The Concept of "Mismatch" at Play in the Supreme Court Fisher Decision is Empirically Unsound

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Introduction

As the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on its latest affirmative action case (Fisher vs. University of Texas, case no. 09-50822), attention has focused on the theory of mismatch, the idea that college students will perform best when placed with students more like themselves. This theory of "mismatch" posits that affirmative action is a "failure" because "racial preferences often put minority students in competition with far better-prepared classmates, dooming many to fall so far behind that they can never catch up."

The late Justice Antonin Scalia was referring to this theory when he stated during oral arguments:

> "There are those who contend that it does not benefit African-Americans to get them into the University of Texas, where they do not do well, as opposed to having them go to a less advanced school... a slower-track school, where they do well."

Justice Clarence Thomas has expressed similar thoughts. In his dissent to the 2003 decision in Grutter v. Bollinger, he wrote:

> "The Law School tantalizes unprepared students with the promise of a University of Michigan degree and all of the opportunities that it offers. These overmatched students take the bait, only to find that they cannot succeed in the cauldron of competition."

The Fisher vs. University of Texas case stems from a law enacted in 1997 requiring the University of Texas to admit all high school seniors who ranked in the top ten percent of their classes and a later modification that allowed for considering race as a factor in admission for all other applicants. Abigail Fisher, a white female who was not in the top ten percent of her class, applied for undergraduate admission in 2008 and was denied. A judge denied Fisher's claim that affirmative action violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, but an appellate court overturned that ruling. The appeal then reached the Supreme Court, which issued its ruling on June 23.

A Flawed Argument

The mismatch argument is flawed because it relies far too much on dangerously broad conclusions drawn from a single study limited to law students in one state. This paper provides analysis of nationally representative data that proves the mismatch theory is empirically wrong.

The data shows just the opposite: three times more students are qualified to attend selective colleges and universities than actually go to them. In fact, when average students are placed in the nation's best colleges and universities, they will graduate at a much higher rate. Rather than being intimidated by not being able to meet the standards of their peers, as Justices Scalia and Thomas have suggested, these students are instead challenged by the circumstances, and succeed at a rate comparable to their peers.

Students at Selective Schools Have Higher Graduation Rates

Going to a selective institution increases the likelihood of success for all able students, not just those whose test scores are near or above the median of top schools. The average student (around 1000 on the SAT) will have a 77 percent chance of graduating when attending one of the top 468 universities in the country, which is a 26 percentage point increase over the expected graduation rate when they attend open access schools, where the average SAT score is below 900.

The fact that these schools have median test scores over 1200 and the fact students around 1000 do better is counter to the mismatch hypothesis, which predicts that students with SAT scores of 1000 would do better when surrounded by other students whose average score is far lower.

Data Hold True for Minority Students

The data hold true for minority students as well. Lower scoring African Americans and Hispanics — many from low income backgrounds — do in fact fare much better when placed in academically challenging environments, even when other students are predominantly white (75%), and well off (56% of students come from the nation's wealthiest families).

At a high-quality university, all groups succeed in roughly equal proportions. White students in the bottom half of test scores have a graduation rate of 75 percent at the most selective colleges and universities, and those in the top half of test scores graduate at a rate of 88 percent. Among minority students, the graduation rate is 73 percent for those from the bottom half of test score and 85 percent for those in the top half of the test distribution.

Perhaps most telling, students at selective universities from the lowest test quartile have a higher graduation rate (68%) than do students from the top test quartile who attend open-access institutions (59%). Because of the misconstrued belief these students will not succeed, every year there are 500,000 high school students who graduate in the upper half of their high school class will not graduate from college. Of those, 240,000 are minority students. As demonstrated in the *Separate & Unequal,*[1] those students would have been successful if they had attended selective institutions.

Conclusion

The mismatch theory is a flawed argument that questions the ability of average students to succeed at a selective university. Three times more students are qualified to attend the top 468 universities than actually go to them. These qualified students, particularly minorities, are being held back under the false assumption that they cannot succeed, when in reality, they indeed can.

[1] Carnevale, Anthony P. and Jeff Strohl, *Separate & Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, July 2013.

Table 1. A low-scoring but wealthy student graduates at the same rate (60%) as a poor student in the 3rd quartile of test performance (61%).

Socioeconomic Status Quartiles (Family Background)				
SAT/ACT quartiles	Low	2	3	High
Low	44%	49%	46%	60%
2	47%	55%	59%	70%
3	61%	57%	67%	75%
High	71%	67%	80%	83%

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of ELS 2002-12, NCES-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files: 1972, 1982, 1992, 2004, 2008

Table 2: Selectivity increases graduation rates more than test scores.

SAT/ACT Quartiles	Most Competitive 468 Institutions	Moderately Competitive	Open Access
All	85%	73%	51%
Low	68%	54%	47%
2	77%	73%	51%
3	82%	73%	55%
High	89%	83%	59%

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of ELS 2002-12, NCES-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files: 1972, 1982, 1992, 2004, 2008

Table 3: Minorities and whites alike do well in selective universities. Test score does not significantly mitigate the downward graduation rate effect in low resourced open access institutions.

	Race	All	Most Competitive 468 Institutions	Moderately Competitive	Open Access
	All	62%	85%	73%	51%
	White	66%	86%	77%	55%
	Black and Hispanic	51%	81%	61%	46%
SAT/ACT					
Below 1000	White	57%	75%	71%	52%
Above 1000		74%	88%	80%	59%
SAT/ACT					
Below 1000	Black and Hispanic	48%	73%	58%	45%
Above 1000		61%	85%	67%	49%

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of ELS 2002-12, NCES-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Data Files: 1972, 1982, 1992, 2004, 2008

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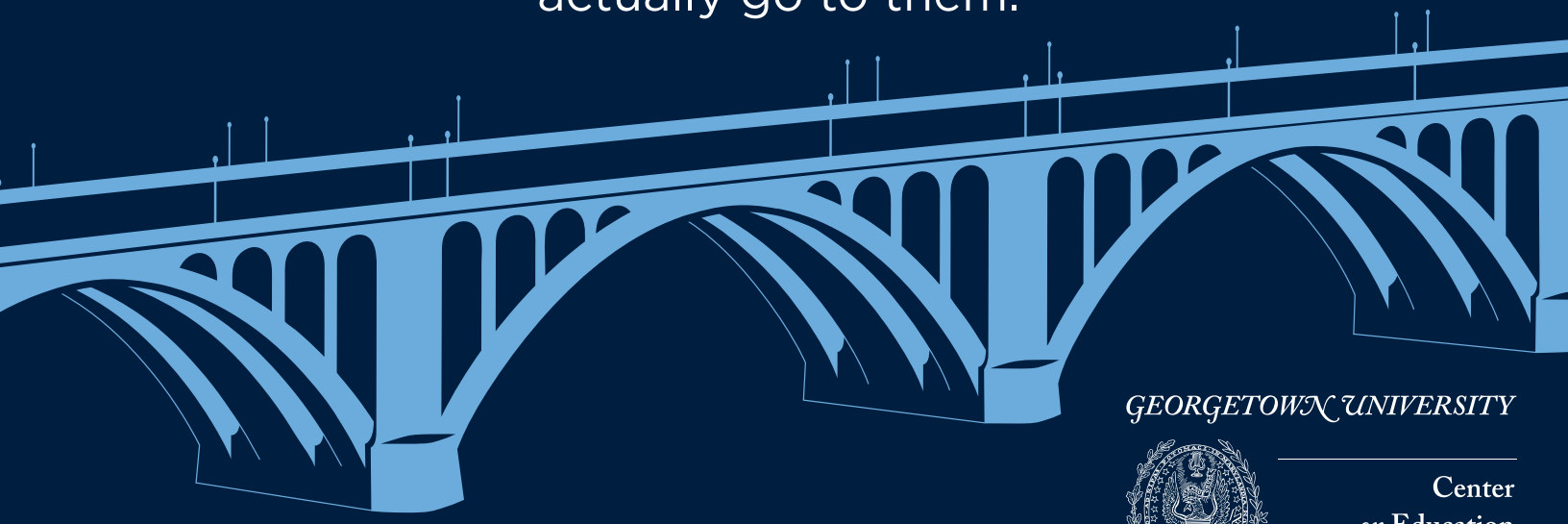

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