



## Are the Doors Closing? Assessing Affirmative Action at Selective Colleges and Universities

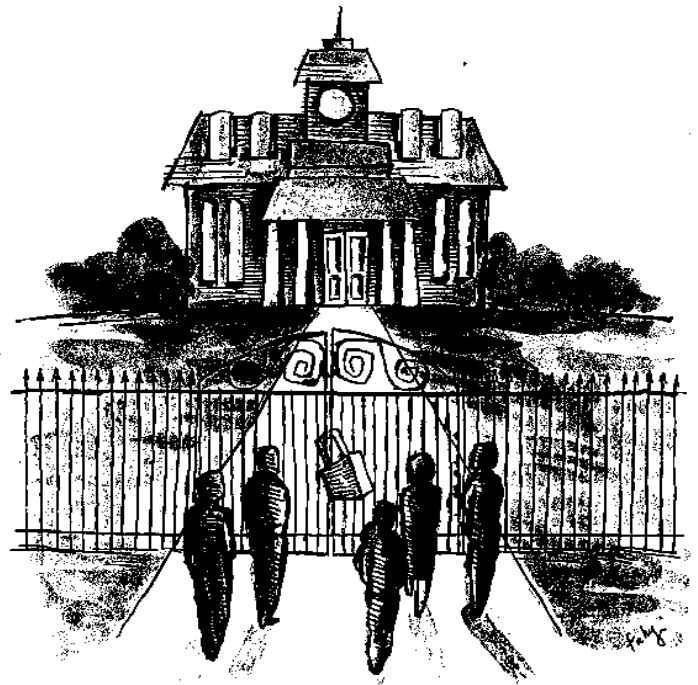
**T**he affirmative-action argument hinges on one of the few facts that both sides can agree upon: programs of affirmative action have yielded substantial increases in minority enrollments in higher education, particularly at the nation's most selective institutions. When President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 in 1961, establishing affirmative action policies for the hiring, promotion, and compensation practices of the federal government and federally supported organizations, most of the nation's colleges and universities voluntarily began applying affirmative-action hiring principles to their admissions practices.

Recent opposition—in the form of legislation, litigation, and public referendums—to the legitimacy of these voluntary policies now threatens to reverse a trend, three decades long, of expanding African-American and Hispanic higher education enrollments. The successful challenges to affirmative action in Maryland, New Jersey, Texas, and California, as well as the new court cases emerging in Georgia, Michigan, and Washington, are closing doors that once welcomed minority students. The larger concern is that the growing number of restrictions placed on affirmative-action programs will have their most pronounced effect on the admissions practices of the nation's most selective colleges and universities.

The stake that colleges and universities have in maintaining affirmative action policies is becoming clearer. Evidence mounts that—were uniform admissions requirements to be applied across all racial/ethnic groups—many minority students would not be admitted, and might not even apply, to top institutions. This issue of *The Landscape* examines that evidence, exploring both the progress and the regress in the affirmative-action debate: the role it has played in expanding minority student entry to selective institutions and the effects of recent challenges in dramatically decreasing that access.

### What the Numbers Tell Us

As part of a larger effort to assess the educational status and progress of African Americans in the United States, researchers at the Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute of



the United Negro College Fund have been examining data on the role of affirmative action in expanding student access to selective colleges and universities. The team includes Michael Nettles, executive director of the Patterson Institute and a researcher at NCPI, as well as his colleagues Laura Perna, Kimberly Edelin, and Cherreka Montgomery.

Their work provides important evidence, first, of the use of affirmative action policies by selective colleges and universities (which are rarely officially documented) and, second, of the troubling effects the reversal of these policies has had on minority access to prestigious institutions. The results presented here represent the research team's analysis of existing national data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, the College Board, and the Educational Testing Service to assess the contribution of affirmative action toward increasing minority enrollments.

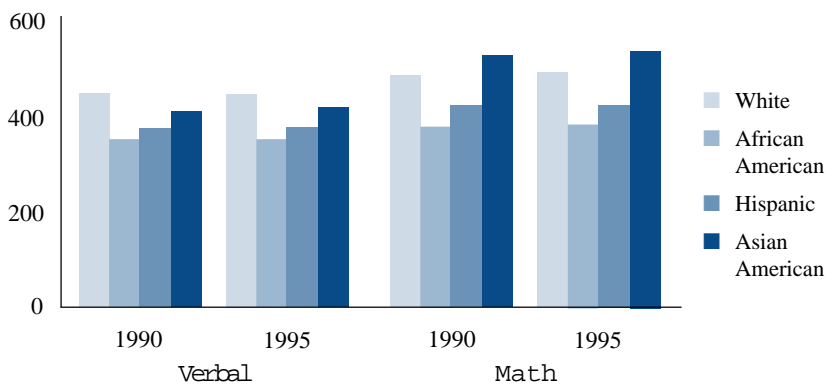
*A Climb Made Quicker:  
Affirmative Action and Enrollment Gains*

What trends in enrollment and degree completion make

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Chart 1  
Trends in Verbal and Math Mean Scores of Students Taking the SAT in 1990 and 1995



Source: Educational Testing Service

clear is that affirmative-action programs have been a primary driver leading to a substantial growth in minority participation in higher education in general and in selective colleges and universities in particular.

Since 1976, the first year for which national education data by race are available, the number of African Americans and Hispanics enrolling in historically white colleges and universities has increased by 41 percent and 203 percent, respectively. On the other hand, during this same period, the increase in participation for white students was only 13 percent.

Many of the nation's most prestigious institutions—the colleges most likely to use affirmative action policies in admissions decisions—admit a larger percentage of African-American and Hispanic applicants than their white counterparts, outstripping even the national acceptance rates for all students combined.

According to an analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS 88), overall, 77 percent of 12th-graders who applied to the nation's "most competitive" and "highly competitive" colleges and universities, as defined by

Barron's Profile of American Colleges, were accepted for admission. After controlling for other factors related to the probability of being admitted, African Americans were about 14 percent more likely than other applicants to be accepted for admission into the nation's 120 most selective colleges and universities.

In terms of specific institutions, the number of African-American and Hispanic undergraduates enrolled between 1980 and 1997 increased, respectively, by 24 and 117 percent at Harvard University, by 68 and 237 percent at the University of California-Berkeley, and by 50 and 74 percent at the University of Texas at Austin. In fact, exactly half of the enrollment growth for first-time, full-time African-American freshmen occurred at the nation's "competitive" to "most competitive" institutions, as defined by Barron's—those whose students have a median SAT score of 950 or higher. These competitive institutions account for 80 percent of the growth in the enrollment of Hispanic students alone.

While enrollment rates paint part of the picture, other data provide evidence that colleges and universities have used affirmative action to increase

the representation of minority students. The first measure is student standardized test scores, which, along with high school achievements, are some of the most important criteria used for admission to the vast majority of selective colleges and universities.

It is well known that, regardless of the type or level of standardized educational assessment, the collective average scores of African-American and Hispanic students are substantially below those of white and Asian-American students. Chart 1 illustrates the differences in SAT scores for minority and white students at two points in time: 1990 and 1995. A smaller percentage of African Americans and Hispanics fall into the high end of the core distribution for the SAT; in fact, only a very small number of African-American and Hispanic students would be eligible for admission into the most selective of the nation's colleges and universities if test scores were used as the dominant criterion and if institutions applied identical weights to the test scores of students across racial and ethnic lines.

Chart 2 reinforces this idea, by comparing the average SAT/ACT equivalent scores of 12th-graders in 1992 by racial/ethnic group and the selectivity of the institution they attended in 1993. The African American-white gap in average SAT score is 162 points at the "most competitive" colleges, 223 points at "highly competitive" colleges, and 142 points at "very competitive" colleges. For Hispanic students, the gap in SAT scores is less severe, but just as apparent.

Even though minority students have relatively lower test scores, they continue to apply to highly selective colleges and universities—at a higher rate than majority students. An analysis of data from NELS 88 suggests that the perception among minority students of their ability to gain admission to highly selective institutions due to affirmative action policies is an

important factor in determining where they apply to college.

African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American 12th-graders tended to apply for admission to more selective colleges and universities than their white peers, after controlling for other factors related to college choice such as gender, socioeconomic status, test scores, high school grades, high school curricular programs, extracurricular activities, educational expectations, and the quality of the high school attended.

For African-American students, the situation is a bit more complicated: among minority students, African Americans tended to apply to less selective colleges and universities than other 12th-graders with comparable educational expectations. However, they were also more likely to be accepted for admission at the “most competitive” and “highly competitive” institu-

tions than their minority counterparts.

#### The Effects of Recent Challenges

What happens when affirmative action policies are undermined? Are these results but harbingers of things to come? The most celebrated unsuccessful attack on affirmative action came in 1978 in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, when the Supreme Court upheld “race” as a legally acceptable criterion for colleges and universities to use in the admissions process.

It is that decision whose legal weight is now on the wane. In the past two years, bills have been introduced in 13 state legislatures to abolish affirmative-action programs. California Republican Congressman Frank Riggs recently introduced an amendment to the Higher Education Act in the U.S. House of Representatives; if it had passed, the amendment would have

prohibited colleges and universities from considering race, gender, ethnicity, or national origin in the admissions process at *all* of the nation’s higher education institutions.

Successful anti-affirmative action efforts have had a telling impact on continued minority representation at the affected schools. The well-publicized *Hopwood v. Texas* decision in 1996 has virtually eliminated the enrollment of African-American students at the University of Texas Law School. In this case, the federal Fifth Circuit Court invalidated the University of Texas Law School’s admissions policies, enacting an injunction that prevents the University of Texas from considering race as a criterion in its acceptance decisions.

Chart 3 illustrates the impact of the *Hopwood* decision on the number of African and Mexican Americans applying to, gaining admission to, and

Chart 2

Average SAT/ACT Equivalent Score by Racial/Ethnic Group and by Selectivity of Institution in Which Students Enrolled\*

Racial/Ethnic Group	Most Competitive	Highly Competitive	Very Competitive	Competitive	Less & Non-Competitive
Percentage of cases with missing data	27%	24%	28%	25%	35%
Total	1248	1117	1012	934	856
Asian American	1299	1168	1039	896	880
White	1252	1127	1024	953	894
Hispanic	1177	1020	940	849	764
African American	1090	904	882	798	715
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African American – White Gap	-162	-223	-142	-155	-179
Hispanic – White Gap	-75	-107	-84	-104	-130

Source: National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS 88)

\* Selectivity Categories adopted from Barron’s Profiles of American Colleges.

Chart 3  
 Applicants, Admitted Students, and Enrollees at the  
 University of Texas at Austin School of Law: 1995 to 1997

Year	Total	White	African American	Mexican American	Asian American	Other
<b>Applicants</b>						
1995	4,131	2,867	356	359	331	218
1996	3,910	2,693	361	354	314	188
1997	3,487	2,515	225	306	309	132
<b>Admitted</b>						
1995	1,091	808	91	92	71	29
1996	1,105	841	65	70	93	36
1997	1,039	864	11	34	105	25
<b>Enrolled</b>						
1995	512	368	38	64	28	14
1996	488	370	31	42	30	15
1997	468	391	4	26	39	8

Source: Unpublished admissions data

enrolling in the University of Texas at Austin School of Law. The number of applicants between 1996 and 1997 declined from 361 to 225 for African-American students and from 354 to 306 for Mexican-American students. The Law School admitted only 11 African-American and 37 Mexican-American students for the entering class of 1997—compared to 65 and 70 students, respectively, in 1996. Only four African-American and 26 Mexican-American students enrolled in 1997. These enrollment rates represent a striking contrast to the previous year's: 31 African-American and 42 Mexican-American matriculants in 1996.

Prior to the passing of California's Proposition 209—a public referendum that bans all gender and racial preferences in public employment, public education, and government contracting—the state's colleges and universities were considered to be national models of racial and ethnic diversity.

Only one year after Proposition 209's implementation, the number of African-American applicants admitted to the University of California system as a whole has declined by 18 percent.

The decline is even more pronounced at the most selective campuses within the University of California system. The number of African-American applicants accepted for admission declined by 66 percent at Berkeley and by 43 percent at UCLA between the fall of 1997 and of 1998. Only 2 percent of all applicants admitted to Berkeley were African American in 1998—down from 7 percent in 1997. The number of Hispanic applicants admitted declined by 53 percent at Berkeley and 33 percent at UCLA.

#### The Need for Perspective

These trends testify to the beneficial effects of affirmative-action admission policies for African-American and Hispanic students.

While the popular argument for dismantling affirmative action is that minority students can compete with white students for places at selective institutions, it is clear from these data that, if colleges and universities adopt race-blind admissions policies that rely primarily on standardized test scores, there will be a significant drop in admission of African-American and Hispanic students to the nation's more selective institutions.

Based on the perception that they will no longer gain admittance, minority applicants to selective institutions will likely decline significantly—whether or not students have the test scores to compete. The outcomes of recently reversed affirmative-action policies punctuate the debate, demonstrating the essential role these measures have played in both encouraging and maintaining minority representation at selective institutions. □