

March 12, 2003: A moment with...

Marta Tienda

Photo by Denise Applewhite



The 1996 federal court ruling in *Hopwood v. Texas* struck down affirmative action in university admissions, leading Texas to create a program in which state students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school classes are assured admission to any state university. Marta Tienda, the Maurice P. During Professor in Demographic Studies at Princeton, studied the program and found that the “10-percent plan” increased geographic diversity but failed to maintain minority enrollment at the state’s flagship universities, Texas A&M University and the University of Texas—Austin. At Texas A&M, for example, the probability of admission for African Americans fell from 74.9 percent to 57.7 percent. African-American enrollment at that university, which had been small even before the ruling, dropped substantially. (A working paper is available at www.texastop10.princeton.edu/publications/tienda012103.pdf.)

As the Supreme Court prepares to hear challenges to affirmative action at the University of Michigan, Tienda discussed her study with PAW’s Argelio Dumenigo.

What was the most surprising finding of your study?

The criticism of the Texas 10-percent plan – that it admits students who are less qualified because they went to low-performing schools, compared to students from high-performing schools who may be ranked lower – hasn’t been borne out. The students who were admitted from the top 10 percent are outperforming students who were not in the top 10 percent, but who had test scores 200 to 300 points higher.

You’ve said that the 10-percent plan capitalizes on persistent segregation in secondary schools. What do you mean?

Having segregated minority schools ensures that a large number, if not all, of their top 10 percent graduates will be minority. This does not guarantee that they will actually enroll in a state university, but they will be guaranteed admission if they apply. Building on segregated schools is a pernicious way to improve minority access to selective colleges; segregation and its consequences are exactly what we’ve been trying to work against.

From a sociologist’s viewpoint, why is diversity so important on a college campus?

I think that’s a very helpful question, because that is the ground on which *Bakke* [*Bakke v. Regents of the University of California*, 1978] was argued – that there can be some compelling state interest in the educational benefits of a diverse student body.

Think about what Princeton may have been like when it was all male and from a certain tier of the income structure, and think of Princeton today, where it has quite a diverse income structure and a very diverse student body, in every possible realm. You have black students who are from the islands as well as from large cities in the U.S. You have foreign students, and you have students who have very different cultural and religious practices.

With the range of opinions that can come from these quite varied cultural experiences and social environments – opinions that are brought to precepts, to classes — we learn from each other, and that is part of education.

What do you think is the best way to maintain diversity?

I think it would be nice if we could be a color-blind society. I don't like anyone talking to me about "you're this, you're that"; I tell them, "I'm a sociologist." I'm not a woman, I'm not Mexican; I'm just a sociologist.

Having said that, I am also someone who was given opportunity through a special program of the Ford Foundation, a doctoral fellowship targeted at Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. I would never have gone to graduate school without that. And I think opening those opportunities, those doors, is really what we should strive for.

Given where we are as a society, I believe we need to take race into account in some fashion. There is no other way to achieve diversity on our college campuses, which we have a civic obligation to do. The race-neutral alternatives the president and others are proposing do not work.

What do you see in the future for affirmative action and 10-percent programs?

Once we put an end to our fixation with race, this debate is about what categories we're admitting and whether some categories should have different weight. We've always had a lot of categories.

I remember what Bill Richardson said when he was president at Johns Hopkins. He said his board of trustees asked him, "Do we have quotas?" He looked at them very calmly and told them, "Well, of course we do. We have to get a tuba player, and we have to get a linebacker, and we need to get a front middle [lacrosse position]." And those were all quotas.

Somehow we can manage the value question on all these other categories: legacies, athletics, instruments, art – all except for race. That's the one category we have so much difficulty with. It's the only one that continues to plague us. 