

Who gets admitted to college?: Affirmative action is just one of the subjective ways colleges choose their student bodies. by Natasha Kumar Warikoo, *LA Times*, June 20, 2013

- 1 At Oxford University in England, admissions criteria are clear. As the admissions director there told me recently, what matters is an applicant's potential to succeed in the subject she wants to study. A student wanting to study mathematics, say, must nail the math entrance exam, and in an interview show the potential to be an outstanding mathematician. Whether or not she is a concert violinist, the first in her family to go on to higher education, or the only female applicant in mathematics is irrelevant.
- 2 Oxford students believe in this system. They feel that the university is not responsible for making British society equal. But that isn't how things have worked in the United States for nearly 100 years — and perhaps not ever.
- 3 The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June on a case involving U.S. college admissions that could lead to significant changes. The lawsuit was initially brought by Abigail Fisher, a white student who was denied admission to the University of Texas and claims that she experienced racial discrimination. But it's important to understand the broader context of U.S. admissions policies when considering affirmative action.
- 4 Although we would like to believe that universities have always admitted students based on some objective definition of merit, in fact admissions criteria have changed dramatically over time. Until the 1920s, elite universities in the United States administered university exams to determine the "best" students. But even then, the exams had their biases — for example, they usually contained material such as Latin that was taught only in elite schools.
- 5 The exam system began to change after Ivy League schools became alarmed at the number of Jewish students applying and scoring well on the tests. At that point, elite schools began to shift their definitions of "merit." Columbia University led the way by introducing "character" as something to be considered in admissions decisions. This amorphous quality was said to include personality traits such as manliness and leadership ability. In order to judge character, the universities asked for photos and letters of recommendation and, in some cases, conducted interviews with applicants.
- 6 During the 1960s, this flexible understanding of merit started to shift. No longer used to exclude Jews, it began being used to address the notable underrepresentation of black students on campus.
- 7 Today, selective universities in the United States consider a range of attributes beyond academics in making admissions decisions. These include an applicant's extracurricular activities, athletic prowess, hardships overcome, legacy status and race. In my research at elite American universities today, I have found that undergraduates are quite comfortable with these flexible notions of merit. They express a belief that racially diverse campuses are necessary to their training as future citizens and leaders in our globalized world. And they also support other examples of flexibility in admissions, including athletic recruiting and preferences for the children of alumni. Athletes, they argue, contribute to a fun campus life and demonstrate merit in athletics, while legacy admissions bring funds to the university that can potentially contribute to scholarships for more disadvantaged students.
- 8 Since long before Abigail Fisher was born, university admissions policies in the United States have been highly subjective, responding to the desires and needs of society and the academic institution itself. Race-based affirmative action is a part of the picture, and it symbolizes a deep commitment on

the part of colleges and universities to the pursuit of racial justice in a country plagued by extreme racial inequality. And it's hard to argue the programs are no longer necessary. Black Americans are still more than twice as likely to be poor as white Americans; black children are more likely to attend underperforming, racially segregated schools than white children; and whites with a criminal record are more likely to receive a callback on job applications than blacks with no criminal record.

- 9 More than 50 years ago, British sociologist Michael Young coined the term "meritocracy." He intended the term to have negative connotations, referring to a dystopia in which the elite use notions of merit to justify and maintain their status across generations. He portrayed a future in which promotion, pay and school admissions would be used to reward elites for their class-based cultural know-how rather than for qualities attainable by anyone in society.
- 10 If the Supreme Court ruling in the Fisher case bans the consideration of factors that promote racial equality and justice in admissions decisions, but allows universities to continue considering other kinds of non-academic "merit" that increase inequality, we will be one step closer to the kind of dysfunctional "meritocracy" Young envisioned.

Moving Beyond Affirmative Action by Thomas J. Espenshade, *NY Times*. October 4, 2012

- 1 In October 2012, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, the latest in a long line of conservative assaults on affirmative action that dates to the late 1970s. Nearly a decade has passed since the court, in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, approved the continued use of race as one factor in an individualized, "holistic" review of an applicant's qualifications for higher education. Now even such limited consideration of race is being challenged.
- 2 Abigail Fisher, who is white, graduated from a Texas public high school in 2008 and barely missed out on automatic admission to the University of Texas at Austin under the Texas Top 10 Percent Law. When she was later denied admission after an evaluation that considered a candidate's race, she sued, alleging racial discrimination.
- 3 Supporters of race-conscious affirmative action in higher education are not optimistic that it will survive. But they shouldn't despair. A Supreme Court ruling against the university might put ethnic and racial diversity on college campuses on a firmer footing for the long term. It would spur Americans who care about racial inequality to seek alternatives to affirmative action by addressing the deeply entrenched disadvantages that lower-income and minority children face from the beginning of life.
- 4 Race-based affirmative action has been a woefully inadequate weapon in the arsenal against inequality. It treats the symptoms but not the root causes of an underlying social problem. It is limited to the more selective private and public colleges (those that accept fewer than half of all applicants), which together account for about 20 percent of all freshmen. By my estimate, between 10,000 and 15,000 black and Hispanic students enroll in selective colleges every year through race-conscious policies. This is about 1 percent of the entering freshman class nationwide and just 1

percent of all black and Hispanic 18-year-olds.

- 5 Graduation rates are higher for all students, not just underrepresented minority students, at more selective colleges. The trade-off is that students who are admitted through affirmative action (and who often have weaker academic credentials than their peers) are more likely to graduate toward the bottom of their class. Analyzing data from eight elite colleges (five private, three public) from 1999 and 2003, my colleague Alexandria Walton Radford and I found that one-half of black students and one-third of Hispanic students graduated in the bottom 20 percent of their class.
- 6 We also found that self-segregation dilutes the educational benefits of diversity that proponents of affirmative action rightly prize. Only half of the students in our sample reported having a roommate or close friend of a different race (or a different Hispanic ethnicity) during college. Finally, when asked about their level of satisfaction with the academic and social aspects of their college years, upper-middle-class white students reported the greatest satisfaction and working-class black students the least.
- 7 To be clear, I believe that race-conscious affirmative action is necessary, and often beneficial — though I am not hopeful that the court will agree. Our study showed that eliminating it would reduce the number of black students by about 60 percent, and the number of Hispanic students by about one-third, at selective private schools. We also showed that there is no substitute policy, including preferences based on socioeconomic class, that would generate as much racial and ethnic diversity as affirmative action, given the large numbers of working-class non-Hispanic whites and Asians in the applicant pool.
- 8 Most important, our study found that without affirmative action, racial diversity could only be preserved if there were no racial differences in learned skills and knowledge or in college preparedness.
- 9 The racial and socioeconomic gap in academic performance is America's most pressing domestic issue. When they enter kindergarten, black children are about one year behind white children. When they graduate from high school, black teenagers are four years behind white teenagers.
- 10 If affirmative action is abolished, selective colleges and universities will face a stark choice. They can try to manufacture diversity by giving more weight in admissions to those factors that are sometimes close substitutes for race — for example, having overcome disadvantage in a poor urban neighborhood. Or they can take a far bolder step: putting their endowments and influence behind a comprehensive effort to close the learning gap that starts at birth. Higher education has a responsibility for all of education. The job of those atop the academic pyramid is not over once they've enrolled a diverse freshman class.
- 11 We need more research into the impact of factors like diet and nutrition, the amount of time parents talk and read with their kids, exposure to electronic screen time, sleep routines and the way

stress outside the home affects family life. However the court decides the Fisher case, affirmative action's days appear numbered. Seven states — Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire and Washington — have banned racial preferences in college admissions. In 2003, in the *Grutter* decision, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote that she expected such preferences to disappear within 25 years — by 2028. The children who would go off to college that year are already 2 years old.