

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

The Shape of the River

LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF
CONSIDERING RACE IN COLLEGE
AND UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS

William G. Bowen • Derek Bok

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY NICHOLAS LEMANN
AND AN AFTERWORD BY DEREK BOK

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WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY NICHOLAS LEMANN AND
A NEW AFTERWORD BY DEREK BOK

William G. Bowen and Derek Bok

IN COLLABORATION WITH

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and Lauren A. Meserve***

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“You’ve got to know the shape of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night. . . .”

“Do you mean to say that I’ve got to know all the million trifling variations of shape in the banks of this interminable river as well as I know the shape of the front hall at home?”

“On my honor, you’ve got to know them better.”

—Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

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Foreword

IF YOU WORK in a university, you'll know that the value of diversity in admissions—meaning, foremost, racial diversity—is a core value of the community, in no way a controversial proposition that is subject to constant heated debate. So it's important to recreate the context in which William Bowen and Derek Bok's *The Shape of the River* appeared, in 1998.

Affirmative action, never a winner in electoral politics, had recently suffered the largest of a string of setbacks in state ballot initiatives with the passage by a wide margin of Proposition 209, the 1996 California initiative that banned race-conscious admissions and hiring by the state government, including the university system. President Bill Clinton, worried about his reelection campaign after the Democratic Party's big losses in the 1994 midterm elections and aware that Proposition 209 was a likely winner, announced in 1995 that his administration was undertaking a major review of affirmative action. (Bear in mind that neither of Clinton's two immediate successors, one a Republican and one a Democrat, chose to let the public know that he was ambivalent about affirmative action.) This ended with a speech by Clinton whose memorable slogan was "mend it, don't end it"—hardly an unqualified defense. The courts have always been a venue somewhat friendlier to affirmative action, but, also in 1996, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case of *Hopwood v. Texas*, thus letting stand a lower-court decision that banned race-conscious admissions at the University of Texas Law School. In 1998, voters in Washington state passed an anti-affirmative action ballot initiative modeled on California's. The term "preferences," as a pejorative name for affirmative action, energetically promoted by its opponents, was beginning to enter the language.

In the intellectual world, probably the main event regarding affirmative action in the mid-1990s was the publication of *The Bell Curve*, by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, which argued that intelligence is all-important, substantially inherited, and associated with race—and therefore that all forms of affirmative action should be abolished. Two generally liberal national magazines, *Newsweek* and *The New Republic*, published highly respectful cover stories on *The Bell Curve*, treating it as a serious work of science that raised uncomfortable but undeniable truths. Even inside the academic Establishment, support for affirmative action was not rock-solid. Back in 1985, Robert Klitgaard, a special assistant to one of *The Shape of the River*'s co-authors, Derek Bok, published a book called *Choosing Elites* that was notably skeptical about affirmative action, especially in elite

universities. “In general, the more selective the institution and the better its prediction of later performance, the higher the costs of increased representation [of minorities] will be,” Klitgaard wrote. When *The Shape of the River* was published, *The New York Times Book Review* commissioned a review by Alan Wolfe, a highly respected political scientist, that supported the prevailing arguments against affirmative action. Wolfe wrote:

“[I]t would be wrong to conclude from *The Shape of the River* that affirmative action works. What Bowen and Bok have proved is that going to a top college works. Their book unintentionally fuels rather than quenches the passions over affirmative action. For if a degree from a top college benefits those who receive it as much as Bowen and Bok clearly demonstrate, then those passed over for admission to those colleges really do have cause for complaint.”

Because the Supreme Court had declined to hear the Hopwood case, the law of the land on affirmative action in admissions was one thing in the Fifth Circuit, which had decided the case, and another elsewhere, where the Supreme Court’s close and carefully limited ruling, which permitted affirmative action to continue, in the 1978 *Bakke v. University of California* case (that’s where the now ubiquitous term “diversity” came from) still prevailed. It was clear that another Supreme Court case was coming, and that it was likely to involve the University of Michigan, where two lawsuits in the spirit of *Bakke* and *Hopwood*—by white plaintiffs denied admission, who claimed that affirmative action represented unconstitutional racial discrimination against them—were already in the court system. The Supreme Court, as it has been since it heard its first case on affirmative action in admissions, *DeFunis v. University of Washington*, in 1974, was obviously split on the issue. At the time that *The Shape of the River* was published, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor was considered the swing vote—and indeed, in 2003, it was Justice O’Connor who wrote the five to four majority opinion in the Michigan cases. That decision upheld the legality of affirmative action in admissions on narrow grounds, but declared, “We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today.” It’s hard to imagine that, only ten years from now, universities will agree with O’Connor and voluntarily bring affirmative action to an end.

So *The Shape of the River* was a book with a focused and urgent mission: to rescue affirmative action at a moment of existential peril. It was impossible to miss the signal of commitment it sent to have a nearly five-hundred-page book, co-authored by the former long-serving presidents of two of the country’s most esteemed universities, aided by a supplementary roster of four collaborators and many more prominent manuscript readers,

containing dozens of charts and tables showing the results of careful quantitative research done for the book, appear at that moment as a full-throated defense of affirmative action. It did, in some ways, turn the tide.

Today in universities, discussions of diversity quickly broaden to a variety of categories—for example, sexual orientation. *The Shape of the River* is notable, on rereading today, for its tight focus on race. Although some of its data encompasses other categories of ethnicity and socioeconomic background, the overall argument is in favor of elite universities going to special lengths to increase their proportion of black students. There are a number of reasons for this. First, as Bowen and Bok note, affirmative action in university admissions was a direct result of the civil rights movement and its aftermath; universities collectively realized that they were overwhelmingly white and decided to integrate themselves as a matter of policy. This was substantially voluntary on universities' part, not something forced on them by government. Their original impulse was not to change the composition of their student bodies along a number of lines (though that came soon), it was specifically to add black students. Second, all the political and legal challenges to affirmative action, and most of the intellectual critiques as well, were based on the letter and spirit of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964: the idea that it is uniquely offensive to take someone's race into account in making a consequential decision. There have not been high-profile lawsuits against admissions preferences for athletes or alumni children or members of any of the other special categories elite admissions offices use, because there is not as clearly available a legal argument against them. The only way to defend against the main line of attack on affirmative action, that it violates the ideal of "color-blindness" was by making a case for color-consciousness.

Finally, and perhaps most important, affirmative action had come on the heels of another major change in the way elite universities, which have remained prominent for centuries by changing constantly, define themselves. In the United States in the twentieth century, the adoption of the research university model—featuring a dual role for faculty members, academic tenure, disciplinary associations, government funding of research, and the academic publishing apparatus—was the most important systemic development. One of its many aspects was that the definition of an ideal student moved in a more academic direction. The widespread adoption in the middle decades of the century of national, standardized multiple-choice tests meant to measure academic potential, like the SAT, was in service of this goal. The elite private colleges that were Bowen and Bok's major concern never instituted an entirely—as opposed to primarily—academic standard for admission; they continued to take a number of other factors into account, like athletic ability, family

ties to the university, geography, and life history. On the whole, though, the adoption of standardized tests in elite university admissions wound up increasing both their perceived openness to all and the perceived value of their degrees, and that led to an ever more intense competition for a limited number of admissions slots.

But America's long history of racial injustice had produced substantial, long-running average differences between black and whites on most measures of educational potential and performance. This created a direct conflict between universities' desire to have a more academic student body and a more racially integrated student body; Bowen and Bok calculated that at the most selective universities, admitting purely on the basis of SAT scores would cause the percentage of black students to drop from almost eight to just over two. To varying degrees, these universities had decided to modify their primary commitment to using academic criteria in admissions in order to enact their newer commitment to integration. And the lawsuits against affirmative action were mainly based on defendants showing that there was a level of standardized test score where a black applicant was far more likely to be admitted than a white applicant. For example, Bowen and Bok's data showed that under the SAT scoring system of the time, at five highly selective colleges, a black applicant with a combined score between 1350 and 1399 had a more than seventy-five per cent chance of admission, and a white applicant had less than a thirty per cent chance. In no other preferred category—alumni children, athletes, applicants from low-income families—was the test-score gap as wide as it was racially. Conversely, no deracialized form of affirmative action, like privileging class instead of race, could produce a class that was not significantly less black. And it wasn't as if the black-white differences were merely an artifact of test scores. In the elite school they sampled, Bowen and Bok reported, "The average rank of black matriculants was at the 23rd percentile of the class, the average Hispanic student ranked in the 36th percentile, and the average white student ranked in the 53rd percentile."

It's characteristic of Bowen and Bok, an economist and a lawyer both deeply committed to the norms of academic life, that they would insist on addressing affirmative action in admissions through rigorously obtained data, not shy away from candor about what it entails, and try to answer the arguments against it through evidence rather than passion. They were also constrained by their evident decision to keep their discussion within the boundaries set by the Supreme Court, in which it was impermissible for a university to set aside a specific number of places for black students, but permissible to use race as a plus factor in service of the goal of creating a diverse student body, under very limited circumstances. In the words of Justice Lewis Powell's decision in the Bakke case, "The diversity that

further a compelling state interest encompasses a far broader array of qualifications and characteristics, of which racial or ethnic origin is but a single, though important, element.” The picture that Bowen and Bok create makes it clear that the elite universities were using race as an overriding plus factor in admissions—and had to, in order to get to the proportion of black students they wanted—in ways that stretched Powell’s conception of how race was supposed to be considered. But they took pains to present data on the importance of becoming comfortable around people different from oneself as a crucial life skill, and of the central role of universities in imparting it. With affirmative action, elite colleges are likely to be far more diverse than the environments most of their students came from.

Most of *The Shape of the River*, though, is focused on a different argument for affirmative action. It is that for black students, going to one of the elite universities Bowen and Bok studied is a highly positive experience, not just while they are students, but for a long time afterward. They complete their undergraduate education and then go on to graduate and professional schools at high rates, they do better economically than they would have otherwise, and they are also likely to be highly involved in civic activities. This kind of information was partly meant to refute the idea that affirmative action “overmatches” black students by placing them one notch higher in the university hierarchy than they should be, but it also gets at what may have been a more central concern of Bowen’s and Bok’s, though one that’s difficult to state openly.

The universities they studied have an important role in creating a disproportionately influential group in American society. Ivy League colleges probably don’t deserve the full measure of obsession that they get from prospective students and their parents. In some parts of the society—the military, the oil business, agriculture—they don’t have much credential value. Still, at this writing, every member of the Supreme Court went to either Harvard or Yale Law School. The last presidential election in which neither major party candidate had a degree from either Harvard or Yale was in 1984. Graduates of the colleges Bowen and Bok studied are heavily overrepresented in the upper ranks of academe, technology companies, Wall Street, publishing and journalism, and other fields that help set the course for the country. The title of *The Shape of the River* signals the expectation that affirmative action is a necessary precondition to integrating, down the river a ways, this elite leadership group. In a country where race has clearly been the leading cause of division and conflict, being managed by a biracial group is both just and necessary. Other countries with similar bad histories with race and caste—India, Brazil, Malaysia—have adopted policies in the same spirit.

If you judge by this standard, the half-century of affirmative action at highly selective universities has been a success. Not only are the

universities themselves significantly more racially integrated than they were before, so are many of the institutions to which the elite universities lead. And taking on this reformist project has not been an act of collective self-sacrifice on the part of the universities; if anything, it has enhanced their stature and influence in American society. It may be an unintentional connection, but the jacket of the first edition of *The Shape of the River* shows, to go along with the title, a map of a bend in a river. Look closely, and you'll see that it's the lower Mississippi River, north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana—the heart of the antebellum plantation economy, with the riverfront properties of slaveholders clearly denoted. A great deal flowed from that part of the river, some of which affirmative action is meant to correct.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that affirmative action is now safe. Outside of the university, President Donald Trump's Department of Justice has come out as a proponent of "color-blind" admissions and an opponent of affirmative action. A well-publicized lawsuit has accused Harvard College of discriminating against Asian-American applicants. The country is in a populist mood, and it's easy to imagine affirmative action becoming a political target. The populists probably aren't the people whose children are applying to highly selective universities, but for those people, admissions is a zero sum game that inevitably leaves most participants unhappy. Deeply embedded in *The Shape of the River* is the idea that universities should have "institutional autonomy" that allows them to admit whomever they want. Although the academic standard remains the primary one, universities are unwilling to operate by a single, openly stated, dispositive admissions criterion, and that inevitably leaves the majority who don't get in feeling bewildered about exactly what it was that caused them not to get the place they wanted. Applicants and their families see an admissions slot as a golden ticket that universities should be duty-bound to offer to those who deserve it most. Universities see admissions as an exercise in institutional curation, requiring the subtle balancing of subjective cultural, political, and economic factors. In the United States, essentially everyone who doesn't get in to one of the elite colleges Bowen and Bok studied will wind up graduating from another, also excellent institution, but that doesn't mean it's possible to achieve comity between applicants and admissions offices. It isn't. Many people are going to wind up feeling wronged.

Affirmative action hasn't created an entirely harmonious world inside universities, either. If you decide to import the most difficult issue in the society into the daily life of your institution, it's unrealistic to expect that the result will be that either the sociological newcomers to the university will cheerfully adopt the culture of the majority, or vice versa. If everyone's perspective were the same, then the argument for diversity

would fall apart. In *The Shape of the River*, Bowen and Bok complain about anecdotal accounts of racial tension on campuses, but note that there isn't much evidence about "whether the educational effects of racial diversity actually fulfill the expectations of university leaders." If there is a semi-official sequel to *The Shape of the River*, it is *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal* (2009), by Thomas Espenshade and Alexandra Walton Radford, also funded by the Mellon Foundation, published by Princeton University Press, advised by William Bowen, and powered by extensive quantitative research. Espenshade and Radford studied how diversity works on campuses, and the results are sobering. Of various pairings of ethnic groups they tested, blacks and whites had the least likelihood of higher between-group than within-group interaction (Hispanics and whites had the highest). Specific interventions, like assigning first-year students roommates of different ethnic groups or taking ethnic-studies courses outside one's own group, are better at fostering diversity than simply using the admissions office to create a multi-ethnic student body and assuming the benefits of diversity will accrue automatically.

Like Bowen and Bok, Espenshade and Radford mean to demonstrate that specifically race-based affirmative action is essential to maintaining the proportion of black students at selective colleges: their meticulous modeling shows that every non-racial preference that might be used as a substitute would substantially reduce the black presence. In proving this, they provide data that demonstrates the magnitude of the racial factor in admissions, and that therefore has regularly been used by opponents of affirmative action as well as by proponents. For example, Espenshade and Radford calculate that at selective private colleges, being a black applicant is the equivalent of having 310 points added to your SAT score in how much it improves your chance of admission (and being Asian is the equivalent of having 140 points subtracted). And, after admission, they note that it "is painful to acknowledge" that black students' class rank at graduation is, on average, 37 percentage points lower than white students' — 17 points lower if the students' class and educational backgrounds are held constant. They wind up endorsing a greater, rather than a gradually lessening, commitment to affirmative action, one that would extend far past admission into stronger institutional efforts on campus to promote black-white interaction and to close the black-white gap in grades.

The Shape of the River is so closely attuned to answering, with data, the arguments against affirmative action made in court cases that it spends relatively little time on the big contextual question: Why race? Bowen and Bok make an overwhelming case that race-based affirmative action is necessary to achieve a non-trivial black presence on elite campuses, and that having gone to elite colleges is a long-running positive experience for black students. But why does that matter so much? Why does it

deserve primacy among the many other goals these colleges are trying to honor?

In public discussions on elite campuses, the value of racial diversity is assumed. People almost always say that there isn't enough diversity, rather than that it isn't a worthwhile primary goal. The question of how to get better at diversity, in admissions and also in the student experience, dominates. Even discussions played in the key of *The Shape of the River*—that is, candid warnings about how steeply the black presence would drop under any admissions policy that used academic and class criteria but ignored race—are rare. So it's easy to miss that the range of possibilities for affirmative action is not just the same versus more. In court cases, in initiative campaigns, and sometimes in speeches and advertisements by politicians, another set of questions emerges. Why should it be permissible to consider race in the operation of institutions, even as a positive factor? Why should a black applicant from an economically privileged background get a place that might have gone to a poor white applicant? Supporters of affirmative action should develop persuasive answers to these questions, because they will surely reappear.

The universities collectively and voluntarily decided to put race in a primary place as they make admissions decisions in response to conditions in the wider society. In the immediate moment, fifty years ago, the country was in an obvious racial crisis. In the broader sense, race (defined as the slave and Jim Crow South defined it in the nineteenth century) was not just, as W.E.B. DuBois put it, "the problem of the twentieth century," but also the problem of the nineteenth century. To a lesser but still distinct extent, it is the problem of the twenty-first century. The persistent, though decreasing, black-white gaps on academic measures are manifestations of how profoundly different the black and white experiences in the United States still are, economically, socially, residentially, educationally, and in almost every other way. The elite universities that are the subject of *The Shape of the River* are trying to do their part to build a society, on campus and afterward, where racial discrimination will not be so pervasive. That is going to take a lot longer than Justice O'Connor's deadline of 2028—both inside and outside the universities. That affirmative action is necessary is a sign that the negative effects of racism persist; only when they end will it no longer be necessary. And until then, affirmative action, both as lived experience on campus and as a political and legal issue in the wider society, is going to continue to be challenging to enact and to maintain. The moment of crisis in which *The Shape of the River* was published may have passed, but no one should make the mistake of believing that the battles over affirmative action have ended.

Nicholas Lemann

Preface

STRETCHING FROM St. Paul to New Orleans, Mark Twain's Mississippi winds for twelve hundred miles through fog, rapids, slow eddies, sandbars, bends, and hidden bluffs. Drawing upon his own experiences on the Mississippi, Twain created an image of the river as both physically central to the United States and symbolically central to the progress of the country. The image of the river is also central to the story of our book, which is concerned with the flow of talent—particularly of talented black men and women—through the country's system of higher education and on into the marketplace and the larger society.

The image most commonly invoked in discussions of this process is the "pipeline." We often hear of the importance of keeping young people moving through the "pipeline" from elementary school to high school to college, on through graduate and professional schools, and into jobs, family responsibilities, and civic life. But this image is misleading, with its connotation of a smooth, well defined, and well understood passage. It is more helpful to think of the nurturing of talent as a process akin to moving down a winding river, with rock-strewn rapids and slow channels, muddy at times and clear at others. Particularly when race is involved, there is nothing simple, smooth, or highly predictable about the education of young people.

While riverboat pilots on the Mississippi navigated "point to point"—only as far as they could see into the next bend—they had to know every depth, every deceptive shoal, and every hidden snag of the river. Moreover, since the boats ran throughout the night, in high water and low, and both up the river and down it, these pilots had to know the river's features in every imaginable condition, and from either direction. Even though they could only steer through what they saw in front of them, they had to understand how the bend that they were navigating at any moment fit into the shape of a twelve-hundred-mile river.

The college admissions process and the educational experience that follows it are similarly complex. Most recently, debate about the use of race as a criterion has centered on the question of who "merits" or "deserves" a place in the freshman class. At this one bend in the river, prior grades and numerical test scores offer a tempting means of defining qualifications, since they are easily compiled and compared. But what do they really tell us, and what are we trying to predict? Much more, surely, than first-year grades or even graduation from one college or another. It is the contributions that individuals make throughout their

lives and the broader impact of higher education on the society that are finally most relevant.

In this book, we seek to be helpful to both the “pilots” of this educational process—the parents of prospective students, the high school counselors, college admissions officers, faculty members, and administrators, trustees, and regents responsible for setting policies—and those future students who will some day have to navigate the river. We also hope this study will be useful to employers, legislators, and the public as a whole, since everyone has an interest in the development of talent and access to opportunity in our society. We need to know as much as we can about what has happened around bends and curves—in college, in graduate school, and then twenty years downstream—from the frozen moment in time when seventeen-year-olds from various races and backgrounds sat down with Number 2 pencils to take the SAT. This book is an attempt to chart what race-sensitive admissions policies have meant over a long stretch of the river—both to the individuals who were admitted and to the society that has invested in their education and that counts so heavily on their future leadership.

These questions are enormously important because this country is not yet where any of us would want it to be in terms of race relations. On this central point, liberals and conservatives often agree. Echoing W.E.B. Du Bois, John Hope Franklin has argued eloquently that “the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of the color line. . . . By any standard of measurement or evaluation the problem has not been solved in the twentieth century, and thus becomes a part of the legacy and burden of the next century.”¹ The problem of “the color line” is so central to American life for reasons that are rooted in the disjunction between the values embedded in the Constitution and the realities of three centuries of collective experience. These reasons reflect a sense on the part of many that, despite all the progress made in the past fifty years, we have not yet succeeded in transcending a racial divide that too often discourages the development of ordinary relationships among individuals based on trust and mutual respect. They include as well persistent gross inequities in wealth, privilege, and position that are hard to explain away simply on the basis of differences in individual effort and initiative, significant as such differences are. Finally, there is a collective concern that we are failing to develop to its fullest the human potential of the country and a growing realization that our society, with its ever more diverse population, cannot ultimately succeed as a democracy if we fail to close the gaps in opportunity that continue to be associated with race.

The subject of race in America is as sensitive and contentious as it is

¹ Franklin 1993, p. 5.

important. Highly charged words, such as “fairness,” “merit,” “achievement,” “preference,” and even “race” itself, often take on very different connotations depending on the speaker and the context. (Note, for example, the radical differences in polling results when the wording of questions about race is changed in relatively minor ways.)² Language itself has been a casualty of heated debate; for this reason one aim of this study is to “unpack” the meaning of terms such as “merit,” clarify their various possible meanings, and set forth the consequences of embracing one conception of what they signify rather than another.

Our country respects individual achievement, but it also recognizes that what people have achieved often depends on the families they have grown up in, the neighborhoods in which they have lived, and the schools they have attended, as well as on their own ability and hard work. People rightly seek a society in which racial prejudice no longer limits opportunities. But any close observer of American society cannot help but see the many ways in which, covertly and overtly, consciously and unconsciously, actively and as a consequence of inertia, racial differences that have been long in the making continue to thwart aspirations for an open and just society. Words reflect this reality. When an interviewer interested in nomenclature asked the distinguished social psychologist, Kenneth Clark, “What is the best thing for blacks to call themselves,” Clark replied: “White.”³

THE NATURE OF THIS STUDY

Many Americans are uncomfortable about the use of race as a factor in admitting students to selective colleges and professional schools. Critics have attacked the policy on several grounds. They maintain that it is wrong for universities to exclude white applicants with high grades and impressive test scores while accepting minority applicants with lower grades and scores. They point out that admissions officers sometimes accept minority applicants who are not disadvantaged but come from wealthier, more privileged homes and better schools than some applicants who are rejected. They claim that all such policies accentuate racial differences, intensify prejudice, and interfere with progress toward a color-blind society. They assert that admitting minority applicants with

² See Kravitz et al. 1996. A New York Times/CBS News Poll indicated that “the issue of affirmative action, much like abortion, is particularly sensitive to semantics” (Verhovek 1997b, p. A1). Even more recently, the rewording of a referendum in Houston seems to have played a major role in retaining that city’s affirmative action program (Verhovek 1997a, p. A1).

³ Roberts 1995, p. 7.

lower grades and scores may stigmatize and demoralize the very students that the policy attempts to help, by forcing them to compete with classmates of greater academic ability.

Defenders of race-sensitive admissions respond with arguments of their own. They insist that such policies are justified to atone for a legacy of oppression and to make up for continuing discrimination in the society. They point out that admissions officers have long deviated from standardized test scores and prior grades to favor athletes, legacies, and other applicants with special characteristics that are deemed desirable. They argue that admitting a diverse class gives students of all races a better preparation for living and working in an increasingly diverse society.

Until now, the debate has proceeded without much empirical evidence as to the effects of such policies and their consequences for the students involved. The chapters that follow seek to remedy this deficiency by drawing on an extensive study of students from a number of academically selective colleges and universities—places where the debate over race-sensitive institutions has been played out in “real time.” We are concerned primarily with the performance, in college and after college, of black and white students admitted to these schools.

In setting forth the “facts,” as best we can discern them, we recognize that all data of this kind are subject to many interpretations. Moreover, even considering such questions can antagonize people on both sides of the argument who believe that the “right principles” are so compelling that no amount of evidence can change their minds. Plainly, data take us only so far in considering this subject. Individuals who agree on “the facts” may still end up disagreeing about what should be done because of overriding differences in values. As a result, we have no expectation that the analyses presented in this study will resolve complex issues to everyone’s satisfaction. But we do hope that our research can inform the debate by framing questions carefully and presenting what we have learned about outcomes.

Of course, it is widely understood that in framing questions and testing hypotheses, investigators are always influenced by their own values and preconceptions. We know that we have been. It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that both of us came to this study of race-sensitive admissions with a history of having worked hard, over more than three decades, to enroll and educate more diverse student bodies at two of the country’s best-known universities. This does not mean that we have favored quotas (we have not) or that we are unaware of how easy it can be for good intentions to lead people astray. Nor have we ever believed that all colleges or universities—including those with which we have been most closely involved—have always made the right choices or imple-

mented every policy perfectly. Still, the fact remains that we are both strongly identified with what we regard as responsible efforts to improve educational opportunities for well-qualified minority students.

At the same time, in contemplating this study, we recognized that race-sensitive admissions policies rested on a set of assumptions that had not heretofore been tested empirically. Much basic information was lacking about such topics as the academic performance of minority students with higher and lower test scores in the most selective colleges and universities, the nature and extent of interaction among different races on campus, and the subsequent careers of minority students accepted through race-sensitive policies. When we began the study, we were far from certain what the data would reveal. Quite possibly, some important assumptions underlying the efforts to enroll more minority students would turn out to be unfounded. Nevertheless, we felt that after thirty years, it was surely time to discover the facts, insofar as it was possible to do so. It was important, we thought, to try to understand and come to terms with any disappointing results as well as to learn from positive outcomes. Now that we have completed our study, we can only say that we have learned a great deal along the way. The image of the river, with its twists and turns and muddy patches, as well as its occasional brilliant vistas, seems exactly right for describing an educational process that has turned out to be even more subtle and complicated than we had imagined it to be when we began our research.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is limited in several important respects. First, we are concerned solely with higher education. In our view, one problem with much of the debate over affirmative action is that it lumps together a large number of highly disparate areas and programs, ranging from the awarding of contracts to minority-owned businesses to policies governing hiring and promotion to the admissions policies of colleges and universities. The arguments that pertain to one area may or may not apply in other areas. It is noteworthy, for example, that the plaintiffs in the *Piscataway* case, which centered on the layoff of a white secondary school teacher, took pains in their final brief to ask the Supreme Court not to confuse the job-specific issues that confronted the plaintiff with the much broader, and rather different, sets of considerations that face educational institutions in deciding whom to admit.⁴

⁴ A brief filed with the Court in October 1997 on behalf of the plaintiff states: "University admissions decisions . . . differ critically from local school boards' employment

Within the realm of higher education, we are concerned only with academically selective colleges and universities. The main reason is that the debate surrounding race-sensitive admissions is relevant primarily within these institutions. In colleges and professional schools that admit nearly every qualified applicant, there is little to debate (although there may be arguments over how “qualified” should be defined, and whether the same definition is applied to white and black candidates). It is when there are strict limits on the number of places in an entering class and far more qualified applicants than places, that the choices become difficult and the issue of whether to give weight to race comes to the forefront. Many very well-regarded public universities have broadly inclusive admissions policies at the undergraduate level, and the overall number of selective undergraduate schools is much smaller than many people assume (see Chapter 2). At the graduate and professional level, many schools also take almost every qualified applicant; however, the leading private and public institutions, including almost all accredited schools of law and medicine, select their students from an appreciably larger number of qualified candidates.

The scope of our study is limited in a third way: although we include information about Hispanic students, our work focuses principally on whites and African Americans (whom we usually refer to as “black”). We hope that other inquiries will be able to do full justice to the educational experiences of Hispanics along with those of Native Americans and Asian Americans. One reason for focusing on black and white students in this study is that so much of the debate over race-sensitive admissions policies

decisions. Unlike the nuanced, multifaceted decisionmaking process that many universities employ in deciding which students to admit—a process that arguably defies the standard ‘underutilization’ analysis of employment discrimination law—school boards are able to determine whether their employment decisions have an adverse impact on available, qualified members of minority groups without resorting to racial preferences.” (Board of Education of the Township of Piscataway v. Sharon Taxman 1997, p. 40).

It is helpful, in our view, to think of admissions decisions as having many of the attributes of long-term investment decisions involving the creation of human and social capital. The considerations, and especially the risk/reward profiles, that are appropriate to such admissions decisions may be quite different from those that apply elsewhere within the academy itself, never mind outside it. For instance, it may make sense to accept considerably more risk, in return for the possibility of a very high long-term social return, in accepting an applicant for undergraduate study than in appointing a senior professor with tenure. Of course, there are many other differences between admitting students and hiring colleagues, as there are differences between layoffs and new hires. See Bok (1982) for a more general discussion of the differences between affirmative action in admissions and in faculty hiring.

has centered on black-white comparisons.⁵ There are also practical considerations. While Hispanics share many of the problems faced by blacks, there are so many differences in cultures, backgrounds, and circumstances within the broad Hispanic category that any rigorous study would need to make more distinctions than are possible within the confines of our database. Native Americans have also endured many handicaps and injustices and have benefited from race-sensitive admissions policies. Nevertheless, their representation at the academically selective colleges and universities is exceedingly small and does not permit proper statistical analysis in a study of this kind. Thus, however much we would have liked to include comparisons with a variety of groups of Hispanic and Native American matriculants, this was not a practical possibility.

Asian Americans differ from other minorities in important respects. Unlike the case of blacks and Hispanics, the percentage of Asian Americans in selective colleges and universities is far higher than their percentage in the population at large and continues to increase at the institutions included in this study. While there are important and sensitive issues associated with the enrollment of Asian American students (who, like Hispanics, are themselves highly diverse), these are different issues from those that confront admissions offices in considering black candidates.

Finally, our study addresses issues of educational policy. Our objective is not to analyze the development of constitutional law, the proper interpretation of civil rights legislation, or the present holdings of the courts in these areas. We are concerned with the admissions policies that colleges and universities have followed and with their consequences for the country.

THE COLLEGE AND BEYOND DATABASE

Much of the new content in this study derives from exploitation of a rich database called College and Beyond (C&B). This database was built by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation over nearly four years (from the end of 1994 through 1997) as a part of the Foundation's broader interest in supporting research in higher education. A full explanation of its construction and its components, including links to data compiled by other researchers, is contained in Appendix A. In brief, the part of the database used in this study contains the records of more than eighty thousand undergraduate students who matriculated at twenty-eight academically

⁵ On the issue of which groups should be included in the discussion of race in America, see Shepard (1997); Shepard quotes scholars from the black, Hispanic, and Asian American communities. Shelby Steele is quoted by Shepard as having said: "The real racial divide in America was and remains black and white" (p. 11).

selective colleges and universities in the fall of 1951, the fall of 1976, and the fall of 1989. Created on the explicit understanding that the Foundation would not release or publish data that identified either individual students or individual schools, it is a “restricted access database.”

The “in-college” component of the database was compiled from individual student records in collaboration with the participating colleges and universities. For each entering student (except those few cases where records had been lost or were incomplete), the database contains information available at the time the student was admitted, including race, gender, test scores, rank in high school class, and, for many students, information about family background. It also includes records of academic performance in college, compiled mainly from transcripts, which have been linked to the admissions data. Each student record was coded to indicate graduation status (when and if the student graduated), major field of study, grade point average, and whether the student participated in athletics or other time-intensive extracurricular activities.

For many of these same matriculants, we also have extensive survey data describing their subsequent histories (advanced degrees earned, sector of employment, occupation, earned income and family income, involvement in civic activities, marital status and number of children). The respondents were also asked to provide information about where else they applied to college, where they were admitted, whether they did or did not attend their first-choice school, how they now assess their experiences in college, and how satisfied they have been with their lives after college. Finally, for the '89 matriculants only, the survey sought information on the extent to which they interacted (during college and since college) with individuals of different races, political outlooks, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic origins. The individuals contacted through the survey were extraordinarily cooperative: the overall sample response rates were 80 percent for the '76 matriculants and 84 percent for the '89 matriculants (Appendix A).

The twenty-eight colleges and universities whose matriculants are included in the C&B database are:

Liberal Arts Colleges

Barnard College
Bryn Mawr College
Denison University
Hamilton College
Kenyon College
Oberlin College
Smith College

Research Universities

Columbia University
Duke University
Emory University
Miami University (Ohio)
Northwestern University
Pennsylvania State University
Princeton University

Swarthmore College	Rice University
Wellesley College	Stanford University
Wesleyan University	Tufts University
Williams College	Tulane University
	University of Michigan at Ann Arbor
	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
	University of Pennsylvania
	Vanderbilt University
	Washington University
	Yale University

Thus the database includes both liberal arts colleges and research universities, including four public universities, and it reflects some reasonable geographic spread. These colleges and universities are not, however, at all representative of American higher education. They were not intended to be. All of them share the attribute of being academically selective, though the degree of selectivity (as measured by the average combined verbal and math SAT score of the entering class) varies considerably.

In the fall of 1976, eight of the twenty-eight C&B schools had average combined SAT scores of more than 1250 (before the recentering of the scores by ETS which has raised all the scores). Nationally, we estimate that there were only twenty schools in this category, and the eight C&B schools enrolled 40 percent of all freshmen entering these extremely selective colleges and universities. Another thirteen of the C&B schools had average scores of 1150 to 1250; nationally, there were fifty-three schools in this range, and the thirteen C&B schools enrolled 34 percent of all their freshmen. The remaining seven C&B schools had average SAT scores in the 1000–1149 range, and they enrolled 7 percent of all freshmen who entered the 241 schools with SAT scores in this range.⁶ In short, the C&B student population contains a sufficiently large fraction of the total number of matriculants at the most selective colleges and universities that we are reasonably confident that our findings apply generally to this set of institutions and especially to those with average scores above 1150.

In building the C&B database, the intention was to assemble data from a group of schools that were similar enough to permit in-depth comparisons, yet different enough to make such comparisons revealing. Being able to observe the full set of entering students at each of the

⁶ See Appendix Table A.2 for the detailed derivation of these percentages. Estimates of the number of institutions in each SAT interval are based on data provided by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

participating institutions⁷ is a great advantage in studying a subject such as race-sensitive admissions. The large size and census-like character of the database, the strong similarities among the institutions in curricula and admissions standards (with many overlapping applications for admission), and the ability to form coherent clusters of institutions (defined by degree of selectivity and type of school) combine to permit a closer, more intensive examination of black-white differences in outcomes than is possible in studies using national samples of individuals from a larger and more diverse array of institutions. We wanted to be able to examine in detail black-white differences among finely classified subgroups of students: men and women, those with lower and higher SATs, those majoring in a variety of fields, those going on to graduate study and those stopping after receipt of the BA, and so on. We believe that “the shape of the river” must be studied at this level of detail if its course is to be charted accurately.

The other side of the proverbial coin is that because the database was not designed to be “representative,” we cannot extrapolate findings from these institutions to the whole of higher education. There are, however, national longitudinal databases that do permit researchers to work with sample data for schools that are much more representative of higher education in general.⁸ The objective was to complement the existing longitudinal databases by creating a new resource that would permit more detailed analyses within a circumscribed set of institutions.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

This study is highly quantitative. In describing and presenting our work, we have used the simplest techniques that are consistent with the obligation to report meaningful results. Most of the findings are presented in the form of tabulations or cross-tabulations, and we make extensive use of bar charts and other figures (from which the main story line of the book can be read).

We also use other standard techniques, primarily multivariate regres-

⁷ This is a slight overstatement. We include the full entering cohorts at twenty-four of the twenty-eight institutions; for the other four institutions, we included all the black matriculants and a sample of approximately half of the white matriculants (see Appendix A).

⁸ National longitudinal databases include: Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS), Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B), National Longitudinal Survey of 1972 (NLS), High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study (HS&B), and National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS).

sions, to disentangle the many forces that jointly affect student performance in college, receipt of advanced degrees, and later-life outcomes. While we have no doubt failed to include enough of this finer-grained analysis to satisfy many empirically minded social scientists, we may well have included too much for readers who want only to know “the bottom line.” (A considerable amount of explanatory material appears in footnotes.) Our goal has been to achieve the balance that allows us to isolate the effects of different variables—and to understand their interactions—without drifting too far from commonsense questions and answers. Throughout, we have done our best to explain our findings and our methods in language that lay readers can understand.

The methods used to analyze the data are described in Appendix B. We have also included a great deal of material in additional tables in Appendix D in an effort to make it as easy as possible for readers to check our interpretations, and, if they choose, to substitute their own. In due course, we expect others, using more sophisticated econometric techniques, to extend the analysis presented here. In many instances, the simple methods we employ can only suggest directions and permit what we hope are informed judgments concerning relationships.

We have devoted a great deal of effort to providing precisely defined national benchmarks that allow the results for the C&B schools to be seen in context. It is important, for example, to compare the earnings of the black graduates of the C&B schools with the earnings of all black holders of BAs who graduated at roughly the same time and to provide the same data for white graduates. In making all such comparisons (as well as comparisons among various groupings of schools included in the C&B database), we confront the problem of selection bias. The process by which students choose colleges and by which colleges choose students is, of course, anything but random, and such a complicated selection process produces outcomes that are independent of the variables we are able to study. We have done our best to deal with this problem by introducing appropriate controls and by attempting to calibrate some of the remaining effects of this double-selection process, but we do not claim to have found a full resolution to this often intractable problem.

In addition to the many statistics, figures, and tables, we have included in the book some brief personal reflections provided for the most part by individuals who participated in the C&B surveys. These accounts are intended to be only illustrative. Our hope is that they will provide some sense of the kinds of experiences and feelings that underlie the rather antiseptic numbers that appear in such abundance. We would have been reluctant to include these observations—even though many of them are quite revealing—had we not first built the statistical foundation upon which they rest. The stories are meant to amplify the empirical findings

and to be thought-provoking, but not to “prove” or confirm any of our interpretations.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 describes the origins and evolution of race-sensitive admissions policies in the context of other changes in American society.

Chapter 2 discusses the admissions process and describes how race affects the odds of being admitted to selective colleges. The chapter then proposes an operational definition of a “race-neutral” standard and develops estimates of how many black students in the ’89 cohort would not have been admitted to certain C&B schools if such a standard had been applied.

Chapter 3 describes how 1976 and 1989 matriculants fared academically in college—the number who graduated, the majors they chose, how the grades of students varied with their SAT scores, and how black students performed in relation to how we might have expected them to do on the basis of pre-collegiate indicators.

Chapter 4 follows the ’76 and ’89 matriculants from college to graduate and professional schools and charts how many of them (classified by rank in class as well as race) went on to earn PhDs or degrees in professional fields such as law, medicine, and business.

Chapter 5 explores how the 1976 C&B matriculants have done in the marketplace—how many are employed, how much money they have earned, and how satisfied they are with their jobs. We compare blacks and whites, women and men, and C&B graduates with graduates of all colleges nationwide.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the lives of C&B matriculants outside of the workplace. We examine their civic contributions, marital status, family income, and their own assessments of how satisfied they are with their lives.

Chapter 7 describes the matriculants’ responses when asked to look back and give their impressions of what they learned in college, and whether, given the opportunity, they would go back to the same school, choose the same major, and spend their time in the same ways.

Chapter 8 examines how much interaction took place across racial and other lines among the 1989 C&B matriculants and reports on the extent to which students from three different eras (those who entered in 1951, 1976, and 1989) agree or disagree with the degree of emphasis that their colleges have placed on recruiting a racially and ethnically diverse student body.

In Chapter 9, we draw together the major findings from the earlier chapters and discuss their implications for the principal arguments that have been used to criticize race-sensitive admissions policies.

Finally, in Chapter 10, we present our own conclusions concerning the role of race in the admissions process and how concepts such as “fairness” and “merit” should be interpreted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is no way we can thank adequately the small army of people who have worked so hard on this study. The evident importance of the subject, and the privilege of being able, perhaps, to contribute something of value to a wrenching national debate, surely account in large measure for the willingness of all of those mentioned below, and others not mentioned, to go far beyond any definition of the call of duty.

We begin by thanking our four principal collaborators:

- James Shulman, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s Administrative and Financial Officer as well as a program and research associate, has had a hand (and a considerable brain) in every facet of the study. He deserves principal credit for having worked tirelessly with individuals at the institutions in the College and Beyond database, as well as with colleagues at the Foundation and others outside it, to guide the construction of a scholarly resource of immense value. He then participated actively in the analysis of the data, in the drafting and editing of chapters, and in the final passage of the manuscript through what must surely have seemed like an endless swamp rather than a smooth flowing river.
- Thomas Nygren, Director of the Princeton office of the Foundation and also the Foundation’s Director of Technology (as well as the program officer responsible for grantmaking in South Africa), has overseen all of the technical work that went into the building of the C&B database with characteristic skill and patience. He has also been responsible for supervising the regression analysis and has taken a principal role (with Stacy Berg Dale) in drafting Appendix A and Appendix B and, more generally, in insisting that the subject deserves the most thoroughgoing effort to respect the underlying data.
- Stacy Berg Dale, a Research Associate in the Foundation’s Princeton office, has mastered the intricacies of the C&B database. We have depended heavily on her unusual talent for thinking—by reflex, it seems—in terms of multivariate regressions. She has used this talent to challenge conclusions that might have been

accepted at face value, to range freely in exploring alternative hypotheses, and to keep to an absolute minimum the number of arbitrary assumptions and inconsistencies that intrude on any research of this kind.

- Lauren Meserve, a Research Associate in the Foundation's New York office, has worked tirelessly to ensure that the underlying empirical analysis was done correctly and to design the charts and figures that provide the main storyline for the analysis. She has an exceptional range of quantitative and qualitative skills and has been, from start to finish, tenacious in using these talents to improve the research and the presentation of the results.

It is no exaggeration to say that this study could not have been done without the crisp intelligence and unflagging dedication of these four collaborators.

Other colleagues at the Foundation also made valuable contributions. In the Princeton office, Susan Anderson checked and re-checked the text, made many suggestions for improving the exposition, assisted in the preparation of the list of references cited, and was our principal liaison with Princeton University Press. Douglas Mills was enormously helpful in providing advice on statistical questions and in extracting data from the Census and other national databases. Joyce Pierre, Dorothy Westgate, Jennifer Dicke, and Deborah Peikes all made important contributions to what was clearly a group effort. Earlier in the project, Fredrick Vars, now completing his studies at the Yale Law School, was instrumental in constructing the institutional files that underlie the C&B database and in doing initial empirical work on black-white differences in the relation between SAT scores and academic performance. In New York, David Crook also helped organize data and explore various empirical questions.

Still other Mellon Foundation staff members provided an unfailing stream of criticism and suggestions as they read versions of the manuscript. Foremost among this group is Harriet Zuckerman, who read more versions of the manuscript than anyone and did so much to improve the clarity of both the analysis and the exposition. Mary Patterson McPherson, T. Dennis Sullivan, Stephanie Bell-Rose, Jackie Looney, and Henry Drewry also read the manuscript carefully and made useful comments. Pat Woodford, Kamla Motihar, and Ulrica Konvalin proved over and over again their willingness to do whatever was needed to bring the project to conclusion. In Cambridge, Connie Higgins has been of enormous help in a project that tested the patience of all who were caught up in its wake.

We are very fortunate to have benefited from a close reading of the manuscript by outstanding scholars who contributed many valuable sug-

gestions: David Featherman, Director of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan; Randall Kennedy, Professor of Law at the Harvard Law School; Alan Krueger, Bendheim Professor of Economics at Princeton University; three other economists who are now college or university presidents—Richard Levin (Yale University), Michael McPherson (Macalester College), and Harold Shapiro (Princeton University); Michael Nettles, Professor of Education at the University of Michigan; Sarah Turner, Assistant Professor of Education and Economics at the University of Virginia; and Gilbert Whitaker, another economist who is now Dean of the Jones Graduate School of Administration at Rice University. Professors Richard Light of Harvard University, Daniel Kahneman of Princeton University, John Simon of the Yale Law School, and Claire Simon commented on particular chapters. Charles E. Exley, Jr., retired Chairman of NCR Corporation and a Trustee of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, also read the manuscript with great care and made extremely insightful comments—which he transmitted to us from the Sudan! At an earlier stage in the study, Professors David Card, now at the University of California at Berkeley, and Orley Ashenfelter of Princeton University, contributed to the shaping of the research design.

Robert K. Merton of Columbia University and Arnold Rampersad of Princeton University provided knowing advice concerning the title of the book and the preface. Alan Rosenbaum, Director of the Art Museum at Princeton, was heroic in his efforts to find just the right cover illustration (he succeeded, we think).

In our initial efforts to collect institutional records, we were joined by an exceptional group of people at the twenty-eight participating institutions, many of whom worked nights and weekends to generate the raw files we needed. It is only limitations of space that prevent us from thanking each of them, and their presidents, for having had the faith to participate so actively in the construction of the C&B database.

The survey component of the database, which plays such a vital role in the analysis, could not have been created without the thoughtful contributions of Herbert Abelson of the Survey Research Center of Princeton University and Geraldine Mooney and her colleagues at Mathematica Policy Research (the entity that administered the surveys so successfully, as is documented in Appendix A). We also want to thank the forty-five thousand individuals who took the time to complete the surveys so carefully and often volunteered additional comments. Many of these former students obviously care, and care deeply, about the questions we have been studying.

As a companion project, the Foundation commissioned the creation of a national control group survey (described in Appendix A); Norman Bradburn and Allen Sanderson of the National Opinion Research

Center in Chicago did yeoman work in completing this part of the project.

We were also able to link the core of the C&B database to two other large databases that complemented the information we were able to collect directly. Donald Stewart and his colleagues at the College Entrance Examination Board and the Educational Testing Service, and Alexander Astin, Director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, and his colleagues at the Cooperative Institutional Research Project, understood what we were trying to accomplish and were determined to help. In addition, Linda Wightman, former Vice President of the Law School Admission Council and now a faculty member at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, went to extra efforts to provide detailed data on law school students.

In order to learn more at first hand about the interest of businesses and professional associations in the recruitment of minority students, we contacted many knowledgeable individuals. Thomas Schick at American Express, Ira Millstein and Marsha Simms at Weil Gotschal & Manges, Jeffrey Brinck and Christina Wagner at Milbank Tweed Hadley & McCloy, Richard Fisher and Marilyn Booker at Morgan Stanley, and Marc Lackritz at the Securities Industry Association in Washington, D.C., were all extremely generous with their time. Subsequently, Glenda Burkhart has been responsible for involving representatives of the business, professional, and academic communities in thinking about the implications of this research.

We have been fortunate, too, in our publisher. Walter Lippincott, Peter Dougherty, Neil Litt, and their colleagues at Princeton University Press made it clear from the outset that for them this project was in no way "business as usual." They have worked diligently to publish a complex book at their usual high standard under extraordinary time constraints.

Finally, we wish to thank the Trustees of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their appreciation of what we have tried to do, their financial support, and their understanding (nay, their insistence) that we would, of course, come to our own conclusions. The arguments developed in this book represent our own thinking, and none of the Trustees of the Foundation, nor any of the others who provided so much advice and help, should be implicated in the results. Whatever faults remain, despite the efforts of so many to "get it right," are solely our responsibility.

William G. Bowen
Derek Bok

May 1998

THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER

Historical Context

FEW PEOPLE today recall the full measure of the predicament in which African Americans found themselves prior to World War II. In 1940, most black men and women lived out of common view in rural communities, chiefly in the South. Approximately 90 percent lived in poverty (measured by today's criteria).¹ Their annual earnings were less than half those of whites. The education they received was markedly inferior in quality. African American children in the South went to predominantly black schools, in which (on average) pupil-teacher ratios were one-quarter greater than those in white schools, school terms were 10 percent shorter, and black teachers were paid half the salary of white teachers.² The median amount of education received by blacks aged 25–29 was about seven years.³ Only 12 percent of blacks aged 25–29 had completed high school; less than 2 percent could claim a college degree.⁴

Very few blacks managed to enter the higher-paying occupations. Only 1.8 percent of all male professionals were black, and only 1.3 percent of all male managers and proprietors.⁵ Blacks made up 2.8 percent of physicians, 0.5 percent of attorneys, and 0.5 percent of engineers. No more than thirty-three elected officials in the entire United States were black. Of these, one was a member of Congress, but there were no mayors, governors, or senators. Only a single African American sat on the federal bench.⁶

World War II brought an unprecedented demand for factory labor and a new wave of migration to the North, trends that did much to better the material circumstances of blacks. The sustained economic growth that followed the war accomplished even more. From 1940 to 1960, black poverty rates declined from roughly 93 to 55 percent, while expected lifetime earnings as a percentage of the prevailing levels for

¹ Jaynes and Williams 1989, p. 277.

² Card and Krueger 1992b, p. 167.

³ Jaynes and Williams 1989, p. 334.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education 1997, p. 17.

⁵ Jaynes and Williams 1989, p. 273.

⁶ Data on the professions are from the U.S. Bureau of the Census 1940, tab. 6; data on public service are from Jaynes and Williams 1989, pp. 240, 243.

whites rose from 42 to 50 percent for men and from 56 to 72 percent for women.⁷

Educational levels also increased as millions of blacks moved from the rural South to the urban North and as Southern states improved black schools in an effort to slow the outward migration of cheap labor. By 1960, even in the South, teachers' salaries and the length of the school term were approximately equal in black and white schools, and the high pupil-teacher ratios for black schools had declined to within approximately 10 percent of the average level in predominantly white schools.⁸ Meanwhile, median years of schooling for blacks aged 25–29 grew from approximately 7 years in 1940 to 10.5 years in 1960.⁹ Over the same period, the proportion of blacks aged 25–29 who had graduated from high school increased from 12.3 to 38.6 percent, and the percentage graduating from college rose from 1.6 to 5.4 percent.¹⁰

Despite these gains, little progress occurred in opening elite occupations to African Americans. The percentage of all professionals who were black rose to 3.8 percent for men and 6.0 percent for women, while the percentages of managers and proprietors who were black grew only to 3.0 percent for men and 1.8 percent for women.¹¹ The percentage of physicians who were black, only 2.8 in 1940, failed to increase at all during the ensuing 20 years. Meanwhile, the proportion of attorneys who were black rose only from 0.5 percent to 1.2 percent, while the percentage of black engineers remained the same.¹² The number of black elected officials jumped from 33 in 1941 to 280 in 1965, but even this total was only a tiny fraction of the thousands of elected offices throughout the nation. No more than four African Americans sat in Congress (less than 1 percent of all members), and there were still no senators. The largest gains came at the lower levels of government, with increasing numbers of blacks serving as state legislators (26 to 102), mayors (0 to 3), city council members (4 to 74), and school board members (2 to 68). In 1961, only four federal judges were black.¹³

The early postwar period also brought several Supreme Court rulings that changed the impact of the Constitution on African Americans. Most of these decisions involved educational opportunity. A 1938 Supreme

⁷ Jaynes and Williams 1989, pp. 278, 295. The changes in the economic and educational status of blacks and Hispanics since 1940 have been described more recently by Reynolds Farley (1996, pp. 208ff.).

⁸ Card and Krueger 1992, p. 168.

⁹ Jaynes and Williams 1989, p. 335.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education 1997, p. 17.

¹¹ Jaynes and Williams 1989, p. 273.

¹² U.S. Bureau of the Census 1940, 1960.

¹³ Jaynes and Williams 1989, pp. 240, 243.

Court opinion had found that Missouri had violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment by barring blacks from attending the state university's law school, giving them tuition money instead to attend an out-of-state law school.¹⁴ In 1949, the Court went further, ruling that Texas could not satisfy the Fourteenth Amendment by establishing a separate law school for blacks.¹⁵ Finally, in 1954, a unanimous Supreme Court handed down its celebrated decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, putting an end to de jure school segregation in the South.¹⁶

As events unfolded, the early effects of *Brown* proved to be limited. Although the prohibition against segregation was quickly extended to public transportation and other state-owned facilities, these rulings were not widely enforced. Southern politicians uniformly denounced the school desegregation decision, and white citizens' councils sprang up in countless Southern communities to harass any black who advocated desegregation.

Responding to these developments, blacks began to organize.¹⁷ The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955–1956 brought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to prominence and launched a long series of efforts to desegregate public transportation, schools, and places of public accommodation throughout the South. During the rest of the decade, however, the federal government refused to take decisive action to secure the rights of blacks. Faced with open defiance by an Arkansas governor, President Eisenhower reluctantly sent federal troops to Little Rock to enforce a court order to integrate the schools, but the executive branch did little more to hasten the end of segregation. Congress did even less, passing a Civil Rights Act in 1957 that was too weak to have much effect in breaching the barriers to black voter registration in the South.

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF RACE-SENSITIVE ADMISSIONS POLICIES

In 1960, then, the outlook for blacks seemed highly uncertain. Their economic position had improved greatly but was still vastly inferior to that of whites. Although they had acquired important new constitutional

¹⁴ *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 305 U.S. 337 (1938).

¹⁵ *Sweatt v. Painter*, 339 U.S. 629 (1950).

¹⁶ 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

¹⁷ A succinct summary of the struggle for civil rights can be found in Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997, esp. pp. 97–180). Among the many extended treatments, see Kluger (1975).

rights, these Supreme Court rulings had not yet produced much tangible change. Moreover, the role of blacks in the nation's power structure was virtually nonexistent. Very few African Americans held public office, and few had entered the elite occupations and professions. Virtually no blacks could be found in the country's leading corporations, banks, hospitals, or law firms. Erwin Smigel reported in his 1960s study of Wall Street law firms: "In the year and a half that was spent interviewing, I only heard of three Negroes who had been hired by large law firms. Two of these were women who did not meet the client."¹⁸ Colleges and professional schools enrolled few black students. In 1965, only 4.8 percent of all U.S. college students were African American.¹⁹

The position of blacks in selective colleges and universities was, if anything, even more marginal than in higher education as a whole. Occasionally, a particular college demonstrated a desire to attract black students. As early as 1835, the Oberlin board of trustees declared that "the education of the people of color is a matter of great interest and should be encouraged and sustained in this institution."²⁰ Beginning in 1941, Antioch College took steps to recruit black students and managed to enroll 123 black undergraduates before discontinuing the program in 1955. Even before World War II, universities such as Rutgers and the University of California, Los Angeles, featured a Paul Robeson or a Jackie Robinson on their football teams. It is probably safe to say, however, that prior to 1960, no selective college or university was making determined efforts to seek out and admit substantial numbers of African Americans.

In the fall of 1951, black students averaged 0.8 percent of the entering class at the nineteen College and Beyond schools for which adequate records are available; the range was from zero at four schools to a high of 3 percent at Oberlin, and the percentage of black matriculants exceeded 1 percent at only five other C&B schools. Overall, there were 63 black matriculants in these nineteen entering classes.²¹ The faces in the college yearbooks tell the same story graphically.

By the end of the 1950s, faint stirrings of interest had begun to appear.²¹ In 1959, the director of admissions at Mount Holyoke College started to visit "schools which might provide promising Negro appli-

¹⁸ Smigel 1969, p. 45.

¹⁹ Hacker 1983, p. 247.

²⁰ Cited in Duffy and Goldberg (1997, p. 137). Chapter 5 of this book provides an informative account of the earliest beginnings of active recruitment of minority students by selective liberal arts colleges and is also the source of the account below of "stirrings of interest" at colleges such as Mount Holyoke and Wellesley.

²¹ The College and Beyond database is described in the Preface and in Appendix A. The 0.8 percent figure cited in the text is an unweighted average of the percentages at the individual C&B schools.

cants,” and the college actually enrolled a total of ten black students in 1964.²² In 1963, Wellesley College introduced a junior-year program for black students attending colleges supported by the United Negro College Fund. Dartmouth, Princeton, and Yale all established special summer enrichment programs to prepare promising disadvantaged students for possible admission to selective colleges.

By the mid-1960s, amid a rising concern over civil rights, a number of schools began to recruit black students. Nevertheless, the numbers actually enrolled remained small, with blacks making up only 1 percent of the enrollments of selective New England colleges in 1965, according to one estimate.²³ The reasons were clear enough. As one author put it, “The selective colleges would rather be selective than integrated.”²⁴ Accordingly, although they might recruit black students vigorously, they did not significantly modify their regular standards for admission and financial aid. Their academic requirements were too demanding to accommodate more than a tiny number of African American students, and their tuition and fees were more than most of those who were admitted could afford.

Similarly, few blacks were enrolled in the nation’s professional schools. In 1965, barely 1 percent of all law students in America were black, and over one-third of them were enrolled in all-black schools.²⁵ Barely 2 percent of all medical students were African American, and more than three-fourths of them attended two all-black institutions, Howard University and Meharry Medical College.²⁶ It was in this context that Harvard Law School dean, Erwin Griswold (later solicitor general of the United States), undertook to increase the number of black students. Griswold was struck by the fact that law had come to play a crucial role in the lives of American blacks, yet virtually no black students were enrolled in the Harvard Law School or any other predominantly white law school. In 1965, therefore, he launched a special summer program for juniors from historically black colleges to interest them in attending law school. One year later, Harvard began admitting black students with test scores far below those of their white classmates. The strategy that Griswold employed was adopted by other law schools, and black enrollment began to rise.

Over this same period, the civil rights struggle had been intensifying throughout the country. In 1960, black students in North Carolina began a series of sit-ins to protest segregation at Woolworth stores and other

²² Duffy and Goldberg 1997, pp. 138–39.

²³ Kendrick 1967, p. 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ O’Neil 1970, p. 300.

²⁶ Nickens, Ready, and Petersdorf 1994, p. 472.

retail establishments. In 1961, black and white freedom riders boarded buses bound for the deep South to protest continued segregation in buses and other forms of public transportation. In 1962, a federal judge ordered the University of Mississippi to admit a black student, James Meredith, and violence erupted as Governor Ross Barnett ordered state troopers to block Meredith's entry. The following year, Governor George Wallace tried to keep two black students from attending the University of Alabama, the last remaining all-white state university. In 1965, police reacted with violence to a peaceful voting rights march in Selma, Alabama.

Meanwhile, as protests continued, public opinion in the country gradually shifted in favor of blacks. Eventually, Congress was moved to act. In 1964, President Johnson signed into law a Civil Rights Act committing the government to serious efforts to dismantle state-enforced segregation. In 1965, following the bloody police action at Selma, Congress passed a Voting Rights Act with real teeth. Almost immediately, black registration levels and election turnouts began to rise rapidly throughout the South.

As the 1960s progressed, the government's efforts on behalf of blacks grew more determined. A policy of simple nondiscrimination gave way to a requirement that companies contracting with the federal government make deliberate efforts to identify and consider minority applicants for employment. In June 1965, at Howard University, President Johnson delivered his now famous justification for moving beyond nondiscrimination to a more vigorous, affirmative effort to provide opportunities for black Americans: "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line in a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."²⁷ Soon, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission were requiring federal contractors to submit elaborate plans that included goals and timetables for assembling a workforce reflecting the availability of minority employees in the relevant labor market. Before long, these requirements were extended beyond the recruitment of black workers to include Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.

In the years that followed, almost all leading colleges and professional schools came to believe that they had a role to play in educating minority students. Often spurred by student protests on their own campuses, university officials initiated active programs to recruit minority applicants

²⁷ Reprinted in Rainwater and Yancey 1967, p. 126.