

***After Fisher: What the Supreme Court's Ruling
Means for Students, Colleges, and the Country***

The Evidence on Race-Neutral Alternatives to Race-Conscious Admissions

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As postsecondary institutions seek to meet the guidelines articulated in *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016), they can draw from the large body of evidence documenting whether race-neutral admissions policies are workable and available, and whether they suffice to further their mission-driven interest in the educational benefits of diversity. This fact sheet highlights some of the most recent evidence on this topic. Postsecondary institutions can supplement this evidence with additional context-specific studies.

What Are Race-Neutral Approaches in Admissions?

Universities and colleges have turned to a number of approaches that, under the legal definition, can be considered race-neutral (Espinosa, Gaertner, & Orfield, 2015). In law, these efforts are called race-neutral because they do not explicitly consider race in admissions. Such strategies are meant to encourage more underrepresented students of color to enroll in college. These include outreach and recruitment efforts, such as visits to high schools that enroll high percentages of students of color and those with low socioeconomic backgrounds. They can also include placing greater weight on a student's socioeconomic status, instead of their race, in the admissions process, or, as was the case in Texas, can use "percent plans" that guarantee admissions to students who graduate within a specified percentage of their high school class.

Diversity Declines With Race-Neutral Admissions

When race cannot be one of many factors in admissions, there are substantial declines in racial diversity.

- Research has documented declines in African-American and Latino enrollment at the most selective undergraduate schools (Backes, 2012; Hinrichs, 2012).
 - In a study of the impact in California, Florida, Texas and Washington states, bans at the most selective institutions (top 50 universities listed in the 1995 US News & World Report college rankings) led to a 1.74 percentage point decline in African-American enrollment, roughly a 2.03 percentage point decline in Latino enrollment, and a decrease in Native American enrollment of roughly .47 percentage points (Hinrichs, 2012). Because of the small percentage of students at these institutions who are African-American (5.79 percent), Latino (7.38 percent), and Native American (.51 percent), these changes in enrollment are very large in relative terms. A separate study by Backes (2012) found similar declines in multiple states.
- Studies have documented declines in racial diversity across a number of important graduate fields of study, such as engineering, the natural sciences, and the social sciences (Garces, 2013), and at schools of medicine (Garces, 2015).
 - In the field of engineering alone, enrollment by students of color declined by 26 percent. This happened at public institutions across California, Florida, Texas, and

Washington. At public medical schools in six states that banned race-conscious admissions, it dropped by 17 percent. It was so even when postsecondary institutions in states with bans pursued race-neutral alternatives.

- Racial diversity has also declined in business schools and law schools. At the six public business schools in the UC system in 2014, African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians *combined* were only 5.3% of UC's M.B.A. students, less than half of the average at comparable U.S. business schools (Kidder & Gandara, 2015). Across all UC first-time professional degrees awarded (law, medicine, pharmacy, business, public policy, architecture, etc.), African Americans and Latinos comprised nearly 20% of the degrees granted in the pre-Proposition 209 graduating class of 1997, compared to only 10% of UC's professional school graduates in 2010 (Kidder & Gandara, 2015).

Additional Evidence on Whether Race-Neutral Approaches Suffice

- Over the last two decades California has tried to bring racial diversity through race-neutral approaches. These include extensive outreach and support programs with very high investment of financial resources. However, at UC Berkeley and UCLA, the proportion of California resident African-American students offered admission in 2011 was still 46 percent lower than 1995, the year before Proposition 209, the ban on race-conscious admissions in that state, was in place (Kidder & Gandara, 2015).
- Percent plans: Evidence from Texas, California, and Florida shows that percent plans have not proven to be reliable alternatives (Flores & Horn, 2015).
- Class-based approaches: Class-based approaches, such as replacing the consideration of race with socioeconomic background in admissions, are not an effective path toward racial diversity. The most rigorous studies show that it is the combination of both class and race in admissions that generates the most robust student body diversity (Alon, 2015; Reardon et al., 2015).
- There is concern from administrators about the viability of strategies like expanded outreach to high schools as a primary alternative to race-conscious admissions because even if more students of color are encouraged to apply, they may not gain admission in a selective admissions process that cannot consider race as a factor, and they may not be able to enroll without targeted financial aid (Garces & Cogburn, 2016).

Race-Neutral Approaches Can Hurt Diversity Efforts and Worsen Inequities

- Race-neutral approaches can also have consequences for supporting inclusive campus environments for all students because they can undermine other efforts that are needed to improve racial climate on college campuses.
 - Laws like Proposal 2, which banned race-conscious admissions in Michigan in 2006, limited the actions administrators could take to address existing racism (Garces & Cogburn, 2015). Administrators discussed how after the law was passed, they felt they had to make their efforts around racial diversity less visible and felt less empowered to advocate for racial diversity. They were concerned that the law contributed to negative perceptions about the university's commitment to racial diversity, which could discourage students of color from applying.
 - In contrast, numerous other studies have shown that diversity efforts needed to be visible and that higher education professionals needed to feel empowered to do

the work that is necessary to support students of color (e.g., Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

- Efforts to enact so-called race-neutral approaches can also lead to what scholars have termed “color-mute language” or actions undertaken in a colorblind framework. Such an approach also has negative implications for racial equity on campus. This evidence shows that diversity efforts under the mantle of race-neutral strategies can actively perpetuate the very racial inequities that educators want to address and dismantle.
 - Scholar Mika Pollock has studied this phenomenon extensively in the K–12 context (Pollock, 2004). She shows that actively deleting race from conversations can increase the role race plays in creating inequities. Color-mute language keeps us from discussing ways in which opportunities are not racially equal. They allow racial biases to go unchecked.
 - Another recent major study documents similar risks of a race-neutral approach in higher education (Posselt, 2016). Over 60 interviews of professors at 10 highly ranked doctoral programs revealed that when faculty and decision-makers undertake ostensibly race-neutral approaches in admissions—despite good intentions to increase diversity—it silences discussions around actions that can systematically exclude underrepresented students of color, such as assessment tests.

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