

Case 17: How should the crew give out ten free seats?

Thirty people want ten free workshop seats, and the crew must choose a fair way to decide who gets them.

On your own Read What happened and underline the sentence that tells how many people want a seat. About 4 minutes.



Duda holds up a phone and points at a blank card on a bulletin board.

Your role: You're the one who writes down the rule before the crew picks the ten names. **New skill:** Set fair criteria before choosing.

What happened

The crew has ten free seats for a workshop, and thirty people want one. The crew opened a sign-up sheet on Monday at 9 a.m. Twenty-two names were on it before 10 a.m. By Wednesday, the sheet has thirty names.

The sheet says only “How seats will be chosen: to be announced.” The crew has argued about the rule since dinner on Sunday. Gia is running the sign-up. She wants to give the seats to the first ten names, because that is simple and fast. Mateo suggests a lottery instead.

Anika, 16, is at rehearsal most days, and she checks her phone after rehearsal ends. Under first-come, she would see the message after the seats were gone. A third option on the crew's whiteboard would give seats to people who cannot afford the paid version of the workshop. That option would ask people for personal information.

Every method seats exactly ten people. The crew has to decide which ten, and then explain the rule to all thirty.

Your question: How should the crew choose who gets the ten seats, and how should they explain the choice to all thirty people?

Key terms

On your own Read each key term and its example, then write your first guess in the box. About 4 minutes.

Criteria Criteria are the standards or reasons a group uses to make a decision.

En español: criterios

In this case: The sheet says “How seats will be chosen: to be announced.” Twenty-two names arrived before 10 a.m. Monday, before the crew stated any criteria.

Trade-off A trade-off is a choice where getting one benefit means accepting a cost or giving something up.

En español: compensación entre opciones

In this case: First-come is fast for Gia to run but favors whoever sees the message first. A lottery gives everyone the same chance but needs a sign-up window and a drawing.

Equity Equity is a way of sharing that adjusts for different needs so everyone gets a fair chance.

En español: equidad

In this case: Option C would give seats to people who cannot afford the paid version of the workshop. It would also ask applicants for personal information.

Who is involved



Gia

Running the sign-up

“First ten to reply get a seat. It’s simple, I can post it tonight, and I have a shift at seven.”



Anika

Checks her phone
after rehearsal

“By the time I see the message, ten people will have answered. I don’t even need a seat. I just want to know how you’re picking.”

Before you look at the evidence, how do you think the crew should choose who gets the ten seats?

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Reading passage

Allocating scarce goods fairly

On your own Read the passage. At each Stop and think box, pause and answer the question in your head or with a partner. About 5 minutes.

Words to know

- **Criteria:** Criteria are the standards or reasons a group uses to make a decision.
- **Trade-off:** A trade-off is a choice where getting one benefit means accepting a cost or giving something up.
- **Equity:** Equity is a way of sharing that adjusts for different needs so everyone gets a fair chance.
- **Consent:** Consent is permission a person gives for something specific, such as sharing a record with a named person.

The story: Thirty applicants, ten places

The crew has ten free seats in a workshop and thirty people who want them. A sign-up sheet opened Monday at 9 a.m. with no stated selection method. Twenty-two names arrived within the first hour, and the list reached thirty by Wednesday. The crew's whiteboard lists three methods, each with its benefit and cost. First come, first served is fast but favors whoever sees it first. A lottery after a three-day window gives equal chances but requires a window and a drawing. A needs-based rubric prioritizes those who cannot afford the paid version but requires personal information and a judge.

The crew members' positions are candid. Gia, who runs the sign-up and has a shift at seven, prefers first-come because it is simple. She later admits she mostly wanted the task off her list. Mateo proposes a lottery. Anika, 16, who checks her phone only after rehearsal, would be excluded by first-come. She explicitly declines to make the decision about herself. She does not need a seat. She wants a stated method and an honest account of who loses.

The case asks students to treat a small allocation as a serious ethical problem, because the same structure governs school admissions, housing lotteries and medical triage.

Your role is to write down the rule before the crew picks the ten names.

❓ Stop and think. Why might a procedurally fair rule be accepted even by people it excludes?

Procedure, criteria and consent

Criteria are the standards or reasons a group uses to make a decision. The new skill is setting fair criteria before choosing and disclosing who each rule disadvantages. Case 4's **trade-off**, a choice where getting one benefit means accepting a cost or giving something up, is unavoidable here. Every method seats ten and excludes twenty. Choosing among them means choosing which cost to accept and defend.

Each method encodes a principle. First-come rewards speed and availability, which correlate with flexible schedules rather than need or merit. A lottery embodies equal chance and treats applicants as interchangeable. A needs-based rubric pursues **equity**, a way of sharing that adjusts for different needs so everyone gets a fair chance. It also shifts costs onto applicants, who must disclose personal information. Case 6's **consent**, permission a person gives for something specific, frames that cost. Any data collection should be minimal, voluntary and limited to people who need to see it.

Procedure carries independent moral weight. The sheet shows that most names arrived before any rule was posted, so a rule adopted now will be applied to a known list. That invites the suspicion that it was chosen to produce a result. Announcing criteria before selection is a form of procedural fairness that can secure acceptance from those who lose. A decision note should therefore state the method and the reason for it, name the strongest objection and offer one mitigation for those who miss out.

Anika's proposed framing, comparing which option helps the most people and whether the method is fair to everyone, separates outcome-based and fairness-based reasoning. Holding both keeps the crew from mistaking an efficient rule for a just one.

 **Stop and think.** How should the crew weigh equity against the privacy cost of a needs-based rubric?

Frameworks and real-world allocation

The Markkula Center's framework examines decisions through lenses of consequences, rights, fairness, the common good, character and care. It explains that ethics and law are different questions (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, revised November 5, 2021). The Belmont Report treats justice as fairness in distribution and names five accepted bases: equal share, need, effort, societal contribution and merit. It also holds that "respect for persons requires that subjects, to the degree that they are capable, be given the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them" (Belmont Report, April 18, 1979). That principle bears directly on a rubric that asks for personal information.

High-stakes allocation debates mirror the crew's options. Emanuel and colleagues argued that first-come, first-served is a poor way to allocate scarce medical resources (New England Journal of Medicine, May 21, 2020). Commentators laid out competing vaccine criteria such as risk, fairness and benefit (Scientific American, September 3, 2020).

Frameworks and real-world allocation, continued

New York City uses random lottery numbers for some school admissions (Chalkbeat New York, October 1, 2024). Consumer markets make similar choices. For the Eras Tour presale, more than 3.5 million people registered, about 1.5 million received codes and 2 million were waitlisted (Ticketmaster, November 19, 2022).

For public servants, ASPA asks members to “treat all persons with fairness, justice, and equality and respect individual differences, rights, and freedoms” (ASPA Code of Ethics, 2013).

? **Stop and think.** Emanuel and colleagues reject first-come in medicine. Does their reasoning apply to the crew’s workshop? Why or why not?

Sources

Real source | Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University | November 5, 2021

A Framework for Ethical Decision Making

Real source

| National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research; published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare
| 1979

The Belmont Report

Real source | New England Journal of Medicine (Emanuel et al.) | May 21, 2020

Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources in the Time of Covid-19

Real source | Scientific American | September 3, 2020

How to Decide Who Should Get a COVID-19 Vaccine First

Real source | Chalkbeat New York | October 1, 2024

What your ‘lottery’ number for middle and high school applications means

Real source | Ticketmaster | November 19, 2022

The Eras Tour onsale explained

Real source | American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) | 2013

ASPA Code of Ethics

Look at the evidence

On your own Read each document and write what it shows and what it leaves out. About 8 minutes.

Evidence A | Sign-up sheet

The workshop sign-up sheet

“Free workshop: 10 seats. Add your name to show interest. How seats will be chosen: to be announced.” The sheet opened Monday at 9 a.m. By Wednesday it had thirty names. The first 22 names were added before 10 a.m. on Monday.

Look closely: When did most names arrive, and what rule was posted then?

What it shows

What it leaves out

Evidence B | Group-chat thread

The crew’s thread, Sunday at 8:30 p.m.

- Gia: first come is easiest to run, we just take the top ten.
- Anika: I’m at rehearsal most days, I’d see it after it’s full.
- Mateo: lottery?
- Gia: then we need a sign-up window and someone to run the drawing.

Look closely: Which cost does each person name? Which cost does nobody name?

What it shows

What it leaves out

Look at the evidence, continued

Evidence C | Whiteboard

Three options on the whiteboard

A. First come, first served: fast to run; favors whoever sees it first. B. Lottery after a three-day sign-up: equal chance for everyone; needs a sign-up window and a drawing. C. Needs-based rubric: prioritizes people who can't afford the paid version; needs personal information and someone to judge it.

Look closely: Underline the cost the crew wrote for each option.

What it shows

What it leaves out

What is still missing from the evidence?

Notes

Key idea: fair criteria

On your own Read the key idea and the code of ethics, then answer the question in the box. About 12 minutes.

Any way of giving out ten seats to thirty people leaves twenty people without one. A **trade-off** is a choice where getting one benefit means accepting a cost or giving something up. First-come is fast, but it favors people who see the message first. A lottery gives everyone the same chance, but it does not consider need. A needs-based rubric aims at equity by helping people who cannot afford the paid version, but applicants must share personal information. Each option has a cost, so the crew has to choose which cost to accept.

Criteria are the standards or reasons a group uses to make a decision. When the crew states its criteria early, everyone knows the rule before anyone is chosen. Even people who do not get a seat may accept the result if the rule was clear in advance. If the crew picks a rule after seeing the names, people may wonder whether it was chosen to favor someone.

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University suggests looking at a decision through several ethical lenses. They include consequences, rights, fairness, the common good, character and care. The lenses can point toward different options, and they do not add up to one automatic score. A strong decision explains which concern matters most in this case, who carries the cost and what could reduce it.

Professional standards

Adapted from a real source

| National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research; published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

The Belmont Report: B. Basic Ethical Principles: 3. Justice

Summary: Summary, not a quotation: the report treats justice as fairness in distribution and lists five widely accepted ways to share benefits and burdens: an equal share, individual need, individual effort, societal contribution and merit.

In plain words: The Belmont Report, written for research with people, lists several fair ways to share limited benefits, such as equal shares or need.

Question: Which whiteboard option comes closest to “an equal share,” and which comes closest to “individual need”?

Professional standards, continued

Your answer

Option ___ matches an equal share and option ___ matches individual need. The limit is ____.

In the news



Real source | NPR | December 20, 2020

The Ethics Of Who Gets The COVID-19 Vaccine And When

A bioethicist explains how leaders chose who went first when there wasn't enough for everyone.



Real source | Scientific American | September 3, 2020

How to Decide Who Should Get a COVID-19 Vaccine First

Lays out competing criteria such as risk, fairness and benefit, the same lenses the crew uses.

Notes

Sort the evidence

On your own Follow each option to its effects and write who carries the cost in each box. About 8 minutes.

Follow each method to its consequences. Who carries the cost under each one, and what makes the chosen process legitimate to the twenty who lose?

First come, first served

The ten fastest responders get seats; people at rehearsal or work see the sign-up late

Who is affected

Lottery after a three-day sign-up

Each of the thirty has the same chance, and need is not considered

Who is affected

Needs-based rubric

Those with the greatest need are prioritized; applicants must share personal information

Who is affected

Whose perspective is missing?

Whose view is missing from these documents? What would you ask them?

The view that is missing is _____. I would ask _____.

Practice: choose a response

On your own Choose the note you would send, explain why and fix the two marked phrases. About 5 minutes.

Gia is drafting a note to the thirty people on the sign-up sheet. Which sentence could the crew defend?

- ☐ A “We picked the fairest method, so nobody loses out.”
- ☐ B “We’re holding a lottery so everyone has the same chance. A lottery doesn’t favor people with the most need, so we’re looking into a second session.”
- ☐ C “Seats go to the first ten names on the sheet, because those people wanted it most.”

Why I chose it

Improve a draft

A student’s first draft

We should do first come first served because ① it’s the most fair. Everyone has the same chance to sign up and if you really want it you’ll sign up fast. It’s simple and ② nobody can complain because they had the same opportunity as everyone else. Also it’s way less work for us than reading thirty applications or doing some random drawing. The people who don’t get in can just come to the next workshop whenever we have one. This is obviously the best way.

Rewrite each marked phrase so it says only what the evidence supports.

Rewrite phrase 1

Rewrite phrase 2

College

Your task

On your own Read the steps and fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 12 minutes.

Write a memo to a student government committee recommending how to give out ten free workshop seats among thirty applicants. Then draft the announcement that publishes the method before sign-ups open.

Use: Case documents: the sign-up sheet, the crew’s debate thread, the three options on the whiteboard and Anika’s statement. Real sources: the Markkula Center framework, the Belmont Report’s principles of justice and informed consent and ASPA’s principle on social equity.

You’ll make: Memo, 350—450 words, plus an announcement of 80—120 words

Time: 75 minutes

- 1

Fill in the options matrix: who gains, who carries the cost and what information each option needs.
- 2

Apply two ethical lenses, including one that challenges your choice.
- 3

Draft the memo’s recommendation section on the Your draft page.
- 4

Finish the memo, 350 to 450 words, on lined paper or in the online workspace.
- 5

Write an announcement of 80 to 120 words that publishes the method.
- 6

Add how people who do not get a seat will be told.



Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Options matrix

Two lenses, one that challenges my choice

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

On your own Write your draft in the boxes, using your planner from the page before. About 30 minutes.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Check your work

On your own Answer the Check your work questions, mark your level in each rubric row and write one change you made. About 8 minutes.

Does your memo compare all three options using the sign-up evidence?

☐ Yes☐ No

Does the announcement publish the method before sign-ups open?

☐ Yes☐ No

Is any personal information protected?

☐ Yes☐ No

Does it say how people who do not get a seat are told?

☐ Yes☐ No

How your work is scored

Mark one box in each row.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Evidence	☐ No reference to who is affected.	☐ Mentions people vaguely.	☐ Names specific people and effects from the case.	☐ Uses case facts to show who gains and who pays.
Reasoning	☐ Claims an option is obviously best.	☐ Gives one reason only.	☐ Uses a lens and names the strongest objection.	☐ Uses two lenses and proposes a revision tied to the objection.
Audience & purpose	☐ Ignores the twenty who miss out.	☐ Mentions them briefly.	☐ Explains the process to all applicants.	☐ Builds legitimacy by publishing criteria and a remedy.
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Wording only.	☐ Adds a named cost and revision.	☐ Explains how the revision addresses the objection.

One change I made after feedback

[illegible]

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question, then complete the sentence frames. About 10 minutes.

1 Whose view would most challenge the option you prefer?

2 Anika says she does not need a seat. What is she asking the crew for?

3 Option C would help people who cannot afford the paid workshop. What would applicants give up to be chosen that way?

4 What would make the twenty people without seats accept the result as fair?

My take

My claim: ____.

My take, continued

The best evidence is ____, because ____.

Someone who disagrees might say ____.

The limit of the evidence is ____.

I would change my mind if ____.

Notes

Talk about this case at home

Case 17: How should the crew give out ten free seats?

In this case, a group of friends has ten free workshop seats and thirty people who want one. Your student compared three ways to choose and wrote a note that explains the choice and who carries its cost.

Questions to talk about

- 1 When something is limited, like tickets or seats, what makes a way of choosing feel fair?
- 2 Why might it help to announce a rule before anyone signs up?
- 3 What is one kind way to tell people they were not picked?

Nobody needs to share personal stories or private information to talk about this case.



See the case online.