



RESEARCH REPORT

# How to Achieve Diverse Access to College in a Post-Affirmative Action World

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# How to Achieve Diverse Access to College

There is an abundance of research on the college admissions process and the practices selective schools employ to evaluate and select students. Most findings are complex, nuanced, or conflicting. The Urban Institute hosted a convening of academic researchers, officials from the US Department of Education and the Biden-Harris administration, and representatives of philanthropic foundations and advocacy organizations for a wide-ranging discussion about the future of college admissions from a research perspective. Informed largely by the discussions from that convening, this report identifies key themes from the relevant research on the recruitment and admissions practices that will play a significant role in the future of college student diversity. Additionally, this report highlights areas for more research and the data needed to support additional areas of future research.

## Background

On June 29, 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* that colleges and universities could no longer consider an applicant's race or ethnicity when making admissions decisions, except in the narrow case of an "applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise."<sup>1</sup> This exception notwithstanding, the decision means that for the approximately 1,900 colleges and universities that do not have an open admissions policy,<sup>2</sup> the process by which they determine which applicants will be admitted to their school can no longer consider a student's race or ethnicity.

The immediate concern after the SCOTUS decision among schools, equity advocates, and others was the impact that eliminating race and ethnicity from consideration in college admissions would have on the racial and ethnic diversity of college and university enrollments, particularly among schools that are highly selective. The banning of affirmative action across nine states has already provided a snapshot of what is expected to play out across the country. Public universities overwhelmingly saw declines among their underrepresented students, some severe.

Exacerbating the decision's potential impact is that many selective schools struggled with racial diversity even *with* the ability to use race and ethnicity in admission decisions. For example, the racial

and ethnic distribution of students enrolled in highly selective colleges and universities in fall 2021 was not representative of the racial and ethnic diversity of high school graduates (table 1). Public schools in particular have been scrutinized for their lack of racial and ethnic diversity, especially as it relates to the diversity of their state population. Given the historical challenges selective schools have had in enrolling diverse student bodies, along with the impact of state-level affirmative action bans, the concern over the future of racial and ethnic diversity among college and university students is understandable.

**TABLE 1**

**Graduating Classes and Enrollment in Selective Colleges and Universities, by Race or Ethnicity**

	Projected graduating class of 2021 from public high schools	2021 enrollment in highly selective four-year colleges and universities
White	50.0%	40.0%
Hispanic	26.0%	15.0%
Black	13.0%	6.0%
Asian	6.0%	19.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8%	0.2%
Two or more races	4.0%	6.0%

**Sources:** US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education National Public High School Graduates by Race/Ethnicity Projections Model, through 2030–31; and 2021 IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey.

**Notes:** “Highly selective” refers to colleges and universities that admit less than 33 percent of applicants. Values in the final column do not sum to 100 percent because of the exclusion of students whose race is unknown and students classified as Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders or “nonresident aliens.”

If the higher education community wants to have any chance of maintaining or improving diversity in selective colleges, it will need to explore new and existing strategies that can increase student diversity in the new legal context.

The impact of the SCOTUS decision is not limited only to highly selective schools or exclusively to admissions practices. States that have few selective schools and have banned the use of race or ethnicity in admissions have seen overall declines in the enrollment of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Liu 2020). And after California banned affirmative action in the 1990s, there was a cascading effect, in that fewer racially and ethnically underrepresented students applied to highly selective schools in the University of California system (many of whom likely would have been accepted) and ended up enrolling at less selective schools (Bleemer 2022). Beyond the implications for admissions, some states began exploring the elimination of race-based practices in scholarships, programs, and employment immediately after the SCOTUS ruling.<sup>3</sup>

Less than a month after the SCOTUS ruling, the Urban Institute hosted a convening to discuss evidence-based practices that decisionmakers can adopt now and to identify key knowledge and data gaps that, if filled, could support efforts to maintain and increase diversity in higher education. We convened approximately 40 academic researchers, officials from the US Department of Education and the Biden-Harris administration, and representatives of philanthropic foundations and advocacy organizations. The goal was not to arrive at any consensus regarding the state of research on equity in college admissions but to provide a forum for experts to discuss what we know (from existing research), what we do not know (inconclusive or conflicting research), and what we need to know (areas for future research).

This report presents key takeaways from the discussion and highlights some of the complexities, nuances, and conflicts in the existing research. The intended audience for this publication is campus leaders and practitioners and state policymakers looking to better understand what the research says about potential admissions practices they may be considering. The report is also intended to assist researchers looking for areas in need of additional research to better inform our understanding of the effectiveness of certain race-neutral admissions practices in achieving campus diversity. Because participants in this meeting were not asked to arrive at consensus on any of the topics, this report is not a consensus document but the author's synthesis of the discussion and identification of key takeaways.

The meeting's overall sense was cautious optimism. Dismay about the SCOTUS ruling was balanced by a recognition that state-of-the-art practices in selective admissions were never adequate solutions to the enduring structural problems of stratification and exclusion in education by race, ethnicity, and social class. Attendees also noted that the organizational variety of the US higher education system should enable creativity, flexibility, and collegial competition among schools seeking to adapt their missions in a changing legal landscape. The hope is that systematic, serious, and dispassionate research can inform the steady improvement of educational opportunity for all Americans.

The remainder of this document is divided into three sections: recruitment practices, admissions practices, and areas for future research. Within each of these sections, key themes from the meeting are identified with bolded text.

## Recruitment Practices

Much of the attention around the college admissions process, particularly in light of the SCOTUS decision, has focused on how applicants to schools with selective admissions are ultimately offered

invitations to enroll. But an equally important part of the admissions process, particularly from an equity perspective, is the diversity of the applicant pool and the recruiting strategies schools use to increase that diversity.

## **Colleges and Universities Need to Diversify Their Recruiting Lists, Possibly Using State Lists with State Standardized Test Scores**

Many colleges and universities purchase lists from third-party providers such as the College Board, ACT, and EAB to identify potential students. Students on these lists typically receive marketing materials and other direct outreach from schools to get them to apply. One study of this practice found that students who participate in the College Board's Student Search Service<sup>4</sup> are more likely to apply and enroll in a college that marketed to them than students who opted out of the service (Howell, Hurwitz, and Smith 2020). In fact, Black students who opted in were more likely to enroll in a school that reached out to them. The issue is that the College Board's list (and others, such as the one from ACT) is largely based on students who take standardized tests (e.g., the SAT, the PSAT, and Advanced Placement course exams), and we know that test taking rates vary significantly by race, ethnicity, and class (Salazar, Jaquette, and Han, n.d.). Such lists tend not to be diverse in their composition of names. For example, a public research university purchased 9,126 prospect profiles for the metropolitan Philadelphia area. The racial and ethnic composition of those purchased prospects was 71 percent white, 18 percent Asian, 2 percent Black, and 5 percent Hispanic. In comparison, the racial and ethnic composition of public high schools in metropolitan Philadelphia was 44 percent white, 5 percent Asian, 35 percent Black, and 13 percent Hispanic. Additionally, the average annual household income among students in the purchased list was \$136,000, while the average for metropolitan Philadelphia was \$84,000. As more colleges and universities make standardized tests optional, it is likely these lists will become even less diverse (Salazar, Jaquette, and Han, n.d.).

Several convening participants stated that colleges and universities need to find more ways to identify potential students. One potential option is using state longitudinal systems to identify talented in-state prospects to recruit. Colleges and universities could identify and reach out to potential students who performed well on state standardized tests but who may not be considering college.

Additionally, several participants pointed out that nothing prevented colleges and universities from providing new forms of educational opportunity beyond admission to their selective residential programs. Schools might seek to broaden their service constituencies by offering credit-bearing courses in hybrid format in partnership with high schools nationwide, developing more robust partnerships with



historically Black colleges and other institutions serving large numbers of racially and ethnically underrepresented students, and creating learning experiences for working adults without four-year college degrees. Such strategies might substantially expand and diversify the populations enjoying the benefits of postsecondary opportunity.

## **Early Decision Helps Schools Meet Enrollment Goals but Often Comes at the Expense of Equitable Access**

Schools offering early decision (ED) continue to see increases in students applying through this mechanism.<sup>5</sup> In fall 2018, colleges and universities saw an 11 percent average increase in ED applicants (Clinedinst 2019). Despite representing only 6 percent of a school's applicant pool, ED applicants are important to colleges whose revenue is largely tied to enrollment (Clinedinst 2019). Because of the program's binding nature, 90 percent of students admitted through ED ultimately enroll compared with a yield rate of just 25 percent among total applicants (Clinedinst 2019). Although ED can provide some stability for enrollment-dependent schools, many believe it comes at the expense of equitable access for racially and economically underrepresented applicants.<sup>6</sup> Two primary reasons are often cited as to why ED is perceived as inequitable. The first is that although many affluent applicants expect to pursue a college education and have often identified their preferred schools by junior year of high school, many low-income students lack the resources and support to make a decision about going to college early, let alone identifying a preferred school. And if they can, where they attend will likely be determined by which school provides the best financial aid package. This leads to the second reason ED is viewed as inequitable. Because ED applicants commit to enroll in a school if they get accepted, they lose the ability to compare financial aid offers from other schools.

Although there are anecdotal arguments refuting claims that ED is inherently inequitable,<sup>7</sup> what little empirical research exists largely supports the claims that ED disadvantages racially and economically underrepresented applicants.<sup>8</sup> In fact, one study found ED not only had a negative impact on racial and ethnic diversity but that additional revenue from full-pay ED admits does not appear to be used to improve student diversity, as many supporters of ED claim (Antecol and Smith 2011).

## **Early Awareness of Financial Aid in Recruitment Is Potentially a Way to Increase the Diversity of the Applicant Pool**

One of the biggest barriers to college for students from low-income households is affordability. And although many of these individuals likely qualify for federal, state, and institutional aid, it generally

requires filling out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Historically, the complexity and time involved in filling out the FAFSA has been a deterrent for low-income students seeking financial aid for college. To encourage more low-income individuals to pursue a postsecondary education, Congress passed the FAFSA Simplification Act in 2022, which significantly reduces the number of questions to be answered (Collins and Dortch 2022). Simplifying the FAFSA is expected to increase the number of low-income students who apply, but there may need to be additional efforts to encourage completion.

For example, in Alabama, nearly \$60 million in Pell grants went unclaimed by eligible Alabama students.<sup>9</sup> To address this issue, state officials made completing the FAFSA a requirement for graduation. The state also partnered with Oracle to develop a FAFSA completion portal,<sup>10</sup> which allows the Alabama Commission on Higher Education to receive detailed information, such as maps with county-level breakdowns of FAFSA completion rates and school-level comparisons and student-level information about why applications have stalled, so counselors can help students complete their forms. This program resulted in a 22 percent increase in FAFSA completions in one year, the second-biggest one-year gain nationally.<sup>11</sup>

Another potential mechanism for enhancing recruitment and admission of students from historically disadvantaged groups is to provide students and their families information about financial aid packages *before* they apply to particular colleges. Typically, colleges and universities “package” a combination of federal, state, and institutional aid a student receives along with private scholarship dollars and then send students an offer letter that indicates how much total aid they will receive and how much they are expected to pay out of pocket, only after they have gone through the often-complicated process of submitting application and aid forms (Burland et al. 2022). Providing low-income students up-front assurances of admission might be a powerful way of eliciting applications and enrollments to a school, along with free tuition.

In 2019, researchers in Michigan staged an experiment to see if up-front offers of guaranteed free tuition influenced student application and enrollment behaviors at the University of Michigan (Burland et al. 2022). The study included 1,800 high school seniors who were high academic achievers and qualified for free and reduced-price lunch.<sup>12</sup> The university randomly mailed letters to 1,200 of these students, inviting them to apply. Six hundred were offered a High Achieving Involved Leader (HAIL) scholarship, which provided an up-front guarantee of zero tuition if the student was admitted, and there was no requirement to fill out financial aid forms.<sup>13</sup> The other 600 were sent a letter asking them to apply and stating they *might* be eligible for free tuition if they qualify. The final 600 students did not receive any special communication via mail. Students receiving the HAIL scholarship offer applied at a

higher rate than students in the other two groups. Sixty-three percent of HAIL scholarship students applied (a 28 percent increase in applicants from low-income students) compared with 44 percent of students who were not guaranteed free tuition (a 9 percent increase). Only 35 percent of students who received no offer applied.

Eighty percent of the students in this experiment were white and lived in rural areas. This was largely because the university was looking to increase its reach in rural regions of the state, and there were other programs successfully recruiting high-achieving, low-income students of color. The findings from this study suggest that making low-income students aware in advance they would receive free tuition and fees would likely increase applications from low-income students. Importantly, this intervention has no net financial costs; it merely changes when aid-eligible students receive information about their packages. Several of the convening attendees see this as a potential model for novel practices across the country.

But even when such programs are carried out, recruiting and enrolling low-income students entails a financial cost that must be borne by some mix of parties. This has led to questions regarding why some well-resourced schools do significantly better than others at enrolling high-achieving, low-income students.<sup>14</sup> Even efforts like the American Talent Initiative that work to increase the number of low-income students in college have seen significant variation among participating schools in making progress toward their goals, with some schools actually seeing declines (Haynes et al. 2022).<sup>15</sup> Although the cause of this variation is not clear, a greater commitment of financial resources has been suggested as a necessary part of any strategy to enhance diversity on college campuses.<sup>16</sup>

## **Community College Transfers Can Serve as Pathways for More Diverse Enrollments, but Increased Material Support and Coordination Would Be Necessary to Build Them**

Given the rich heterogeneity of students who attend community colleges, many see creating better pathways for transfer as a potentially powerful way for selective four-year schools to enroll more students of color. Programs built to do this might have the additional benefit of enhancing degree completion rates. More than three-quarters of students at community colleges report plans to obtain a bachelor's degree or more,<sup>17</sup> but less than 30 percent ultimately transfer to four-year programs,<sup>18</sup> with Black students (25 percent) and Hispanic students (24 percent) even less likely to transfer.

The low transfer rate from two-year to four-year schools has largely been blamed on bureaucratic complexity and opacity.<sup>19</sup> California's master plan for higher education places a priority on students'

ability to transfer from the state's community colleges into the California State University (CSU) or the University of California (UC) systems.<sup>20</sup> With increases in funding and efforts to reduce obstacles to transfer, both CSU and UC have seen steady increases in the number of Hispanic and Black community college transfers (Johnson and Mejia 2020). Similarly, Virginia recently established a guaranteed transfer admission plan to better fulfill its State Policy on Transfer by simplifying what is required to transfer to a four-year college (State Council 2016).<sup>21</sup>

Although removing barriers will improve overall transfer rates, for many Black and Hispanic students, confronting important barriers to college may begin earlier in their college career. For example, although UC has seen increases in its Black and Hispanic community college transfers, their transfer rates still lag behind those of white and Asian transfers (Johnson and Mejia 2020). For Black students in particular, the challenges begin early on, as these students are least likely to enroll in courses that are consistent with transfer, complete transfer-level math and English, and earn at least 60 transferrable hours. A recent report suggests a possible reason for this is that students of color at community colleges are disproportionately placed in remedial courses that typically result in students not advancing to college-level courses.<sup>22</sup> One way to address this challenge is corequisite remediation, in which students are placed in college-level courses with learning supports that enable them to receive the support they need while still progressing toward course credits that count toward successful transfer.

Nationally, among community college students who transfer to a four-year school, most enroll in a public institution (Glynn 2019). A growing number of partnerships between community colleges and private nonprofit schools should provide community college transfers more pathways to four-year institutions.<sup>23</sup>

## Admissions Practices

Several of the practices discussed in this section are frequently pointed to as the ones colleges and universities will likely turn to in efforts to maintain diverse enrollments. But the existing research suggests there is a lot of nuance in the implementation of these practices that can affect outcomes.

## **Although Income-Based Affirmative Action Is Often Mentioned as a Race-Neutral Alternative, Measures of Adversity May Be More Effective, but More Research Is Needed**

Socioeconomic status (SES)-based admissions policies are one of the more frequently cited alternatives to race-based preferences in admissions, and several studies have explored how well these policies can produce racial and ethnic diversity. Although some regard the results of this overall body of literature inconclusive, simulation studies defining SES as household income, parental income, and parental occupation have found SES ineffective at producing racial and ethnic diversity. This point was echoed in an amicus brief submitted to SCOTUS by the University of Michigan in the *Students for Fair Admissions* cases; the brief's authors stated that the challenge with using SES as a race-neutral way to increase both economic and racial diversity is that "there are almost six times as many white students as black students" who come from low-income households and are academically qualified for admission to a selective college or university (Lynch, Kobersy, and Elwood 2022, 26).

But more comprehensive measures of "adversity" or "disadvantage" may be more effective than traditional measures of household income and parental education alone at achieving racial and ethnic diversity. Such measures have recently gained attention as a result of their use by schools such as the UC Davis Medical School, which became one of the most racially diverse schools in the country in a state that has banned affirmative action.<sup>24</sup>

Adversity measures are not a new concept. Educational Testing Service (ETS) developed the "Strivers" concept in the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> ETS created a predicted score for applicants based on 14 factors of adversity, including academic strength and income level of a student's high school and whether English was their second language, in addition to household income and parent education level.<sup>26</sup> Students within given ranges who scored 200 points higher on the SAT than their predicted score were labeled Strivers. But the Strivers concept was never implemented.

The UC Davis concept, the Socioeconomic Disadvantaged Scale, is composed of eight measures of "disadvantage" that are captured on students' applications (Fenton et al. 2016). Those measures are then converted to an adversity score, and the higher an applicant rates on the disadvantage scale, the greater their chance of admission. This measure helped contribute to UC Davis Medical School's most recent entering class being 44 percent Black and Hispanic (compared with 22 percent for medical schools nationally), 84 percent from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 42 percent first-generation college students.<sup>27</sup>

New tools, such as the College Board's Landscape, have been cited as a resource to help college admissions officers better account for student adversity.<sup>28</sup> But unlike the UC Davis Socioeconomic Disadvantaged Scale or ETS's Strivers, Landscape does not provide student-level data that would allow for the calculation of an adversity score. Incorporating Landscape into the college admissions process has been associated with a large increase in the chances of admission for applicants from more challenging backgrounds,<sup>29</sup> but it is unclear whether its use contributes to racial and ethnic diversity.

## **The Effectiveness of Percent Plans Largely Depends on Factors beyond State Diversity and Segregation**

Percent plans are race-neutral practices that guarantee admission for a fixed percentage of the top students from every high school in the state (Horn and Flores 2003). They first gained recognition after Texas implemented them in the wake of 1996's *Hopwood v. Texas*, which banned affirmative action in the state.<sup>30</sup>

Discussions about the effectiveness of percent plans often focus on the level of diversity and segregation in a state.<sup>31</sup> But a study of percent plans implemented in Texas, California, and Florida found that not all percent plans are the same. Among major differences were the percentages of students admitted (ranging from 4 percent to 20 percent), what high schools were included in the plan (public and private high schools versus public high schools only), the criteria students were required to meet (type and number of high school courses to be completed), who calculates class rank (the high school versus the university system), and what does automatic admission mean (admission to the school of your choice versus admission to the university system but not necessarily the school of your choice).

Additionally, understanding the impact of percent plans requires a comparison of students who gained admission solely as a result of the percent plan and students who got in despite a percent plan. Among the studies that attempted to do this for Texas (Tienda et al. 2003), California (Geiser 1998), and Florida (Marin and Lee 2003), researchers consistently found that most students admitted under percent plans would likely have gained admission absent the percent plan. More importantly, as with most efforts to increase diversity, schools in Texas, California, and Florida did not rely solely on percent protocols but supplemented them with additional recruitment and support programs that likely contributed to enrollment outcomes (Horn and Flores 2003). One idea that does not appear to have been implemented is a tiered percent plan. For example, what impact would admitting a higher percentage of students from Title 1 schools under a percent plan have on the effectiveness of these plans contributing to greater student diversity?<sup>32</sup>

## **More Research Is Needed to Better Understand the Impact of Test-Optional Policies, Which Vary Widely in Form and Scope**

A growing number of colleges and universities are no longer requiring applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores. In 2010–11, 21 percent of four-year schools did not require standardized tests.<sup>33</sup> By 2019–20, the share had increased to 36 percent. Many schools have said the reason for going test optional is to increase applications from historically underrepresented students, but some speculate that schools have additional motivations for this change (rather than dropping standardized tests altogether) that are tied to increasing institutional status and perceived selectivity (Belasco, Rosinger, and Hearn 2015).

Despite the various reasons schools may decide to become test optional, much research has focused on the impact this decision has had on increasing the diversity of students who apply and enroll in college. Overall, this research remains inconclusive, with as many studies showing test-optional policies expand access for underserved populations as ones suggesting they do not. Many of these studies overwhelmingly focus on private liberal arts colleges and universities. This is likely because in 2019 (the last year before the onset of COVID-19 pandemic), more than 90 percent of schools that did not require standardized tests were private. The existing research does little to clarify the impact of test-optional policies on increasing student diversity at private colleges, but it tells us even less about the policies' potential impact at large public institutions.

And not all test-optional policies are the same. Among schools that do not require standardized test scores, 13 percent still recommend students take them, while 20 percent of schools neither require nor recommend that tests be taken.<sup>34</sup> In many studies, it is not clear whether such variation influenced whether and how particular groups of students submitted applications.

## **Changes to Legacy and Athletic Admissions Policies Should Be Considered as Ways to Increase Diversity**

With the consideration of race in college admissions effectively eliminated, legacy and athletic admission policies have come under greater scrutiny. Legacy admissions in particular, which have long been questioned, are now under scrutiny because of a civil rights complaint filed against Harvard University claiming the practice violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>35</sup> The practice of legacy admissions and the use of standardized tests began a century ago as ways to manage the number of Jewish students at predominantly Protestant universities.<sup>36</sup> Legacy admissions may no longer be used to intentionally exclude students, but it does appear to provide a significant admissions advantage for high-income students (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman 2023). Some have argued increases in racial and

ethnic diversity among graduates of selective private universities will lead to more racial and ethnic diversity among legacy admits over time.<sup>37</sup> But a study examining legacy and athletic preferences at Harvard found that a white legacy applicant had nearly twice the likelihood of being admitted than did a Black or Hispanic legacy applicant (Arcidiacono, Kinsler, and Ransom 2019). Others have argued that wealthy legacy admits help fund institutional aid for low-income students at private schools that do not receive state support.<sup>38</sup> But even if legacy admissions were eliminated from highly selective private schools, the share of students from the top 1 percent of household income is estimated to drop just 2 percentage points from 16 percent to 14 percent (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman 2023).

Although athletic admits have received less scrutiny, the role of athletics has still raised some questions regarding equity in light of the SCOTUS decision.<sup>39</sup> Some of the studies exploring legacy admits at private selective universities have also looked at athletes and found that being an athlete confers a greater admissions advantage to wealthy and white applicants (Arcidiacono, Kinsler, and Ransom 2019; Chetty, Deming, and Friedman 2023). But there does not appear to be any parallel research on the role athletics plays in admissions at selective public universities.

## Important Areas for Further Research

More research is needed to better understand the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of recruitment and admissions practices on ensuring equitable access to colleges and universities. But there were two areas that were raised during the meeting that were in particular need of further study: (1) alignment of K–12 requirements and college requirements and (2) certain opaque areas of the admissions process.

### **Inequities in PK–12 Education Are Arguably the Root Cause of Inequities in College Admissions**

In the aftermath of the SCOTUS decision, much of the discussion has focused on race-neutral admissions and recruitment practices that will allow colleges and universities to continue enrolling diverse incoming classes. But much of the challenge selective schools face diversifying their student enrollment stems from inequities in K–12 education.<sup>40</sup>

In fall 2021, 42 percent of Asian students and 34 percent of white students attended a public school with low levels of poverty, while just 13 percent and 7 percent, respectively, attended a school with high levels of poverty (US Department of Education 2023). The opposite is true for Black and Hispanic



students. Just 12 percent of Black and Hispanic students attended a public school with low poverty, while 37 percent and 38 percent, respectively, attended a high-poverty school. These disparities matter because students in high-poverty schools typically enter high school already behind academically and unable to progress to more advanced courses such as Advanced Placement classes (which many of these schools do not offer because of a lack of staffing) (GAO 2018). The lack of access to certain courses can also be the difference between meeting the basic requirements for graduating from high school versus meeting the requirements for admission to college.

In most states, there is at least one subject required for admission to most public university systems but not required to graduate from high school (Jimenez and Sargrad 2018). For example, 10 percent of high schools do not offer Algebra I, and 20 percent do not offer Algebra II, courses that signify college readiness to admissions counselors. Most schools that do not offer these advanced courses are high-poverty and underresourced schools predominantly attended by students of color. In these schools, there may be 1 college counselor for every 1,000 students (compared with 1 for every 491 students nationally). This means not only are these students less likely to have access to the courses needed for college admission, but they are not likely to even be aware they need it to get into college.

One potential mechanism for redressing at least some inequities in PK–12 education is to better align what states require to graduate from high school with the requirements for college admission. Some hoped that the Every Student Succeeds Act would result in better alignment between K–12 and postsecondary education requirements, but significant misalignment remains, particularly in high schools with high poverty rates and predominant enrollments of students of color (Education Strategy Group 2017; Jimenez and Sargrad 2018).<sup>41</sup> More research might investigate barriers to better align K–12 and postsecondary requirements and how that alignment affects college access among historically underrepresented groups.

## **College Admissions Practices Should Be Less Opaque and Should Engage Researchers to Help Identify Practices That Could Lead to Meeting Diversity Goals**

Despite the proliferation of research on college admissions, the process by which applicants are admitted into selective colleges is still largely a black box. Some believe the opacity of admissions practices is a function of the fact that researchers seek to focus on the why and what of college admissions (e.g., Why do colleges consider legacy status, and what factors are most important for admission?) and less on the how (e.g., How do these decisions get made?).<sup>42</sup> Others see the opacity as a function of a willful secrecy on the part of colleges and universities, who guard their discretion over

applicant evaluations to balance all the different factors that impinge on admissions decisions, such as institutional rankings, competitiveness in athletics, and fundraising (Stevens 2007).

One area that could benefit from more research is a better understanding of who reads and evaluates applications and how readership might affect admissions decisions. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, 71 percent of college admissions counselors are white. Additionally, 82 percent of chief enrollment officers and 81 percent of chief admissions officers are white.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, only 46 percent of public high school students<sup>44</sup> and 48 percent of college undergraduate students are white.<sup>45</sup> Beyond racial and ethnic demographics, it would be informative to know more about those who review college applications and decide who is admitted. For example, how many years of experience and training does the average college admissions counselor have? Would variation in the amount and kind of training influence how admissions decisions in the aggregate are made?

Another area that could benefit from additional research is the practice of holistic admissions. Although the College Board and EducationCounsel published an extensive guide to holistic admissions, there is still a fair amount of confusion about how it works in practice and what it means for college applicants (Coleman and Keith 2018).<sup>46</sup> This is largely because there is no single definition of holistic admissions that can account for the vast variance in how it is implemented across colleges and universities based on different institutional missions and admission goals (Coleman and Keith 2018).

## **More Data Are Needed to Better Understand College Admissions, and the Federal Government Has the Ability to Address Some of the Need**

Much of our knowledge about college admissions comes from research on a single school or a small group of similar institutions. This level of research is valuable for understanding the intricacies of the college admissions process, but it leaves a void in the national picture of college admissions. Federal data could fill this void. But, for several reasons, federal data that could inform our understanding of college admissions, particularly in the area of equity, present some challenges. For example, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) collects data on the number of students who apply to a college or university, the number who are admitted, and the number who ultimately enroll.<sup>47</sup> These data are useful to answer national-level questions, such as how many colleges and universities admit less than 50 percent of their students and how many of those admitted ultimately enroll. IPEDS even collects these data by gender, so anyone could look up a school and see whether there are differences in admittance rates for men and women. But IPEDS does not disaggregate this information

by race or income. As such, no federally collected publicly available data indicate what share of college applicants come from low-income households or racially underrepresented groups, or the share of applicants that are ultimately admitted. Additionally, IPEDS does not provide any information on the number of students who were admitted as legacy students or on athletic scholarship (let alone by race or ethnicity, gender, or income). There is currently no way to assess the impact the SCOTUS decision has had on college application patterns among students of color.

Another area where federal data could be more informative regarding equitable postsecondary access is by creating more datasets that align K–12 and postsecondary measures. For example, the US Department of Education could use FAFSA data to map high schools that are being underserved (e.g., Title 1 schools) by postsecondary institutions. These data could be presented as a measure on the College Scorecard that lists the number of students at each postsecondary institution that graduated from a Title 1 school.

Beyond collecting and publishing additional data points, the federal government could also make it easier to share data across federal agencies. Aside from the logistical complexities of establishing data agreements, many agencies are hesitant to share data because of uncertainty about how it will benefit them or because they have historically been so risk averse, they simply do not entertain the idea of sharing data (Ipiotis et al. 2021). But when federal agencies have shared data, the results have been valuable, such as with the University of Texas at Austin Federal Statistical Research Data Center and the College Scorecard.<sup>48</sup> The US Department of Education has a wealth of information on the more than 17 million college students who apply for and receive federal aid, but the federal government as a whole has additional information that, if combined with data from the Department of Education, could be informative about postsecondary students and could make it easier for students to access federal student aid. For example, there is a greater chance of students applying for college if they are aware of their student aid up front. The Department of Education and the US Department of Health and Human Services could share data, allowing students who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits to automatically qualify for federal student aid.

One additional area where federal data could fill a gap in knowledge is around students who opt out of applying to college altogether. Aligning data across several agencies such as the US Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Department of Education could provide at least a high-level comparison of the individuals who apply to college and those who choose not to apply. It will be just as important to understand the demographics of students of color *not* applying to college as it is to understand the types of colleges students of color are now applying to.

## Novel Programs for Expanding Diversity and Access to Selective Institutions Should Be Encouraged and Rigorously Studied

One participant at the convening suggested that race and ethnicity preferences in selective admissions had been little more than a modest strategy for addressing massive problems of inequality in opportunity and access. Now that the strategy has been removed, there is an opportunity to experiment with new and perhaps more ambitious remedies: revising K–12 curriculums, dramatically changing how admissions decisions are made, and providing new forms of access and opportunity to admissions-selective schools. Pairing these experiments with rigorous observation and, where feasible, experimental and quasi-experimental designs will accrete a substantial evidence base to inform best practices going forward.

## Conclusion

There are several efforts colleges and universities can undertake to diversify their student enrollment without considering race or ethnicity, but there is no single, evidence-based, race-neutral admissions practice that will produce the same level of student diversity schools achieved when race or ethnicity could be considered. Schools in states that banned affirmative action that have either returned or are close to returning to pre-affirmative-action-ban levels of racial and ethnic diversity have not relied on any single practice. Many of these schools have tried multiple approaches and have been met with varying levels of success. Schools will need to take a trial-and-error approach to testing new admissions practices.

One of the factors that will play a significant role in what recruitment and admissions practices schools can implement is the state in which they are located. The way the SCOTUS decision has been interpreted by elected officials varies significantly by state. The Department of Education and the US Department of Justice jointly released guidance to help schools understand the scope of the SCOTUS decision and implement lawful admissions practices, but how that guidance will be viewed and interpreted will likely vary across states (DOJ and ED 2023).

Another factor that will drive schools' decisions regarding their handling of equity initiatives in admissions and more broadly will be the potential for litigation. There are several lawsuits being brought against programs believed to favor some races or ethnicities at the exclusion of others, including some at the high school level.<sup>49</sup> Schools that are committed to ensuring a racially and ethnically diverse student body may find themselves having to thread a needle between admissions

practices they believe to be legal and the potential of a lawsuit. The extent to which schools can recruit, admit, and enroll similar or greater levels of students from underrepresented backgrounds in a post-affirmative action world may depend on their ability to thread that needle.

The SCOTUS decision makes efforts to improve equity in postsecondary access more challenging, particularly at selective colleges and universities, but there are opportunities in recruitment and admissions practices that can continue to provide pathways for diversifying who applies, who is admitted, and who ultimately enrolls in college. This report has identified some of the practices that appear to make a difference, others that are promising but that should be studied further, and additional data needed to provide a national context.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College; Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina, 600 U.S. \_\_\_ (2023), 39.
- <sup>2</sup> This is the number of four-year schools in the 2021 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data that identified as not being an open admissions institution. Open admission is defined in IPEDS as an admission policy whereby the school will accept any student who applies.
- <sup>3</sup> Kate Hidalgo Bellows, “Some Colleges Will No Longer Consider Race in Awarding Student Scholarships,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 30, 2023, [https://www.chronicle.com/article/some-colleges-will-no-longer-consider-race-in-awarding-student-scholarships?cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/some-colleges-will-no-longer-consider-race-in-awarding-student-scholarships?cid=gen_sign_in).
- <sup>4</sup> “Connect with Colleges and Scholarships,” College Board, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/student-search-service>.
- <sup>5</sup> “Early Decision and Early Action,” College Board, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://counselors.collegeboard.org/college-application/early-decision-action>.
- <sup>6</sup> Rick Seltzer, “Early Decision: For the Privileged?” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/10/14/panel-examines-who-benefits-early-decision>.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Massa, “Colleges Should Abandon Early Admission? Really?” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/01/24/colleges-shouldnt-abandon-early-admissions-programs-essay>.
- <sup>8</sup> Harold O. Levy, “Colleges Should Abandon Early Admissions,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/01/12/discrimination-inherent-early-admissions-programs-essay>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Urge Your State Board of Education Member to Prioritize FAFSA Completion,” Alabama Possible, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://alabamapossible.org/letter-writing/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Oracle, “Alabama Taps Oracle Cloud to Help High School Grads Secure Financial Aid,” press release, April 19, 2022, <https://www.oracle.com/news/announcement/alabama-taps-oracle-student-financial-planning-2022-04-19/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Oracle, “Alabama Taps Oracle Cloud.”
- <sup>12</sup> These students were identified using data from the Michigan Department of Education, which provided data on students’ academic achievement and financial need.
- <sup>13</sup> See “HAIL (High Achieving Involved Leader),” University of Michigan, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://admissions.umich.edu/hail>. Students did not have to fill out financial aid forms for the free tuition provided by the university, but they still had to fill out the FAFSA to receive any federal student aid.
- <sup>14</sup> R. Pena, “Income-Based Diversity Lags at Some Universities,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/31/education/college-slots-for-poorer-students-still-limited.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> See the website for the American Talent Initiative at <https://americantalentinitiative.org/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Michael T. Nietzel, “The Momentum on Enrolling 50,000 More Lower-Income College Students Has Slowed—Four Steps for Getting It Back,” *Forbes*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2020/02/25/the-momentum-on-enrolling-50000-more-lower-income-college-students-has-slowedfour-steps-for-getting-it-back/?sh=15c99ecd4497>.
- <sup>17</sup> 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study. The code to retrieve results is tskout.

- <sup>18</sup> 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study. The code to retrieve results is jizvok.
- <sup>19</sup> J. Marcus, “Bachelor’s Degree Dreams Get Farther Out of Reach for One Group of Students,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/01/06/community-college-transfer-difficulties/>.
- <sup>20</sup> “Institutional Research and Academic Planning: California Master Plan for Higher Education,” University of California Office of the President, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/content-analysis/academic-planning/california-master-plan.html>.
- <sup>21</sup> See also “Transfer Programs,” Virginia’s Community Colleges, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://www.vccs.edu/transfer-programs/>.
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- <sup>26</sup> R. Kahlenberg, “The Colleges, the Poor and the SATs,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1999/09/21/the-colleges-the-poor-and-the-sats/9f707187-4b98-45dc-924e-8fb1cb237831/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Saul, “With End of Affirmative Action.”
- <sup>28</sup> See the website for the College Board’s Landscape at <https://landscape.collegeboard.org/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Zachary Mabel, Michael D. Hurwitz, Jessica Howell, and Greg Peretto, “Can Better Information on Applicants’ Backgrounds Increase Socioeconomic Diversity at Selective Colleges?” *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), Brookings Institution, August 22, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-better-information-on-applicants-backgrounds-increase-socioeconomic-diversity-at-selective-colleges/>.
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- <sup>31</sup> Scott Jaschik, “What Could Colleges Do without Affirmative Action?” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/2023/06/20/what-could-colleges-do-preserve-diversity-without-affirmative-action>.
- <sup>32</sup> “Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (Title I, Part A),” US Department of Education, last updated October 24, 2018, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>.
- <sup>33</sup> 2021 IPEDS Admissions Survey. Open admission schools are excluded.
- <sup>34</sup> 2021 IPEDS Admissions Survey.
- <sup>35</sup> Michelle N. Amponsah and Rahem D. Hamid, “Federal Complaint Says Harvard Legacy Preferences in Admissions Violate Civil Rights Act,” *Harvard Crimson*, July 4, 2023, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/7/4/legacy-admissions-complaint/>.

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- <sup>42</sup> Brian Noble Jones, “*Inside the Black Box: The Garbage Can Model of Decision-Making in Selective College Admissions*” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2018).
- <sup>43</sup> “DEI Challenges in College Admission,” National Association for College Admission Counseling, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://www.nacacnet.org/dei-challenges-in-college-admission/>.
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- <sup>48</sup> See the website for the College Scorecard at <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>. See also University of Texas System, “UT System Partners with U.S. Census Bureau to Provide Salary and Jobs Data of UT Graduates across the Nation,” news release, September 22, 2016, <https://www.utsystem.edu/news/2016/09/22/ut-system-partners-us-census-bureau-provide-salary-and-jobs-data-ut-graduates-across>.
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