

Letter from America: Race and the American Academy

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Refugees from British academia to America quickly discover that one of things that is not expected is help with undergraduate admissions. At prestigious American universities, where the four-year cost of around \$120,000 is far from eliminating the oversupply of candidates, the task of selecting a class is too important to be left to faculty. And while academic credentials—high school records and results on the (standardized) Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs)—are given considerable weight, so are many other factors, such as athletic ability, “legacy” status—children of alumni/ae, extracurricular activities, and (in the last 25 years or so) race. The weights attached to these factors have undergone great changes over the years, and the fact that admissions officers have not been constrained by a single criterion has given them the ability, not only to shape the class in traditional images of Harvard, Princeton, or Yale, but to change those images as the need arose. Princeton was for many years dominated by the nearby Presbyterian theological seminary, and for much of this century was widely regarded as a club for Southern gentlemen. Stories that the first African-American students at Princeton were sometimes asked to carry the luggage of young white freshmen are likely apocryphal, but entirely credible. Certainly, the Ivy League was almost entirely white, all male, and exercised quotes against Jews. And for universities with an undergraduate student body of five thousand, the need to field a football team of nearly a hundred players places serious constraints on the ability to meet other goals.

When the objectives changed after the mid-1960s, Admissions Offices went on much as before, but instead of attempting to exercise a uniform academic cutoff, as happened in most British universities, they continued to “shape each class,” only with different criteria. Women, blacks and Hispanics were not only admitted, but actively recruited, Jews were no longer discriminated against (although there is still controversy about whether Asian Americans are equitably treated), and football scholarships were abandoned according to an Ivy League treaty in an (at least partially successful) attempt to have academically well-qualified football players. For some time, there was a forceful backlash from those who were hurt by these new policies, particularly the gentlemen whose clubs were being opened to non-members, though the fact that even gentlemen have daughters helped support one of the changes. Although much of the reaction has now died down, the use of race as a criterion for admission is an issue that is far from dead. The controversy is a national one, wider than the Ivy League, and wider than universities. Public support for affirmative action is lower than it has been for many years, and two states have passed laws prohibiting public universities from using race in their admissions. After a referendum vote against affirmative action in California, the Regents of the University of California prohibited race-based admission, and at Berkeley, the most selective of the California universities, the fraction of African-American applicants offered admission fell by two thirds, from 48.5 percent for the 1997 entering class to 15.6 percent in the 1998 entering class. (The admit rate for Whites rose by only 0.4 percentage points, from 29.9 percent to 30.3 percent.) A similar prohibition is in force in Texas, and others are being considered elsewhere.

Most of the debate on race-based admissions has taken place in the absence of data on the effects of these policies. No longer, thanks to an extraordinary book by two men who have been closely associated with race-based policies at selective universities, William Bowen, an empirical labor economist and former President of Princeton, and Derek Bok, onetime Dean of the Harvard Law School and former President of Harvard. Bowen and Bok collected data—the “College and Beyond” (C&B) database—from 28 selective liberal arts colleges and research universities on a total of 80,000 undergraduates who matriculated in 1951, 1976, and 1989. The data include not only academic records at college, but the admissions files with SAT scores and high-school records, as well as follow-up surveys with the ex-students on their subsequent education, occupations, and earnings, as well as information not in the college records, such as the other colleges to which they applied. The book’s title, *The Shape of the River* is chosen to emphasize the main argument, that we must not judge the outcome of race-based policies by looking only at what happens in college, but what happens afterwards. These universities are not just shaping a class, they are shaping a nation.

Black students come to the selective C&B colleges with lower SATs, they are less likely to graduate than white or Asian students (79 percent versus 94 percent and 96 percent), and they do less well in college, graduating on average at the 23rd percentile (from the bottom) of their class as opposed to the 53rd percentile

for whites, a difference that is reduced but not removed by conditioning on SAT scores. After college, blacks earn less than their white classmates, again even conditional on class rank. Even so, an extraordinary 40 percent of black graduates go on to earn advanced degrees in law, medicine, or academia, they earn a premium over other black graduates that is larger than the corresponding premium for whites, they express high levels of job satisfaction, and they are active as leaders in civic activities, both in their own communities, and in association with the colleges from which they graduated. The follow-up surveys among graduates reveal a high level of support for the current policies even among those who were not the direct beneficiaries; graduates emphasized how much they learned from other classmates, how important it had been to learn from people who were different from themselves, and the degree of interaction between undergraduates of different races and backgrounds. When asked about actual and desirable institutional priorities, the white members of the 1976 entering cohort (although in favor of reducing faculty research!) also favored a greater emphasis on diversity. For these and the younger cohorts, diversity is not simply a codeword for race. The Shape of the River will not resolve the issue of race in American universities, but its replacement of evidence for assertion will surely improve the terms on which the debate is conducted.

Angus Deaton's Letter from America appears every six months in the Royal Economic Society's Newsletter. For more information, visit <http://www.res.org.uk/society/newsletters.asp>.

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