
The Affirmative Action Aftermath:

New Trends in College Admissions

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For many students, the summer between junior and senior year marks a pivotal moment—transforming dreams of higher education into tangible possibilities. Amid the whirlwind of college tours, acceptance letters, and the flood of applications, students craft personal narratives that intertwine their lived experiences with university mission statements. For those from underrepresented communities, holistic admissions were a vital opportunity to share how their background—balancing part-time jobs, family care, or limited access to advanced coursework—shaped their academic journey. This approach recognized that a 4.0 GPA or high SAT score didn't always reflect the full story. But with the dismantling of Affirmative Action, that lifeline has now been severed, leaving many wondering how universities will maintain diversity in the absence of these policies (Totenberg 2023).

The first wave of post-Affirmative Action admissions data reveals a stark divide (Knox 2024). Some universities have found ways to maintain or even increase diversity, relying heavily on other factors like socioeconomic status or first-generation status to compensate (Columbia Undergraduate Admissions n.d.; Florida International University n.d.). Others, however, have seen steep declines in the enrollment of underrepresented groups, exposing the fragility of previous efforts to level the playing field (Snyder 2024). These discrepancies raise troubling questions: how can students from marginalized backgrounds authentically tell their stories when the element that shaped so much of their journey—race—is no longer acknowledged? And more urgently, without intentional, race-conscious policies, can higher education preserve its promises

of equity and diversity?

The importance of these policies cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the challenges they sought to address—challenges that many students continue to face today. Affirmative Action policies emerged from the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement, when it became glaringly clear that access to education and employment was far from equal (Mark, Telford, and Kumer 2024). For generations, racial and ethnic minorities, along with women, faced a gauntlet of obstacles—discriminatory hiring practices, underfunded schools in Black and Latino communities, and admissions processes tilted in favor of the wealthy and well-connected (Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro 2019). These barriers didn't just limit individual opportunities; they formed walls that kept entire communities locked out of prosperity, perpetuating cycles of exclusion. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, officially codifying Affirmative Action and compelling contractors to treat applicants equally, regardless of race, religion, or national origin (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission n.d.-a). His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, pushed the movement further with Executive Order 11246, requiring federal contractors to actively promote equal opportunities for minorities, not just avoid discrimination (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission n.d.-b).

As Affirmative Action took root, the concept of holistic admissions evolved alongside it, reshaping the way universities evaluated applicants. Holistic admissions were found to be successful at increasing diversity and promoting a more comprehensive evaluation of applicants, with studies from the American Educational Research Association highlighting their positive impact on broadening access to higher education beyond just GPAs and test scores (Bastedo et al. 2023). Colleges began to consider the full scope of an applicant's story—factors like family background, extracurricular activities, personal challenges, and even geography. Holistic admissions acknowledged that talent and potential don't always show up on paper and sought to understand how students' experiences shaped their ambitions. In the landmark *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Supreme Court ruled against racial quotas but affirmed that race could still be part of the conversation, just one thread in a broader tapestry of attributes shaping a student's identity (Oyez n.d.-a). This dual approach—affirming both diversity and individual merit—gave universities a more nuanced framework to build diverse, dynamic student bodies.

Years later, *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña* (1995) added another layer of scrutiny, demanding that Affirmative Action programs be narrowly tailored to serve compelling government interests (Oyez n.d.-b). Over decades, Affirmative Action and holistic admissions have balanced equity and fairness in their implementation—tools designed not only to correct historical wrongs but also to cultivate environments where opportunity isn't limited by background.

While these policies opened doors for underrepresented students, they sparked ongoing debates about whether fairness can coexist with efforts to right past injustices, a tension that persists today.

Early data on post-Affirmative Action enrollment reveals troubling disparities across several prominent institutions. Brown University saw its percentage of incoming Black freshmen plummet from 15 percent to just 9 percent, a 40 percent decline, while MIT's incoming class saw an equally stark drop—from 15 percent to 5 percent in just one year (Brown University 2024; MIT Admissions 2024). And this trend isn't limited to private institutions. Large state universities like UNC Chapel Hill are also grappling with declines in racial diversity (Zhu 2024). However, the results are not uniform. Some schools, like the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Virginia (UVA), reported modest increases in the number of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students in their 2028 classes (Watanabe 2024; Mather 2023). These discrepancies highlight the complex fallout from dismantling Affirmative Action: while some institutions pivot toward new strategies with success, others are struggling to maintain diversity. UVA, for example, offers students a chance to describe how their experiences, including those related to race or ethnicity, shape their ability to contribute, considering race only in the context of individual contributions (Mather 2023).

The consequences of declining racial diversity extend beyond representation; they impact the very quality of education students receive. One study shows that students working in racially and ideologically diverse groups demonstrate higher levels of integrative complexity, or the ability to think through multiple perspectives. The study found that students exposed to racial and opinion minorities were not only better at identifying novel ideas but also developed more nuanced ways of understanding the world. With Affirmative Action dismantled, students risk losing the cognitive benefits associated with a diverse learning environment.

To address the fallout from the Affirmative Action ban, other universities are adopting race-neutral strategies to maintain diversity. One key approach prioritizes students from low-income backgrounds, benefiting low-income students regardless of race. Florida, Texas, and California offer guaranteed university admission to top high school graduates (Florida Department of Education n.d.-a; Texas Education Agency n.d.; University of California Admissions n.d.). Community college transfer programs also provide a path to build more diverse student bodies by creating opportunities for students who may not have been initially eligible for direct university admission to gain access through demonstrated academic success at the community college level (Florida Department of Education n.d.-b). These programs can particularly support underrepresented groups who disproportionately begin their post-secondary education at community colleges.

While these measures are important, they alone will not address the full scope of the opportunity gaps that Affirmative Action once helped to narrow. Closing these gaps will require sustained, long-term investments in K-12 education, particularly in underfunded communities (Tilsley 2017). Universities may need to consider reworking their outreach strategies to reach students who are often overlooked, while also exploring more inclusive pathways through community colleges and technical schools. Additionally, advocates and educators have a role to play in pushing for innovative approaches that seek to help students gain access to resources (Martin et al. 2018). Achieving these goals will require thoughtful adaptation and collaboration to create systems that enable future generations to thrive in diverse environments that reflect the society they will shape.

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