Do Elite Private Colleges Discriminate Against Asian Students?

Students of different races have varying odds of admission to elite private colleges, a study finds

By Kim Clark
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A recent study of the applicants to seven elite colleges in 1997 found that Asian students were much more likely to be rejected than seemingly similar students of other races. Also, athletes and students from top high schools had admissions edges, as did low-income African-Americans and Hispanics.

[Read the full study here (PDF).]

Translating the advantages into SAT scores, study author Thomas Espenshade, a Princeton sociologist, calculated that African-Americans who achieved 1150 scores on the two original SAT tests had the same chances of getting accepted to top private colleges in 1997 as whites who scored 1460s and Asians who scored perfect 1600s.

He also found some indications that while rich students make up an increasingly large share of the entering freshman classes, the top private schools appeared to be giving admissions edges to low-income minorities, but not necessarily low-income white students. The very richest students also generally had lower acceptance rates than similarly qualified, but less wealthy, students.

Espenshade warned against concluding that his study proved that colleges improperly discriminated. For one thing, Asians, who make up less than 5 percent of the U.S. population, often make up nearly a third of the applicant pools to elite colleges. And they generally account for at least 10 percent of the student body. Meanwhile, low-income students and minorities make up disproportionately smaller shares of the applicant pools and, often, student populations. Harvard reported last year, for example, that 15 percent of its undergraduates were Asian, but only 7 percent were black, and just 6 percent were Hispanic.

In addition, Espenshade's study didn't account for "soft" qualifications such as essays, recommendations, extracurricular activities, musical or artistic talents, or community service, all of which play important roles in admissions decisions.

Nevertheless, some experts said Espenshade's findings seem likely to add more fuel to long-running criticisms of admissions offices. Even though the study reflects 12-year-old practices, "I have no doubt that circumstances have not changed in the interval between then and now," said Ward Connerly, who has spearheaded anti-affirmative action drives in several states. Connerly and other observers noted that college admissions policies have been controversial for decades.

During the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, African-Americans, American Indians, Jews, and other minorities were barred or severely restricted from many colleges. Civil rights laws and court rulings banned discrimination and encouraged colleges to reach out to long-disadvantaged students.

Some of those efforts created resentment among white and Asian students who felt they were denied opportunities to make room for those whom they believed to be less qualified minorities. Sparked by a lawsuit filed by a white applicant who had been rejected from a medical school, the U.S. Supreme Court in 1978 ruled that racial quotas were illegal. Voters in California, Michigan, and Washington have since voted to ban many affirmative action practices. In recent years, Asian-Americans have fought admissions policies they believe artificially limited their numbers on campuses. In 2006, an Asian student who scored 2400 on the three SAT tests filed a federal
complaint against Princeton alleging the university rejected him because of anti-Asian bias. The U.S. Department of Education is now examining Princeton's admissions policies.

Although the schools Espenshade studied have not been identified, Princeton says it wasn't part of the set. And it says it doesn't discriminate on the basis of race or national origin. "The class of 2010 had a record 17,564 applicants for a class of 1,231. We admitted only about half of all the applicants with maximum 2400 SAT scores," says university spokeswoman Cass Cliatt. "Princeton considers factors such as interest in and demonstrated commitment to a particular field of study or extracurricular activity, exceptional skills and talents, experiences and background, status as an alumni child or Princeton faculty or staff child, athletic achievement, musical or artistic talent, geographic or socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, any unique circumstances, and a range of other factors," she added. Currently, Asians make up 15 percent of Princeton's undergraduate student body.

Mitchell Chang, a professor of higher education at UCLA, said Asians have long complained about the "penalty" they face when applying to colleges. But Espenshade's documentation of a threefold difference for similarly qualified students at elite private universities "is stunning. Really worrisome." Chang said Asian students might be disproportionately less likely to participate in certain kinds of extracurricular activities and that many Asian parents push their children to apply to famous "brand name" elite schools. But he insisted that the Asian applicant pool is nevertheless diverse. He fears that college admissions officers might be stereotyping Asians and saying to themselves: "We don't want another academic nerd."

Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education, noted, however, that other recent studies have shown that many well-qualified students who come from low-income, African-American, or Hispanic families don't apply to elite schools. So the few who do apply are likely to have better odds.

Espenshade's research indicates that eliminating affirmative action policies would most likely reduce the number of Hispanic and African-American students and racial diversity on campuses. Some schools that have eliminated affirmative action policies have seen significant changes in their student demographics. At UC-Berkeley, for example, 42 percent of undergraduates are Asian. Fewer than one third are white. While African-Americans make up 14 percent of the general population in Michigan, they account for only 6 percent of the undergraduates at the University of Michigan.

Espenshade found that when comparing applicants with similar grades, scores, athletic qualifications, and family history for seven elite private colleges and universities:

- Whites were three times as likely to get fat envelopes as Asians.
- Hispanics were twice as likely to win admission as whites.
- African-Americans were at least five times as likely to be accepted as whites.
- Athletes were more than twice as likely to get in as non-athletes with similar qualifications.
- Students from private high schools were twice as likely to receive acceptance letters as similar students from regular public high schools.
- Students from highly regarded public and private high schools were three times as likely to win admission as others.
- Students in the top 10 percent of their high school classes were about twice as likely to get in as students in the next 10 percent.

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