

Admissions plans faulted

Harvard releases pair of reports

By Lyle Denniston, Globe Correspondent, 2/11/2003

WASHINGTON -- State policies that guarantee college admission to a top layer of high school seniors, a practice the Bush administration favors as an alternative to affirmative action, actually have had little impact on minority enrollment at public universities, two new Harvard studies say.

One of the studies released yesterday by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project concludes that the existing "percent plans" in Florida, California, and Texas were not responsible for all or even most of the minority admissions that have occurred since the plans began in the late 1990s.

"While it may seem easy to attribute such admissions solely to percent plan eligibility, in fact many of these students would have likely qualified for admission without any percent plan in place," the researchers said.

In Texas, the findings "suggest that any impact the percent plan may have had on racial/ethnic diversity was negligible." In Florida, less than 1 percent of the top graduates who were admitted "needed the guarantee in order to gain admissions" because they satisfied normal admissions standards anyway. In California, the percent plan accounted for "roughly 8 percent" of admissions of the top high school seniors.

The results of the three-state study and another solely on Florida generally contradict claims made last month by the Bush administration in legal briefs submitted to the Supreme Court in two University of Michigan cases. Citing statistics gathered by state universities in Florida, Texas, and California, the administration said their percent plans had succeeded in bringing minorities students into state college systems at the same or higher rates as when race was considered in admissions.

"As the experience in Texas, Florida and California demonstrates," the administration argued, "public universities have ample race-neutral means available to achieve objectives such as educational diversity, openness and broad participation."

The administration urged the court to rule that if there is a race-neutral alternative that works, using race in admissions is unconstitutional. The court will hold hearings on Michigan cases on April 1.

The Civil Rights Project, a seven-year-old policy institute, began the studies long before the Supreme Court agreed in December to reopen the question of the constitutionality of affirmative action in college admissions.

Under the percent plans, a fixed percentage of the top high school graduating seniors at in-state public schools are guaranteed admission if they apply to that state's public colleges. California guarantees places for the top 4 percent, Florida the top 20 percent, and Texas the highest 10 percent.

In January, another academic study reached similar conclusions about the Texas plan, which began in 1998 when President Bush was governor. The Princeton University report focused on the impact at the only two state institutions that previously used race in admissions: the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University.

Princeton sociologist Marta Tienda concluded: "The 10 percent plan is not an alternative to affirmative action. It will not and has not restored diversity" in the racial makeup of student bodies at the two Texas universities.

The Harvard researchers make the same point about all three states' plans. Gary Orfield, one of the center's leaders, commented: "In fact, simply enacting a percent plan does almost nothing to replace affirmative action. . . . The suggestion the percent plan by itself can solve this problem is, as this report shows, obviously incorrect."

The second Harvard study released yesterday focused on Florida's "Talented 20" program -- an initiative started by Governor Jeb Bush, the president's brother. The study disputes claims by the governor and by President Bush's legal team that the state's program works to assure minority admissions.

"There is simply no basis for the claim that Florida's Talented 20 percent plan solved the affirmative action issue," said Orfield. "In fact, this report indicates that the percent plan was virtually irrelevant."

The study of Florida's top 20 percent plan puts heavy stress on the fact that, although Governor Bush banned the use of race in actual admissions decisions, he did not forbid its use in recruitment, outreach, or financial aid. The study gives those race-specific policies primary credit for almost all of the minority admissions since 1999.

The top public universities in the state, the University of Florida and Florida State University, were the only two that previously made significant use of race in admissions decisions, the study points out. After those policies were forbidden by the governor, "what has apparently produced minimal gains in Florida's two selective campuses has been affirmative recruitment, aid, and support policies targeted at minority students and schools."

States that have banned all use of race in the admissions process, the study says, "would not be able to benefit" from the initiatives that have helped protect diversity in admissions at Florida's best state colleges.

Patricia Marin, the lead researcher on the Harvard study of Florida's "Talented 20" program, said in an interview that the reports were not designed to be legal advocacy

documents, although she said lawyers favoring affirmative action have shown an interest in them and may seek to lay the studies before the Supreme Court.

This story ran on page A3 of the Boston Globe on 2/11/2003.

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