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Views

A New Manhattan Project

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The seemingly endless debates about the pros and cons of race-based affirmative action point to two essential conclusions. First, without denying the relevance of moral or philosophical arguments and legal principles, it is important to confront claims with empirical evidence. This is what we do in our new book, [No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal](#) — a study of how students' racial and social class backgrounds are intimately intertwined with the selective college experience. We find, for instance, that:

- Compared to white applicants at selective private colleges and universities, black applicants receive an admission boost that is equivalent to 310 SAT points, measured on an all-other-things-equal basis. The boost for Hispanic candidates is equal on average to 130 SAT points. Asian applicants face a 140 point SAT disadvantage.
- "Descendant" black applicants (those who are in the fourth-or-higher immigrant generation and single race — to a first approximation, the descendants of the American slave population) are admitted to selective colleges at significantly higher rates than "vanguard" black candidates (students who are multiracial and/or first- or second-generation immigrants). Even so, vanguards make up close to 60 percent of all black students on private college campuses and nearly 25 percent at public universities. Vanguards represent even larger shares of black applicant pools.
- We find evidence for and against a "mismatch" hypothesis. Students who are the beneficiaries of race-based affirmative action are more likely to graduate, more likely to enroll in professional or graduate schools, and more likely to have higher lifetime incomes if they attend a more selective college. However, class rank at college graduation for a given student is likely to decline as college selectivity goes up. On balance, we conclude that a higher graduation rate and the other advantages of attending a more selective institution more than outweigh the potential disadvantages of lower class rank at graduation.
- Doing away with racial preferences for underrepresented minority students would substantially reduce the number of such students at selective colleges. No admission policy that we have examined is able to replicate underrepresented minority student shares at selective universities if affirmative action is eliminated. This includes policies that substitute class-based for race-based affirmative action.

A second and more important conclusion is that debating the relative merits of affirmative action deflects attention away from something much more fundamental — America's racial gap in academic achievement. Fixing the achievement gap would obviate the need for affirmative action to create racially diverse campuses. This gap is observed in the pre-college academic records of applicants in our study, and it persists among first-year students. For instance, the average SAT score among entering Asian students in the sample of competitive colleges we studied is 225 points higher (on a 1600-point scale) than the average for black students. More than three-quarters of Asian students graduated in the top 10 percent of their high school class, in contrast to less than one-half of black students. Academic performance in college shows similar racial disparities, whether it is measured by six-year graduation rates or by class rank.

What we see at selective colleges and universities is just the tip of the iceberg. It is symptomatic of a much broader societal phenomenon. Racial gaps in academic skills and knowledge begin to develop soon after birth. They are reflected initially in children's inventories of vocabulary words and later in tests of math and reading. By the time of kindergarten entry, black children lag about one year behind whites. Gaps continue to grow throughout the elementary and secondary school years in a pattern of cumulative advantage and disadvantage. By 12th grade, black students on average have fallen roughly four years behind whites.

Hispanic students perform slightly better than blacks but not nearly at the level of white and Asian students. The likelihood of repeating a grade, lower-track placement in high school, and graduating high school are differentiated by race in the same way. Social class differences account for some of these gaps, but the gaps remain when income and other measures of socioeconomic status are held constant.

A skeptic might reasonably ask: "How much does this really matter?" For one thing, the racial academic performance gap lies at the heart of many adult forms of social and economic inequality. What starts off as a racial gap in school readiness quickly becomes an academic achievement gap, which is followed by a graduation gap, a labor-market skills gap, a wage gap, and eventually a poverty gap. The chain of cumulative causation extends well into adulthood. Racial gaps in academic accomplishment have been linked to racial differences in educational attainment, crime, health, and family structure. There is every reason to believe that these differences in adult outcomes would be reduced if a way could be found to narrow racial performance gaps among children and adolescents.

An additional reason to be concerned is that racial gaps in academic success have implications for workforce quality and the competitiveness of the U.S. economy. Poorly educated Americans face a number of growing hurdles. There are important racial and ethnic differences in the distribution of job-related skills; nearly half of all new jobs being created in the U.S. require a college degree; and the Hispanic plus non-Hispanic black share of the workforce is increasing. Added to this is the fact that global forces are putting pressure on American families with inadequate education. The end of the cold war and the integration of China, India, and the former Soviet-bloc republics into the international market-oriented, capitalist production system effectively doubled the number of workers in the global economy from about 1.5 billion in 2000 to 3 billion. Whereas unskilled U.S. workers once had to compete only with other unskilled Americans, now poorly educated Americans have to compete with unskilled, low-wage workers anywhere in the world. At the very time we need a better educated population to compete with other rapidly modernizing countries and to avoid a decline in living standards, growth in the quality of the U.S. workforce has slowed or stagnated.

The challenge facing all Americans is to identify the factors responsible for the racial academic achievement gap and close this gap as soon as possible. Time alone is an unreliable ally. Given the slow rate of convergence in black-white test outcomes over the past 30 years, it is likely to take another century to reach parity. The No Child Left Behind Act aims to eliminate the racial gap in academic achievement by the end of the 2013-14 school year, but no serious observer believes this goal will be met. Test scores have been rising for all students, but racial gaps persist. There is general agreement about the broad set of factors responsible for the achievement gap. Home environments, schools, and neighborhood conditions, among other determinants, have been implicated. But no one knows for sure how all of these factors interact or what their relative importance is. Most critically, there is no consensus on the most effective intervention strategies.

So What is to Be Done?

To address this problem, we propose in our book the equivalent of a Manhattan Project for the social and behavioral sciences — a project with the same scale, urgency, and sense of importance as the original Manhattan Project. Its aims should be twofold: (1) to identify the causes and cumulative consequences of racial gaps in academic achievement and (2) to develop concrete steps that can be taken by parents, schools, neighborhoods, and the public sector all working together to close these gaps on a nationwide scale. We should not be satisfied with demonstrated success in pilot studies on a local level.

The project we envision is an extraordinarily ambitious undertaking, likely on a scale previously unimagined in social or behavioral science research. It will have to monitor the lives of a large sample of children — perhaps as many as 50,000 — who are followed from birth to roughly age eighteen, or onto the first rung of their postsecondary plans. Data generated by this project will doubtless consume the time of hundreds of graduate students, faculty, and research scientists at our leading research and teaching institutions.

All Americans stand to benefit from the knowledge and action plan derived from this project, especially individuals whose life chances will be made brighter as a result. But there are several groups that have a particular stake in its success:

Higher education. As we have shown in our simulations, if black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gaps are closed, affirmative action policies would no longer be needed at selective colleges and universities to preserve current shares of underrepresented minority students on campus. This issue takes on greater urgency because of the 25-year sunset provision for affirmative action suggested in Sandra Day O'Connor's 2003 majority opinion in *Grutter v. Bollinger* and the realization that students going to college in 2028 will be born next year.

Corporate America. Achievement gaps impede diversity in the workplace, not only in entry-level positions but up and down the

corporate ladder. All too often one finds a shrinking diversity pipeline as one looks at upper levels of management. Closing the achievement gap would help expand this pipeline.

U.S. taxpayers. Many of our public policies and programs are directed to combating the symptoms of the achievement gap, but this approach is both expensive and inefficient. Individuals with improved education and greater labor market success have higher earnings, pay more in taxes, and make fewer claims on public services.

Philanthropic sector. Identifying successful intervention strategies will give foundations concerned with child welfare and, especially, the education of children and adolescents a clearer idea of where to target resources.

The racial gap in academic performance plays a much more central role in problems that loom large today than almost anyone realizes. That is why we call this gap “the most pressing domestic issue facing the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century.” Closing the achievement gap has the potential to do more for race relations and racial equality in this country than any other initiative currently under consideration.

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