Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin II
Research Findings on the Consequences of Eliminating Individualized Considerations of Race in Postsecondary Admissions¹

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There are great costs in not considering race in admissions in the narrowly tailored manner that the University of Texas at Austin employs. Research on the impact of laws that ban the consideration of race in admissions shows that at selective schools these bans have led to declines in racial and ethnic student body diversity, including in the important fields of medicine, law, business, and science. Not only do these declines degrade the educational experiences of students, but they harm the nation’s future. Research shows that barring the kind of consideration that UT Austin gives race in its holistic admissions system can not only isolate and stigmatize admitted students, but may also harm race relations by limiting cross campus racial integration and preventing institutions from addressing and countering the ways in which race shapes the educational experiences of all students.

Public Institutions That Cannot Implement Race-Sensitive Admissions Have Experienced Substantial Declines in Racial Diversity, Harming the Nation’s Future

- Racial diversity has fallen significantly at selective undergraduate institutions that are barred from considering race as a factor in admissions.

A study by Hinrichs (2012) found that bans on race-conscious admissions policies in multiple states have led to a 1.74 percentage-point decline in African American enrollment and a 2.03 percentage-point decline in Latino enrollment at the most selective institutions. A separate study by Backes (2012) found similar declines in multiple states.

After Proposition 209 prohibited race-conscious admissions decisions in California, racial diversity declined significantly at the University of California flagship campuses. Between 1997 and 1998, enrollments of African American freshman at UC Berkeley declined by 53%, while Latino enrollees fell by 45% (University of California Office of the President, 2015). In the same period, African American enrollments at UCLA dropped by 38%, while Latino enrollments declined by 30%. Although demographic shifts have resulted in a modest recovery in absolute numbers, especially for Latinos, since that time, neither campus has regained the diversity it had in 1995.

Prohibitions on the holistic consideration of race in admissions have shifted Latino and African American students from more selective to less selective colleges, which limits these students’ educational and later career opportunities (Grodsky & Kurlaender, 2010).

As is true of selective colleges in other states, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, despite its best efforts to maintain racial diversity, experienced a sharp decline in the

¹ Information is drawn from Brief of 823 Social Scientists as Amici Curiae in Support of Respondents in Fisher v. University of Texas II (2015).
enrollment of students of color after Proposal 2 took effect. From 2006 to 2012, the proportion of African American undergraduate students enrolled declined by about 25% and the proportion of Latino students fell by 24% (University of Michigan Office of the Registrar, 2010, 2012).

- **Racial student body diversity has also dropped substantially in professional schools in medicine, business, and law, and in graduate science fields that are critical for continued scientific and technological advancement and to national security.**

Bans on race-sensitive admissions at public institutions across six states have led to a 17% drop in the percentage of enrolled students in medical schools who are Latino, African American, or Native American (Garces & Mickey-Pabello, 2015).

Racial diversity has also declined in business schools and law schools. At the six public business schools in the UC system in 2014, African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians combined were only 5.3% of UC’s M.B.A. students, less than half of the average at comparable U.S. business schools (Kidder & Gandara, 2015). Across all UC first-time professional degrees awarded (law, medicine, pharmacy, business, public policy, architecture, etc.), African Americans and Latinos comprised nearly 20% of the degrees granted in the pre-Proposition 209 graduating class of 1997, compared to only 10% of UC’s professional school graduates in 2010 (Kidder & Gandara, 2015).

Bans on race-sensitive admissions across four states have led to a 26% drop in the percentage of engineering graduate students who are Latino, African American, or Native American, and a 19% decline in the natural sciences (Garces, 2013).

**Low Levels of Racial Diversity and the Inability to Consider Race Are Associated with a Less Welcoming Campus Racial Climate**

Climate surveys from UT Austin and other leading research universities administered in recent years show that lower levels of campus diversity are associated with greater reporting by African American and Latino students of stereotyping and discrimination (Kidder, 2012; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). African American and Latino students are more likely to feel excluded from campus events and activities at institutions with low levels of racial diversity than at those with higher levels. Although African American students are not the predominant minority on any of these campuses, the data indicate that they feel more included where there is a diverse campus environment. Higher levels of diversity on campus are also significant in reducing Latino students’ feelings of isolation.

A survey of 58 schools shows that in the sample’s least diverse schools about one in five (20.5%) African American students and one in seven (14.5%) Latino students reported at least one discriminatory incident to campus authorities, and this is just the tip of the iceberg since most instances of perceived bias and discrimination go unreported (Hurtado & Ruiz-Alvarado, 2015). In the survey’s more diverse schools, significantly lower percentages of African American and Latino students report such incidents.
Other data from over 8,000 Latino students on 82 campuses show that reports of feelings of exclusion, negative verbal comments, and offensive visual images are lower in moderately diverse institutions (with 21-35% African American and Latino student enrollment) than in less diverse institutions and diminish still further as minority enrollments increase (Hurtado & Ruiz-Alvarado, 2015). Other work shows that more diverse campuses have per capita fewer reports of hate crimes (Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012).

Other Diversity Learning Environment survey research on college students confirms that African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos manifest much greater “racial salience” (i.e., they think about their racial group membership and identity with greater frequency) than white students (Hurtado et al., 2015).

The Inability to Consider Race as One Among Many Factors in Admissions Can Harm Race Relations and Prevent Institutions from Addressing Racial Barriers for Students

- Because race often operates subconsciously to shape attitudes and behavior, not allowing attention to race in admissions can harm race relations, whereas permitting its consideration can improve mutual understanding and social cohesion.

An extensive overview by Tropp and colleagues of how social science informs the use and interpretation of racial categorization demonstrates that classifications on the basis of race may be necessary to improve race relations and to address the ways in which race influences the educational experiences of students (Tropp et al., 2007). This is because race operates not only structurally to shape a child’s life chances, including his or her opportunity for a quality education, but also at the individual level, influencing the thoughts and behavior of individuals of all races.

Race matters in subconscious ways through implicit biases, such as attitudes toward particular social groups (Dovidio et al., 2008; Dovidio et al., 2002) and other racialized psychological phenomena such as stereotype threat, classically manifested in high stakes test performance, involving the threatening experience of conforming to negative race-based stereotypes present in the larger society (Steele, 2003). Failing to consider race in the limited manner permitted by Supreme Court precedent can harm both majority and minority groups by allowing harmful racial stereotypes to operate without policies that can help counter such negative perceptions.

Studies have shown that suppressing the ability to consciously consider race can cause educators to reproduce the very racial inequities they wish to dismantle (Pollock, 2004; Apfelbaum et al., 2010).

A recent study by Garces & Cogburn (2015) shows that laws barring the consideration of race in admissions decisions have hindered institutional efforts to support students by making racial diversity efforts on campus less visible and making higher education professionals who have sought to promote racial diversity feel less empowered.
Because efforts to achieve the educational benefits of diversity require visible, sustained support at various institutional levels (Milem et al., 2005), barring race-sensitivity at the outset thus creates serious barriers for institutions seeking to further diversity in service of their educational mission. These bars undermine the support students of color need to succeed. By contrast, acknowledging and affirming group membership can positively motivate students of color (Tropp & Bianchi, 2007).

References


