

On the Merits

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Body

Defenders of racial preferences in college and graduate school admissions resort to the most convoluted arguments. Some supporters of such preferences insist that ending them would harm highly qualified minority students by discouraging them from applying to elite schools. Such students, the theory goes, would be uncomfortable attending a school without a large minority population. So universities need to admit a host of unqualified students in order to help the few qualified students feel more at home.

It's a silly argument to begin with. According to a study recently released by the National Bureau of Economic Research, moreover, it's completely false. The study - "Would the Elimination of Affirmative Action Affect Highly Qualified Minority Applicants?" - was conducted by economists David Card of the University of California at Berkeley and Alan Krueger of Princeton, respectively. They found that the college application decisions of talented minority students are "not very sensitive to changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the student bodies at selective public colleges and universities." Thus, reads the report, fears "that ending affirmative action would cause a diversion of highly qualified minority students away from the elite colleges and universities appear to be unfounded."

In Texas and California, public universities extended preferential admissions policies to black and Hispanic students until the late 1990s. In 1995, Professors Card and Krueger report, minority applicants achieved higher acceptance rates than whites or Asians at UCLA, Berkeley, the University of Texas at Austin, and Texas A & M despite having substantially lower grade point averages and SAT scores that were more than 100 points lower on average.

California voters ended racial preferences Proposition 209. In Texas, race-based admissions policies were struck down by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. With the end of such preferences, admission rates for minorities applying to freshmen classes dropped at the most elite schools. System-wide, however, there was little change. In California, acceptance rates fell by about 7% for blacks and 4% for Hispanics.

The end of affirmative action, discovered Messrs. Card and Krueger, produced no change in the schools to which minority students chose to send their SAT scores. The only group to change its behavior following the end of racial preferences was Hispanic students with high grade point averages, who started applying to elite California schools in much greater numbers.

The next time apologists for racial preferences contend that minority students are too scared to apply to selective universities without special standards, opponents of such preferences can point to the young people of Texas and California who remain determined to excel - this time, on the merits.

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