



## BOOKS: EDUCATION POLICY

## The Effects of Affirmative Action

Robert E. Thach

**H**ow best to deal with racial differences in a diverse society? This question is again being debated with alarming intensity. Major sectors of the United States' populace are turning away from attitudes and policies that have been widely supported for over 30 years.

At the center of debate is the U.S. system of higher education, and the "affirmative action" policies that have guided the preferential admission of minority applicants into colleges, graduate schools, and professional programs. The need for an in-depth, quantitative assessment of those policies and

their outcomes is overdue. *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* offers such an assessment. It documents, in sometimes overwhelming detail, the lives of 62,195 students who entered 28 highly selective colleges and universities in 1976 or 1989 (dates that demarcate important phases in affirmative action's trajectory); another 31,465 students entering in 1951 served as a baseline or control cohort. This massive "College and Beyond" database was assembled by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and has been intensively analyzed by William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities, respectively.

On the strength of these credentials the reader can expect much, and much is delivered. The coverage of the subject is (with a few exceptions) encyclopedic: the primary text contains 69 figures and 8 tables, and is followed by 158 pages of appendices, which contain an additional 6 figures and 63 tables. All this data is brought to bear with great force on virtually every important issue involved in the debate. Chapters are devoted to the histor-

ical and legal context of affirmative action in higher education, the process by which minority applicants are selected for admission, how well these applicants perform academically, and their further education, employment, and civic participation after graduation. The graduates' satisfaction with their employment (including compensation) and life in general are also examined, as are their views on their college experience and the role racial diversity played in it.

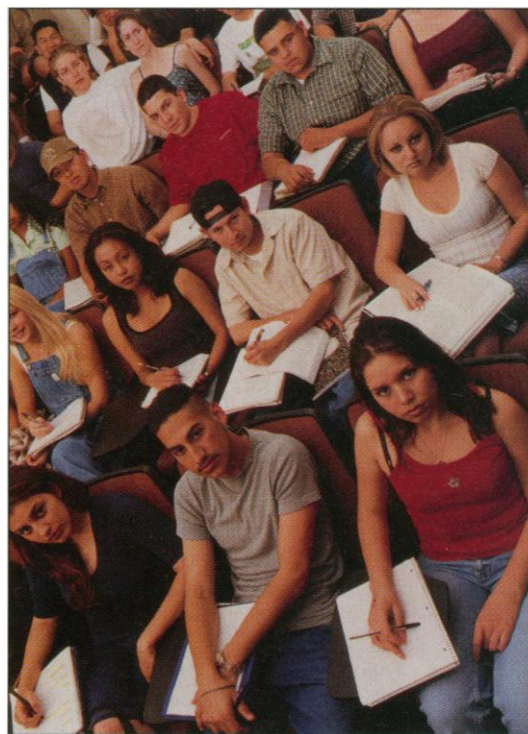
A myriad of important insights are achieved; so many, in fact, that the reader is advised to plan a systematic approach to this book in order to avoid becoming lost in the details—fascinating though they are. One method is to first read, in sequence, each chapter's summary, as these provide a useful overview, and then the final chapter ("Summing Up"). Once the context is established, individual chapters can then be savored in all their complexity.

Among the highlights is the finding that the great majority of black graduates of highly selective institutions are well satisfied with the education they received. They also strongly endorse the precept that a racially diverse student body enriched their learning experience. Interestingly, their white classmates agree with this assessment, and both groups feel that even more attention should have been paid to racial diversity on campus. Moreover, statistical analyses of outcomes such as graduation rates or subsequent earnings patterns indicate that even for blacks who are ostensibly less qualified than their white classmates, there would be no advantage in attending less selective institutions (even though there they would be surrounded by white classmates with equivalent qualifications). These results contradict the contention that mixing exceptionally qualified white students with seemingly less qualified minorities leads to disenchantment of both groups, and to frustration of the latter (1). These considerations are informed by a sophisticated discussion of what we mean by academic qualifications or "merit" and how the definition of merit closely depends on each institution's mission. Particularly illuminat-

ing is a thorough analysis of which aspects of performance (both in college and in later life) are predicted by standardized test scores, and which are not.

Another important finding is that the advantage of receiving an education at a highly selective college is a lasting asset, for blacks as well as whites. It leads directly to high enrollments in graduate and professional schools, high incomes, and high levels of job satisfaction, as well as to personal commitments to civic leadership.

Not all the conclusions are so positive. For example, just as black students on average enter college with lower high school grades and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores than whites, they continue to perform less well academically in subsequent years; indeed, they do not do as well as would be predicted by their pre-college records. This somewhat surprising phenomenon is called "underperformance," and the authors can only speculate as to its causes. Similarly, while black graduates of the prestigious institutions studied do very well financially relative to the average college graduate, they do not do as well as



their white classmates. Nor are they as satisfied with their lives in general after graduation. The authors' preferred explanation for these and other black-white differences is that they are all a consequence of long-term racial inequality in our society. It is implied that the persistence of these discrepancies is therefore a reason to maintain racial preferences in college admission until the differences disappear.

**The Shape of the River**  
Long-Term  
Consequences of  
Considering Race in  
College and  
University  
Admissions  
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Derek Bok  
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Praise for *The Shape of the River* has not been universal. Some reviewers have criticized its focus on elite institutions, and its conclusion that the most selective of these have been the most successful in educating minorities (2). They have complained that the results reported are not generalizable to all of higher education. Although not directly refutable, this criticism does not seriously undermine the value of this book; within its context, the described recipe for success is undeniable. Others have angrily proffered evidence for bias in Bowen and Bok's interpretation of the data (3).

A more significant problem is the absence of any data on financial aid. Surely, offers of aid are nearly as important as offers of admission, especially because minority family incomes are usually well below the national norms. What new dimensions an analysis of financial aid patterns might reveal is open to conjecture. One aspect that would likely be affected is "cascading": the hypothetical shifting of minority admittees from highly selective institutions to less selective ones if the nation as a whole were to shift to "race neutral" admission policies. The authors imply that in a race-neutral world the chief disadvantage would be that "many now being admitted to the most selective colleges and universities would have to attend schools where the competition for admission is less keen." Some might argue that this would not be too high a price to pay for the achievement of "fairness" in admissions, but I suspect that the consequences of cascading would be more deleterious. The less selective institutions are also less wealthy, so the net amount of financial aid offered to minority applicants might well decline as a result of race-neutral admissions. This could lead to a net reduction in the numbers of minority students that can afford to attend any college or university. I wonder whether precisely this kind of cascading contributes to the recently reported sharp decline in black and Hispanic graduate students in science and engineering (4). [For a positive spin on cascading, see (5).]

In spite of these problems, *The Shape of the River* is a monumental achievement. Its foundation is so solidly anchored to a bedrock of data that it will be relied upon as a navigational beacon for years to come. Moreover, if the authors are correct in predicting that "the controversy is moving toward some new authoritative review and resolution," then this work will surely play a major role in shaping the outcome.

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2. C. Adelman, *University Business* (January/February 1999), p. 42; A. Wolfe, *ibid.*, p. 47.
3. S. Thernstrom and A. Thernstrom, *Commentary* 107 (2), 44 (1999).
4. S. M. Malcolm, V. V. Van Home, C. D. Gaddy, Y. S. George, *Losing Ground: Science and Engineering Graduate Education of Black and Hispanic Americans* (American Association for the Advancement of Sciences, Washington, DC, 1998).
5. J. Traub, *New York Times Magazine*, 2 May 1999, p. 44.

#### BOOKS: MENTAL HEALTH

## Light on Darkened Minds

Norman E. Rosenthal

In *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression*, the distinguished embryologist Lewis Wolpert discusses his personal experience with this complex and painful condition. The book is not a chronological narrative. Instead, in a useful and straightforward manner, Wolpert presents chapters that deal with various aspects of depression that any interested reader would want to know about: the experience of depression, the definition and diagnosis of the condition, who is likely to become depressed, biological and psychological explanations, and available treatments.

Wolpert is well known in the United Kingdom for his broadcasts on scientists and their research. By writing about his own illness, he joins a growing list of celebrities who have gone public about their experiences with depression. These individuals have done a great service to all who suffer from this psychiatric disorder by de-stigmatizing it. "If this famous person can admit his depression," someone might reason, "so can I. If he can succeed and be prominent despite the illness, I can accomplish things, too." It is important to remember, however, that many depressed people are not as gifted, successful, and fortunate as these celebrities. Such victims might also lack the resources available to celebrated authors, the ability to be helped to the same degree, and the chance to recover so completely.

Wolpert observes that the experience of depression is indescribable. The pain is so great that words are inadequate to express it; the feelings are so different from

those encountered in the ordinary course of life that a person unfamiliar with them is unlikely to be able to fully apprehend them. In this regard, he is no doubt correct. Yet others have done better in using words to convey this experience. Works by William Styron and Kay Redfield Jamison (1), which Wolpert cites, vividly brought their painful experiences to life.

In contrast, Wolpert takes a more detached and clinical attitude towards his own depression. Although he may remember how bad the experience was, the reader does not really feel the pain and has to take it on faith. Nevertheless, this clinical approach could be very comforting to a depressed reader, reinforcing that depression is a medical illness with known causes and cures. Wolpert discusses the possibility that his depression was triggered by a medication he took, conveys his hospital experience in a very matter-of-fact way, and portrays his recovery as a relatively rapid and linear process—all of which would reassure someone undergoing a depression.

The phrase "malignant sadness" is creative and evocative. It communicates the sense of horror that comes with clinical depression as well as the potentially fatal outcome. Nonetheless, when Wolpert stretches this metaphor to compare the chemical changes that occur in depression with those that occur when cancer cells proliferate, the image seems overdrawn and unscientific.

Wolpert makes excellent information very accessible.

The general reader, to whom *Malignant Sadness* is primarily directed, is likely to find much of it new. And even though the bulk of the material will be familiar to researchers and clinicians in the field, they may still encounter some new gems. For example, I appreciated the melancholic quotations from the Book of Job, John Stuart Mill, and Edgar Allan Poe. Wolpert's ventures into the manifestation and treatment of depression in other cultures are also novel and fascinating. In summary, this is an excellent account for those who are grappling, or have grappled, with clinical depression and are trying to make sense of their experience. It is authoritative, comprehensive, easy to understand and, most important, full of hope—a commodity sorely needed by those who suffer from malignant sadness.

#### Malignant Sadness The Anatomy of Depression by Lewis Wolpert

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19172-X.

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