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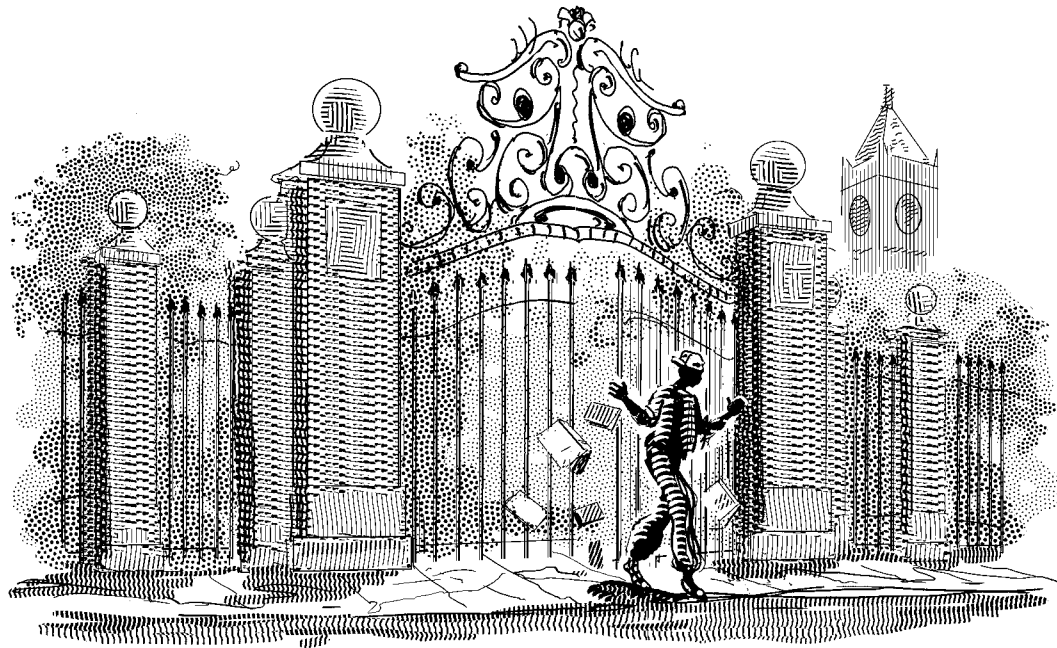
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THE PERVERSITY OF DIVERSITY

Mismatch: How Affirmative Action Hurts Students It's Intended to Help, and Why Universities Won't Admit It, by Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor, Jr. Basic Books, 368 pages, \$28.99



ANYONE WHO FOLLOWS PUBLIC POLICY issues can easily think of policies that help one group at the expense of some other group. What is rarer, however, is a policy that on net balance harms all groups concerned, even if in very different ways. Affirmative action policies in the academic world can claim that rare distinction.

Many among the liberal intelligentsia dismiss criticisms of affirmative action as coming from “angry white males,” who are presumably just upset at losing places in colleges or elsewhere to either women or minorities. But if that was the real reason, the question then is why white males are not angry at Asian Americans, who have displaced more white males at many elite academic institutions than have blacks or Hispanics. But, as an old song once said, “It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it.” The way Asian Americans have done it is by outperforming others, and most of us still recognize that as legitimate, even in these excessively egalitarian times.

We can probably all agree that affirmative action has an adverse effect on the admissions prospects of white males. What may seem more controversial is the proposition that affirmative action imposes serious handicaps on black and other minority students. There have been critics (including me) who have

been saying that for some time. However, the devastating new book *Mismatch*, by Richard H. Sander and Stuart Taylor, Jr., has so much overwhelming evidence on the harm done to students who are black, Hispanic, or from other “under-represented” minorities, that it will be hard for anyone with pretensions of honesty to be able to deny that painful fact.

Does this mean that academics and others will finally have a fact-based debate over this contentious issue? Not necessarily. Indeed, not likely. Another highly successful strategy used by academic administrators and other defenders of racial preferences in higher education has been to simply ignore any and all evidence that goes against their policies or the assumptions behind those policies. Where academics or foundations control data sources, they often simply refuse to release the data to those with differing views. However, this latter strategy will now be like locking the barn door after the horses are gone. Sander and Taylor already have a decisive quantity and quality of hard data in their book.

The book is titled *Mismatch* because the fundamental problem created for black and other minority students admitted to elite colleges and postgraduate programs under affirmative action preferences is not that those students are “unqualified” to be in colleges

and universities, but that they are far too often mismatched with the particular colleges and universities that admit them under standards lowered to get a desired racial body count, whether expressed as “goals” or “quotas.”

AS SANDER AND TAYLOR POINT OUT, THE late Professor Clyde Summers of the Yale Law School was the first person to explain, back in 1968, why preferential admissions policies for minorities were so often damaging to those minority students’ education. Summers, incidentally, had years earlier published a landmark article that criticized labor unions’ discrimination against blacks, so he could hardly be dismissed as an “angry white male” opposed to minorities’ advancement. Professor Summers explained that admitting black students to top-tier institutions, when they had academic qualifications that were at a level that fit second-tier institutions, meant that second-tier institutions now had a reduced pool of suitable black applicants and would have to dip into the pool of black students whose qualifications fit the third tier—and so on down the line.

The net result would be a systematic mismatching of black students with institutions up and down the ranks of academic institutions. This in turn would mean unnecessary



academic failures among black students who were qualified to be successes, though not at the particular institutions where they were admitted under lowered standards for the sake of demographic representation.

By contrast with Professor Summers's analysis, the prevailing theory of affirmative action is that admitting black and other minority students to institutions they might otherwise not qualify for is giving them a much-needed avenue to upward mobility. But what are the facts?

WHAT A WIDE VARIETY OF EMPIRICAL evidence in *Mismatch* shows is that, when black and other minority students are admitted to colleges and universities where the other students have substantially stronger academic backgrounds, the minority students fail to graduate as often as other students and—a crucial fact—they graduate less often than other black students with the same level of academic credentials as themselves, but who attend other academic institutions where their preparation is more similar to that of the other students at those institutions. What Clyde Summers predicted back in 1968 is repeatedly confirmed by data from academic institutions across the country today.

The reason is not hard to understand. As Sander and Taylor point out, professors tend to pitch their courses to the level of the students they have. If the black students at an elite college score at the 75th percentile on tests used nationwide, most would undoubtedly do very well at the average American college, or at a somewhat above-average American college. But, if they are admitted to a top college where the other students score at the 99th percentile, the courses they take are likely to move at a pace that is too fast for their reading speed or their mathematical skills. These minority students may be perfectly capable of mastering the same material in these courses, if they were at an institution where the courses moved at a pace, and on a level of complexity, geared to students with a similar level of academic preparation as themselves.

As Sander and Taylor put it, "A freshman physics class at Dartmouth would presume that students were comfortable with calculus and fairly complex, realistic models of natural phenomenon, a freshman class at Fisk—or at the University of Tennessee—would probably start with algebraic approaches to more classical concepts." Certainly when I taught introductory economics to engineering students at Cornell University, and came to the concept of "marginal revenue," I would simply say that marginal revenue was the first derivative of total revenue, and keep moving, knowing that

all the engineering students know calculus and would understand what that meant. But, when introducing "marginal revenue" in an introductory economics course at Howard University, I prepared numerical examples that would get across the same concept.

What is the practical consequence of all this?

THE EMPIRICAL DATA PRESENTED IN *Mismatch* shows that black students admitted to colleges and universities where the other students have higher academic qualifications do not graduate as often, graduate with much lower grades, and, when they start out trying to major in difficult subjects like mathematics, the natural sciences, engineering, or economics, they end up majoring in much easier subjects with much less of a payoff in terms of their careers in later life. Moreover, black students with very similar academic qualifications who attend predominantly black colleges succeed in graduating with degrees in the natural sciences, mathematics, engineering, and economics far more often. Nor is this simply a matter of their being granted college degrees while having less knowledge of their subjects. Predominantly black colleges are 17 of the top 21 colleges whose black graduates go on to receive Ph.D.s in scientific, mathematical, and technical fields.

It is not that black students who attend predominantly white colleges avoid majoring in science, mathematics, or engineering. Initially they choose such majors more often than white students at the same institutions. It is just that black students subsequently abandon these fields in large numbers in institutions where they are academically mismatched. As a professor at one of the black colleges put it, the predominantly white schools are "wasting" well-qualified black students who "wind up majoring in sociology or recreation or get wiped out altogether."

In the field of law, there is another external criterion for the success or failure of the education of students admitted under lower academic standards. That is the ability to pass the bar examination. Black students admitted to George Mason University Law School with lower academic qualifications than the other students there had "roughly a 30 percent chance" of graduating and passing the bar exam on the first attempt, according to Sander and Taylor. But "students at the historically black Howard University Law School, only a few miles away, had academic indices very similar to blacks at GMU Law but had a graduation-and-first-time-bar-passage rate of about 57 percent, nearly twice as high."

In short, black and other minority students seem to learn better at institutions where the other students are similar in academic qualifications. The same conclusion is implied in data on what happened after affirmative action in admissions was outlawed in the University of California system. When racial preferences were banned by the voters in California, there were dire predictions that this would mean the virtual disappearance of black and Hispanic students from the University of California system. What in fact happened was a 2% decline in their enrollment in the University of California system as a whole, but an *increase* in the number of black and Hispanic students graduating, including an increase of 55% in the number graduating in four years and an increase of 63% in the number graduating in four years with a grade point average of 3.5 or higher.

INSTEAD OF THE PREDICTED DRASTIC decline in enrollment in the system as a whole, there was a drastic *redistribution* of black and Hispanic students within the University of California system. Their enrollment dropped at the two most elite campuses, Berkeley and UCLA—by 42% at the former and 33% at the latter. But their enrollment rose by 22% at the Irvine campus, 18% at the Santa Cruz campus, and 65% at the University of California at Riverside. After this redistribution, the number of black and Hispanic students who graduated with degrees in science, mathematics, and engineering "rose by nearly 50 percent," according to Sander and Taylor. The number of doctorates earned by black and Hispanic students in the system rose by about 20%.

In short, the problems created by the mismatching brought on by affirmative action gave way to significant improvements in the academic performances of black and Hispanic students in the University of California system after those preferences were banned. In purely intellectual terms, these results might seem to vindicate what had been long said by critics of race preferences in college admission, and lead to some rethinking on the subject. *But no such thing happened.* On the contrary, new and more clever ways of evading the ban on affirmative action were created, even by academic administrators who privately admitted that affirmative action had the bad effects that were found—and this not just in California but in the academic world more generally. "Diversity" had become a sacred cause, and sacred causes are seldom defeated by statistics.

Sander and Taylor have written an outstanding book that deserves to be read and pondered in many places for many years. They



have performed a major service for all those who have an open mind on affirmative action, however modest the number of such people may be—and a still more important service for those who think that black students on campus should be there to advance their own education and lives, not to serve in a role much like that of movie extras, whose presence enhances the scene for others.

THE AUTHORS OF *MISMATCH* DRAW POLICY conclusions from their work. The most obvious conclusion might seem to be that group preferences in academic admissions should be ended. But Professor Sander and Mr. Taylor see that as a virtually impossible thing to achieve, and indeed see a beneficial role for “a race-neutral system of smaller, socioeconomic preferences” focused on increasing the enrollment of people from lower income backgrounds, whether such people are black or white or whatever. They apparently see a role for thoughtful statesmanship toward that end by the Supreme Court, which is now considering academic affirmative action issues yet again, after having tried judicial statesmanship before, in earlier decades.

I could not disagree more with the distinguished authors of this outstanding study. It

was precisely by trying to be judicious social engineers and statesmanlike legislators that Supreme Court Justices have left affirmative action a bleeding sore on the body politic that will not heal, but which only produced polarizing bitterness on all sides. The time is long overdue for them to carry out their judicial function and recognize that the 14th Amendment means what it plainly says about “equal protection of the laws.”

Nor is it at all obvious why college and university administrators should be entrusted with the God-like role of fine-tuning society. Neither their past record of counterproductive results for people they claimed to be helping nor their many disingenuous tactics in promoting failed policies that they seem hell-bent to continue, inspire any such confidence. It seems plain, after all these years, that they are not going to stop unless they get stopped.

An unequivocal legal ban on the use of race in college admissions seems to me a necessary, though not a sufficient, step toward putting an end to this educationally and socially pernicious practice. To say that race can be just “one factor” in college admissions decisions is to make a judicious compromise in rhetoric while keeping the floodgates wide open in reality. From my own research for my book *Affirmative*

Action Around the World (2004), I know that attempted restrictions on group preferences in other countries that leave the decision-makers wiggle room to factor in subjective considerations virtually guarantee that those subjective considerations will be used to offset objective differences in qualifications, in order to end up with the group numbers desired.

If and when there is an outright ban on using race in college and university admissions decisions, the next step should be a return to the once common practice of forbidding the submission of photographs or other things that permit racial identification. Some examination papers, as well as articles submitted to academic journals, are already being judged without any identifying information, in order to get unbiased decisions. There is no reason why the same practice cannot be followed with applications for college or university admissions. Affirmative action has already turned too many minority students with the potential for success into induced failures, because they were mismatched, quite aside from the racial polarization and academic corruption spawned by these programs.

Thomas Sowell is the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow on Public Policy at the Hoover Institution.

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