



HOW RACIAL INEQUALITY PERSISTS IN SELECTIVE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY ENTRY

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In its 2003 decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of limited use of affirmative action in college admissions. Writing for the majority, Justice O'Connor famously stated in her opinion that, "(t)he Court expects that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today." This speculation fits into a broader framework, which holds that, in the absence of continued discrimination, racial inequality will recede on its own given sufficient time. This speculation is not supported by evidence.

Persistent Racial Inequality

In our recently published paper, my co-author, Nicole Bateman (Brookings Institution), and I document changes over the past two decades in the antecedent conditions which leave Black, Hispanic, and Native American youth to be less likely to be competitive for admission at selective public universities. While most of these gaps have narrowed somewhat, the pace of improvement is very slow. Extrapolating these time trends would imply it would take another 28 years to eliminate the White-Black gap in incarceration; 37 years to eliminate the White-Black gap in rates of poverty; and 57 years to eliminate the White-Black gap in 8th grade math test scores. (To close the White-Latinx gaps, it would take another 48 years, 18 years, and 46 years, respectively.) Moreover, we document that some gaps have not closed at all in the past two decades (e.g. White-Black disparity in male labor force participation) or have gotten worse (e.g. White-Black disparity in median household income and wealth). There is no reason to believe that these disparities will eliminate themselves without sustained policy actions.

Changes in Underrepresentation in Selective Public Universities

Beginning in the mid-1990s, several states banned affirmative action in public employment, contracting, and education. Subsequently, there were immediate declines in representation by minority students at selective public universities. Administrators and legislators responded by trying a variety of approaches as alternatives to race-based affirmative action. However, these alternative policies largely failed in improving the long-run representation of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students among those enrolled in selective public universities. As Bateman and I demonstrate, *gaps in representation have been maintained if not widened in the decades following affirmative action bans.*

We measure disparities in representation by the difference between the percentage of a public college's domestic students (applicants, admittees, and enrollees) who are Black, Hispanic, or Native

American and the percentage of high school graduates in that state who are Black, Hispanic, or Native American. We find that while the share of underrepresented minorities has increased overall at the nineteen selective public universities that we track, this progress can be attributed entirely to the changing demography of high school graduates. Thus, growth in “diversity” of the classes did not improve the extent of “underrepresentation”.

We must also recognize that the racial distribution of college entrants did not mirror that of high school graduates in the era of affirmative action policies at these institutions. The composition of a university's enrollees is largely driven by the composition of its applicants, whether or not the university practices affirmative action. Therefore, most of the disparity has been generated by a lack of minority representation among applicants.

Implications for Policy

Our results challenge assertions commonly made about improvements in “diversity” at selective public universities. Administrators should be aware that gains made in underrepresented minority groups' share of enrollees is likely due to demographic change rather than successful interventions. The strategies these university administrators have attempted to date have failed to improve representation among minority groups on these college campuses. In fact, gaps in representation have widened in the past several decades.

University administrators should be willing to subject their practices to rigorous evaluations to determine which strategies are most effective. Further, administrators at selective public universities should be challenged to utilize policies that make their student bodies more reflective of the racial and ethnic composition of their state's high school graduates.

While some progress has been made in narrowing economic and K-12 educational disparities, such disparities are still large and will take decades to improve. If we expect selective public universities to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of their states, then state and federal policymakers must work to alleviate these pre-college disparities and thereby improve the college readiness of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students.

Read more at Mark C. Long and Nicole A. Bateman “[Long-Run Changes in Underrepresentation After Affirmative Action Bans in Public Universities](#),” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42, 2 (2020):188–207.