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Affirmative Action: a middle ground?

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Affirmative Action: A Middle Ground?



Given the strong and increasingly important link between higher education and economic success in our economy, any policy that affects access to higher education is likely to be of interest to students, families, institutions and others. Affirmative action is one such policy whose merits continue to be hotly debated.

Eight years ago California passed Proposition 209, which outlawed state universities from “discriminating against or granting preferential treatment” to any racial or ethnic group in college admissions (or hiring and contracting). The outcome was predictable in some ways—there are fewer black and Hispanic students in the selective UC system (Berkeley, UCLA, etc.)—but

maybe surprising in others—the number of blacks and Hispanics rose in the California state system, partly due to more students who did not get into UC schools, but also because of increased outreach by Cal State schools. Naturally this outcome pleased some and disappointed others.

Recently, Democratic California legislators, who have a strong majority in the legislature, proposed legislation that would **roll-back Proposition 209** and allow the return of affirmative action. This move was pushed by black and Hispanic legislators whose constituents’ children would benefit by getting a greater share of the limited places in the selective UC system.

Affirmative action has also been in the news lately because of the recent **Supreme Court decision** upholding Michigan’s constitutional amendment that bans the use of affirmative action in college admissions.

The problem with admissions at most educational institutions, especially those that can’t or do not want to increase in size, is that it is a zero sum game. Any spot taken by student X is a spot not available to student Y. So while affirmative action produces clear winners, it also produces losers. The losers are usually not obvious as admissions committees do not send student Y a note telling them they failed to get in due to affirmative action and the losers in this system have typically been majority caucasian students as a group. Certainly not everyone has been happy with this outcome but for many supporters of affirmative action the costs to white students are more than outweighed by the benefits to minority students who come from groups that have historically been discriminated against.

[I should note that there are other criticisms of affirmative action in education beyond the impact on majority students,

including whether it actually helps its intended beneficiaries. [See here](#) and [here](#) .]

The zero sum nature of admissions has produced an interesting twist that is especially evident in California. Certain minority groups who have also suffered historical discrimination but who have also had great academic success, namely Asian-Americans, find themselves harmed by affirmative action. Due to their academic success, they are included with the majority white population for purposes of affirmative action policy and therefore see a decline in their share of spots at institutions using affirmative action. Conversely, there has been a rise in the share of Asian-American students at the UC schools following the passage of Proposition 209. (Another minority group hurt by affirmative action is Jewish students, but they are harder to identify because they are typically part of the white majority.)

If there is a limited pool of qualified minority applicants who would not be admitted to the most selective institutions in a purely-merit based system, as appears to be the situation based on the California experience following the passage of Proposition 209, there will be an inevitable tension between assuring minority candidates access to top schools and admitting majority students (and some minorities like Asian-Americans) who have academically stronger records. Yet there may be a way to ease this tension.

Recent research by economists Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery found that the pool of high achieving students capable of succeeding at the most selective colleges might actually be larger than current policy debates suggest. Studying the college admissions behavior of high achieving students from all across the country, Hoxby and Avery found that, “Only 34 percent of high-achieving high school seniors in the bottom fourth of the income distribution attended any one of the country’s 238 most selective colleges, [while] among top students in the highest income quartile, that figure was 78 percent.” So equally talented students from low-income families don’t attend selective schools at nearly the rate as students from upper-income families. (The complete study is available [here](#)).

The study focuses on socio-economic status rather than race, but there is a strong correlation between income and race, so many of the students from families in the lowest quartile of household income are also minorities. So if colleges and universities could tap into this heretofore unmined vein of high achieving students, the racial and ethnic makeup of selective schools might look much more like the United States’ overall demographic make-up without resorting to affirmative action.

The research by Hoxby and Avery suggests an obvious question: why don’t more talented low-income students apply to selective colleges? Like any good economist Hoxby, this time working with economist Sarah Turner, **sought to answer the question** her earlier research generated. The short answer is lack of information about the opportunities available and the true cost of attending an apparently high-priced selective institution.

Hoxby and Turner found that by simply receiving an information packet about financial aid, admissions standards and the actual cost of attending a selective institution, many low-income students ended up better matching their academic performance to their college choices. “Among a control group of low-income students with SAT scores good enough to attend top colleges — but who did not receive the information packets — only 30 percent gained admission to a college matching their academic qualifications. Among a **similar group of students who did receive a packet, 54 percent gained admission.**”

Of course the challenges posed by complicated public policy issues like educational access and affirmative action are not amenable to simplistic solutions. The politics, psychology and economics are just too fraught, but that does not mean we should not use social science research to make modest changes that most observers would agree are improvements on the status quo.

I take this research and the policy implications to be hopeful. More diverse student bodies, less tension around race, better matching of student preparation and talent to educational institutions—what’s not to like? Now there is, of course, the question of financing....but we can worry about that tomorrow. “After all, tomorrow is another day.”

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 5th, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).