1. What is “Mismatch Theory,” and what is its relevance to affirmative action?

Mismatch theory argues that learning is hampered when a student attends an institution of higher education where his or her academic skills as measured by admissions credentials (i.e., high school grades and SAT scores, college grades and LSAT, MCAT or similar scores) are substantially below the median of most students. The argument is that professors pitch their lectures and assignments to the level of the median student, and students whose credentials are well below the classroom median have difficulty in understanding lectures and assignments or otherwise keeping up. Since a substantial proportion of students admitted to largely white colleges and professional schools with the benefit of affirmative action have prior grades and admissions test scores well below the school’s median, the argument is that these affirmative action admittees, because they are overmatched, will learn less and be less successful in college and beyond than would have been the case if they had attended less-selective institutions where their credentials were closer to those of the median student.

2. Is the suggestion of a mismatch effect in the empirical work by Richard Sander, Doug Williams, and others generally accepted as valid in the educational research or other relevant scientific communities?

No. The works most frequently cited in support of mismatch theory are studies conducted by the lawyer/economist Richard Sander and his coauthor, economist Doug Williams. However, those who have looked most closely at these studies have not only identified serious methodological flaws, but also have failed to duplicate Sanders’ results in their own analyses of the same law school data Sander used. (For evaluations by sociologists, economists, statisticians and law professors see, e.g., Daniel E. Ho (2005); Ian Ayres & Richard Brooks (2005); David L. Chambers, Timothy T. Clydesdale, William C. Kidder & Richard O. Lempert (2005); Gregory Camilli, Darrell D. Jackson, Chu Chia-Yi & Ann Gallagher (2011); Jesse Rothstein & Albert H. Yoon (2008); Alice Xiang & Donald Rubin (2015).) Moreover, a recent commentary found that an assumption regarding law school selectivity, at the heart of the models both Sander and Williams develop, is statistically indefensible (Kidder and Lempert, 2015). Most significantly, a group led by some of the country’s leading social science methodologists, including National Academy of Science members Gary King and Daniel Rubin, urged the Supreme Court in Fisher 1 to disregard the Sander and Williams studies because of serious methodological flaws. This group reaffirmed its position in an amicus brief filed in Fisher 2.
3. Is there research on how affirmative action admittees fare after receiving professional degrees?

Yes. Lempert, Chambers and Adams (2000), looking at graduates of the University of Michigan Law School during the first 27 classes that admitted students using affirmative action, found that controlling for years since graduation white students and students of color who benefitted from race-conscious admissions did not differ on how much they earned or how satisfied they were with their careers, but the student of color graduates devoted significantly more time to pro bono work and community leadership activities. Davidson and Lewis (1997), who studied graduates from the University of California at Davis Medical School over a twenty-year period, also found that the school’s minority and white graduates were similar on measures of career success.

4. What is the evidence regarding mismatch effects among undergraduate students?

Numbers of scholars, including many recognized leaders in the educational research community, have searched for mismatch effects at the undergraduate level. Results beginning with Bowen and Bok’s (1998) seminal book, *The Shape of the River*, consistently find either no evidence of mismatch or reverse mismatch effects; that is, students perform better than their academic entrance credentials might lead one to expect (see, e.g., Hoxby & Avery (2013); Bowen, Chingos & McPherson (2009); Thomas. J. Kane (1998); Small & Winship (2007); Fischer & Massey (2007); Alon and Tienda (2005); Melguizo (2008), and Cortes (2010).) Although some of these studies use samples drawn from the nation’s most selective schools, others use national databases or state-focused ones. Arcidiacono & Koedel (2014), using a data set that allowed them to control for high school quality, found that in Missouri, a state whose schools are not generally regarded as elite, minority students still did better relative to their academic credentials and background characteristics if they attended the state’s more selective rather than its less-selective schools. Other researchers have followed students beyond graduation, and like Bowen & Bok (1998) find that minority students do better in their careers when they have attended schools where mismatch theory predicts they will do poorly (see, e.g., Dale & Kruger (2014); Daniel, Black & Smith (2001); Kane (1998); and Fryer & Greenstone (2010).) What is most striking about this work is its consistent demonstration that minorities are not harmed and often appear advantaged by affirmative action.

References


Robert Davidson and Ernest Lewis, *Affirmative Action and other special consideration admission at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine*, Journal of the American Medical Association 278 (1997)


