

Thursday, March 27, 2008

Major Shifts in College Admissions Policies in Texas Had Unforeseen Consequences

By [PETER SCHMIDT](#)

New York

Texas essentially became the site of a large-scale education experiment as a result of two developments in the 1990s. The first was a 1996 federal-court decision, *Hopwood v. Texas*, that barred the state's public colleges from using race-conscious admissions. The second was state lawmakers' subsequent move to guarantee Texans who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high-school classes admission to a public college of their choice.

Over the past decade, researchers have examined how those two developments have affected both colleges' enrollments and students' achievement. Findings from the newest wave of such studies, being presented here this week during the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, suggest that both developments have had a profound effect on a wide range of public colleges - not just the most selective ones. Many of the effects were unpredicted or belie popular perceptions.

Parsing the results of the court ruling and 10-percent law is difficult for several reasons. Texas has undergone major demographic changes over the past decade, with the number of high-school graduates increasing by 50 percent and the number of Hispanic high-school graduates rising by 78 percent from 1994 to 2004. Besides coming under the sway of the 10-percent law, top universities responded to the *Hopwood* decision by adopting a host of other policies that may have affected their minority enrollments, including aggressive recruitment and outreach efforts and broad expansion of financial-aid offerings.

But in crunching enrollment numbers from the state's two flagship higher-education institutions - the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University - the researchers felt they were able to draw several major conclusions.

The co-author of many of the papers presented here was Marta Tienda, a professor of sociology, demographic studies, and public affairs at Princeton University who is a principal investigator for the [Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project](#). Among the papers' key findings:

- Guaranteeing students admission to a flagship university did not necessarily guarantee that they would enroll. Ms. Tienda; Sunny X. Niu, an associate research scholar at

Princeton University's Office of Population Research; and Sigal Alon, an assistant professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University, report in one paper that neither flagship experienced big increases in black and Hispanic enrollments as a result of the 10-percent law, despite increases in the numbers of black and Hispanic students eligible for admission. Drawing upon past research, the authors suggest that financial concerns and attending high schools without strong college-going traditions kept many such students from applying or matriculating.

- The 10-percent law failed to bring about nearly as much socioeconomic diversity on the flagship college campuses as had been hoped. A paper written by Ms. Tienda and Dawn Koffman, a statistical programmer in Princeton's population-research office, found that the lion's share of the rise in applications to the two flagships came from affluent high schools. As of 2003, four years after the law went into effect, class-rank-eligible students from poor high schools were only half as likely as their affluent counterparts to apply to the University of Texas at Austin, and flagship campuses remained dominated by wealthy students.
- The average SAT and ACT scores of students enrolled at less-selective public institutions rose as high-scoring students who were not in the top tenth of their class were crowded out of the University of Texas at Austin by top-10-percenters, according to a paper written by Ms. Tienda and Mark C. Long, an assistant professor of public affairs at the University of Washington at Seattle.

Similar findings are contained in a paper written by Mariana Alfonso, a research economist at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, and Juan Carlos Calcagno, a researcher at Mathematica Policy Research, based in Princeton, N.J. In addition to looking at enrollment trends at Texas A&M at College Station, they studied trends at Texas Tech University, which is in the middle of the state's public colleges in terms of selectivity, and Texas A&M University at Kingsville, a nonselective institution that admits all applicants.

Their paper concludes that the *Hopwood* decision led to a shift in black and Hispanic students from highly selective institutions such as Texas A&M at College Station to less-selective institutions, largely because "the elimination of affirmative action has discouraged minority students from applying to the selective universities." The Texas 10-percent plan appeared to increase the likelihood that black and Hispanic students would be admitted to moderately selective Texas Tech and to bolster their enrollments at Texas Tech and the Kingsville campus of Texas A&M. But it did not increase the likelihood of their being admitted to the College Station campus or bring about increases in minority enrollments beyond what could be expected given demographic changes in the state.

The paper by Ms. Alfonso and Mr. Calcagno suggests that if state policy makers and college administrators want to increase minority enrollments at selective colleges, they should focus on trying to expand the black and Hispanic applicant pools by taking steps such as working to improve high-school quality, setting up more dual-enrollment programs allowing high school students to earn college credit, and waiving college application fees. The papers written by Ms. Tienda and her colleagues contain similar recommendations for increasing the size of the minority and low-income applicant pool.