RACE, CLASS, AND COLLEGE ACCESS

ACHIEVING DIVERSITY IN A SHIFTING LEGAL LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

The American Council on Education’s Center for Policy Research and Strategy—in partnership with The Civil Rights Project at UCLA and the Center for College & Career Success in Pearson’s Research & Innovation Network—presents its groundbreaking study examining how legal challenges to race-conscious admissions have changed contemporary admissions practices.

The project’s first phase is a survey study of admissions and enrollment management leaders at four-year nonprofit, non-open-access institutions from around the country. The report, Race, Class, and College Access: Achieving Diversity in a Shifting Legal Landscape, catalogues innovative strategies and leading practices implemented by institutions that have the ability to consider race in admissions, as well as those that have adapted to or have always used exclusively race-neutral admissions practices.

Headlines surrounding the consideration of race and ethnicity in college admissions are often incomplete and ill-informed, promoting polarization and deflecting attention from practices that promote racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in higher education.

As colleges and universities seek to educate an increasingly diverse citizenry and achieve associated educational aims, it is imperative that postsecondary leaders, policymakers, researchers, and members of the media better understand the work and challenges facing institutions. This report is intended to help address those needs.

To learn more about this project and to access the full report, visit www.acenet.edu/adreamundone
In the past two decades, U.S. Supreme Court rulings and multiple statewide affirmative action bans have restricted many institutions’ options for supporting student body diversity. These policies and the subsequent legal climate could hinder colleges’ ability to sustain their commitments to student diversity.
STATES THAT HAVE BANNED THE USE OF RACE-CONSCIOUS ADMISSIONS PRACTICES, 2015
Our Data and Our Aims

This is the first large-scale, nationwide survey of institutional diversity strategies and admissions practices. We collected responses from 338 nonprofit four-year institutions enrolling more than 2.7 million students and receiving more than 3 million applications for admission in 2013-2014. A full 60 percent of the most selective institutions—those admitting 40 percent or fewer applicants—consider race in admissions.

Our aim is to support a much-needed dialogue on how institutions can best respond to a shifting policy and legal landscape at a time when access to postsecondary education has never been more vital and our American citizenry never so diverse.

Before we introduce our findings, it is important to remind readers that context matters. What works for one school may not work for another. This isn’t emphasized enough when researchers, policymakers, and the press discuss promising diversity strategies. Large-scale studies—including ours—should always be interpreted in light of each institution’s mission, goals, and resources.
KEY TAKEAWAY #1:
The most widely used diversity strategies receive the least attention

Three of the five most widely used strategies to support racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity involve student outreach and recruitment:

- Targeted recruitment and outreach to encourage racial/ethnic minority students to apply (78%)
- Enhanced recruitment and additional consideration for community college transfers (76%)
- Targeted recruitment and outreach to encourage low-income and/or first-generation students to apply (71%)

Despite wide media and research attention, the least widely used strategies include:

- Reduced emphasis on legacy admissions (24%)
- Test-optional admissions (16%)
- Percentage plans (13%)
EFFECTIVENESS OF SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS

One particularly promising diversity strategy is the summer bridge program. Eighty percent of more selective public institutions and 61 percent of all institutions in our study say they have data indicating summer bridge programs are effective supports for racial and ethnic diversity.

ARE SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAMS AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT FOR RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY?
KEY TAKEAWAY #2:
Supporting racial and ethnic diversity is not an “either-or” but a “both-and” proposition

The institutions in our study that consider race in admissions decisions use other race-conscious and race-neutral diversity strategies more often and find them more effective than institutions that use race-neutral strategies alone. Put simply, race-conscious and race-neutral approaches can and do coexist.

In addition to holistic application review, some of the most widely used and effective diversity strategies at institutions that consider race include:

- Targeted recruitment and yield initiatives to encourage racial and ethnic minority students to apply and enroll
- Targeted recruitment and yield initiatives to encourage low-income and/or first-generation students to apply and enroll

WIDELY USED DIVERSITY STRATEGIES AMONG INSTITUTIONS THAT CONSIDER RACE
KEY TAKEAWAY #3:

Reactions to the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court *Fisher* decision are still evolving and more research is needed.

Institutions that consider race in admissions have made only modest changes in admissions factors and diversity strategies since *Fisher vs. University of Texas at Austin*. Most of the post-*Fisher* changes involved the pursuit of diversity strategies. Institutions were most likely to increase their emphasis on recruiting community college transfers (23 percent of institutions) and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (22 percent).
It is important that admissions professionals fully understand the intent of the U.S. Supreme Court *Fisher* ruling and its implications for their practice. Fortunately, 89 percent of participants responded that they were “familiar” or “very familiar” with the requirements and implications of the ruling.

Among the institutions “very familiar” with the *Fisher* ruling, the most popular sources of information and guidance were professional organizations, an institution’s general counsel, media coverage, peer institutions, and the U.S. Department of Education.

**SOURCES OF LEGAL INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE**

![Chart showing sources of legal information and guidance](chart)

Such heavy reliance on media coverage underscores the influence the press wields in its reports on legal issues in higher education. It is imperative, therefore, that journalists accurately and objectively report on legal judgments that may (or may not) affect race-conscious admissions policies.

Institutions across the selectivity spectrum are hungry for research and guidance in the post-*Fisher* context. When presented with four potential areas for additional research or guidance, participants prioritized them in the order shown on the following page.
Interest in a broad array of research and guidance reinforces our finding that race-conscious admissions and campus diversity are important issues across the higher education landscape. The relevance and consequence of these concerns will only increase as postsecondary institutions work to prepare a diverse country for a global economy.

1. Research on the educational impact of campus diversity

2. Research and guidance on defining and achieving a “critical mass” of diverse students

3. Research on the diversity effects of admissions strategies where race-conscious admissions practices are prohibited

4. Methodological guidance on assessing the diversity effects of alternatives to race-conscious admissions
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