

# diversifying the college campus

by marta tienda

One thing I know is that race-neutral alternatives to affirmative action have not diversified college campuses.

The latter half of the 1990s witnessed a spate of court decisions and public referenda outlawing the use of affirmative action in college admissions decisions. In response to a judicial ban on affirmative action imposed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, for example, the Texas Legislature passed a law guaranteeing admission to any state public university to all seniors who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school classes.

In force since 1998, the top 10 percent law disregards standardized test scores for students eligible for automatic admission. When the outcome of the 2003 Supreme Court decisions involving the University of Michigan's affirmative action policies was uncertain, supporters touted the Texas law as a race-neutral strategy to increase campus diversity because it applies a uniform merit criterion to all high schools, whether rich or poor, large or small.

Although diversity of the freshman class plummeted the year affirmative action was banned and diversity rebounded after the uniform admission law was implemented, it doesn't follow that the percent plan is race-neutral or that it is responsible for the rebound.

The percent plan capitalizes on Texas's highly segregated high schools to boost minority representation at the state's public flagships—University of Texas at Austin (UT) and Texas A&M University (TAMU). What's more, both institutions began an aggressive outreach campaign that targeted poor high schools with low college-going traditions, offering scholarships to rank-eligible students. In Texas, high schools that fit this description tend to be predominantly black or Hispanic. On average, minority students are less likely to qualify for automatic admission if they attend integrated schools, but their chances are much higher if they graduate from predominately minority schools.

The uniform admission law didn't have uniform impacts at both public flagships. Representation of minority students rose at both premier campuses, but not equally. In fact, African-Americans and Hispanics were better represented at TAMU under affirmative action than the top 10 percent regime. Black and Hispanic enrollment at UT has returned to levels achieved before affirmative action was outlawed, but this is mainly because these minorities represent a much larger percentage of the college-eligible population and not because of the admission guarantee. Today, less than half of Texas high school graduates are white, and despite their elevated high school drop-out rates, Hispanics are currently more than one in three Texas high school graduates.

Although many minority students qualify for admission to selective institutions under the percent plan because standardized test scores aren't considered for top-ranked graduates, an admission guarantee doesn't guarantee enrollment. This is particularly important in the quest to diversify campuses because minority students are more likely than their white counterparts to attend resource-poor high schools with low college-going traditions. Simply put, not enough minority students are taking advantage of the plan.

Finally, the top 10 percent law did broaden access to the public flagships, as intended by the legislation's architects. Today, a larger number of high schools send students to UT and TAMU than before the admission guarantee was in force. In fact, application rates of top-ranked graduates from affluent high schools rose, while application rates from top 10 percent graduates from poor schools remained constant (at UT) or fell (at TAMU). Apparently the playing field is more uneven than advocates of the law admit.

At its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the top 10 percent law has become as controversial as the race-sensitive admission regime it replaced. Critics from affluent districts claim the uniform admission law gives unfair advantage to highly ranked students from low-performing schools who are presumed less well prepared for high level college work compared with lower ranked students from competitive high schools. Support for the percent plan also has eroded among UT administrators, who complain that diversity in a broad sense is compromised when more than 80 percent of students are admitted using a single metric—top 10 percent high school class rank.

There are many different arguments for (and against) programs designed to foster diversity in our nation's colleges and universities. The major lesson for the country is that even in a majority minority state like Texas, no viable race-neutral alternatives currently exist. States like Michigan that are considering a percent plan after a decisive ballot initiative outlawed affirmative action should understand that the unintended consequences of a percent plan will likely outweigh the benefits. Fortunately, the 2003 Supreme Court *Grutter* decision upheld narrowly tailored consideration of race in college admissions, which is the most efficient and effective strategy to diversify college campuses.

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