**Heyman Center Friends Colloquium**

**Spring 2020**

**Understanding Meritocracy**

**A Noble Ideal or a Serious Mistake?**

Roger Lehecka

Tuesdays 6-8 p.m.

***Course Description:***

While it appears to be an ancient word, like democracy or aristocracy or oligarchy, meritocracy was invented as an English word about sixty years ago by a British sociologist named Michael Young. As unlikely as it sounds, his book The Rise of the Meritocracy was a novel, not a work of social science. Since the time of the word’s invention it has become the name for what most people say a society should be: fair, recognizing talent and effort, removing inherited privilege and advantage. This is ironic because, in describing a fictional future society that was fully meritocratic, Michael Young wrote a dystopian novel, not a utopian one. Furthermore, despite the obeisance paid to merit and meritocracy in public discourse today, meritocracy is under attack by writers on the political right, left and center.

The colloquium will explore what merit and meritocracy mean in the United States today, and why those words produce so much contentious debate. Because sorting people through education is central to current meritocratic ideals, higher education is inevitably a vital instrument in realizing a meritocratic society. Therefore, discussions of American colleges generally, and Columbia in particular, will occur throughout our six class meetings. Other subjects we will cover are how notions of merit have evolved since the founding of the United States; how the word meritocracy has come to have connotations opposite to what its creator intended; how meritocratic American society, or a part of it like admission to selective colleges, is today; what it would take for the United States to become truly meritocratic; the wisdom of equating school success with promise of professional success; and whether Young was correct to see meritocracy as a flawed or even incoherent ideal.

***Syllabus:***

February 25: A discussion of the book that coined the word, and of the word itself. Reading: Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy

March 10: Standardized tests, college admissions, and the role of both in the meritocratic world. Reading: Nicholas Lemann, The Big Test, Books One and Two

March 31: The history of the idea of merit in the United States. Reading: Joseph Kett, Merit: The History of a Founding Ideal from the American Revolution to the 21st Century

April 14: Can we sort out how much talent and hard work affect one’s success, as opposed to luck? Reading: Robert Frank, Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy, chapters 1-6 and Appendix 1

April 28: Is meritocracy a goal we should pursue? Is there an alternative other than restoration of unearned privilege? Reading: Daniel Markovits, The Meritocracy Trap

May 5: Summing up what we’ve learned and what we still need to know. Readings: Various reflections relevant to meritocracy

May 12: Make up class if needed

***Texts***:

Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy (Transaction Publishers)

Nicholas Lemann, The Big Test (Farrar, Straus and Giroux—**must get paperback)**

Joseph F. Kett, Merit: The History of a Founding Ideal from the American Revolution to the 21st Century (Cornell University Press)

Robert Frank, Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy (Princeton University Press)

Daniel Markovits, The Meritocracy Trap (Penguin)