The New Calculus of Diversity on Campus

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At public universities in California and Texas, the end of affirmative action in admissions has benefited one minority: Asian-Americans.

And if the Supreme Court decides later this year to limit or eliminate race-conscious admissions at the University of Michigan, Asian-Americans stand to gain far more than any other group, at least in proportion to their numbers in the general population.

Their experience in the admissions process provides yet another prism through which to view the affirmative action debate. As things stand now, a relatively low percentage of Asian-American students are admitted to many top private and public institutions, nearly all of which practice affirmative action, compared with the high numbers of the arguably qualified among them.

But if the Supreme Court phases out race-conscious admissions, the number of Asian-American students can be expected to soar, at the expense of other groups, even whites.

The statistics in California and Texas give ammunition to critics of affirmative action who say that some applicants, primarily white or Asian-American, are being rejected in favor of blacks and Hispanics who may not be as accomplished, at least as measured by standardized-test scores and grade-point averages.

But the same statistics also provide ammunition to those who support race-conscious admissions and who argue that unless colleges give special attention to black and Hispanic applicants, whites and Asians could lay claim to all but a handful of the spots on some campuses.

To gain a sense of how the composition of a student body can shift, consider the University of Texas at Austin.

After a federal court in 1996 barred the University of Texas from practicing affirmative action, the state began offering admission to all high school students ranked in the top 10 percent of their classes. Given the racial and economic segregation in the state's
high schools, the assumption was that blacks and Hispanics would be given a fairer chance to enroll, without having to compete directly with whites who lived in richer districts.

But as it turned out, the main beneficiaries were Asian-Americans. The percentage of freshmen entering the Austin campus who were Asian-American rose to 18 percent last fall, compared with 14 percent in the fall of 1995. Thus, almost one in five freshmen at the university's flagship school is Asian, in a state where only about three of 100 residents are.

As the admission rate of Asian students rose, to 71 percent from 68 percent over that period, the admission rate of whites fell, by one percentage point to 66 percent. So did that of blacks, to 43 percent from 59 percent.

Hispanics were admitted at a rate of 56 percent in 2002, down from 72 percent in 1995. They make up about a third of the state population but less than a fifth of the freshman class at Austin.

Asked to explain the dynamic, Bruce Walker, the director of admissions at Austin, said, "Obviously they are the top students in their schools."

"Any state that goes to a percent plan and has a significant number of Asians will discover that Asians will be the ones who will benefit most," he added.

In California, where Asians make up 11 percent of the general population, the gains were also striking after the state ended traditional affirmative action in the late 1990's and adopted a system similar to that of Texas.

At Berkeley, the percentage of the freshman class that was Asian-American rose 6 percentage points, to 45 percent, in 2001. Over the same period, the percentage of the class that was black fell by three percentage points, to 4 percent; the percentage that was white dropped by one percentage point, to 29 percent; and the percentage that was Hispanic fell by six percentage points, to 11 percent.

Contrast that with the experience of the University of Michigan Law School, which practices race-conscious admissions in a typical way, with admissions officers considering applicants' test scores and grades, as well as their backgrounds. Along with the
undergraduate program, which uses a more formulaic approach that awards extra points to a black or Hispanic applicant, the law school is a defendant in the lawsuits being heard by the Supreme Court.

When, for example, it assembled its class for the fall of 1999, the law school accepted only one of the 61 Asian-Americans, or 2 percent, who were ranked in the middle range of the applicant pool, as defined by their grades and test scores, according to court filings. The admission rate for whites with similar grades and scores was 3 percent.

But among black applicants with similar transcripts, 22 out of 27, or 81 percent, were offered admission.

Michigan, like other selective colleges, defends the lift given to black applicants, as well as Hispanics, for two main reasons: to level the playing field for what it calls underrepresented minorities, who might not have the educational advantages of many whites and Asians, and to enhance the educational experience of all students by immersing them in a diverse environment.

Though supportive of affirmative action for black and Hispanic applicants in particular, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, a professor of history and ethnic studies at Brown, said she took offense at the perception that there might be a threshold for how many Asians on a campus was too many.

"I'll tell you what is discriminatory in the case of Texas," said Ms. Hu-DeHart, who emigrated from China in the 1960's. "They don't say whites are overrepresented. They're pitting Asian-Americans against blacks and Latinos by saying Asian-Americans are taking your place."

She added: "Let Asians compete freely with white students."