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# Race, Merit, and College Admission

August 2006

Is it fair to include race in the criteria for admission to highly selective colleges and universities so that Blacks will be present in greater numbers on college and university campuses? This is a central question in the affirmative-action controversy. To address this key question we will focus on prestigious institutions of higher education because that is where affirmative action policies are most controversial. Therefore, we will consider some of the most compelling arguments of opponents and proponents of affirmative action programs and policies at prestigious colleges and universities.

## The SAT as Gate Keeper

The role of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) has been at the center of the dispute about including race as a factor in college and university admissions. Affirmative action critics use the SAT to challenge affirmative action policies. They exploit the exalted public image of the SAT and assert that test scores are the legitimate measure of institutional and student quality. The colleges and universities themselves use the SAT scores of their entering classes in their promotion brochures and commercial guides to American colleges and universities, and they play up the test scores as a basic indicator of institutional quality. Moreover, the influential US News & World Report regularly ranks colleges and universities largely on the SAT scores of their entering classes.

Although we are focusing on admissions policies at highly selective colleges and universities, the general public impression is that unqualified or lower qualified Black students are taking the places of better qualified White students throughout the system of higher education. However, the fact is that even though more than 70 per cent of entering four-year-college students take either the SAT or ACT exams, only perhaps 200 (out of 1,800) four-year colleges place enough weight on those scores in admissions decisions to make a difference in students' lives. Clifford Adelman, a senior research analyst with the U.S. Department of Education says that at most, SAT scores have played a role in the fate of 1 out of 6 four-year-college students and 1 out of 13 undergraduates altogether (Adelman 1999). Affirmative action critics in their discourse about the role of the SAT in admissions exploit this widespread inflated misconception that hundreds of thousands of less qualified Blacks are denying more qualified Whites better educational opportunities.

Roger Clegg and Lenore Ostrowsky, critics of affirmative action, attack and condemn admission policies that consider race because they claim that such policies are unfair, that they lower the academic quality and standards of the higher education institutions, and they violate the cherished American values of merit and equality (Clegg and Ostrowsky 1999). Let us examine these criticisms point by point.

These critics assume that the primary mission of the elite institutions is to educate the brightest students as measured by SAT and American College Testing Assessment (ACT) scores. They,

like Nathan Glazer, believe that standardized tests like the SAT and ACT are neutral and the single most reliable predictor of academic success for students from all racial, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds (Glazer 1998). Moreover, they maintain that standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT remain the single best means of assessing future aptitude for learning because these tests measure reasoning ability and bear some similarity to I.Q. tests, from which they were drawn.

In essence, these critics claim that the SAT and ACT are valid cognitive tests that measure the ability to master the complex material taught at any institution of higher education that has traditional academic standards. They conclude that a policy designed to admit Black students who do not have the highest test scores will not only lead to lower academic standards, but it will also hurt the Black students admitted under such a policy by placing them a very competitive environment in which they are doomed to academic failure and dropping out.

Now let us consider what research shows about the validity and predictability of the SAT and ACT tests. Adelman notes that the SAT is a proven measure of general learned abilities, but he says research indicates that performance on the test is influenced by socioeconomic status, family income and structure, as well as high-school location. He points out that the justification for using SAT scores in admissions decisions is that they are a decent predictor of first-year college grades. However, he states that research shows the strongest predictor of college graduation is the academic intensity and quality of the four-year high-school curriculum that a student has completed.

## **Black Academic Achievement**

William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities, respectively, document in their book, *The Shape of the River*, how Black students who benefited from affirmative action have fared both during and after college. The book is based on a study of 45,184 students who entered 28 selective colleges in the fall of 1976 or the fall of 1989 (Bowen and Bok 1998).

They found that about 75 per cent of the Black students who entered the 28 colleges in 1989 graduated within six years. Of the Black students with combined SAT scores below 1000 who attended the eight most selective colleges in the data, 88 per cent graduated. Moreover, Black graduates were more likely than White graduates to earn graduate degrees. Forty percent of the Black students who entered the 28 colleges in 1976 earned a graduate or professional degree, compared with 37 per cent of the White students who entered in that year.

In my own longitudinal study of Black students who were admitted to the University of Michigan under a special program because their SAT scores were generally lower than their White counterparts, I found that slightly over one-third of those who graduated earned advanced degrees, including almost one-fourth who earned doctorates. These achievements suggest that they had both the motivation and the ability to compete academically at the highest levels. A majority of the graduates indicated that they were glad they attended Michigan and described their experiences in positive terms, commenting favorably on academic discipline and the camaraderie among Black students (Tripp 1987).

## **Black Critics of Affirmative Action**

Vocal Black opponents of affirmative action such as Ward Connerly, Shelby Steel, and Walter E. Williams argue that affirmative action discriminates against White students and stigmatize Black students. Walter E. Williams asserts that it is immoral and unjust to turn away more highly credentialed White students so as to be able to admit more Blacks. He views affirmative action policies as a special privilege for Black students that translate into a special disadvantage for White students (Williams 1997). William G. Bowen and Derek Bok do say that without race-sensitive admissions, Black enrollment at the five colleges for which complete statistics were available would plunge "to early 1960s levels." (The five colleges, which are unidentified, are "roughly representative" of the 28 in their study.) They indicated that if Black students who entered the five colleges in 1989 had been admitted and had chosen to enroll at the same rates as White students, their proportions would have fallen from 7.1 per cent to 3.6 per cent. But, they point out that the effect on White admissions would have been minuscule. The odds of admission for White students would have increased only slightly -- from 25 per cent to about 27 per cent.

## **Using the Law to Fight Black Admission**

Some opponents of affirmative action use legal arguments and strategies to fight against efforts to increase the enrollment of Black students at prestigious institutions. Michael Greve, executive director of the Center for Individual Rights, is at the legal forefront aggressively attacking admission policies that are designed to increase Black admissions. He views those policies as tantamount to intentional anti-White discrimination (Greve, 1999). He, along with Theodore B. Olson and Douglas Cox of Gibson, Dunn, and Crutcher, represented two of the plaintiffs in the Hopwood case. In that case, known as Hopwood V. State of Texas, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit held that the University of Texas Law School "may not use race as a factor in law school admissions." Greve states that the Hopwood decision strikes not merely at the scope of race-based affirmative action or at the techniques used in the process, but, more broadly, at the two presumed state interests on which affirmative action has been based -- remedying historical discrimination and "diversity."

The Fifth Circuit held that consideration of race or ethnicity "for the purpose of achieving a diverse student body is not a compelling interest under the Fourteenth Amendment." That amendment guarantees all citizens equal protection of the laws. The Fifth Circuit explained that "the classification of persons on the basis of race for the purpose of diversity frustrates, rather than facilitates, the goals of equal protection. However, the Fifth Circuit indicated that colleges may use qualitative admission criteria and even criteria that correlate with race -- "such as whether an applicant's parents attended college or the applicant's economic and social background" -- provided they do not do so because of race or in a racially discriminatory manner. " For Greve, this court ruling represents the broad trend toward official colorblindness. Thus he concludes that the significance of this judicial holding lies in its realization that we cannot get beyond race by constantly taking it into account. Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, widely published opponents of affirmative action, amplify this theme in their book *America in Black and White*.

But, Derrick Bell, a defender of affirmative action, notes that Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment which was adopted in the post-Civil War years to protect the citizenship rights of Blacks, for almost a century proved to be of far greater value to major financial interests -- such as railroads and other corporations -- than it was to Black citizens. Aided by favorable judicial interpretations that viewed corporations as "persons" covered by the Equal Protection Clause, these entities used the provision to insulate their exploitation of land, labor, and resources from states seeking to rein it in. He says that we again see courts interpreting the Equal Protection Clause to shield White majorities from the modest efforts by Congress and state legislatures to remedy some racial discrimination, discrimination he believes is continuing and growing more open and more blatant (Bell 1997).

## **Arguments for Diversity**

Bell advocates approaches that insulate our diversity programs from political and judicial attack. This can be done, he believes, by eliminating racial and gender classifications and giving greater emphasis to characteristics that we know, from our affirmative-action experience, can predict academic success for many who do not have high grades and test scores. These factors include life experience, community service, motivation, character, demonstrated leadership ability, and educational disadvantages that were overcome. The challenge he sees is to undergird our commitment not to one strategy -- affirmative action -- but rather to the goal of helping anyone excluded from social opportunity because of a disadvantaged background. To do this he advocates the use of diversity plans that identify overlooked talent whatever the applicants' race, color, or gender.

Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League, agrees to a great extent with Derrick Bell that colorblind criteria do exist that can be used to promote the inclusion of a broad cross section of qualified minority-group students in higher education. However, he thinks that race should be included along with other factors in determining college admission. He asserts that America has a quintessential compelling state interest that justifies the explicit use of race as one among many factors in allocating opportunity in higher education. He argues that in this information age, the quality of a nation's human capital is the key to its productivity. The more highly educated our growing minority population is, the more competitive our economy and cohesive our society will be. He notes that the U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2050, the American population will be roughly half Caucasian, half people of color. Blacks and Latinos will constitute nearly 40 per cent of the populace. That means, he says, that our country's economy increasingly will be carried on the backs of African-American and Latino workers, entrepreneurs, and consumers (Price 1998).

Even Nathan Glazer, a longtime opponent of affirmative action, now concedes that for demographic, historical, political, and moral reasons, Blacks cannot be thoroughly excluded. Even though he believes that affirmative action undermines the American "meritocracy," out of necessity, he says, democratic principle must trump meritocratic principle. He thinks that to avoid racial turmoil on a massive scale, the principle of equal participation must be given a role.

## **Racial Diversity and Educational Quality**

Foes of affirmative action believe that a race inclusion policy promotes a double standard that allows unqualified individuals to get ahead simply on the basis of their race, leading ultimately to the lowering of standards in the professions. The standards of the medical profession are probably of greatest concern of the public. A study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), concludes: "Criteria other than undergraduate grade-point average and Medical College Admission Test scores can be used in predicting success in medical school. An admissions process that allows for ethnicity and other special characteristics to be used heavily in admission decisions yields powerful effects on the diversity of the student population and shows no evidence of diluting the quality of the graduates (Healy and Lively 1995)."

The mission statement of most elite institutions of higher education contains objectives and goals that are related to academic excellence and social responsibility. Goals such as instilling sensitivity and respect for the values of a diverse society and a multicultural world and a concern for individual worth and human rights are usually included. Colleges typically have cited the virtues of racial diversity on the campus. They point to the way that it enriches intellectual discourse, teaching, and research by making available multiple viewpoints and life experiences. One major benefit of the racial diversity is the quality of education. Researchers and scholars have found that multiracial experiences are important to the academic and social development of all students. The standard established in 1987 by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education defines a quality education as one, which requires that: All students be exposed to the variety of cultural perspectives that represent the nation at large. Such exposure can be accomplished only via a multiethnic teaching force in which racial and ethnic groups are included at a level of parity with their numbers in the population.

## **Social Commitments of Black Graduates**

Two important questions are what contributions did Black graduates make to society, and how did they compare with their White counterparts in terms of social commitments? In other words, in what ways did society gain from Black students who benefited from affirmative action? Studies have found that Black and Latino physicians are more likely than their White counterparts to practice in the nation's ghettos and barrios (Dreier and Freer 1997). Bok and Bowen found that Black physicians are twice as likely as White physicians to lead community or social-service activities. Moreover, their research shows that 33 per cent of the Black students who earned doctorates went on to lead community or social-service activities. Only 6 per cent of White students with doctorates reported such activities. They conclude that Black students are giving back to their communities rather than mimicking "White flight" to the suburbs or "allowing the lure of personal gain and affluent life styles to remove them from feeling an obligation to social service."

In my study of "affirmative action" Black graduates of the University of Michigan, I found that 75 percent reported that they had worked with others to try to solve some community problem. The community problem that the highest proportion of the graduates attempted to address

through organized cooperative activity was schooling. Thirty-nine percent of the graduates described their activities as counseling and serving as role models in programs designed to help Black youth, participating in high school projects aimed at college bound students, working in campaigns for school funds, and working for school integration. It seemed that their focus on the education and socialization of the youth reflected the value they placed on education and their concern for the future generation of Blacks. Based on their comments, many seemed to view the youth as the segment of the community whom they could probably help most by serving as "success" models and by encouraging them to strive for success. Perhaps they thought that this was one way to improve the social conditions of Blacks (Tripp 1987). In general, research suggests that minority populations will be better served by having teachers, lawyers, bankers, physicians, and other professionals who come from backgrounds similar to theirs.

## **Elite Colleges, Race, and Power**

Why is it important that Blacks be present beyond token numbers at prestigious colleges and universities? We live in a stratified society structured by racial oppression and class domination. Elite institutions of higher education are viewed as the gateways to prominence, privilege, wealth, and power in American society. As compared with graduates from lower tier institutions, graduates from elite institutions benefit to a much greater degree from the formal and informal social and professional career networking that takes place at their alma maters. These graduates are more likely to be connected to channels that lead to positions in the upper echelons of political and corporate power. Thus, the higher the number of Blacks graduates from prestigious colleges and universities, the greater the chances that Blacks will have access to positions of power. History has shown and present events confirm that it is necessary to have Blacks in positions of authority and power to effectively defend and advance the struggle against Black oppression in racist America.

Why is it fair to include race in the criteria for admission to highly selective colleges and universities so that Blacks will be present in greater numbers on college and university campuses? Race should be used as a factor in admissions because it is a significant factor in virtually every aspect of social life in America. Whether it is in education, employment, business, health care, housing, the media, or the criminal justice system, especially prisons, the racial reality is the same. There is individual and, more importantly, system level discrimination against Blacks. In the interest of fairness, how do we attempt to reduce the disadvantages of being Black in a pervasively anti-Black racist society? I believe that the more political and economic power Blacks acquire, the more America will move away from operating in an anti-Black way. Given this premise, it makes sense to increase the opportunities of Blacks to gain access to the educational resources and channels which improves their opportunities for upper-level power positions.

## **Meritocracy and Racism**

How do we reconcile the contradiction between the principles of meritocracy and colorblindness against the ever-so-present reality of systemic White privilege and anti-Black discrimination? To assume that American society is fundamentally fair, and that racial discrimination is an



aberration that is made worst by affirmative action is to disregard the terrible plight of African-Americans for almost four hundred years. For about two and a half centuries Blacks suffered dehumanizing slavery. This moral abomination was practiced by many of the esteem framers of the American Constitution. Furthermore, the so-called "founding fathers" guaranteed its protection in the Constitution itself. Following slavery there were decades of semi-slavery in the form of sharecropping. By the late mid-century, millions of Blacks migrated from Southern farms into isolated ghettos of urban poverty.

White America has not simply treated Black unfairly; it has treated them brutally. Stanley Fish cogently sums up the plight of Blacks: They have been subjected first to decades of slavery, and then to decades of second-class citizenship, widespread legalized discrimination, economic persecution, educational deprivation, and cultural stigmatization. They have been bought, sold, killed, beaten, raped, excluded, exploited, shamed, and scorned for a very long time. The word "unfair" is hardly an adequate description of their experience, and the belated gift of "fairness" in the form of a resolution no longer to discriminate against them legally is hardly an adequate remedy for the deep disadvantages that the prior discrimination has produced. When the deck is stacked against you in more ways than you can even count, it is small consolation to hear that you are now free to enter the game and take your chances (Fish 1993).

## **Color Blind Concept**

The colorblind policy has to be challenged directly. It represents an insidious strategy to undermine affirmative action by apparently appealing to sentiments favoring equality. The positive inference likely to be drawn from the colorblind idea is that race should be a neutral or non-factor in making decisions about opportunities. But, there are some serious problems. One is that a colorblind policy in admissions in higher education reinforces racial stratification in that system. It would have the effect of putting Blacks at a greater disadvantage than they now have. To have a so-called colorblind policy in one aspect of higher education while virtually the whole society operates in a color conscious way is to make a mockery of the principle of racial equality.

I concur with Roger Wilkins who observes that racism is a permanent feature of American life. He believes that the United States is the most color-conscious society on earth. Over the course of nearly 400 years, he notes that Whites have given Blacks absolutely no reason to believe that they can behave in a colorblind manner. Logically, he concludes that affirmative action is required to counter deeply ingrained racist patterns of behavior (Wilkins 1995).

## **Summary**

We have seen how the opponents of affirmative action have defined and measured merit in terms of SAT scores, which they claim are unbiased and valid in selecting the most qualified students for admission to college. They concluded that admitting Black students who have lower test scores than White students will hurt the Black students because it will place in them an intensely competitive environment in which they will be doomed to academic failure.



We have also examined how they have pursued a colorblind legal strategy to remove race as a factor in admissions criteria. They maintain that an admissions policy that includes race as a factor is unfair to White students because it will allow less qualified and undeserving Black students to take Whites' rightful places and thus deny Whites their just reward. This policy harms race relations, they add, because it engenders White resentment.

On the other side, we have looked at the arguments of proponents of affirmative action. For them merit is defined and measured in terms of a student's academic vita, which includes race along with life experience, community service, motivation, character, demonstrated leadership ability, educational disadvantages, academic curriculum, as well as SAT scores.

They point to the many positive outcomes for the Black graduates who were admitted under affirmative action and their greater social service contributions to society as compared with their White counterparts. They also predict that negative consequences will follow if affirmative action is banned; racial antagonism and division will increase, and democracy will be undermined, thereby leading to more social instability.

From my perspective, the social context of the colleges and universities in America is one in which racism is rooted centuries deep in a culture with a legacy of brutal Black slavery followed by legal segregation and continuing anti Black discrimination. Given this history which shapes the present social reality of a racially stratified society based on White dominance and privilege, affirmative action policies that address the moral wrongs of both the past and the present are more than justified.

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