

# Hispanic Students Are Missing From Diversity Debates

By Marta Tienda and Susan Simonelli

**T**HE BIGGEST NEWS coming out of the 2000 census has significant implications for higher education: The Hispanic population in the United States has grown so rapidly in the past decade that it now is roughly the same size as the black population.

Thus far, policy makers and the public have often neglected the role of Hispanic people in issues like affirmative action in college admissions. In evaluating how admissions policies encourage or discourage college attendance, for instance, they have focused on black students. But both the new demographics and the elimination of race-sensitive admissions criteria in California, Texas, and now Florida bring into focus vexing issues for Hispanic students as well. Those issues bear directly upon their prospects for admission to and graduation from postsecondary institutions—and, ultimately, upon the long-term socioeconomic standing of the fastest-growing population group in the United States.

A study conducted last year by Public Agenda, a nonprofit public-opinion-research organization, found that 65 percent of Hispanic parents, compared with 47 percent of black parents and 33 percent of white parents, believe that a college education is the single most important factor to an individual's success. Yet a significantly smaller proportion of Hispanic people age 18 to 24 attend college.

Hispanic people drop out of high school at almost four times the rate of non-Hispanic white people, which narrows the pool of potential Hispanic college applicants. As a result, despite growing numbers of Hispanic students in higher education, the gap between the proportions of Hispanic students and non-Hispanic white students has widened. In 1980, 27 percent of all 18-to-24-year-old non-Hispanic white students attended college, compared with 16 percent of all college-aged Hispanic students. By 1997, the respective shares were 41 and 22 percent.

Of the total campus population, more than 70 percent of all students enrolled in college are white and 11 percent are black, while only 8 percent are Hispanic.

College graduation rates tell a similar story. In 1970, almost 11 percent of white adults 25 and older held college degrees; that figure had jumped to 28 percent by 1999. But the comparable shares of Hispanic graduates were 5 and 11 percent. If current demographic trends continue, we will see even greater enrollment and graduation disparities in the future.

Meanwhile, the type of postsecondary institutions that Hispanic students usually attend also encourages inequality. In 1996, more than half of Hispanic students attending college were enrolled in two-

year institutions, in contrast to 37 percent of white students. Two-year colleges provide relatively inexpensive, local access to higher education, but research shows that only about one-fourth to one-half of community-college students eventually transfer to four-year institutions.

Because the best-paying jobs require at least some postsecondary education, such disparities will undoubtedly translate into economic inequities. The opportunity costs for Hispanic students of their educational underachievement will be enormous, unless we take strong measures to reverse the current circumstances.

**T**HAT SUCH discouraging trends have occurred while race-sensitive admissions have been in place raises two obvious questions. First, how much have Hispanic students benefited from "preferential" admissions policies? Second, will the elimination of those policies further jeopardize Hispanic representation in higher education?

Some argue that affirmative-action policies have had, and will continue to have, a minimal effect on the overall number of Hispanic students in higher education, because those policies have usually been aimed at expanding minority enrollments at elite institutions—which most Hispanic students don't attend. Others say proposed alternatives—like the "percentage plans" that require even the most selective public institutions to admit the top slice of every graduating class in the state—can achieve the same results as race-sensitive policies. Still others, however, assert that the demise of affirmative-

For the past two years, with financing from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we have been studying how children of poorly educated parents manage the transition from high school to college. We also are assessing the consequences of changed admissions policies on minority enrollments in Texas colleges, and documenting how high-school students confronting the new admissions guidelines make their college decisions. Our research reinforces

concerns that the elimination of affirmative-action policies will have a negative impact on current and potential Hispanic students.

Texas and California provide crucial vantage points from which to gauge the consequences of changes in admissions criteria. More than half of all Hispanic people in the United States reside in Texas and California, and an even larger share of the Hispanic school-age population lives in those two states.

In Texas, the trend in Hispanic enrollment at the University of Texas at Austin after the 1996 *Hopwood* ruling is modestly encouraging. Following that landmark decision, Austin—the most selective institution in the university system—modified its admissions criteria to comply with a new law that required public institutions to admit the top 10 percent of graduating seniors from every high school in the state. Those students went on to earn better grade-point averages, in general, than did other students, even those who had scored 200 to 300 points higher on their SAT's.

Equally important, the share of Hispanic students in Austin's freshman class was preserved. The 1999 enrollment levels for African-American and Hispanic freshmen returned to those of 1996, the year before *Hopwood* ended race-sensitive admissions policies. Before the 10-percent rule, Hispanic students made up about 14.6 percent of the freshman class;

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action admissions policies will drastically curtail the meager Hispanic presence at the most selective colleges and, in turn, continue an inequitable and destructive two-tier system of higher education in this country.

that figure dipped to just below 14 percent after the university system fully implemented the new guidelines in 1999.

Although similar enrollment rates do not guarantee similar graduation rates, we

have no a priori reason to expect that future graduation rates at U.T. institutions will be significantly different. Much depends on whether the Hispanic students enrolled under the 10-percent plan are as ready to pursue college-level study as those admitted before the admissions criteria were changed. In addition, Austin restructured some of its financial aid to provide greater assistance to qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds; the stability of Hispanic enrollments may be partly attributable to that change.

In short, it remains to be seen whether the allegedly more "merit-based" criteria of the percentage plan in Texas will preserve the diversity at elite colleges that was achieved by race-sensitive admissions policies. While the first results are promising, more time is needed to determine if the new plan maintains—or, better yet, improves—Hispanic matriculation and graduation rates.

CALIFORNIA'S experience provides far less cause for optimism. Following the repeal of race-sensitive admissions policies, minority enrollment declined appreciably at the two most selective University of California institutions, Berkeley and Los Angeles. At Berkeley, Hispanic students composed 16 percent of the entering class in 1995, but less than 8 percent in 1998. At U.C.L.A., the Hispanic share of the freshman class dropped by nearly half, from 15 to 8 percent over the same period. (Black enrollment registered similar declines in the freshman class, falling from 6.5 to 3.7 percent at Berkeley and from 7.3 to 3.5 percent at U.C.L.A.)

Not only have such setbacks followed the repeal of affirmative-action policies, but they have occurred in the context of very mixed strategies to maintain ethnic and racial diversity on the campuses. California has a larger and more diverse population than Texas, and the percentage plan that was implemented this year is more limited; it only guarantees admission for the top 4 percent of graduating seniors to one of the public universities. When competing with Asians in large urban high schools, few Hispanic students are likely to be admitted under such a plan.

Moreover, California policy makers are considering giving the SAT II exams—which test students on specific subjects—more weight than the SAT in test-score rankings. Some observers suggest that less dependence on the SAT will help minority students. But because those students are less likely to attend schools that offer Advanced Placement courses, that admissions criterion, if implemented, would further undermine talented Hispanic students' access to California's elite institutions.

Therefore, a comparison of the experiences in Texas and California suggests that elimination of race-sensitive admissions criteria, in the absence of a substitute plan, can have very deleterious effects on educational opportunities for Hispanic and black students.

What's more, when mapped against the growing gaps between Hispanic and white students in college enrollment and graduation rates, even the seemingly stable enrollment at Austin, using the 10-percent class-rank criterion, is worrisome. Simply staying even will not suffice. In 1950, several years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision required desegregation of public schools, only 2 percent of the college-age population was Hispanic, and 11 percent was black. Today, 15 percent of college-age people are Hispanic, and 14 percent are black. By 2020, Hispanics are projected to represent almost one in four college-age youths. If their swelling numbers are not accompanied by commensurate increases in college attendance and graduation rates, educational inequality will continue to rise for the foreseeable future—in fact, even faster than it has during the past two decades.

INDEED, until such time as the starting lines of Hispanic and non-Hispanic youths are equalized before they reach college age, admissions guidelines that identify arbitrary class-rank thresholds can do no more than maintain the status quo in preserving access to higher education for Hispanic students. Moreover, the percentage plans are potentially harmful over the long term, because they rely on segregation to have only a minimal effect in a highly stratified society. Disingenuous redistricting or alteration of ranking systems also can easily undermine the percentage plans, if students from high-achieving schools are allowed to compete with those from low-performing schools in the ranking schemes.

Most important, policies that focus only on admissions at selective colleges may deflect attention from the larger problem of Hispanic educational underachievement: the growing gaps in enrollment and graduation at all educational levels that limit Hispanic students' opportunities before college is even considered. Although affirmative-action and percentage policies have helped alleviate what could have been even worse trends, the gaps have widened while those policies have been in place. We should not concentrate solely on Hispanic representation in higher education and neglect the fundamental question of why more Hispanic students aren't coming through the educational pipeline.

A vast literature has documented the confluence of individual, family, and social factors that contribute to the low high-school-graduation rates of Hispanic students and their poor performance on standardized tests compared with those of white and Asian students. One thing is clear: In ethnically diverse schools, Hispanic students are rarely at the top of their class, so percentage plans simply won't help them. Higher-education leaders must develop other strategies both to promote Hispanic admission, matriculation, and graduation from college, and to improve elementary, middle- and high-school graduation rates.

Ironically, the elimination of affirmative-action programs has fostered some of those very changes. For example, some institutions are reaching out to high schools that have traditionally not been a major source of applicants, working with principals and counselors to help prepare students for college. In Texas, the president of the Austin campus has been visiting high schools that have large minority populations, meeting with administrators, teachers, parents, and students, emphasizing the importance of taking college-preparatory courses, and educating parents about how to pay for college.

Another strategy that colleges can and should pursue to protect diversity involves providing more scholarships to economically disadvantaged students who qualify for admission to competitive institutions. For example, Austin has established the Longhorn Opportunity Fellowship Program, offering need-based scholarships to qualified students as a reward for strong performance. Over time, competition for such prestigious fellowships may foster college aspirations among younger Hispanic students, spreading higher achievement goals. Public colleges should also consider developing and adopting a common application to simplify those procedures for Hispanic and other disadvantaged students, and provide academic support and remediation to high-achieving students from low-performing schools during the students' first few years of college.

Growing educational gaps and a powerful demographic momentum make it all the more urgent that we develop such multiple strategies if we truly want to reverse the trend toward Hispanic inequality in education. But even if colleges significantly increase their efforts along those lines, such measures will take time.

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In the interim, administrators should learn from the Texas and California experiences: Dropping affirmative action, especially without alternatives, is untenable. While it is just one strategy that we should use to reverse the trend toward educational inequality, the use of race and Hispanic origin as a plus factor in college admissions is essential to maintain the racial and ethnic diversity of our selective higher-education institutions. Until Hispanic students have truly equal opportunities to attend college, affirmative action is the only proven path that we can follow to strive to become a unified and fair society.

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