

The Decline of Affirmative Action

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By **Scott Jaschik**

Starting around 1995, the percentage of colleges that considered students' minority status in admissions decisions fell dramatically — so dramatically that it appears to have gone beyond those states where court rulings or constitutional amendments barred the use of racial preferences.

That finding comes from research being prepared for publication by two sociologists at the University of California at Davis. Eric Grodsky, an assistant professor there, and Demetra Kalogrides, a graduate student, were able to document the shifts by obtaining results from the College Board of a survey it does annually on college admissions practices.

Examining data from 1986 through 2003, they found that the proportion of public four-year colleges that considered minority status in admissions fell from more than 60 percent to about 35 percent. For private institutions, the drop during those years was from 57 percent to 45 percent. The study examined about 1,300 four-year colleges, and excluded institutions that had only one major, seminaries, historically black colleges and for-profit institutions.

Rates of colleges considering race in admissions held steady for about the first 10 years covered by the study, with the drops coming after 1995, when the campaign against affirmative action started to heat up. Throughout the period studied, colleges that were more elite (judging by factors such as SAT averages) were more likely to consider minority status.

Grodsky said that it seems clear that many colleges abandoned affirmative action in admissions even though they were not forced to do so. “We suspect that colleges were responding not only to actual litigation but the threat of litigation.”

The data covered by the study end in 2003, the year that the U.S. Supreme Court, in two cases involving the University of Michigan, upheld the constitutionality of affirmative action in admissions, but also limited its use. That ruling overturned the precedents that barred the use of affirmative action in Texas, but did not undo state bans on affirmative action, such as the one adopted in California. Grodsky said that he had no idea what more recent data would reveal.

Grodsky said that while there were large declines in the percentages of colleges practicing affirmative action, he saw “a glass half full side of this” in that “a fairly large number of institutions have continued to explicitly say, ‘we consider minority status in admissions.’ “

He thinks that's an appropriate position for colleges to take. "The bad news was that there was so clearly a decline, and in my view, that decline was premature. It's still important to engage in affirmative action to extend opportunities."

During the period covered by the study, one of the other striking shifts is that public colleges were once more likely than private colleges to practice affirmative action, and that has reversed. Grodsky said that he expected public institutions to be more likely to practice affirmative action because of pressure from state legislators and others to serve all the populations in a state. But with public colleges facing more legal challenges to affirmative action, Grodsky said, private institutions "may see an opportunity" to become more diverse.

The study was based on institutional self-reporting of policies, Grodsky stressed. And the colleges that answered that they do consider minority status probably do so in many different ways. "They say that they consider minority status, but does that consideration outweigh AP courses or academic performance? We can't tell from this data," he said.

Grodsky said that he hoped that some colleges would look at these results — which are being refined to submit for publication — and consider whether they should return to considering minority status. Many colleges, having abandoned affirmative action, are trying to achieve diversity by placing more emphasis on class rank or family income or disadvantages that someone has overcome. Grodsky applauded these "creative approaches," and said that he was especially pleased to see more attention given to class inequalities.

But he added that he didn't think such measures were a substitute for considering race and ethnicity. "There's a lot of work that shows that if you want to increase access for minority students, the best way is to increase access for minority students," Grodsky said.

At the same time, he acknowledged that not everyone will look at his new data the same way. He received a call this week from one of the organizations that has fought affirmative action in admissions, requesting the study. "They'll say that the declines are good."

Carol Larrimer
Administrative Coordinator
The University of Texas System
e-mail: clarrimer@utsystem.edu
(512) 499-4241 Office
(512) 499-4240 Fax
Office of Academic Affairs
601 Colorado, OHH 305
Austin, TX 78701

