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College Admissions Debates

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College Admissions Debates

Few public debates elicit as much angst as the one over college admissions and the persistence of racial inequalities in college access. As a result of the civil rights movement, public and private postsecondary institutions began taking affirmative action in the 1960s to advance racial equity in their admissions and enrollment management policies and practices. By doing so, many institutions amended the ways they evaluated students' applications and included a consideration of students' race, gender, and national origin, leading to significant changes in the demographics of American college students. By the 1970s, a movement to roll back civil rights gains began to develop, resulting in the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Bakke v. Regents of the University of California* (1978), followed by *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), and *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013). Each court decision has reinforced

narrow restrictions on how race is included in admissions practices.

Within the fight over affirmative action in college admissions, Asian Americans have played complex roles. Benefiting from equal opportunity policies and immigration reforms that resulted from the civil rights movement, the numbers of Asian American college students have increased substantially since the 1970s. This growth has been particularly conspicuous at the most selective institutions. Given this context of demographic changes, some universities have been found to privilege white applicants over Asian Americans in their evaluation procedures. Additionally, conservatives have used Asian Americans as a discursive device in their efforts to dismantle affirmative action policies. However, Asian American perspectives on affirmative action are more varied and complex than dominant portrayals suggest.

College Enrollment Demographic Changes in Context

Asian American undergraduate enrollments have increased significantly since the 1970s. Between 1976 and 2010, the Asian American proportion of the U.S. postsecondary enrollment, part-time and full-time students, increased from less than 2 percent to more than 6 percent, making them the fastest growing racial group among college students. This increase in population share occurred within a general context of growth in U.S. higher education. In 2010, more than 30 million 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in college, up from slightly over 27 million in 2000. Overall, the percent of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in postsecondary education rose from 35 percent to 41 percent between 2000 and 2010.

The relatively small Asian American percentage of the total traditionally aged U.S. college student population belies the high representation of Asian Americans enrolled at the nation's most prominent colleges and universities. At some prestigious public universities, like the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and UC Berkeley, Asian Americans currently represent more than 40 percent of undergraduate enrollments. Moreover, the Asian American share of elite private college enrollments hovers between 15 and 40 percent at universities like Caltech, Harvard, Cornell, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford. While these enrollment

statistics at the most selective institutions can lead one to believe that Asian Americans represent a much higher percentage of the American college student population, elite institutions constitute a very small percentage of institutions out of more than 7,000 postsecondary colleges and universities. Therefore, the majority of Asian American college students continue to enroll at less-selective institutions and community colleges.

Overview of Admissions Processes

While Asian Americans have experienced tremendous growth in their representation among U.S. college students, it is important to remember that enrollment data is not a direct outcome of admissions policies and practices. Once institutions notify applicants of admissions offers and rejections, much can occur to influence students' decisions in where they enroll. Enrollment yields, like the college preparation and application stages of the college access process, are significantly influenced by race, class, gender, and other identities.

Admissions practices at selective institutions are complex evaluation methods that incorporate a wide range of criteria, which may include test scores, high school grades, and other cognitive and noncognitive characteristics. Some noncognitive measures and admissions criteria, such as evidence of persistence, leadership, and demonstrated intellectual curiosity, have been proven to be reliable in predicting the success of future college students. Other noncognitive factors in the admissions process, such as an applicant's status as the descendant of a donor or alumnus, recruited student athlete, hometown location, or racial identity have no value in predicting a prospective student's future success. However, each criterion can contribute toward an institution's agenda, mission, or immediate institutional needs.

Given the Supreme Court decision in the Fisher case, most colleges and universities may continue to use race as one factor among many in their evaluation processes. Institutional criteria for admissions evaluation make up how each unique school defines merit. Given the diversity of postsecondary institutions and missions, there is no universal definition of merit in selective college admissions. However, what is fair and racially just in these policies continues to be hotly debated.

Allegations of Anti-Asian Discrimination in Elite College Admissions

In the early 1980s, Asian American student activists and community leaders questioned college admissions offices at the University of California, Stanford, Harvard, Brown, Yale, and Princeton about possible discrimination against Asian American applicants in favor of white students, also known as negative action. After extensive investigations by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Education and California State Auditor General into allegations of anti-Asian American quotas, the chancellor at UC Berkeley apologized for admissions policies that privileged white applicants over similarly qualified Asian American applicants. Harvard and other private elite institutions were found to have lower admission rates for Asian Americans compared to similarly or less academically qualified white applicants but were not found to be illegally discriminating against Asian Americans.

The investigative authorities attributed the disparity in admissions rates between similarly qualified Asian Americans and white students to differences in the lower proportion of Asian American applicants classified as legacies, or children of alumni and donors, and student athletes compared to white applicants.

More recently, some Asian Americans have made public accusations and filed federal civil rights complaints, opening OCR investigations into suspicions that elite private and universities continue to discriminate against Asian American applicants in favor of whites. Most notably, Jian Li, a Chinese American, filed a civil rights complaint with the OCR against Princeton University in 2006. In his complaint, Li claims that Princeton's consideration of race and legacy status in its admissions procedures discriminates against Asian Americans. In 2012, a rejected South Asian American applicant filed a civil rights complaint against Harvard, alleging that the university illegally discriminates against Asian Americans in favor of whites. The OCR has not concluded its investigation of Princeton and Harvard at the time of writing this entry.

Additionally, in 2009, a handful of Asian American community leaders and elected officials in California raised concerns about the potential effects of the elimination of the SAT II requirement

on Asian American admissions at the University of California.

Asian Americans as Discursive Tools in the Anti-Affirmative Action Agenda

The primary concern in all of the alleged and proven cases of negative action against Asian Americans has been focused on anti-Asian American discrimination in favor of white applicants. However, conservatives have appropriated Asian American concerns and argued that affirmative action harms Asian Americans to support their efforts to dismantle affirmative action policies. During campaigns for state ballot measures banning affirmative action in admissions, hiring, and public contracting in California, Washington, and Michigan, stereotypical images of hardworking and successful Asian Americans have been useful for dismissing accusations that these campaigns are racist.

Even though anti-affirmative action advocates like Ward Connerly argued that affirmative action policies hurt Asian Americans, there is evidence that the majority of Asian Americans are supportive of affirmative action policies. The majority (61 percent) of Asian American voters in California voted against Proposition 209 in 1996, meaning they voted to support affirmative action. In Michigan, 75 percent of Asian American voters rejected Proposal 2 in 2006, supporting affirmative action policies. More recently, three-quarters of Asian Americans polled by the National Asian American Survey indicated support for affirmative action policies.

Asian American Affirmative Action Divide

Despite strong evidence that Asian Americans are generally supportive of affirmative action policies, there remains a notable divide between Asian American community advocates in the debate over affirmative action in college admissions. In the 2013 Fisher case in the U.S. Supreme Court, there were two amici briefs submitted by Asian American organizations in support of banning race conscious practices and policies. There were also three amici briefs submitted by Asian American organizations in support of the preservation of affirmative action policies in admissions. Interestingly, the two anti-affirmative action briefs represented groups (Asian American

Legal Foundation and the 80–20 Foundation) that were dominated by East Asian Americans and South Asian Americans, two subpopulations that are generally more socioeconomically privileged than other Asian Americans.

The pro-affirmative action briefs represented groups with missions to advocate for low-income and less privileged Asian Americans, which include Southeast Asian American populations (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Asian American Justice Center, and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center). This conflict among Asian American organizations may reflect the socioeconomic disparities and divergent interests among the diverse subgroups represented in the Asian American population.

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See Also: Affirmative Action; Higher Education, Asian Americans in; Pan Asian American Education; Student Affairs, Asian American.

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