Affirmative-Action Programs for Minority Students: Right in Theory, Wrong in Practice

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The use of race-sensitive criteria in admissions continues to be controversial, and critics have leveled three basic charges against it.

For one, opponents say the practice constitutes reverse discrimination, lowering the chance of admission for better-qualified white students. They also contend that it creates a mismatch between the skills of minority students and the abilities required for success at selective institutions, setting those students up for academic problems. And they claim that it stigmatizes minority students as less than fully qualified, which results in demoralization and substandard performance, when in fact those students may be well qualified.

The first criticism has not stood up to empirical scrutiny. In fact, studies show that affirmative action generally has had only small and insignificant effects on the admission prospects of white students. The second criticism, or "mismatch hypothesis," also has not been supported by hard data. For example, in their research for The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions (1998), William G. Bowen and Derek Bok found that black students who attended selective institutions were more likely to graduate than their counterparts at less-selective institutions.

The third argument, however, merits further consideration. If white students believe that many of their black peers would not be at a college were it not for affirmative action and, more important, if black students perceive whites to believe that, then affirmative action may indeed undermine minority-group members' academic performance by heightening the social stigma they already experience because of race or ethnicity. In addition, we have uncovered a fourth possibility: the idea that affirmative action exacerbates the psychological burdens that minority students must carry on campuses. Those who feel threatened because they have internalized negative beliefs about their group will find that they feel even more so if they themselves fall below the institutional norm for SAT performance. Likewise, those who feel they are representing their race every time they are called on to perform academically will have a heightened sense of responsibility, or what we call a "subjective performance burden," when their group's average SAT score is known to be well below that of other students at the institution. Given the plethora of guides that publish institutional average SAT scores, a person from a minority group may well be aware that his or her score is below the usual level for the institution. In addition, students can observe a gap between groups either directly, because the data are often published online or by a college rating service, or indirectly, because group differences can sometimes be apparent in class.

We have based our views on extensive research that we've conducted to gauge the effects of affirmative action on academic performance. We have used SAT scores to measure the impact of affirmative action not because they are ideal, but because they offer a practical method that can be applied across groups and
institutions. (One must devise some operational measure by which students from extremely diverse backgrounds can be compared, and despite vocal criticisms, the SAT remains a staple of the admissions process.) In essence, we take the critics at their word and reason that if admissions standards have indeed been "loosened" to facilitate the entry of underrepresented minorities, then we would expect a gap in SAT scores between minority-group members and other students.

To measure affirmative action at the individual level, we computed the difference between the SAT scores earned by specific black and Latino students and the institutional average at 28 colleges and universities. According to our calculations, 84 percent of black students had test scores below their institutions' averages, compared with around 66 percent of Hispanics. Such results assume that minority-group SAT scores fall below the institutional average because admissions officers trade off test scores against other criteria associated with their desire to recruit more minority students — the essence of affirmative action.

To measure affirmative action at the institutional level of each campus, we took the difference between the average SAT score earned by blacks or Hispanics and that earned by all students at a particular institution. We hypothesized that the larger the gap, the more an institution used criteria other than test scores to determine minority admissions. Among the 28 institutions that we studied, none displayed mean black and Latino SAT scores that were above the institutional average, suggesting that all institutions practiced some form of affirmative action. The differences between the SAT scores of black students and all students at those institutions ranged from 43 to 194 points and averaged 122 points. For Hispanics the average difference was 61 points, with a range that went from 56 to 139.

Based on those findings, our research has revealed that black and Latino students with relatively low SAT scores do no better or worse than their counterparts who scored at or above the average for their institutions. Affirmative action does not appear to set individual students up for failure by creating a mismatch between cognitive skills and academic demands at competitive colleges and universities. Other things being equal, individual affirmative-action beneficiaries earn the same grades as other students.

But at the same time, we have found a significant effect of institutional affirmative action on the grade performance of black and Latino students. A sizable minority-majority test-score gap within any given institution appears to create a social context that makes it more difficult for minority students to perform academically. The greater the discrepancy in SAT scores between minority students and others on a particular campus, the lower the grades earned by black and Latino students as a group on that campus.

Indeed, our research suggests that the extensive use of race-sensitive criteria under institutional affirmative action, when it produces a large test-score gap between minority and other students on campuses, appears to lower minority achievement in two ways: Directly, it creates a stigmatizing social context within which black and Latino students find it more difficult to perform. Indirectly, it heightens the subjective performance burden experienced by individual minority students.

Our statistical analyses of the academic effects of affirmative action have produced results that challenge as much as reassure supporters of affirmative action in higher education. But the results of our research do not mean that affirmative action is necessarily detrimental to the academic interests of minority students and should be abandoned. Rather, the results imply that as currently administered by selective institutions, the application of race-sensitive admissions criteria appears to create a stigmatizing setting and should be reconsidered. Indeed, if the way affirmative action is administered and framed can be changed so as to mitigate the stigma now being created, its negative academic effects might disappear.

Claude M. Steele, a social-psychology professor at Stanford University, has written extensively on the stereotype threat that occurs among minority students who perceive that others have low opinions of their abilities. He has suggested that faculty and staff members can defuse the power of negative stereotypes and overcome minority students' subjective performance burden through programs of "wise intervention" that
provide:

- Optimistic faculty-student relationships, in which professors communicate expectations of exceptional rather than poor performance and offer feedback in the context of an encouraging relationship.

- An emphasis on challenge rather than remediation in learning, conveying to students their potential for growth rather than their accumulated deficiencies.

- An emphasis on the expandability of intelligence through incremental experience, training, and effort rather than on framing intellect as a fixed and limited resource.

- Affirmation of minority students' belonging on the campus and their routine acceptance as members of the scholarly community.

- Validation of multiple approaches and perspectives in dealing with academic issues, which communicates to students that the campus is an environment where stereotypes are not likely to be used or welcomed.

As described in a paper to be published in *Harvard Educational Review*, Steele and several colleagues initiated a special program for African-American students at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, in which students weren't stigmatized by labeling the program as remedial or compensatory. Rather, they were told that, as Michigan students, they had survived a competitive selection process, and that their assignment to the program was intended to maximize their strong potential. In that way, university officials acknowledged the students' worth as scholars, communicated their high expectations for them, and explicitly labeled the program as nonremedial. A systematic analysis of the participants' academic progress showed that students in the program lived up to their academic potential, while comparable students who were assigned to remedial programs did not. No matter what their SAT scores, black students in programs that were labeled compensatory earned a mediocre GPA of 2.5.

Those findings suggest that if minority students were welcomed and supported at selective institutions in the same way that star athletes and legacy students routinely are, the grade performance of black and Latino students might improve markedly. But, if anything, elite colleges and universities now seem to be doing the opposite of wisely intervening in support of minority students. When they arrive on campus, black and Latino students are often singled out for special treatment in ways that typically imply a need for remediation. They have been far more likely than white or Asian students to report the use of a tutor or the receipt of special instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, test taking, and study skills. Over all, black students have been more than twice as likely as white students to receive institutional help.

The worst possible situation is for minority students to be typically selected for remedial programs on the basis of race and ethnicity rather than ability or level of preparation, thus communicating the tacit assumption that all black and Latino students are of suspect intellectual quality, no matter what their class or educational background. Under that policy, minority students who have two professionally employed parents and who attended an elite prep school and scored high on the SAT receive the same message of suspected deficiency and low expectations as those who come from a single-parent, welfare-dependent household and who attended inner-city public schools and scored much lower on the SAT.

Selective colleges and universities have long been running two other affirmative-action programs without creating a social stigma or raising the performance burden of participants: one for students with athletics skills, and one for children of alumni. Yet in our research, two of us — Massey and Mooney — have found no evidence of a greater performance burden among them. The only significant statistical effect we have found is for athletes, and for them the effect of institutional affirmative action has been the opposite of that for minority students: It has reduced anxieties about academic performance.
In the end, our finding that affirmative-action programs can undermine grade performance by stigmatizing students and increasing the pressure they feel to perform tells us less about the inherent weakness of affirmative action than about the poor fashion in which programs are carried out. Affirmative action taken to ensure the inclusion of athletes and legacies has operated for decades without creating debilitating performance burdens on either football players or the children of alumni. There is no good reason that affirmative-action programs for minority students cannot be run in the same way.

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