

Affirmative Action and the Role of Race in College Admissions - By Darsh Shah

The role of race in college admission has been a long-debated topic that has been fiercely debated. Affirmative action is defined as the practice of favoring people from underrepresented groups and was approved by the US Supreme Court in the landmark 1978 Regents of the University of California v. Bakke case that allowed universities to use these types of programs for admissions in the name of promoting diversity. However, this ruling has come into question due to lawsuits filed against Harvard, UNC, and many other colleges which have been accused of “reverse-discrimination,” specifically against white and Asian Americans (Bazelon). There is valid reasoning behind this, as the main purpose behind these kinds of programs was to make up for the lack of educational opportunities that minorities had before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But in today’s world, there are many more opportunities for everyone in education, and the gap in opportunity has narrowed significantly. In addition, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022 found that the vast majority of Americans, a whopping 74% and at least 50% when considering each demographic group, did not support the use of race in college admissions (Wood). It is evident that affirmative action programs should be ended, and race should not be considered as a factor in college admissions because it is a form of reverse discrimination and does not address the underlying issue behind the educational gap between races, which is poverty.

The primary argument against affirmative action in college admissions is that it tries to make up for discrimination in the past by favoring those groups in the present, which is known as reverse-discrimination. There has been ample proof that this sort of discrimination happens often in colleges. Specifically, in the Harvard lawsuit, an expert presented a hypothetical scenario of an Asian American male who has a 25% chance of admission. But, when his race was changed, “*ceteris paribus*,” the chances of admission greatly increased: 36% when white, 77% when Hispanic, and a massive 95% when African American (Blum). Clearly, Asian American and white students are being discriminated against in college admissions at Harvard and likely other schools as well.

It was also discovered that, among the Harvard applicant pool, Asian Americans ranked the highest on objective measures such as grades, test scores, and extracurricular activities, which are some of the best indicators for academic success in college, but despite this, they are ranked considerably lower than other groups in “personal ratings” (Hartocollis). This raises many questions, and it seems like a way that Harvard admissions were manipulating their “holistic admissions criteria” to limit the number of Asian Americans in the student class. This would not have been the first time they have discriminated against a particularly high-achieving ethnic group, as many Jewish students had found themselves also being unfavorable at a point because they consisted of 25% of the student body, which led to changes being made in

Harvard's "holistic admissions process" (Blum). This led to a massive reduction in the number of Jews being admitted and is clearly a form of discrimination.

This phenomenon is not just limited to Harvard, and most colleges today use some kind of holistic admissions process like Harvard has, and many similar incidents have likely occurred. Evidently, this is unfair to many of these high-performing groups as they are being punished for not being part of a historically discriminated group, something which they have no control over. Although these groups deserve aid for the setbacks they have had, it ultimately is unfair because colleges can only admit a limited number of students.

Another issue with affirmative action programs is that they do not address poverty, the main factor behind the educational achievement gap between races. It has been shown by numerous studies across the world that socioeconomic status is closely linked to a student's academic performance, which can be seen through test scores and grades (Ferguson et al. 701). Students from low-income families often attend underfunded schools, lack access to resources such as textbooks and computers, and may have to work part-time jobs to support their families, all of which can hinder their ability to excel academically. While affirmative action programs can help increase diversity and provide access to opportunities, they do not address these fundamental issues, which can prevent students from achieving their full potential.

To truly address the educational achievement gap, it is important to address poverty and its related issues, such as inadequate access to quality education, healthcare, and other resources. This can involve policies such as increasing funding for public schools in low-income areas, providing access to affordable healthcare, and increasing access to job opportunities and financial assistance programs. By addressing poverty and related issues, these students will have access to the resources they need to succeed, which can help them be more competitive with other students leading to a fairer and more diverse student body accepted into colleges and universities without discriminating against those who were more privileged.

On the contrary, the main argument of supporters behind affirmative action is that underprivileged students from these races should be prioritized to be given the opportunity to succeed and come out of poverty. These students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face additional barriers and may not have had access to the same educational resources as more affluent students. Thus, the use of race as a factor in college admissions and affirmative action programs are seen as necessary to level the playing field and create more equitable opportunities for all students (Bazelon). While it is true that underprivileged students may face additional barriers to success, using race as a factor in college admissions is neither an effective nor fair solution. There are more effective ways to address the needs of underprivileged students, such as providing aid and opportunities to level out the playing field. Additionally, using race as a factor in college admissions can have unintended consequences, such as stigmatizing certain racial

groups and perpetuating stereotypes. It is important to find solutions that address the root causes of poverty and inequality in society, rather than preferring those races as a factor in college admissions.

Moreover, it is important to note that not all students of a particular racial or ethnic group come from underprivileged backgrounds. This usually leads to only the upper-socioeconomic classes of these minorities benefitting from these race-based admissions programs (Drake). Hence, these programs do not again benefit those who need it the most, the lower classes, and they end up benefiting the wealthier people in those ethnic groups. Even though the rates of poverty are still much higher in these minority groups, affirmative action overwhelmingly benefits the specific wealthy groups, which it was not primarily meant to help. Therefore, while it is important to address the needs of underprivileged students, the use of race in college admissions is not the most effective or equitable solution.

Ultimately, race should not be used in college admission because it discriminates against high-achieving students who are not part of a historically discriminated group and because it does not address the root causes of the gap in academic performance. While some argue that it is necessary to ensure that underprivileged students are given the opportunity to succeed, affirmative action programs tend to mostly benefit the wealthier people in these groups and they do not address poverty, the root cause behind the educational achievement gap. Programs such as increased funding for poorer districts and more financial aid for the impoverished should be implemented instead to help increase academic performance for these groups which in turn will help them get into better colleges without the need for affirmative action. Using race as a factor in college admissions is an outdated idea that is neither fair nor effective anymore, which is why affirmative action programs should be eliminated, creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

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