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## Achieving Racial and Economic Diversity with Race-Blind Admissions Policy

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Race-based affirmative action in selective college admissions is under legal attack, as the chapters written by Arthur Coleman and Teresa Taylor, and by Scott Greytak, in this volume both make clear. In *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013), the U.S. Supreme Court pushed universities to adopt race-neutral strategies (proxies) to achieve the compelling interest of promoting racial and ethnic diversity. In the opinion's key passage, the Court ruled that universities bear "the ultimate burden of demonstrating, before turning to racial classifications, that available, workable race-neutral alternatives do not suffice." What are the leading alternatives, and how workable are they? What benefits and costs do they entail?

### Diversity with and without the Use of Race

We simulate various admissions models at the top-rated 193 colleges primarily because the dialogue about affirmative action often implies that it is access to these

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schools and the opportunities they provide in business, social, and career advancement that truly matters. Using SAT/ACT scores, we build merit-based affirmative action programs on a foundation of college success; not just access. We took this approach because we believe that college access without college completion is an unfulfilled promise. Also, as framed by the Court's pointed aim of beneficial educational diversity, we believe a merit-based approach is appropriately aimed toward beneficial diversity and away from merely racial balancing. In the extreme, we start with a purely race-blind, merit-based admissions model that has no special admissions. Here, we simulate an admissions queue of students ranked by SAT/ACT test score and fill the 250,000 freshman seats at the most elite 193 universities, starting with the highest-scoring students. This has a significant negative impact on the racial distribution of the incoming freshman class. We follow this pure-merit model with one giving some consideration to high-scoring disadvantaged students—what we call an admissions boost based on socioeconomic status (SES)—while still queuing students starting with the highest scores. In this simulation, we calculate the effect of each individual's disadvantage on their test scores and use this adjustment to move them ahead in the queue. In other words, once we control for high test scores, this adjustment ensures we admit students with the most disadvantage before the student with the least disadvantage. We believe admitting students in this way—controlling for readiness while adjusting for disadvantage—will prove educationally beneficial. The difference in median test score between the pure-merit and the adjusted simulation is minor.

The best models for producing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity are 10 percent models in which the criterion is relative performance in each of the nation's high schools. These models all outperform their companion pure-merit and adjusted models, but with a decline in average test scores. The last of these 10 percent models is the only one in which we use race, after considering class rank and socioeconomic status; this simulation is the top performer in terms of racial diversity.

In the end, we find that “race-blind” and “race-conscious” (giving an added boost to underserved minorities) forms of affirmative action can substitute for the use of “race alone” in college admissions. But these alternatives are only available if elite colleges are willing to risk lower average test scores (in the case of two of our five simulations, one estimate is higher but not statistically different) and thereby lower graduation rates.

In our admissions simulations, a plan that uses test scores in combination with SES-based affirmative action can produce high levels of SES diversity and moderate levels of racial diversity. (We use SES-based and income-based interchangeably below.)<sup>1</sup> By contrast, an approach that combines class rank with SES-based affirmative action results in a rich mix of both race and SES diversity. Finally, using relative-merit (10 percent plan), SES- and race-based admissions standards together increases the race mix the most, but with only modest increases in the SES or class mix.

Our analyses demonstrate that alternative admissions policies can substantially improve racial and socioeconomic diversity at the 193 “Most” and “Highly” selective colleges as listed in *Barron’s Profiles of American Colleges*, without appreciably lowering college-wide test scores and thereby graduation rates. But we also find that the extent of access and graduation for minorities and low-income students in elite colleges is ultimately limited by poor K–12 preparation. If, for example, we apply our selection models to create racial diversity in the top 468 colleges, the top three tiers in *Barron’s* ranking, we would run out of qualified minorities, especially African Americans. Ultimately, our ability to find a “critical mass” of qualified minorities and low-income students hits a statistical wall imposed by unequal preparation in K–12 education. Simply stated, the pool of qualified (scoring 1000+ on the old SAT/ACT) underserved minorities, African Americans in particular, runs out before any admissions boost can have full effect. Increases in college readiness among disadvantaged populations would increase the effectiveness of all race-blind selection by raising the likelihood of obtaining racial diversity when not using race as a selection criteria.

The enormous social and political stresses that engulf the ongoing fight over race-based affirmative action have produced a thriving empirical market in alternatives. In our own research, we find that, in the main, Americans prefer access to selective colleges to be based entirely on merit, as measured by test scores and other academic achievements. But the public is more willing to affirm those cases in which individuals overcome economic or social disadvantage along the way to high achievement.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the public is wary of using group characteristics, such as race, as evidence of disadvantage or deservedness, with the notable exceptions of groups such as veterans and the disabled. As a result, the public’s view is that low-income students in general and, to a lesser extent, low-income minorities are more appropriate than racial minorities alone as targets for

affirmative action. The most optimistic view is that class-based affirmative action will produce both race and class diversity because of the high concentration of racial minorities among low-income households.

The failings of race-blind selection are articulated by analysts who are skeptical of income-based affirmative action as a good proxy for achieving racial diversity. They point out that, although the share of low-income (SES) high school seniors among whites is substantially lower than among minorities, because the share of whites in the general population is larger, there are many more white youths than minority youths at the bottom of the income ladder. As a result, many studies find that there are as many as five low-income white students for every minority student who would meet minimum standards for admission at selective colleges.<sup>3</sup> Because our model recognizes that income alone does not fully represent the relative economic disadvantages that typical minority families face compared to whites of the same income (on measures such as wealth and living in poverty-concentrated neighborhoods), it avoids a purely income-based definition of socioeconomic status.

Because of the prominence of class-based admissions criteria as an alternative to race-based admissions criteria, our simulations (aside from the pure-merit benchmark in simulation 1) include disadvantage factors—those used to create our SES-based admissions boost<sup>4</sup>—either directly (simulations 2, 4, 5) or indirectly (simulation 3). Simulation 5 also uses race to augment the SES-based admissions boost. In all instances, we find that both perspectives on the use of class-based admissions criteria hold up:

- Class-based criteria can deliver on racial diversity, especially for Hispanics.
- Class-based criteria are especially effective at promoting diversity when combined with class rank and/or race variables.

But the skeptics are also correct that in order to get substantial increases in African-American and Hispanic admissions in selective colleges, especially if admissions are race blind, the colleges will have to admit many more lower-SES students to obtain modest increases among African Americans and Hispanics. For example, if admissions were conditioned on merit, top 10 percent of the high school class, and SES (simulation 4), African-American and Hispanic enrollments would increase, but Asian enrollments would decline, and the share of students from the top income quartile would drop from 65 percent to 45 percent.

## An Overview of What We Did and What We Found

In our simulations, we employed four “race-blind” admissions strategies and a single “race-conscious” strategy that used race in the context of class rank and socioeconomic status.<sup>5</sup> In all cases, we compared our results to the diversity in the current system (see Table 15.1), and also compared to the pure-merit baseline results. (Our base simulation is a pure-merit model based solely on test scores with no affirmative action consideration, legacies, or other type of special admissions.) Here are our bottom-line results. (See Tables 15. 1 and 15.2 for a summary.)

### *Simulation 1. Race-blind Pure Test-Based Merit*

- Method: A pure-merit benchmark based on test scores alone in which all legacy and all affirmative action considerations are absent.
- Effect: Reduces African-American enrollments from 4 percent to 1 percent, Hispanic enrollments from 7 percent to 4 percent and holds low-SES enrollments constant at 5 percent.

### *Simulation 2. Race-blind Merit with SES-based Admissions Boost*

- Method: Test-based merit with a race-blind preference for socioeconomic status.
- Effect: Improves Hispanic access but reduces African-American and Asian access below current levels; increases income-based diversity from the bottom SES quartile from 5 percent to 16 percent.

### *Simulation 3. Race-blind Relative Merit—Top 10 Percent of the High School Class*

- Method: Test-based merit with guaranteed admission for the top 10 percent of the high school class based on standardized test scores (rather than high school grades).
- Effect: Holds white enrollments constant, reduces Asian enrollments, significantly increases enrollments for Hispanics and low-SES students while enrollment share for African Americans increases slightly.

### *Simulation 4. Race-blind Relative Merit—Top 10 Percent of High School Class with SES-based Admissions Boost*

- Method: Test-based merit with guaranteed admission for the top 10 percent of the high school class with an added “SES-based plus factor.”

**TABLE 15.1.** Effect of Simulations on Student Race, Ethnicity, and Test Scores

There are race-blind and race-conscious forms of affirmative action that can substitute for the use of race alone in college admissions if elite colleges are willing to risk slightly lower average test scores and graduation rates.

	<b>Status Quo</b>	<b>Simulation 1</b>	<b>Simulation 2</b>	<b>Simulation 3</b>	<b>Simulation 4</b>	<b>Simulation 5</b>	<b>High School</b>
	<i>Current Share of Seats at Top 193 Colleges</i>	<i>Pure Merit: Admission by Test Scores</i>	<i>Pure Merit Plus SES</i>	<i>Merit Top 10% of High School Class</i>	<i>Merit Top 10% and SES</i>	<i>Merit Top 10%, Race, and SES</i>	<i>High School Class</i>
Race/ethnicity							
White	74%	83%	77%	74%	69%	59%	62%
African American	4%	1%	3%	6%	9%	14%	14%
Hispanic	7%	4%	10%	11%	14%	18%	15%
Asian	15%	12%	10%	10%	9%	9%	9%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Mean SAT/ACT score	1230	1362	1322	1254	1160	1149	

**TABLE 15.2.** Impact of Our Simulations on Student Body Socioeconomic Diversity and Test Scores

Using test scores in combination with income-based affirmative action produces the most income diversity, but combining class rank with economic affirmative action results in the richest mix of race and income diversity.

	<b>Status Quo</b>	<b>Simulation 1</b>	<b>Simulation 2</b>	<b>Simulation 3</b>	<b>Simulation 4</b>	<b>Simulation 5</b>
	<i>Current Share of Seats at Top 193 Colleges</i>	<i>Pure Merit: Admission by Test Scores</i>	<i>Pure Merit Plus SES</i>	<i>Merit Top 10% of High School Class</i>	<i>Merit Top 10%, and SES</i>	<i>Merit Top 10%, Race, and SES</i>
Socioeconomic Status						
Top quartile	65%	65%	32%	45%	26%	24%
Second quartile	20%	21%	21%	24%	21%	21%
Third quartile	9%	10%	30%	18%	33%	32%
Bottom quartile	5%	5%	16%	13%	20%	22%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Mean SAT/ACT score	1230	1362	1322	1254	1160	1149

- Effect: Reduces white and Asian enrollments; more than doubles African-American enrollments; almost triples Hispanic enrollments, and increases lower-income student enrollments substantially; method produces large improvements compared to using the top 10 percent alone and creates roughly proportional enrollment distribution by income quartiles.

*Simulation 5. Race-conscious Admissions with Relative Merit and Race and SES-based Admissions Boost*

- Method: A top 10 percent–based admissions approach with SES and race “plus factors” in the admissions model.
- Effect: Decreases the level of white enrollments to 59 percent, roughly the white youth population share, increases Hispanic share slightly above Hispanic youth population share, and increases African-American share just below African-American population share; increases income-based diversity from the bottom SES quartile from 5 percent to 22 percent.

### Data and Creating “Plus Factors”

To generate our simulations, we used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002. This study followed a nationally representative class of tenth graders (2002) and twelfth graders (2004) and tracked their college enrollment status to their first post-secondary institution as of 2006. Our analysis is representative of early college-going outcomes for the high school class of 2004. This is not fully reflective of the incoming freshman class of that year; the weighted sample of these high school seniors is approximately 93–94 percent of the freshman admissions in the top 193 schools. Hence, our “searching analyses” can be understood as presenting potential affirmative action models covering an eligible pool of high school students, and the diversity results if used on the next class of high school students.<sup>6</sup>

All of our simulations are based on a merit queue in which students are lined up from highest to lowest SAT/ACT score. Admissions start from the top until all seats are filled. “Plus factors” are a way to nudge high-scoring students ahead in the queue based on their individual, not general, disadvantage. We create “plus factors” by first building a regression model to estimate how identifiable disadvantage correlates with SAT/ACT scores.<sup>7</sup> Some of the factors are completely outside a student’s control, including family factors such as parental income, education, and occupation, and neighborhood factors such as neighborhood education level and school poverty concentrations. Other factors are within a student’s constrained or environmental choice set, such as taking an

Advanced Placement (AP) course or obtaining an or International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma (which can be a matter of individual choice, but is obviously more difficult in schools where few such courses or degrees are offered). Our primary models create SES “plus factors” by inverting these disadvantages (not having AP/IB available or not having taken them, not having peers attending college, being the first generation to attend college, and so on) and “adding” these to an applicant’s score (the median add or addition is 100 points). In this way, the admissions consideration is based primarily on a high score with a “boost”<sup>8</sup> given for disadvantage. SES factors combined with race as a “plus factor” are calculated in the same fashion: each individual is considered primarily based on his or her test score, with a boost given to reflect any disadvantages shown to have a measurable effect on test results.

A note of caution: this “boost” does not indicate an expectation of higher academic performance, but rather reflects how the individual student would have scored had he or she not been disadvantaged (for example, had he or she had access to AP/IB options).

### The Status Quo

In 2006, African Americans represented about 14 percent of the nation’s high school senior class, and Hispanics represented 15 percent, for a total of 29 percent. So, compared to the demographics of the high school senior class—the prime-age group for college enrollment—only about a third of African Americans’ and Hispanics’ proportional share are enrolled at the top colleges.

Students with low socioeconomic status are underrepresented at the top colleges at twice the rate of racial minorities. Students from the bottom SES quartile represent just 5 percent of freshmen students enrolled in the top 193 colleges, compared with an 11 percent combined participation rate for African Americans and Hispanics.<sup>9</sup> In comparison, the white share of freshman students at the top colleges (74 percent) is much higher than the share of the white high school senior class population (62 percent).

### A Deeper Look at Our Simulations

#### *Simulation 1: Race-blind Pure Test-Based Merit*

Pure test-based selection strips out every other kind of special admission—affirmative action based on legacies, geography, special talents such as sports and music as well as specialized subject matter interests.

This model, for instance, pays no heed to the debate team, the football team, or the need to get a certain number of likely classics majors to fill a tenured classics professor’s classes. An admission procedure based purely on test scores increases white dominance at selective colleges and reduces access for African Americans and Hispanics. At the same time, the use of a pure test-based merit approach shifts elite college enrollments in the middle SES tiers but has no effect at the top or bottom SES quartiles. In this pure merit-based model, the average SAT/ACT score (on the math and verbal sections) increases from the current 1230 to 1362.

Our simulation of pure test-based merit:

- increased white enrollment shares from the current level of 74 percent to 83 percent;
- reduced the African-American share from the current level of 4 percent to 1 percent;
- reduced the Hispanic share from the current level of 7 percent to 4 percent;
- decreased the Asian share from the current level of 15 percent to 12 percent;
- held the bottom SES quartile constant at 5 percent; and
- increased average test scores from the current level 1230 to 1362.

**TABLE 15.3.** Simulation 1: Comparison of Status Quo and Pure-Merit Admissions

	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>				
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian and Other</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	74%	4%	7%	15%	
Pure merit: admission by test scores	83%	1%	4%	12%	
High school class	62%	14%	15%	9%	
	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>				<i>Mean SAT</i>
	<i>Top quartile</i>	<i>Second quartile</i>	<i>Third quartile</i>	<i>Bottom quartile</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	65%	20%	9%	5%	1230
Pure merit: admission by test scores	65%	21%	10%	5%	1362

*Simulation 2: Race-blind Test-Based Merit with SES “Plus Factors”*

We simulated an affirmative action alternative using admissions criteria based on test scores with a boost based on relative disadvantage that we label SES “plus-factors.”<sup>10</sup> These SES plus-factors boost Hispanics, low-SES students, and African Americans compared to pure test-based merit. Compared to the status quo, Hispanics and low-SES students gained, while African Americans lost shares in selective colleges.

Our simulation using test-based merit with SES plus factors:

- increased the level of white enrollments from the current level of 74 percent to 77 percent;
- increased Hispanic admissions above the current level of 7 percent to 10 percent;
- decreased African-American enrollments from the current level of 4 percent to 3 percent;
- decreased Asian and other access from 15 percent to 10 percent;
- increased economic affirmative action from 5 percent to 16 percent of the bottom quartile of SES, with a total of 46 percent coming from the bottom half of the income distribution; and
- raised the average test scores from the current level of 1230 to 1322.

**TABLE 15.4.** Simulation 2: Comparison of Status Quo and Pure Merit Plus SES

	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>				
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian and Other</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	74%	4%	7%	15%	
Pure merit plus SES simulation	77%	3%	10%	10%	
High school class	62%	14%	15%	9%	
	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>				<i>Mean SAT Score</i>
	<i>Top quartile</i>	<i>Second quartile</i>	<i>Third quartile</i>	<i>Bottom quartile</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	65%	20%	9%	5%	1230
Pure merit plus SES simulation	32%	21%	30%	16%	1322

*Simulation 3: Race-blind Test-based Relative Merit—Modified Top 10 Percent Plan Applied to All U.S. High Schools*

This metric makes high school class rank by test scores (rather than high school grades)<sup>11</sup> a powerful factor in the allocation of seats at selective colleges. Using this relative merit approach holds white enrollments at their current levels and increases access for African Americans and Hispanics above current levels in which universities employ race-based affirmative action. It increases diversity by race and SES. This approach works because Americans are segregated into neighborhoods that are relatively homogenous by race and by family income. In our simulations, this alternative adds greater racial diversity than the use of test-based merit nationally, even combined with SES plus factors. This does not produce as much SES diversity as the SES approach, but it does produce greater socioeconomic diversity than the status quo of race-based affirmative action. The average test score in the top 193 colleges increases slightly from 1230 to 1254.

Our simulation using merit and the top 10 percent of the high school class:

- held white enrollments constant at 74 percent;
- increased Hispanic admissions above the current level of 7 percent to 11 percent;
- increased African-American enrollments from the current level of 4 percent to 6 percent;
- decreased Asian access from the current level of 15 percent to 10 percent;
- increased income diversity from the bottom quartile from 5 percent to 13 percent; and
- increased average test scores just slightly from the current level of 1230 to 1254.

*Simulation 4: Race-blind Relative Merit— A Modified Top 10 Percent Plan for All U.S. High Schools with the Inclusion of SES “Plus Factors”*

This approach provides the biggest increase in enrollments in the top 193 colleges for minorities, especially African Americans, reflecting both the income and racial segregation of individual high school catchment areas. It reduces the access of the top SES quartile students dramatically, almost to the “expected” 25 percent population share. The average SAT/ACT score drops at the most selective colleges.

**TABLE 15.5.** Simulation 3: Comparison of Status Quo and Merit Plus Modified Top 10 Percent

	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>				
	<i>African American</i>				
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	74%	4%	7%	15%	
Merit top 10% of high school class	74%	6%	11%	10%	
High school class	62%	14%	15%	9%	
	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>				<i>Mean SAT Score</i>
	<i>Top quartile</i>	<i>Second quartile</i>	<i>Third quartile</i>	<i>Bottom quartile</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	65%	20%	9%	5%	1230
Merit top 10% of high school class	45%	24%	18%	13%	1254

**TABLE 15.6.** Simulation 4: Comparison of Status Quo and Merit, Modified Top 10 Percent, and SES

	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>				
	<i>African American</i>				
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 Colleges	74%	4%	7%	15%	
Merit, top 10% of high school class and SES Plus Factors	69%	9%	14%	9%	
High school class	62%	14%	15%	9%	
	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>				<i>Mean SAT Score</i>
	<i>Top quartile</i>	<i>Second quartile</i>	<i>Third quartile</i>	<i>Bottom quartile</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	65%	20%	9%	5%	1230
Merit, top 10% of high school class, SES plus factors	26%	21%	33%	20%	1160

This simulation:

- reduced the level of white enrollments from the current level of 74 percent to 69 percent;
- doubled Hispanic admissions above the current level of 7 percent to 14 percent;
- almost tripled African-American enrollments from the current level of 4 percent to 11 percent;
- decreased Asian access from the current level of 15 percent to 9 percent;
- created a roughly proportional enrollment distribution between the top and bottom half of SES (47 percent versus 53 percent); and
- caused a decline in average test scores from the current level of 1230 to 1160.

*Simulation 5: Relative Merit with Race Consciousness—  
A Modified Top 10 Percent Plan for All U.S. High Schools  
with the Inclusion of SES “Plus Factors” and Race*

In our final model we investigate the impact of using race as a final consideration in admissions. This plan builds on the relative merit, or 10 percent plan, with SES plus factor boosting by including race as a plus factor for African Americans and Hispanics. As might be expected, the

**TABLE 15.7.** Simulation 5: Comparison of Current Enrollments at the Top 193 Colleges with Admissions on Relative Merit and Race and SES Plus Factors

	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>				
	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Asian</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	74%	4%	7%	15%	
Merit, top 10%, race, and SES	59%	14%	18%	9%	
High school class	62%	14%	15%	9%	
	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>				<i>Mean SAT Score</i>
	<i>Top quartile</i>	<i>Second quartile</i>	<i>Third quartile</i>	<i>Bottom quartile</i>	
Current share of seats at top 193 colleges	65%	20%	9%	5%	1230
Merit, top 10%, race, and SES	24%	21%	32%	22%	1149

addition of race as an admissions factor leads to higher levels of inclusion of underserved minorities; in fact, this model leads to slight underrepresentation of whites, 59 percent, compared to the high school pool. On the other hand, African-American and Asian enrollment shares are equal to their shares of the high school senior class at 14 percent and 9 percent, respectively. This relative merit race-conscious model leads to overrepresentation of Hispanics whose share increases to 18 percent. The average test score drops from 1230 to 1149 in this simulation, the largest drop of any of the five options.

### How Do We Choose?

Our simulations show that, at least in theory, it is possible to achieve both racial and economic diversity in selective colleges without using race per se as an admissions criterion. All of our simulations have merit-based components. The first was pure test-based merit; the second was test-based merit with an SES-based admissions boost; the next two were relative-merit or top 10 percent models, and the final model added consideration of race. We find that race-blind selection models can move the needle on both racial and SES diversity, that relative merit (10 percent models) do better than a national (absolute) merit queue, and that, if you want to boost racial diversity far above what we have today, race needs to be a criterion. Because the models we utilize in this chapter factor in college readiness, we believe they are consistent with the Court's opinion that affirmative action models ought to promote racial diversity as an educational benefit instead of promoting racial diversity for its own sake.

This focus on merit—or college readiness—has led to one interesting finding. Our data suggests that selective colleges are not taking full advantage of the talent pool of minorities. Currently, a large share of minority students admitted to selective colleges have below-average test scores, while a substantial number of minority students with above-average test scores do not go to selective colleges. One clear benefit of a merit-based selection criterion is the potential for better matching between top-scoring students and top schools. (Other work that we have done finds that, annually, nearly 600,000 college students who scored in the top half of their high school class drop out of college.)<sup>12</sup>

Our research also shows that all of these affirmative action plans present a tradeoff between individual and group gains, between overall system outcomes and outcomes at selective colleges. The first two models, both

national merit queues, result in higher SAT/ACT scores at the schools, so we would predict higher graduation rates for selective colleges. Given that neither model leads to higher representation of underserved minorities, and that both displace high-SES students, we expect little to no impact on graduation rates for these students. This follows research<sup>13</sup> and our own unpublished analysis<sup>14</sup> that show high-SES students tend not to get a big outcome boost by going to the most selective schools.

Our other models are less clear. First, we know that they lower the average test score at the selective institutions, which will lead to lower predicted graduation rates.<sup>15</sup> Second, we know that the disadvantaged students will get large boosts from attending the top, highly resourced schools—more than advantaged students will be penalized by going to a good, but not top, school. At best, the displacement (shift of students) caused by these plans would result in better graduation rates for underserved minorities and low-SES students, while causing slight declines in top schools. Overall, system graduation rates could be expected to increase (marginally) if the minority gains are larger than declines among displaced students; graduation rates at the top schools would decline unless these schools use the information on student disadvantage to improve supports.

We find that there is substantial racial and economic diversity that can be achieved with merit-based admissions criteria, depending on the willingness of higher education institutions to take risks on graduation rates, to discount tuition, and to fund supportive services. In theory, increasing access to selective colleges by race and class might reduce graduation rates at the top colleges, but graduation rates would still be high. For example, while graduation rates at top colleges are often over 90 percent, even the most generous affirmative action programs would be unlikely to drop overall graduation rates below 80 percent. In addition, lower graduation rates can be minimized by increasing supportive services targeting less advantaged students. Moreover, while graduation rates might decline in the most selective colleges, they likely would increase for the affected minorities and the overall postsecondary system.

In closing, we offer two findings that are somewhat outside the parameters of the above analysis. First, we find that our merit-based approach combined with race and class admissions factors requires substantial disruption in the admissions practices and enrollments of selective colleges. The disruption in the profile of selective colleges could be minimized and the number of minority and low-income students increased

if greater access for minorities and lower-income students were treated as an add-on rather than a substitute for the current admissions process. Moreover, additional diversity would be easier to achieve if the government would provide funding directly to selective colleges to defray the preparation, search costs, educational costs, and supportive services for less-advantaged minority and low-income students. It would also help if the institutional performance in providing access and success for those students were measured and rewarded separately for purposes of public funding and institutional rankings.

While there are substantial numbers of minority and low-income students who can benefit from admission to selective colleges, K–12 preparation presents barriers that cannot be overcome by admissions policy. While we were successful in finding substantial numbers of minority and low-income students who could benefit from access to the top 193 selective colleges, this matching comes at a cost. Schools in the next tier (ranked 194 to 468 in selectivity) would have to dig deeper into the SAT pool in order to attract minority students. The good news is that preparation levels by race are not an immutable fact of life and can be addressed with stronger elementary and secondary programs. Ultimately, affirmative action policies of any kind are a poor substitute for providing genuine equality of opportunity at the K–12 level.