification, test-scoring, and qualifications."<sup>8</sup> Meritocracy in its wider sense can be any general act of judgment upon the basis of people's various demonstrated merits; such acts are frequently described in sociology and psychology. Thus, the merits may extend beyond intelligence and education to any mental or physical talent or to work ethic. <sup>9</sup>In rhetoric, the demonstration of one's merit regarding mastery of a particular subject is an essential task most directly related to the Aristotelian term Ethos. The equivalent Aristotelian conception of meritocracy is based upon aristocratic or oligarchic structures rather than in the context of the modern state.<sup>10</sup> The most common form of





meritocratic screening found today is the college degree. Higher education is an imperfect meritocratic screening system for various reasons, such as lack of uniform standards worldwide,<sup>11</sup> lack of scope (not all occupations and processes are included), and lack of access (some talented people never have an opportunity to participate because of the expense, most especially in developing countries)<sup>12</sup>. However, academic degrees serve some amount of meritocratic screening purpose in the absence of more refined methodology. Education alone, however, does not constitute a complete system, as meritocracy must automatically confer power and authority, which a degree independently does not accomplish.<sup>13</sup>

According to Kishore Mahbubani, "the simplest way of understanding the virtues of meritocracy is to ask the question: why is Brazil a soccer superpower and an economic middle power? The answer is that when it looks for soccer talent, it searches for it in all sectors of the population, from upper classes to the slums. A boy from the slums is not discriminated against if he has soccer talent. But in the economic field, Brazil looks for talent in a far smaller base of the population, primarily the upper and middle classes." This idea is an example on how he perceives the concept of meritocracy. Each one of us has its own impression of what meritocracy is. The perception that we give matters in terms of attitudes and characteristics, more so with the intelligence level. Likewise, according to Scott Belsky<sup>14</sup>, "Imagine a world where the best ideas have the best chance to succeed. No more favoritism that places the wrong people on creative projects. Cut out the middlemen that arbitrarily recommend cost-efficient talent over the most deserving talent. Forget the corporate nepotism that appoints leaders based on relationships over merit. Every individual, team, and industry would benefit from a world where the most talented people got the most opportunity". He implies that we dream a reality in the near future as far as meritocracy is concerned.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is meritocracy? Use your own words / opinions to support your answer.
2. How does a meritocratic government system function? Give an example.
3. Give your insights about this phrase "Every selection of one is a rejection of many".
4. Why is meritocracy an ideology?
5. When do we say that our society is meritocratic?

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