



BLACK MALE INITIATIVE CONVENING

on Fisher v. University of Texas

Hosted by The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity &
Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male

At The Ohio State University
September 17, 2012

REDEFINING MERIT

Why Holistic Race-Conscious College Admissions Policies are Needed

By Thomas Rudd

Much of the discussion about the Fisher case, and about diversity in higher education more generally, is really about the question of who deserves a college education. When we consider the vast array of benefits that our society can bestow on its citizens, we recognize the tremendous value of higher education as an asset for achieving material, social and intellectual success in life. At the Kirwan Institute, we analyze barriers to success in critical “opportunity domains.” In this analysis, we recognize education—pre-school through college completion—as a “gateway” domain. In this context, success in education directly influences success in other opportunity domains including housing, health, employment, criminal justice and civic engagement.

For decades, traditional college admissions policies have relied heavily on standardized high-stakes tests, cumulative high school grade-point averages and rank-in-class measures. Research suggests that while these policies have worked to the advantage of middle- and upper-income White students, they have painted an incomplete picture of the academic potential of poor students and students of color. Despite evidence to the contrary, standardized tests like the SAT are too often viewed as intelligence tests, enabling colleges to open their gates to the “most intelligent,” i.e., the most deserving. Of course, these are not intelligence tests.

The College Board says that the SAT measures literacy and writing skills that are needed for academic success in college. They state that the SAT assesses how well test takers analyze and solve problems—skills they learned in school that they will need in college. Researchers Nathan Kuncel and Sarah Hezlett suggest that “...test scores reflect developed abilities and are a function of innate talent, learned knowledge and skills, and environmental



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factors that influence knowledge and skill acquisition, such as prior educational opportunities” (Kuncel, N. R. and Hezlett, S. A. (2010). Fact and fiction in cognitive ability testing for admissions and hiring decisions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 19, 6, 339-345).

Professor Claude Steele and other researchers suggest that “stereotype threat” can actually depress the performance of African American students on high-stakes tests like the ACT, SAT and LSAT. Stereotype threat is a very complex and nuanced concept. In simple terms, it is an unconscious response to a prevailing negative stereotype about an identifiable group by a member of that group. For example, the statistical fact that African American students generally score lower than White students on standardized college entrance examinations like the SAT, ACT and LSAT gives rise to pervasive negative stereotypes about the collective cognitive ability of all African Americans when compared to all Whites. An African American student who is aware of this stereotype understands—consciously or unconsciously—that it can have negative consequences on judgments made not only about the student but on judgments made about all African Americans and that these judgments can limit opportunity.

So, when confronted with a standardized college entrance examination (typically and incorrectly perceived as a test of cognitive ability, i.e., “intelligence”), the student believes that poor performance on the exam will reinforce the negative stereotype and create negative consequences for all African Americans. In a classic stereotype threat scenario, this fear creates such a high level of stress and anxiety that a student’s cognitive function may be impaired while taking the test, and the student may perform below his or her actual ability.

A close look at the distribution of average SAT scores by race and family income suggests that the SAT does a very good job of measuring “access to opportunity.” The correlation between SAT scores and reported family income is very high. In 2009, the highest average score on the SAT was posted by students who reported their family income as greater than \$200,000 annually (*USA Today*. “SAT scores show disparities by race, gender, family



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income." August 26, 2009. <http://www.aetr.org/college-board.php>). For these students, high access to opportunity, generally evidenced by high SAT or ACT scores, is cumulative. Access to high performing primary and secondary schools leads to high test scores that lead to heightened opportunity to attend selective colleges and universities that leads to greater opportunity throughout the individual's life. Despite historic and impassioned prognostications about the public mission of the academy to energize fundamental democratic values including racial and ethnic diversity, most highly selective colleges and universities use the SAT or the ACT as a key component of their admissions strategy.

Traditional college admissions policies that embody traditional definitions of merit have not been successful in capturing the potential of students to become fully engaged citizens and agents of change, to succeed in the world of work and to contribute to the quality of life for all Americans. After reviewing a comprehensive study of 1970-96 Michigan Law School alumni, Harvard University Professor Lani Guinier concludes that:

The study confirms the benefits of affirmative action to all Michigan graduates. It tells us that affirmative action critics' much-touted reliance on objective measures of merit have little to recommend them over the life span of a lawyer. After all, it is the life's work of the graduates that is the big test. Thus, rather than ban affirmative action, the law school might do well to expand its practice and to revamp the admissions criteria for all incoming law students. The Michigan study, to the degree that it can be generalized to other peer institutions, supports the position that law school admission criteria should be revamped. The authors found no relationship between LSAT/UGPA index scores and subsequent success in the legal profession, as measured by income or career satisfaction. Moreover, the minority graduates of Michigan, who had appreciably lower average LSAT scores, nonetheless went on to serve as leaders in public service at higher rates than their White classmates. The hidden societal costs of selection criteria heavily dependent on the LSAT extend beyond the Michigan study. Research shows a



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negative correlation between social activism and performance on the LSAT for the national pool of test takers (Kidder, William C. “LSAT Magnifies Differences in Educational Attainment”).

We know that millions of African American and Latino students do not succeed in low performing under-resourced schools in hyper-segregated communities through the U.S. These schools are plagued by tangible barriers to educational success that include inadequate funding, under qualified teachers, inadequate parental involvement, rigid unresponsive pedagogy, overly punitive zero tolerance discipline policies and implicit racial bias. For far too many of these students, these barriers are insurmountable. And yet, many students do succeed—even excel—in these schools. These achievers possess some “internal resources” and/or connections to powerful mentors—including caring teachers—that enable them to overcome the inadequacies of their schools and rise to the top. Many of these high achievers are fully capable of succeeding at top-ranked colleges and universities in the U.S. but would not be given those opportunities without holistic race-conscious admissions policies. Even in states with “top percent” plans, many of these “strivers” cannot compete with the highest performing students when measured on grades and test scores alone. Holistic review enables colleges and universities to identify African American and other students of color who will succeed academically and enhance the diversity climate at these institutions.

More broadly, holistic race-conscious admissions policies enable institutions of higher education to operationalize “merit” in a way that promotes the conditions necessary for a thriving democracy, to define and use merit as an incentive system to reward those actions that our society values and to achieve the democratic mission of the academy. Historically, colleges and universities in the U.S. have not uniformly met their responsibility to promote diversity and energize democracy by admitting students who have the will to advance a democratic society.



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For too long, highly selective colleges and universities have focused heavily on traditional “objective measures of excellence” based either explicitly or implicitly on what students have done, where they live, the quality of their primary and secondary schools, who their parents are, and how they have performed on standardized achievement tests. This strategy assists in reinforcing the selectivity of some institutions while ignoring or deemphasizing what students might produce or contribute to the larger society after they graduate—a transformative way of contextualizing the concept of merit and connecting merit to democratic values. Holistic race-conscious admissions policies shift the meaning of merit and enable colleges and universities to achieve a number of strategically important goals including realizing a racially and ethnically diverse student body (a goal that has been recognized as a compelling interest for the Nation) and cultivating a cadre of future leaders who are committed to social justice and democracy.



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