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The effects of affirmative action in higher education

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Abstract

We use the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF) to analyze the effects of affirmative action on college outcomes for among the 1999 cohort of freshmen in 28 selective colleges and universities. We develop indices of affirmative action at the individual and institutional levels to test the validity of two charges leveled by critics of affirmative action: that it undermines minority performance by placing academically unprepared students into competitive schools without the required skills and abilities (the mismatch hypothesis) and that it stigmatizes all minorities as academically challenged and intellectually weak to produce added psychological pressure that undermines academic performance (the stereotype threat hypothesis). We find no evidence for the mismatch hypothesis. If anything, individual students with SAT scores below the institutional average do better than other students, other things equal. We do, however, find evidence consistent with the hypothesis of stereotype threat, although the effect is not particularly strong compared with other determinants of academic success.

Keywords: Affirmative action; Minorities; Higher education

1. Introduction

The debate over the use of affirmative action in college admissions has once again returned to the spotlight with high profile lawsuits and subsequent Supreme Court rulings. Although the court upheld the right of educational institutions to use race as a factor in admissions, the practice of giving a fixed 'bonus' to racial minority candidates was overruled. As universities struggle to create admissions systems that achieve a balance between

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group diversity and individual fairness, it is important to understand how affirmative action has been working thus far.

At this point, the basic demographic facts are familiar: black representation in college has increased since the implementation of affirmative action policies, as have the number of blacks with college degrees (Nettles et al., 1998(2000)). Hispanics have also benefited from affirmative action and represent a slightly higher proportion of college enrollees and graduates than do blacks. However, black and Hispanic students continue to be quite underrepresented among college students relative to their shares in the population, a fact that is often used to justify the continued use of affirmative action in admissions.

Critics of affirmative action have made three principal arguments: (1) affirmative action constitutes reverse discrimination that lowers the odds of admission for 'better' qualified white students; (2) affirmative action creates a mismatch between the skills of the student and the abilities required for success at selective universities, thereby setting up beneficiaries for failure; (3) affirmative action stigmatizes all members the target group as unqualified, which results in demoralization and substandard performance regardless of individual qualifications.

Although vocal critics of affirmative action have made the foregoing arguments (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Sowell, 2004; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1999a,b), few empirical studies have sought to evaluate their claims. In this paper, we focus on the latter two of the three anti-affirmative action arguments delineated above. We do so by measuring the degree to which institutions seem to be employing affirmative action in minority admissions and the degree to which individual students are likely to benefit from such policies. Using these two indicators, we assess the effect of affirmative action policies on grades, college satisfaction, and educational persistence among black and Hispanic students in selective schools.

At the institutional level, we measure the degree of a college or university's commitment to affirmative action as the difference between the average black or Hispanic SAT score and the average for the institution as a whole, arguing that the larger this gap the more the institution is probably trading off other criteria (such as race or ethnicity) against test scores to determine admission. At the individual level, we measure the extent of a minority student's likely benefit from affirmative action by taking the difference between his or her SAT score and the institution's overall average, again arguing that students with test scores below the institutional average are likely to have been admitted using other criteria, not limited to but including race and ethnicity. Controlling for a student's personal characteristics and family background, we then regress these indicators of institutional and individual affirmative action on GPA, self-expressed satisfaction with college, and the probability of leaving the institution.

2. Separating evidence from hype

As noted above, one criticism of affirmative action is that it requires "reverse discrimination" against whites (see Glazer, 1975). Many white applicants believe they have been denied admission to a college or graduate program while minority applicants with lower test scores are "unfairly" admitted. This was the basic complaint of students who filed the lawsuits against the University of Michigan that were decided by the US Supreme Court in June of 2003 (*Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*). Given the data at our disposal, we are not in a position to evaluate what might be called *the reverse discrimination hypothesis.*