

## **Banning Race-Conscious Affirmative Action Will Make It Impossible for Selective College Admissions to Mirror the Growing Racial Diversity in High Schools, Georgetown University Report Says**

*Class-conscious alternatives could allow selective colleges to partially claw back their current levels of diversity in some cases*

(Washington, DC, March 28, 2023) New analysis from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) demonstrates that an expected national ban on race-conscious admissions practices would threaten the racial and ethnic diversity of students at selective colleges unless these colleges fundamentally altered their admissions practices.

The new CEW report, *Race-Conscious Affirmative Action: What's Next* finds that selective colleges barred from considering race and ethnicity in their admissions decisions may be able to partially claw back some racial/ethnic diversity using class-conscious admissions practices, but they will be extremely unlikely to enroll student bodies that match the demographic diversity of the high school class.

Moreover, if the US Supreme Court declares race-conscious college admissions unconstitutional *and* selective colleges preserve admission preferences for legacy applicants, student athletes, and other privileged groups, as is expected, selective college campuses will most likely become less racially and ethnically diverse than today. The Supreme Court is considering cases in its current term that challenge affirmative action policies at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, with a ruling expected by the end of June.

In the report, CEW researchers examine six different admissions models and the impact they would likely have on racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity if used consistently across selective colleges. Four models consider alternatives to race-conscious admissions, and two demonstrate what could happen in the unlikely event that race-conscious admissions were expanded instead of banned. Two models specifically consider class-conscious admissions as alternatives to race-conscious admissions.

Class-conscious admissions practices are often touted by those who oppose the consideration of race/ethnicity in college admissions because students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are underrepresented at selective colleges across almost all racial/ethnic groups. While CEW's findings indicate that class-conscious admission models could help selective institutions partially claw back the levels of diversity currently present among enrolled students, they also demonstrate that maintaining or exceeding existing levels of representation without race-conscious admissions would require a complete transformation of the admissions system by changing both how selective colleges evaluate applicants and whom they consider for admission.

“Our models make one thing very clear: the most effective way of increasing socioeconomic diversity at selective colleges is to consider race in the admissions process, not to ignore it,” CEW Director and lead author Anthony P. Carnevale said. “There’s a prevailing idea that race-conscious admissions practices only privilege the richest members of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, but that does not hold up under

scrutiny. According to our analysis, white and Asian/Asian American students are much more likely than Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students to be from upper and upper-middle class families.”

Among the six models that were tested, those that expand rather than prohibit race-conscious admissions practices come the closest to mirroring the racial/ethnic composition of the population graduating from the nation’s high schools. An admissions strategy that considers class, not race, and creates preferences for applicants from lower-SES families could be used to partially recoup, maintain, or even slightly exceed current enrollment shares for Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American students, although these students would remain significantly underrepresented relative to their share of the high school class. Every class-conscious alternative model would result in a drop in the existing percentage of students at selective colleges who are American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (AI/AN/NH/PI), a group that is already severely underrepresented relative to their representation in the high school class.

“The barriers to educational opportunity that stem from race and class are connected but distinct. As a result, when it comes to the goal of equalizing college access and success across advantaged and disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups and across advantaged and disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, there is no good substitute for the joint consideration of both race and socioeconomic status in college admissions,” said Zack Mabel, report co-author and research professor at CEW. “Without race-conscious admissions, the role selective colleges play in creating equal opportunity in our society is likely to diminish.”

The report emphasizes that for selective colleges to effectively diversify the student body without race-conscious admissions, they must dramatically enhance student recruitment and/or scale up direct admissions practices: the applicant pool would have to mirror the composition of the high school graduating class, rather than just those who apply to selective colleges today. Class-conscious alternatives could result in more racial diversity than the current system, but only if all selective colleges used class-conscious admissions practices and considered a much larger and more diverse pool of applicants for admission. Unfortunately, neither of these conditions seems very likely.

The report also addresses concerns that, due to gaps in college preparedness, achieving greater racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity at selective colleges would cause completion rates to decline. The models suggest that increasing diversity along either of these dimensions would come with a tradeoff—enrolling students with lower grades and test scores. These changes could have a negative impact on institutional prestige, but they are not likely to lower completion rates. Instead, admitted students from historically underrepresented groups would likely experience a performance boost from the academic and nonacademic resources that selective colleges provide and perform similarly to students from more advantaged backgrounds.

“Opponents of race- and class-conscious admissions have raised the concern that students with lower test scores and GPAs suffer from academic ‘mismatch’ at more prestigious schools, but the evidence suggests that students who gain access to more selective four-year institutions benefit—not suffer—in terms of higher graduation rates and higher post-college earnings,” said Kathryn Peltier Campbell, report co-author, associate director of editorial policy, and senior editor/writer.

To view the full report, including a detailed appendix on methodology, visit:  
[cew.georgetown.edu/diversity-without-race](http://cew.georgetown.edu/diversity-without-race)

###

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) is a research and policy institute within Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy that studies the links between education, career

qualifications, and workforce demands. For more information, visit [cew.georgetown.edu](http://cew.georgetown.edu). Follow CEW on Twitter [@GeorgetownCEW](https://twitter.com/GeorgetownCEW), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Medium](#).