Research Supporting the Compelling Interest in Diversity

One of the key questions that the U.S. Supreme Court may address in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* is whether the University’s interest in student body diversity is a compelling governmental interest. The Court ruled in 2003 in *Grutter v. Bollinger* that promoting student body diversity is a compelling interest, and relied on findings contained in the AERA, et al. amicus curiae brief and leading research studies. If the Court decides to revisit the compelling interest question in *Fisher*, the body of scientific evidence, which has expanded significantly since the *Grutter* decision, continues to strongly support the diversity rationale.

The AERA, et al. amicus brief filed in the *Fisher* case highlights three lines of recent research supporting the compelling interest in diversity: (1) student body diversity leads to important educational benefits; (2) significant harms are associated with racial isolation and tokenism in non-diverse settings; and (3) the purported harms to minority students associated with race-conscious admissions are inconsistent with recent findings and lack a solid empirical basis.

(1) **EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY**

**Student Body Diversity Promotes Cross-Racial Understanding and Reduces Prejudice**

- Racially diverse educational settings are effective in reducing prejudice by promoting greater intergroup contact—both informally and in classroom settings—and encouraging friendships across group lines. (e.g., Chang et al., 2004; Lopez, 2004; Saenz, et al., Denson & Chang, 2009)
- Meta-analyses (studies compiling and summarizing findings from several previous studies) show that positive intergroup contact reduces prejudice and that greater intergroup contact is associated with lower levels of prejudice. (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008)
- Studies and meta-analyses focusing on friendships developed in diverse settings also reveal positive effects resulting from cross-racial interaction. (e.g., Fischer, 2008; Levin et al., 2003; Davies, et al., 2011)
- Cross-racial interaction also has positive effects on curricular and co-curricular diversity activities that lead to prejudice reduction.(e.g., Denson, 2009)

**Student Body Diversity Leads to Educational Benefits such as Improvements in Cognitive Abilities, Critical Thinking, and Self-Confidence**

- Student body diversity fosters improvements in students’ cognitive skills—such as critical thinking and problem-solving—because students’ exposure to individuals different from themselves, as well as to novel ideas and situations arising from that exposure, challenges their thinking and leads to cognitive

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1 Prepared for AERA Media Briefing on *Fisher v. University of Texas, Austin*, Briefing on AERA et al. Amicus Brief On Strength of the Science, September, 27, 2012; Washington, DC.
growth. (e.g., Antonio et al., 2004; Chang, et al., 2009; Hurtado, 2005; Bowman, 2010)

- Student interaction with diverse peers contributed to positive effects by the second year of college, including improvements in cognitive abilities (e.g., analytical problem-solving skills and complex thinking skills), socio-cognitive skills (e.g., cultural awareness and leadership), and democratic sensibilities (e.g., pluralistic orientation and the importance of civic contribution) (Hurtado, 2005)
- Students with greater exposure to diversity are more likely to score higher on academic self-confidence, social agency (the belief in taking personal action to improve society), and dispositions toward critical thinking. (Nelson Laird, 2005)

**Student Body Diversity Promotes Civic Engagement and Skills Needed for Professional Development and Leadership**

- Multiple studies have documented the positive relationships between diversity and a range of benefits that have long-term implications for civic engagement, professional growth, and the preparation of leaders for an increasingly diverse society. (e.g., Hurtado, 2005; Engberg, 2007; Gurin et al., 2004).
- Improvements in measures of civic engagement, including (1) civic attitudes toward democratic participation, (2) civic behaviors such as participating in community activities, and (3) intentions to participate in civic activities, have been documented in multiple studies. (e.g., Bowman, 2011; Engberg&Hurtado)
- Post-college leadership skills (as measured by leadership ability, public speaking, social self-confidence, and ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues) and the level of pluralistic orientation are significantly related to the degree of student body diversity and to the racial climate of institutions, as well as to the level of cross-racial interaction during college. (Jayakumar, 2008)
- One study showing the long-term effects of diversity found that diversity experiences were positively related to personal growth, purpose in life, recognition of racism, and volunteering behavior among college graduates in their mid-30s (thirteen years after graduation). (Bowman, et al, 2011)

**Student Body Diversity Leads to Improved Classroom Environments**

- Survey data from over 500 students from the University of Michigan revealed that most respondents were engaged in positive interactions with students from different racial backgrounds, and that the data revealed: (a) greater diversity in the student body leads to increased classroom diversity and improved learning; (b) classroom diversity results in open minds and engaging classroom conversations; and (c) more structural diversity leads to greater participation by minority students and less tokenism.” (Deo, 2011)
- The same study concluded that more lively and engaging conversations occur when diversity discussions are included in the classroom, and improved learning occurs because abstract concepts are tied directly to concrete examples drawn from personal experience. (Deo, 2011)
• Improved discussions and learning outcomes result from classroom diversity, where African American and white students added different personal experiences to the discussion (Pitt & Packard, 2012)

(2) HARMS ASSOCIATED WITH TOKENISM, RACIAL ISOLATION, AND STEREOTYPING

• **Isolation, subordination, and negative stereotyping** are common problems that arise in a wide range of settings when minority numbers are especially low and the norms and behaviors of majority groups dominate. (e.g., Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002; Moss Kanter, 1977; Harper & Hurtado, 2007)

• **Stereotype threat** (increased pressure on groups arising from negative stereotypes that leads to poor performance on tests and other measures) contributes to diminished academic performance among racial and ethnic minorities, as well as women in mathematics and science fields. (e.g., Steele, 2010; Logel et al., 2012; Walton & Spencer, 2009)

• **Microaggressions** (day-to-day verbal and non-verbal slights and insults) are commonplace in non-diverse settings. (e.g., McCabe, 2009; Smith, 2011) For example, a 2009 study drawing data from a large public university containing low percentages of minority students found microaggressions in many campus and classroom settings: African American men were characterized as aggressive, threatening, and criminal; African American women frequently reported not being taken seriously in discussions or always being expected to represent their race; and Latino women commonly encountered stereotypes of foreignness and exoticism, often of a sexual nature. As a result, minority students consistently reported feeling isolated and not belonging to their campus community. (McCabe, 2009)

• Feelings of exclusion from campus events and activities, as well as offensive verbal comments and visual images, are more prevalent in low-diversity institutions among underrepresented minority students, with significant declines as the campus minority student enrollment increases. (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012)

• Problems of tokenism, stereotyping, and microaggression are commonplace in programs and fields with low numbers of minorities or women, particularly in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) (e.g., Chang et al., 2011; Museus et al., 2011; Ong et al., 2011)

• Several studies show that less supportive educational environments are tied to minority students’ departure from STEM fields (Museus, et al., 2011), while positive factors such as the racial and gender diversity of graduate students in STEM have been linked to persistence among women and minority students in STEM majors (Griffith, 2010).

(3) CLAIMS THAT MINORITY STUDENTS ARE HARMED BY RACE-CONSCIOUS ADMISSIONS LACK A STRONG EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION

• **Stigma:** The claim that stigma increases under affirmative action programs is contradicted by a number of recent studies. (e.g., Bowen, 2010; Onwuachi-Willig et al., 2008)
Recent research indicates that stigma among minority studies is lower in states with race-conscious admissions. (Bowen, 2010)

A study of elite public law schools found little evidence of stigma, and the little stigma that was reported was no more common in the four schools with race-conscious admissions than in the three schools without race-conscious admissions. (Onwuachi-Willing, et al, 2008)

- **Mismatch Hypothesis**: The claim that minority students suffer academic harms when their admissions credentials do not “match” their institutions finds limited support in the scientific literature. (e.g., Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bowen et al., 2009; Fischer & Massey, 2007; Ayres & Brooks, 2005; Chambers et al., 2005)
  - Research on undergraduates has found that probabilities of graduation were higher, rather than lower, at selective institutions compared to non-selective ones, a finding that controverts the mismatch hypothesis. (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bowen et al., 2009)
  - Research has also found that diversity-based admissions were positively related to minority students’ first-semester grades and negatively related to their dropout rates. (Fischer & Massey, 2007)
  - Research on law schools schools shows little evidence of mismatch, and evidence suggests significant declines in the number of African American lawyers if race-conscious admissions are eliminated. (Ayres & Brooks, 2005; Chambers et al., 2005; Ho, 2995; Rothstein & Yoon, 2008)

- Numerous studies show that minority students gain significant educational and economic benefits through their attendance at selective institutions—including higher graduation rates and increased earnings and labor force participation following graduation. (e.g., Bowen et al., 2009; Melguizo, 2008; Small & Winship, 2007; Long, 2010)

**References**

All references above are fully cited in the AERA et al. Amicus Curiae Brief available online at [www.aera.net](http://www.aera.net). All studies referenced in the brief are available through toll free links to online articles or to PDF files with the courtesy of the publishers.