

Policy Brief

Closing the Gap?: Admissions and Enrollments at the Texas Public Flagships Before and After Affirmative Action

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Study Description

With the national debate on affirmative action currently taking place, policy questions arise as to how admissions criteria influence the diversity of college campuses. After a federal court outlawed affirmative action in the 1996 case *Hopwood vs. Texas*, Texas legislators in 1998 instituted a plan in which high school graduates in the top 10 percent of their class are guaranteed admission to any state university. The so-called Texas "10 percent plan" has gained renewed attention as the United States Supreme Court prepares to hear two lawsuits challenging the University of Michigan's affirmative action admission policies.

The Office of Population Research (OPR), a major research center affiliated with the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, has issued a working paper, "Closing The Gap?: Admissions & Enrollments at the Texas Public Flagships Before and After Affirmative Action." Princeton University sociologist Marta Tienda and colleagues are the first researchers to analyze application, admission and enrollment data from 1990 to 2000 from the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University, the only public universities in the state that had practiced affirmative action prior to the Hopwood ruling. The researchers began their analyses in early 2002.

The OPR working paper evaluates the impact of a change in admission regime at the two most selective public institutions in Texas during the 1990s. The study address two key questions: first, how did the change in admission criteria alter the probability of acceptance and enrollment at each institution for African Americans, whites, Hispanics and Asian Americans? Second, how would the racial and ethnic composition of the admittee pool change, if those students who applied under the pre-*Hopwood* affirmative action regime instead applied under the "10 percent plan?"

Tienda and colleagues used a *non-overlapping groups framework* to simulate an answer to the latter question, and in the working paper also consider whether there are alternative strategies to diversify a campus to garner the benefits of diversity without taking race into account. The study illustrates a need to maintain race-conscious admissions policies, an issue at the forefront of higher education, with the Supreme Court set to address it later this spring for the first time since its historic *Bakke* decision in 1978.

Study Findings

The study demonstrates that rates of admission for minority applicants at Texas' flagship institutions fell sharply after the ban on affirmative action. For African Americans applying to

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Texas A&M, the probability of admission fell from 74.9 percent pre-*Hopwood* to 57.7 percent after *Hopwood*, while the admission probability for Hispanic applicants dropped from 79.9 percent to 68.3 percent.

At the UT-Austin, admission probability fell from 71.3 percent to 69.3 percent for African American applicants, and from 77.7 percent to 76.3 percent for Hispanics. In the same period, the probability of admission for white students rose from 73.7 percent to 74.3 percent at Texas A&M and from 73.6 percent to 80.6 percent at UT-Austin.

Due to the lower probability of admission for minority candidates and fewer minority applicants since the ruling, the numbers of enrolled minority students fell. Prior to *Hopwood*, African Americans represented 3.7 percent of Texas A&M enrollees, but only 2.4 percent after the ruling. For Hispanics, the corresponding drop was from 12.6 percent to 9.2 percent. Similar declines were witnessed at UT-Austin, where African American enrollees dropped from 4 percent to 3.3 percent and the Hispanic share fell from 15.8 percent to 13.7 percent.

These declines are noteworthy because African Americans and Hispanics together represented more than half of Texas' college-age population in 2000, at 12.3 percent and 40 percent, respectively. White students represented 43.5 percent of the college-age population and Asian Americans accounted for 2.9 percent.

The decline in minority admissions was less drastic at UT-Austin due to an aggressive outreach plan, the UT Longhorn Scholars program, which recruited students from high schools with relatively large economically disadvantaged and minority student bodies. Texas A&M recently implemented the Century Scholars program, modeled after the Longhorn Scholars, hoping to restore its campus diversity to pre-*Hopwood* levels. These are minimalist goals, however, because Texas' college-age population is "majority-minority."

The study noted that graduates in the top 10 percent of their high schools were admitted with "near certainty" to Texas public universities prior to the *Hopwood* ruling, meaning the race and ethnic differences in their probability of admission under the "10 percent plan" were negligible. But for graduates in the second and third deciles of their high school classes, those differences were significant - with admissions of African American and Hispanic students in those categories declining at Texas A&M and UT-Austin since the ruling.

At Texas A&M, the admission probability of students ranked in the second decile of their senior class fell from 85.3 percent to 71.7 percent for African Americans, and from 86.9 percent to 75.9 percent for Hispanics. The corresponding figures for UT-Austin dropped from 78.7 percent to 73.8 percent for African Americans and from 81.8 to 79.5 percent for Hispanics.

Also at Texas A&M, the admission probability of similarly ranked white and Asian American students rose from 80.2 percent to 83.9 percent and from 72.7 percent to 75.7 percent, respectively, after the *Hopwood* decision. Likewise, at UT-Austin, the admission probability of white and Asian American students ranked in the 80th to 89th percentile of their class jumped from 80.4 percent to 91.1 percent and from 75.3 percent to 92.4 percent, respectively, after affirmative action was banned.

Policy Implications

The study disproves criticism that the "10 percent plan" puts Texas' traditionally higher-performing "feeder" high schools at a disadvantage by automatically admitting the top 10 percent of lower-achieving urban schools, since the top 10 percent of students from all schools were admitted with near certainty prior to *Hopwood*.

Tienda and colleagues conclude that if the U.S. wants to have policies in place that diversify its institutions of higher education, and if the U.S. wants public flagships to play a role in creating a community of leaders among all segments of the population, then in the near term it is necessary to take race into account when considering admissions criteria. The study demonstrates that, by itself, the "10 percent plan" will not adequately diversify campuses of selective universities.

The study is part of a five-year investigation into admission policies in Texas, funded by the Ford Foundation. Tienda and her colleagues will now begin analyzing recently obtained data on applicants, admissions and enrollment from additional public and private colleges and universities, as well as other public institutions.

The researchers also are studying the results of a statewide survey of Texas high school seniors conducted in spring 2002 in an effort to better understand the college decision-making process. Tienda said that study should help explain why the percentage of minorities among college applicants has declined in Texas since 1996.

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