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# Affirmative Action is a Successful Policy for Diversity in College Graduation

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## **Affirmative Action is a Successful Policy for Diversity in College Graduation**

**POLICY BRIEF # 4**  
June 7, 2023

Amy Lutz, Pamela R. Bennett, and Rebecca Wang

Affirmative action in higher education has become an active arena for policymaking and legal challenges in the United States. The passage of the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964 prohibited colleges and universities that receive federal funding from engaging in discriminatory behavior.<sup>1</sup> In his 1965 commencement address at Howard University, a historically black university, President Lyndon B. Johnson acknowledged the need to go beyond non-discrimination policies to engage in affirmative actions to realize “not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.”<sup>2</sup>

Colleges and universities began implementing race-conscious admissions in the 1960s to provide underrepresented minorities greater access to selective institutions.<sup>3</sup> The Supreme Court upheld the use of affirmative action in college admissions beginning in 1978. Since then, the Court has clarified and placed limits on how a student’s race can be considered when evaluating applications. Currently, colleges and universities can use race in a limited way and as part of a holistic review of a student’s application. Despite its previous decisions on affirmative action, the Supreme Court may end the practice this summer when it renders decisions in cases brought against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill over their admissions policies.

### **KEY FINDINGS**



There are no racial-ethnic differences in cumulative grade point average (GPA) among students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds with comparable academic resources and educational experiences.



Black and Latino students are more likely to graduate from selective colleges than White students who come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds with comparable academic resources and educational experiences.



Our findings suggests that affirmative action is an effective educational policy in the United States for providing underrepresented students with degrees from selective institutions, which can serve as a springboard to social mobility.

A question frequently raised about affirmative action is whether racial and ethnic minority students who benefit from affirmative action are successful in the academically demanding context of selective colleges. In other words, how do the beneficiaries of affirmative action perform in selective colleges and universities once they are admitted? This brief uses data from the Educational Longitudinal Study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics to examine the collegiate

outcomes (grade point averages [GPAs] and odds of graduating) of Black, Latino, and White students who attended selective colleges and universities in the United States.

### **Differences in Socioeconomic Background and Educational Experiences Explain Racial and Ethnic Differences in College GPAs**

We analyzed racial-ethnic differences in cumulative GPAs for White, Black, and Latino students who were high school seniors in 2004 and subsequently attended selective colleges and universities. On average, Black and Latino students (collectively) had somewhat lower college GPAs than White students—2.97 compared to 3.26, a difference of 0.29 points that is statistically significant. Average differences between groups are not very informative, however, if groups experience different opportunity structures, as is the case in America.

For a better contrast, we compared the GPAs of Black and Latino students to those of White students who came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, have similar types of high school preparation and whose college experiences were broadly similar. This multifaceted comparison showed that average differences between White students and Black and Latino students was only 0.001 and not statistically significant.

### **Black and Latino Students in Selective Colleges and Universities are Highly Likely to Graduate**

The real success of affirmative action can be seen in the second collegiate outcome we analyzed—graduation from selective colleges and universities. On average, 87.8% of Black and Latino students who started at selective institutions graduated from such institutions, compared to 84.6% of White students—a

difference of 3.2 percentage points that is not statistically significant. We repeated our multifaceted comparison in which we contrasted Black and Latino students to White students with similar backgrounds and educational experiences. It showed that Black and Latino students were more likely to graduate than their White peers.

### **The Future of Affirmative Action**

Affirmative action is an effective race-conscious admissions policy that facilitates the graduation of Black and Latino students from selective institutions, which can offer the potential of social mobility. Given its success, we believe that affirmative action should continue to be permitted in the United States. If the Supreme Court forbids the use of affirmative action at American colleges and universities, these institutions will need to find alternative ways to enroll Black and Latino students at meaningful levels. Unfortunately, the most-discussed alternatives, such as using class instead of race, top percentage plans based on high school rank, targeted recruiting, and making the SAT optional, are not enough to create substantial racial-ethnic diversity in selective institutions. More will need to be done. We have shown in other research that enrollments of Black and Latino students shift from public selective to non-selective institutions when states ban affirmative action.<sup>4</sup> If the Supreme Court prohibits the use of affirmative action, this state-level pattern may assume a national scale.

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### **Data and Methods**

The Educational Longitudinal Survey is a nationally representative survey that was administered in 2002 to approximately 16,200 tenth graders in 750 schools along with parents, teachers, and principals, with follow-ups in 2004, 2006, and 2012 with postsecondary transcript data available in 2013. The data were linked to *US News and World Report* rankings to determine selectivity of

postsecondary institutions. The full paper can be found at Lutz, Amy, Bennett, Pamela R., and Wang, Rebecca. (2019) How Affirmative Action Context Shapes Collegiate Outcomes at America's Selective Colleges and Universities. *Journal of Law and Social Policy*, (31): 71-91.

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