The Shape of the River

By William G. Bowen and Derek Bok

Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions

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A Panel Presentation and Discussion of the Book

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Thomas Poole (Office of the Vice-Provost for Educational Equity)
“You’ve got to know the shape of the river perfectly.... Do you mean to say that I’ve got to know all the million trifling variations of shape...?”

Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi
Bowen and Bok:

“The image of the river is also central to the story of our book, which is concerned with the flow of talent—particularly of talented black men and women—through the country’s system of higher education and on into the marketplace and the larger society.”
Rather than a ‘pipeline’,

“It is more helpful to think of the nurturing of talent as a process akin to moving down a winding river.... Particularly when race is involved, there is nothing simple, smooth, or highly predictable about the education of young people.”
Organization of Chapters and Presenters

- Chapter 1: Historical Context (Poole)
- Chapter 2: The Admissions Process and “Race Neutrality” (Escalet)
- Chapter 3: Academic Outcomes (Escalet)
- Chapter 4: Advanced Study: Graduate and Professional Degrees (omitted)
- Chapter 5: Employment, Earnings, and Job Satisfaction (Poole)
• Chapter 6: Civic Participation and Satisfaction With Life (Poole)
• Chapter 7: Looking Back: Views of College (Escalet)
• Chapter 8: Diversity: Perceptions and Realities (Escalet)
• Chapter 9: Informing the Debate (Brisson)
• Chapter 10: Summing Up (Brisson)
• Appendices, including the College and Beyond Database
Scholarly and Political Context

- Framing the nature of the debate: what premises one begins with and how the issues are formulated
- Herrenstein’s and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*
- Biological arguments against affirmative action
- Sociological (the ‘right fit’ hypothesis) arguments against affirmative action
- Simplistic, one-dimensional characterizations in the popular media
The College and Beyond Database

- Studies long-term consequences of attending academically selective universities.
- Core database consists of an institutional data file and a survey data file.
- Cohort years are 1951, 1976, and 1989.
- Control group study created independently by National Opinion Research Center (NORC)
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<th>Participating Universities (all)</th>
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<td><strong>11 Liberal Arts Colleges</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Research Universities (inc. 4 public):</strong></td>
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Penn State All University Cabinet 1955
Agriculture
and engineering courses
continue to be highly rated nationwide,
though a feminine presence has invaded the class room.

Penn State School of Agriculture 1975
Penn State Members of Student Govt. 1976
Penn State Classroom 1989
Penn State Students 1998
The Status of African Americans Prior to the Civil Rights Movement (1940)

Educational level of African Americans aged 25-29 years

The median educational level was 7 years

12% had completed high school

Less than 2% had a college degree
African Americans in the Professions

- 1.8% of all male professionals were African American
- African Americans constituted 2.8% of physicians, 0.5% of attorneys, and 0.5% of engineers
- Nationally, only 33 elected officials were African American, of which only one was a member of congress; none were mayors
- One African American sat on the federal bench
Admissions Criteria at Selective Institutions

20-30% of all colleges nationally are selective

Admissions Goals among Selective Institutions:

- Admit only those students who meet whatever academic criteria the institution has established that indicates students will be able to successfully complete and benefit from a course of study.

- Attract an ample number of students who show particular promise of excelling in their studies.

- Assemble a class of students with a wide diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and talents (i.e., athletes, musicians, low-income, minorities, etc.).
Admissions Criteria at Selective Institutions (Cont.)

• Admit students who show promise of utilizing their education to make distinctive contributions to their professions and the welfare of society.

• Admit students who will continue to foster institutional loyalties and traditions (i.e., legacies).
The Effects of “Race-Neutrality” on Admission to Selective Institutions (1989 Cohort)

- Reduce the probability for admission for African American applicants from 42% to 13%
- Reduce the actual number of matriculants from 7.1% to 3.6%
- Increase the probability of admission for white students by 1.5%
Five Conclusions:

- A strict race-neutral admission standard would reduce the enrollment of African American students at selective colleges by 50 to 70%.

- Under race-neutral admissions policies, the most selective schools would experience the largest drop in African American enrollment.

- Continuing disparities in SAT scores and high school grades between African American students and their white counterparts require the continuation of race-sensitive admissions policies if selective institutions are to be able to admit a significant amount of African American students.
Five Conclusions (Cont..)

• Class-based preferences cannot be a substitute for race-sensitive policies in attaining academic excellence and diversity.

• The academic credentials of African American students who would be rejected under race-neutral policies are only slightly weaker than those who would be accepted under these policies.
There is good news and bad news

Most black matriculants (75%) do graduate within six (6) years of beginning their undergraduate careers. According to Bowen and Bok, those who do not graduate generally do not drop out because of academic inability. The most common culprits are issues like loss of motivation, campus life issues, family problems, financial difficulties, and poor health.
Factors that influence graduation rates

- Institutional Selectivity is a major factor in the graduation rates of students (selectivity is defined as SEL – 1 = average SAT scores of 1300 or higher, SEL – 2 = average SAT scores of 1150 – 1299, SEL – 3 = average SAT scores below 1150). According to Bowen and Bok, there is a correlation between having higher standards for admission and graduation. The bad news for us (PSU) is that we are a SEL – 3 institution (an institution with lower standards) and the data show that our students do not fare as well as those who attend the more selective institutions.
The central finding is...

“those who attended the most selective schools graduated at higher rates than did those who attended less selective schools.” Bowen and Bok conclude that “the college or university that a student attends is a much better predictor of the odds of graduating than is the student’s own SAT score.”
– Socioeconomic status/background is another factor bearing on graduation rates on all student groups. It seems to have a “much stronger effect on graduation rates for black students than it does for all students.” (a difference of 15 percentage points)

– The attending good news is that between 1976 and 1989 the first school graduation rate rose from 77% of the ’76 cohort to 85% of the ’89 cohort.
Choice of major is often identified as a possible factor for minority students doing better. The argument being essentially that they are choosing easier majors and courses. However, the data do not support the argument. The students are enrolling in the same types of majors and courses as their white colleagues.
“While the majors chosen by black students are similar to those chosen by their white peers and provide no cause for concern, their college grades present a more sobering picture. The grades earned by black students at the C&B schools often reflect their struggles to succeed academically in highly competitive academic settings.”
When the comparison is made on an “all things being equal” basis (variables of SAT and high school grade point average and Socioeconomic status) Black students earn an average cgpa = 2.61 while their White colleagues earn an average cgpa = 3.15. And the average class ranking is roughly 16 percentile points lower than the class rank of apparently comparable classmates.

The suggestion here is that there other factors that influence the performance of students that are apparently more influential on black students than on whites.
Institutional Initiatives

- Successful programs that seem to address the underperformance phenomenon typically combine the following components:
  
  - Aura of high expectations
  - Emphasis on meeting intellectual challenges rather than receiving remediation to achieve a minimum standard
  - Encourage participants to work in groups
  - Offer appropriate advising and counseling
Institutional initiatives (Cont.)

• Assign students to successful professionals who act as mentors
• Provide summer internships
• Offer enough financial aid to remove the risk of students having to work excessively
• Involve parents and keep them continuously informed
Employment, Earnings, and Job Satisfaction

• Labor Force Participation and Work Status

93% of all '76 cohort males worked in April 1995. There was no significant difference between black and white males.

Less than 60% white women in the C&B group worked full time, 20% did not work.

In contrast, only 5% of black women were not working, and 85% worked full time.
Mean earned income by Race & Gender, 1995 (1976 Cohort)
Civic Participation and Satisfaction with Life

- Civic participation and leadership
  90% of the entire ‘76 cohort participated in civic activities in 1995 (50% of all Americans, 70% of all graduates).

- Types of civic activities measured:
  Professional and trade associations
  Education (Primary and Secondary)
  College-related (fund-raising, recruiting, etc.)
  Cultural and art activities
  Environmental and conservation programs
Conclusions:

- Black C&B matriculants were even more active than white classmates (nationally the percentages were the same).

- “Black men were appreciably more likely to participate in the clusters of activities that include community, social service, youth, and educational organizations.”

- “… in every type of civic activity, the ratio of black male leaders is even higher than the ratio of black male participants to white male participants.”
Factors that predict leadership

- SAT scores and grades: they make very little difference

- Family circumstances: a positive relationship, though affluence plays little role. E.g., raising children dramatically increased the likelihood that parents would be involved in education and children’s groups.

- School selectivity: generally positive, but based on several factors. For education, there is little effect, but it’s positive for professional, community and social services, and cultural
Black leadership

“Black ‘76 C&B matriculants were much more likely to have taken on leadership positions in virtually every type of civic endeavor.”

What are the implications for society at large?

“The willingness of black C&B graduates to assume leadership roles in particularly significant in light of the role of civic participation in building a stable community structure.” That ... “civic engagement makes a critical difference in forming a more stable society.”
Family Income

- Unusually high for C&B graduates: Over $100,000 for white men, white women, and black men ($93,000 for black women)—this is very impressive considering that the cohort was only in its late 30s at the time of the survey.

- The differences from national graduates: $32,600 for black women, $37,500 for white women, $42,700 for white men, $44,400 for black men
Satisfaction with Life

- Race and life satisfaction
  Consistently lower degree of satisfaction expressed by black C&B individuals
  For ‘76 cohort there is 29% vs. 44% unadjusted difference. Adjusted factors such as household income lower the difference to 10%: how to explain this?
“The success of the black 1976 matriculants in earning advanced degrees and finding good jobs offers a partial response to the question whether these students deserved to be admitted to the C&B schools...”

“The contributions outside the workplace provide additional confirmation.”

They have modestly lower family incomes and are somewhat less satisfied with life than comparable white graduates.
More black than white graduates attending selective institutions reported college helped develop important skills and felt college made a difference.

Among the matriculants at selective colleges in 1976, 90% were satisfied with their undergraduate experience, levels of appreciation are higher in 1989 matriculants.
• The more selective the institution, the greater the satisfaction

• Authors noted that in teaching and academic advising, effort has to be devoted to encourage students, regardless of race to take advantage of their educational opportunities
DIVERSITY: PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES

- The authors assessed the educational value of diversity.
- Far more black and white students in the 1989 cohort than in the 1976 group found it important to get along with people of different races.
The authors asked students if they "knew well" two or more students of different races, answers revealed the following:

1989 - 88% black students said they knew well two or more white students. 56% of the white students said they knew well two or more black students.
• Authors concluded that if there was segregation on these campuses, the walls between the subgroups were highly porous.

• The authors also explored views expressed by graduates of selective colleges about the value of education and contributions that a diverse body has made to their capacity to live and work with people of other races.

• Study suggests that colleges and universities are having more success in helping students benefit from diversity on campus.
• 42% of white 1976 students and 74% of black students found it very important to learn to work well, get along with members of different races and cultures; these percentages increased to 55% and 76% for 1989 group.

• The findings suggest that going to college with a diverse body of fellow students made a valuable contribution to their education and personal development.

• Authors concluded that "the ultimate test of diversity as an educational policy...is not whether friction and misunderstanding occur, but what students think of their total experience"
Informing the Debate: Do Race-Sensitive Admissions Harm the Intended Beneficiaries?

- Graduation Rates
- Incentive Effects
- Demoralization and its Possible Effect on Grades
- Possible harm to minority graduate careers?
- Effects of diversity on campus life
Assessing the Performance of Minority Students

Black applicants at the 5 most selective colleges (1989 cohort):

> 75% had math SATs above the national average for whites

73% had SATs > 1100
Minority students graduate

- Black students at the 28 colleges (1989 cohort):
  - 75% graduated from their 1st school within 6 years
  - 4% transferred and graduated from another college within 6 years
  - Were as likely as whites to earn graduate and professional degrees
  - 90% of black students at leading professional schools graduate

- Higher average SAT of college = higher black graduation rate
  - The most selective institutions have the highest graduation rates
Minority students from selective schools do well after graduation.

Black graduates are in highly productive careers.

**Black men:**

- Earned higher salaries than other black males with BA degrees
- Are much more likely to be civic and community leaders
Effects of Diversity on Campus Life

• The College & Beyond surveys speak clearly and strongly to the value of racial diversity: most students rate its value as a 4 or a 5 on a 5 point scale.

• Self-segregation does not occur: the large majority “knew well” a person of another race.

• Diversity has numerous positive effects.
Summing Up: Lessons Learned

• The meaning of “merit” in the admissions process must be articulated more clearly:

  Admission based on merit to selective schools is important because for...

  1) individual reasons (payoffs in terms of career)

  2) societal reasons (addressing long-term societal needs)

BUT...
What do we mean by merit?

• Grades and test scores are only of limited use: they predict only 15-20% of variance among all students in academic performance (the percentage is even less among African-Americans).

• What other criteria should be included as indicators of merit?
To admit “on the merits”, then, is to admit by following complex rules derived from a

Above all, merit must be defined in light of what educational institutions are trying to accomplish. In our view, race is relevant in determining which candidates “merit” admission because taking account of race helps institutions achieve 3 objectives central to their mission:
• Identifying individuals of high-potential.
• Benefiting Educationally from Diversity on campus.
• Addressing long-term societal needs.
“The members of the Kellogg Commission believe in encouraging broad access to our institutions and greater diversity in enrollment not because access and diversity make good economic sense—although they do— but because they are matters of simple fairness and justice.... But if appeals to fairness are not sufficient, Americans need to know that access must be broadened because the practical economic need for diversity on our campuses is too compelling to ignore.”