
Today's News

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Bans on Affirmative Action Help Asian Americans, Not Whites, Report Says

By [PETER SCHMIDT](#)

Although opposition to colleges' affirmative-action policies runs highest in the white population, a new study suggests that it is Asian Americans'—not whites'—whose chances of gaining admission to a selective university surges after an institution is precluded from considering applicants' ethnicity or race.

One of the study's authors, David R. Colburn, a professor of history and former provost at the University of Florida, said in an interview on Tuesday that the study shows "Asian Americans were discriminated against under an affirmative-action system." Asian Americans' share of enrollment has shot upward at selective public universities that have been forced to abandon affirmative-action preferences, he said, and the Asian-American population has not increased nearly enough to explain the trend.

Meanwhile, a report on the study's findings says, white enrollments, as a share of the student body, actually declined slightly at the universities examined. That trend, it says, though partly attributable to the growing diversity of the states served by the institutions, "can hardly be satisfying" to "those who campaigned for the elimination of affirmative action in the belief that it would advantage the admission of white students."

Black students' share of enrollment at such institutions generally dropped—sometimes substantially—while the picture for Hispanic students was mixed, the researchers found.

The study, the results of which are to be published next week in *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, was based on an analysis of enrollment data from selective universities in three states: California, where voters passed a 1996 referendum barring such institutions from considering applicants' race or ethnicity; Florida, where Gov. Jeb Bush persuaded the state university system to abandon race-conscious admissions in 2000; and Texas, where race-conscious admissions were prohibited under a 1996 federal court decision that remained in effect until the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of such policies in 2003.

The specific institutions examined in the study, which tracked freshman enrollment patterns from 1990 through the fall of 2005, were the University of Florida, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of California's campuses at Berkeley, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

One of the study's three co-authors, Charles E. Young Jr., was chancellor of UCLA when California's ban on affirmative-action preferences was passed and later served as president of the University of Florida at the time when public universities there were barred from considering applicants' ethnicity or race. The third co-author is Victor M. Yellen, a former director of institutional research at Florida.

To help pinpoint which of the trends they observed were clearly due to changes in affirmative-action policy, the researchers also studied five universities that had never been affected by affirmative-action bans: Cornell University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the Universities of Arizona, Illinois at

Urbana-Champaign, and Maryland at College Park.

Debating the Asian Impact

In looking at how Asian Americans were affected by affirmative-action policies, the researchers have waded into an area of considerable controversy.

A similar conclusion to the latest one was reached in a 2005 study by Thomas J. Espenshade, a professor of sociology at Princeton University, and Chang Y. Chung, a statistical programmer at Princeton's Office of Population Research. Based on their analysis of the profiles of 124,000 applicants to elite colleges, they concluded that the elimination of affirmative action would result in a significant increase in Asian-American enrollments at such institutions, as Asian Americans filled nearly four out of five of the seats left vacant by declines in the share of black and Hispanic applicants admitted.

Those findings were challenged in a 2006 study by William C. Kidder, then a senior policy analyst at the University of California at Davis, who accused the Princeton researchers of falling prey to the "yellow peril causation fallacy" by confounding the effects of affirmative action and "negative action," or outright admissions bias against Asian-American students. Mr. Espenshade, who characterizes himself as a supporter of affirmative action, later said in an e-mail message that he and Mr. Chung had "inadvertently blurred the conceptual distinction between eliminating affirmative action and moving to a race-neutral admissions system," and that their paper had focused on the latter.

Mr. Kidder's study was based on an analysis of enrollment data from five law schools in California, Texas, and Washington. He argued that Asian-American students had made only minor gains at such institutions after the schools were barred from considering applicants' race or ethnicity. But, although Mr. Kidder's study did not mention it, four of the five law schools he examined—those at the University of California's Berkeley, Davis, and Los Angeles campuses and the University of Washington—had had affirmative-action policies that were somewhat exceptional in that they actually *avored* at least some Asian Americans.

The report being published in *InterActions*

next week notes that prohibitions against race-conscious admissions had put the colleges examined under pressure to curtail other admissions preferences given to applicants with some sort of connection, and that those other preferences may also have played a role in limiting Asian-American enrollments. "Clearly in an open admissions process where affirmative action does not enter into enrollment decisions and where legacy and donor issues are discouraged, Asian-American students compete very well," it says.

In California, it says, Asian Americans "filled the gap as black and Hispanic enrollment fell following the elimination of affirmative action." The share of UC-Berkeley freshmen who were Asian American rose from 37.30 percent in 1995 to 43.57 percent in 2000 and to 46.59 percent in 2005, and Asian-American enrollments experienced similarly large jumps at the university's Los Angeles and San Diego campuses.

The share of University of Florida freshmen who were Asian American rose from 7.5 percent in 1995 to 8.65 percent in 2005, while Asian Americans' share of freshman enrollment at the University of Texas at Austin rose from 14.26 percent to 17.33 percent during that time frame.

Black Declines

The forthcoming report says the changes in black enrollments in the states examined varied greatly, depending on how aggressively state and university officials worked to mitigate the effects of affirmative-action bans.

In California, it says, black enrollment declines were "devastating," with the numbers for black men falling especially far.

At the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses, black students' share of enrollment dropped by more than half, about as much as the universities' leaders had feared it would. Berkeley's entering freshman class of 1995 had 149 black students, accounting for 6.51 percent of first-year students; of those who entered in 2005, 109, or 2.97 percent, were black. At UCLA, black enrollment dropped from 7.31 percent to 2.67 percent.

The decline was not as steep at San Diego, but the campus's black enrollment had been fairly negligible to begin with, accounting for 1.31 percent of the entering class of 1995 and 1.16 percent of the entering class of 2005.

Few of the university's efforts to offset such declines had much effect, the report says. The university adopted a policy guaranteeing admission to students in the top 4 percent of their high-school class, but most black students who got in under the 4-percent rule also had been eligible under the old admissions criteria, the report notes.

The situation was different in Florida and Texas.

Black students' share of the University of Florida's entering class declined from 11.33 in 2000—just before the end of race-conscious admissions—to 9.41 percent in 2005, not nearly as sharp a decline as that experienced by the California institutions.

The report says it helped that Florida adopted a policy of guaranteeing students in the top 20 percent of their high school a seat at one of the state's public universities. Florida, unlike the universities in California and Texas, was allowed to continue to consider race and ethnicity in recruiting and awarding financial aid. And even though black students' share of its entering classes declined, it was able to increase the raw numbers of black students on campus by substantially increasing its overall enrollment.

In Texas, Gov. George W. Bush helped reverse black enrollment declines by persuading lawmakers to adopt the "Texas 10 Percent Plan," guaranteeing students who graduated in the top 10th of their class at one of the state's high schools admission to the public university of their choice. Black students' share of enrollment at the University of Texas at Austin initially dropped from 4.89 percent in 1995 to 3.38 percent in 2002, but has since rebounded to 5.05 percent, which is above 1995 levels.

Hispanic enrollments dropped substantially at Berkeley and UCLA, but rose substantially at UC-San Diego and at Florida and Texas.

The increases were driven partly by population growth. The University of Florida, Mr. Colburn said, did not have to take big steps to maintain Hispanic enrollments because Hispanic students "were consistently competitive" with many coming from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds.

The report notes that all five of the universities studied mitigated actual and potential declines in their black and Hispanic enrollments by increasing their five and six-year graduation rates, so that higher percentages of their black and Hispanic students graduated in 2000 than had 10 years before. Mr. Colburn said the information analyzed for his study did not shed light on whether graduation rates were bolstered by the better academic preparation of students admitted without the benefit of affirmative-action preferences. "My observation would be the jury is out on it," he said.

The report predicts that white people might begin actively opposing race-neutral admissions policies if Asian Americans continue to make gains. "Whites are still too influential in politics and in the private sector to sit quietly while this trend continues," it says.

Mr. Young said he expects a continued decline in the amount of racial and ethnic diversity on such campuses as the competition for admission intensifies. Already, he says, limits on affirmative action have "clearly negatively affected their ability to provide diversity in education," hurting the education of their students.