

# *NO LONGER SEPARATE, NOT YET EQUAL: A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF ELITE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS WITH REGARD TO RACE, CLASS, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY*

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In an era of economic uncertainty and increasing global competition, American colleges and universities face heavy scrutiny regarding the extent to which these institutions truly serve as engines of opportunity and social mobility. These questions are especially acute for selective institutions, which serve as influential gatekeepers for future opportunities and leadership positions in a society often enamored with rankings and prestige. At a time when politicians and pundits of all persuasions freely express strong opinions and emotions on these issues with no particular evidentiary basis, it is refreshing to come across a resource from serious scholars who are attempting to shed light on the subject with real empirical data and thoughtful analysis. Thomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford's recently published study, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life*,<sup>1</sup> is just such a resource, and is therefore a much-needed and welcome addition to the literature on this contentious and important topic. Perhaps not surprisingly in light of the topic, the authors' research methods and conclusions have themselves been the subject of considerable debate.<sup>2</sup>

As the title suggests, the study intentionally focuses on race and social class because of the particular salience of these characteristics in the ongoing national dialogue on equality of opportunity. The authors acknowledge, as the Supreme Court reiterated in *Grutter v. Bollinger*,<sup>3</sup> that

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1. THOMAS J. ESPENSHADE & ALEXANDRIA WALTON RADFORD, *NO LONGER SEPARATE, NOT YET EQUAL: RACE AND CLASS IN ELITE COLLEGE ADMISSION AND CAMPUS LIFE* (2009). Espenshade is a professor of sociology at Princeton University and Radford is a research associate in postsecondary education at MPR Associates, Inc.

2. See, e.g., Scott Jaschik, *The Power of Race*, *INSIDE HIGHER ED* (Nov. 3, 2009), <http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/news/2009/11/03/elite>.

3. See *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

diversity in higher education includes many factors that contribute to the whole person.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the book includes many interesting findings related to other attributes that students bring to the admissions process (such as leadership, involvement in extracurricular activities, work experience, etc.).

The authors choose to focus on selective institutions not because they reflect the totality of American higher education (which they most certainly do not), but rather because of the particularly influential role played by these institutions with regard to opening doors to opportunity and advancement in society. The questions the authors explore include the extent to which American elite higher education promotes social mobility, the nature and extent of so-called “affirmative action” used by these institutions, and what actually happens to students while they are at these institutions. These questions go to the heart of these institutions’ educational missions and the study sheds at least some light on the key issue as to whether these institutions are in fact promoting mobility and equality of opportunity—as contrasted with reinforcing existing privileges and exacerbating inequalities.

The study is based on data provided by the National Survey of College Experience (“NSCE”) collected from eight selective academic institutions that are part of the College and Beyond database assembled by the Mellon Foundation.<sup>5</sup> The database originally included ten institutions (including public and private, and research and liberal arts institutions), but the authors decided to exclude two historically black institutions from most of this study because of the nature of the questions being raised about race and class, and because of limitations in the data from those institutions.<sup>6</sup> The individual student data involved reflects many thousands of applicants for admission in the fall of 1983, 1993, and 1997. It takes a significant amount of time to collect, organize, and analyze such data, so it should not be surprising that there is a considerable time lag in the collection of the data and publication of the study results. Nevertheless, critics are already arguing that the age of the data is itself a problem because a lot may have changed in the past thirteen years with regard to admissions practices and student attitudes and experiences.<sup>7</sup> In spite of these limitations, the database nevertheless represents a large, rich, and detailed set of records on which a variety of regression analyses were performed.

Many of the results discussed in the book will surprise few readers. Espenshade and Radford conclude, for example, that academic merit (as indicated by high school grade-point averages, class rank, and standardized

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4. *Id.* at 337.

5. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 10.

6. *Id.* at 413–14.

7. See, e.g., Martin Morse Wooster, *A Weak Defense of an Obsolete Idea*, CLARION CALL (Apr. 6, 2010), [http://www.popecenter.org/clarion\\_call/article.html?id=2331](http://www.popecenter.org/clarion_call/article.html?id=2331).

test scores) is the single most important criterion used by elite institutions,<sup>8</sup> although it is by no means the only factor. The definition of merit in its totality in the admissions context is one of the key educational judgments facing selective institutions as they assemble entering classes to create overall learning environments, and it is clear from this study that factors other than numerical academic criteria play an important role in admissions decisions. For example, the research results here also suggest that student-athletes enjoy a significant and growing advantage in admissions.<sup>9</sup> These findings reflect and reinforce commonly held perceptions of the admissions process.

But to what extent are elite institutions genuinely open and accessible to individuals of varying socioeconomic backgrounds? This question has been the subject of considerable recent debate and many commentators have called on colleges and universities to do much more to ensure equal access regardless of social class and wealth.<sup>10</sup> As expected, the study shows that high family socioeconomic status (“SES”) is correlated significantly with applying to elite institutions. The reasons for this correlation are numerous and built into the fabric of our democratic, capitalist society. Students and families from such backgrounds have a variety of financial, educational, and cultural advantages at their disposal. Students born into such environments may be raised with very different expectations and role models than students from more modest financial backgrounds.

Differences in socioeconomic backgrounds are in turn also related to other characteristics that admissions offices value and that contribute to broad definitions of “merit” or “potential.” For example, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities and leadership experiences that provide a boost in admissions.<sup>11</sup> The study shows that involvement in extracurricular activities, leadership, and community service makes a significant difference in admissions, especially at private institutions.

The study also reveals that not all activities are treated equally, however. Career-oriented programs such as ROTC or co-op work programs were found to have a negative association with admissions outcomes at highly selective institutions.<sup>12</sup> This finding raises questions about the values and priorities reflected in the admissions process and will undoubtedly add fuel to the fire for critics who charge that elite institutions of higher education are politically liberal and out of touch with much of mainstream America.

In fact, the authors’ overall assessment of the role of socioeconomic

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8. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 110–11.

9. *Id.* at 114.

10. See, e.g., Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Toward a New Affirmative Action*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (May 30, 2010), available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Toward-a-New-Affirmative-Ac/65675>.

11. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 31–36.

12. *Id.* at 129.

status in elite higher education casts considerable doubt on the extent to which selective colleges and universities are actually contributing to the American dream of economic opportunity and social mobility. The study shows that “students who attend the most selective of these institutions are an increasingly privileged subgroup of all college students.”<sup>13</sup> A rising percentage of students at these schools are coming from upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Espenshade and Radford deduce that “[i]t would not be an exaggeration to conclude that elite higher education plays an important role in the intergenerational production and maintenance of social inequality in the United States.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the authors call upon selective institutions to aspire to “socioeconomic neutrality”—i.e., “they should aim to preserve the socioeconomic composition of students in their applicant pools in the social class profiles of students whom they admit, enroll, and graduate.”<sup>15</sup>

These sobering findings should prompt selective colleges and universities to reexamine their efforts and strategies with regard to providing access for students from less privileged economic backgrounds and to ensure that their own policies and practices are not magnifying and reinforcing existing inequality. As the authors point out, high tuition costs and debt burdens may discourage many students from more modest socioeconomic backgrounds from applying to, or enrolling in, selective institutions. The challenge is not limited to private institutions, as cutbacks in state aid to public colleges and universities are putting a financial squeeze on students at those institutions as well. As our society looks increasingly upon higher education as a private good rather than a public benefit, the pressures on students and families from financially disadvantaged backgrounds will only increase.

In an era of severe financial constraints in higher education, these findings have important policy and resource implications for many facets of institutional decision-making and priorities—including admissions policies and the criteria used, the availability of need-based financial aid, strategies for debt management and financial counseling, and the nature and extent of other forms of support provided to students from underprivileged backgrounds. Institutions that are serious about providing access to students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds need to do more than pay lip service to this concern. Indeed, the types of findings evident in this study will need to be carefully and honestly understood, considered and addressed, or selective institutions will run the risk of multiplying inequities that already exist. And as is true generally with regard to access and opportunity, it is not enough to pay attention to these issues only when students are coming in the door—what happens

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13. *Id.* at 338.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 383.

after they arrive on campus (and how well they are supported while in the higher education environment) is equally crucial to their success.

With regard to race, the data reveal significant differences in the academic profiles of successful applicants at selective institutions. Asian students had the highest high school grades, class rank, and standardized test scores of all admitted students, whereas black students had the weakest numeric academic credentials. According to Espenshade and Radford, the data from the institutions studied show that:

Black applicants receive a boost equivalent to 3.8 ACT points at public NCSE institutions and to 310 SAT points (out of 1600) at private institutions, on an all-other-things-equal basis. The Hispanic advantage is less than one ACT point at public schools and equal to 130 SAT points at private institutions.<sup>16</sup>

The data also show, however, that broad racial and ethnic labels can hide a great deal of heterogeneity that must be unpacked to be properly understood.<sup>17</sup> For example, many black students admitted to these selective institutions were first or second-generation students in the United States (particularly at private institutions). In other words, they were not direct descendants of slaves in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, labels such as “Hispanic” or “Asian” ignore significant differences among sub-groups and individuals within those very broad categories. With its focus on holistic, individualized review—rather than bluntly stated, broad categories that mask all kinds of distinctions within them and that fail to account for the growing number of students who identify themselves as being multiracial—Justice O’Connor’s decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* provides a useful guidepost for institutions seeking to take a more nuanced approach to complex issues of race.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, critics of race-conscious affirmative action policies will point to the data here to bolster their argument that race is being used in a way that leads to the admission of academically less qualified students at these selective institutions.<sup>20</sup> Espenshade and Radford’s own assessment, however, is that race-conscious measures at selective institutions give students from historically underrepresented groups “a greater likelihood of graduating than if they attended a less selective college or university.”<sup>21</sup> They claim that their data fails to support the so-called “mismatch

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16. *Id.* at 127.

17. *Id.* at 128.

18. *Id.* at 150.

19. See *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306, 337 (2003).

20. See, e.g., Russell K. Nieli, *How Diversity Punishes Asians, Poor Whites and Lots of Others*, MINDING THE CAMPUS (July 12, 2010) [http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2010/07/how\\_diversity\\_punishes\\_asians.html](http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2010/07/how_diversity_punishes_asians.html); Patrick J. Buchanan, *Bias and Bigotry in Academia*, WorldNetDaily (July 19, 2010), <http://www.wnd.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=181357>.

21. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 258.

hypothesis” (i.e., the theory that minority students are done a disservice by race-conscious measures because they are placed into settings where they are not adequately prepared for the level of academic competition they will face) and that greater institutional selectivity is associated with greater retention and graduation rates for all students.<sup>22</sup> While students from underrepresented groups may sometimes have lower grade-point averages than other students at these selective institutions, Espenshade and Radford argue that the long-term benefits of educational attainment, occupational status, and earnings outweigh this risk. In short, they conclude that “affirmative action, which enables more underrepresented minority students to gain access to selective colleges than would a race-blind admission policy, appears to help more than harm minority students’ futures.”<sup>23</sup>

The study also provides useful insights into the interrelationships of class and race. For example, among the students at these selective institutions, “[w]hites and Asians are consistently the most socioeconomically advantaged, while Hispanic and black students are by comparison more disadvantaged.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, “[p]arents of white and Asian students consistently have more education than black and Hispanic students’ parents.”<sup>25</sup> These types of results have led some commentators to argue that increased attention to class-based affirmative action will help to lessen (or perhaps even eliminate) the need for race-conscious measures in admissions.<sup>26</sup> Most institutions of higher education purport to care about both of these facets of diversity and the data do not seem to suggest that class is a perfect substitute or proxy for race. Indeed, the authors conclude here that race-conscious measures are still necessary, at least in the short term, to ensure racial diversity at selective institutions. They argue that their own statistical simulations underscore the findings of previous researchers who have determined that “income-based policies are not an effective substitute” for race-conscious measures.<sup>27</sup> Given the legal necessity to analyze race-conscious measures and race-neutral alternatives on an ongoing basis, however, the kinds of questions asked by Espenshade and Radford may be useful to institutions seeking to study the impact and effectiveness of their own admissions criteria.

Espenshade and Radford’s work is noteworthy in that it goes beyond admissions data to look critically at how undergraduates engage with race

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22. *Id.* In this respect, the findings in this study are similar to the conclusions set forth in an earlier landmark study by the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard on the consequences of considering race in admissions at selective colleges and universities. See WILLIAM G. BOWEN & DEREK BOK, *THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER* (1998).

23. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 262.

24. *Id.* at 152.

25. *Id.* at 153.

26. See, e.g., Kahlenberg, *supra* note 10.

27. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 358.

and ethnicity once they are on campus. Critics of affirmative action policies in higher education have long discounted the educational benefits of diversity by arguing that students from various groups self-segregate once on campus and have very little meaningful cross-racial interaction in or outside the classroom.<sup>28</sup> The results from this study provide a decidedly mixed picture on this subject, although there are certainly some encouraging signs that cross-racial interactions are occurring and gradually increasing over time. For example, “[n]early one-third of white students report having taken at least one course in African American, Latino, or Asian American studies.”<sup>29</sup> Nearly one-third of white students reported participating in ethnic extracurricular events or celebrations and more than ten percent belonged to a student organization oriented toward issues related to a particular race or ethnicity other than their own.<sup>30</sup> More than sixty percent of students indicated that they socialized “often or very often” with classmates from other races.<sup>31</sup> Roughly half had a roommate from a different race or ethnic background (an experience that correlates with a much greater likelihood of future additional cross-racial interactions for students) and a similar proportion had a close friendship with other-race classmates.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the data also show that “the amount of social contact within racial and ethnic groups is far greater than that between groups.”<sup>33</sup>

Once again, Espenshade and Radford do not simply report the data. They discuss the policy implications for institutions that are striving to obtain educational benefits from student body diversity both in and outside the classroom. They argue that the research suggests that fostering intergroup relations through general socializing and residential rooming arrangements can lead to meaningful cross-racial experiences. The data suggest that informal opportunities to interact may have a powerful impact, as “[s]tudents who report that they socialized often or very often with other-race classmates are more than three times as likely to report a substantial amount of learning from other-race peers.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, curricular and extracurricular offerings focused on issues related to race and ethnicity can provide opportunities for students to learn across racial lines in a safe learning environment. The authors suggest that mandatory community service activities can also play a constructive role in encouraging people to interact across racial and ethnic lines, as well as in providing incentives that encourage diverse student organizations to co-

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28. *Id.* at 176–225.

29. *Id.* at 222.

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.* at 222–23.

34. *Id.* at 314.

sponsor events.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the data reinforce the premise that population availability matters in fostering cross-racial experiences.<sup>36</sup> This finding underscores the importance of efforts to achieve a “critical mass” of students from historically underrepresented groups on campus in order to foster the educational benefits of diversity, as discussed by the Supreme Court in the *Grutter* decision.<sup>37</sup>

If institutional leaders believe that diversity has educational benefits for all students and that this aspect of the educational experience is a crucial part of the mission of their institutions, then they need to be intentional about fostering cross-racial engagement through a variety of means. These educational benefits are not automatic. Paying attention to diversity at the admissions stage alone is not enough to create a rich cross-racial learning environment. While many students may already be having such experiences and recognizing them as being a valuable part of their education, the data also demonstrate that not all students readily grasp such opportunities or believe them to be important. Students can be encouraged to think about the ways in which they each contribute to a robust learning environment, and faculty members can be provided with resources and information about how to engage more diverse classes of students in meaningful ways. In an era in which assessment and accountability are being incorporated into all aspects of higher education, colleges and universities should be analyzing the effectiveness of their diversity-related initiatives on an ongoing basis.<sup>38</sup>

So where do we go from here? To their credit, Espenshade and Radford do not simply provide a long list of statistics and regression analyses. Instead, they go beyond the data to propose specific steps to address nagging issues of inequality of opportunity. Based on their conclusion that “[t]he racial gap in grades, test scores, and other measures of the skills, abilities, and knowledge that children acquire is arguably the most pressing domestic issue facing the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century,”<sup>39</sup> they conclude their book with a stirring call to action. They point out that the racial gap in academic performance is linked to most adult forms of social and economic inequality, as well as to the competitiveness of the United States workforce in a global economy. Therefore, Espenshade and Radford call for nothing short of a “declaration of war on the root causes,” rather than public policies focused merely on

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35. *Id.* at 392–94.

36. *Id.* at 224.

37. *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306, 329–30 (2003).

38. See, e.g., Peter Schmidt, *New Research Complicates Discussions of Campus Diversity—in a Good Way*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Feb. 5, 2010) (discussing additional research on whether and how racial and ethnic diversity produces educational benefits).

39. ESPENSHADE & RADFORD, *supra* note 1, at 398.



the symptoms of the underlying problem.<sup>40</sup> They propose a “Manhattan Project” for the behavioral and social sciences, which they label “the American Competitiveness and Leadership Project” (“ACLP”), to accomplish two aims:

- (1) to identify the causes and cumulative consequences of racial gaps in academic achievement and (2) to develop concrete measures that can be taken by parents, schools, neighborhoods, and the public sector all working together to close the gaps on a nationwide scale.<sup>41</sup>

Emphasizing the urgency of a strategic national approach to these issues, they assert that “[w]e should not be satisfied with demonstrated success in small-scale, localized projects.”<sup>42</sup>

The scope of the project recommended by Espenshade and Radford is dramatic and daunting, especially at a time when ambitious national goals and projects seem to create inherent suspicions of big government run amok and when constrained financial resources seem to inhibit major infrastructure projects of any sort. Their comparison to a national Manhattan Project for peaceful purposes is bold and visionary:

Like the Manhattan Project, the ACLP will of necessity involve interdisciplinary teams of researchers at multiple sites of universities and research institutes around the country. And like the Manhattan Project, the ACLP will be an important element of our national self-defense viewed broadly.<sup>43</sup>

Espenshade and Radford call for the monitoring of a large birth cohort, perhaps as many as 50,000 children, and point out that useful findings could emerge quickly “because racial gaps develop in the first few years of life.”<sup>44</sup> They argue that the benefits of such a project could be enormous for our society, since so many other major social challenges (crime, welfare, health care, etc.) have significant roots in the racial achievement gap.

The authors’ conclusions should help serve as a wake-up call to policy makers and educators throughout the country with regard to the urgency to understand and address persisting, fundamental inequities in our society. While progress has been made in many respects with regard to expanding opportunity in American higher education, this research makes clear that much work remains to be done. Espenshade and Radford declare that local, piecemeal approaches alone will not be sufficient to tackle these large societal issues and that “[t]ime alone is an unreliable ally” in light of rapidly increasing global competition and the relatively slow pace of

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40. *Id.* at 403.

41. *Id.* at 403.

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.* at 404.

44. *Id.*

change to date in overcoming racial achievement gaps.<sup>45</sup>

Espenshade and Radford are not exaggerating when they assert that the nation's economic future and national security are dependent upon addressing these major issues. Our diverse human capital may be our most important and valuable strategic asset, but it can only be fully utilized if individuals from all backgrounds have the opportunity to develop their skills and intellects to their full potential. As Justice O'Connor stated eloquently in *Grutter*, "the diffusion of knowledge and opportunity through public institutions of higher education must be accessible to all individuals regardless of race or ethnicity."<sup>46</sup> This language could apply with equal force to social class as well as race, as well as to other barriers that stand in the way of true equality of opportunity.

The thoughtful work of Espenshade and Radford represented in this significant volume should be just the beginning of the next phase of the ongoing national conversation about the role of higher education in providing equality of opportunity and social mobility. This book provides a useful framework for additional research and policy development. Additional research is needed on the impact of the full array of institutions in American higher education, not just on the most selective institutions. Most of all, this study should serve as a reminder to all of us in higher education to focus our energies on the missions of our institutions as they relate to the democratic society of which we are a part, and on the ways in which we can and should contribute to the study and analysis of the biggest and most complex issues of our time.

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45. Thomas J. Espenshade & Alexandria Walton Radford, *A New Manhattan Project*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Nov. 12, 2009), <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2009/11/12/radford>.

46. *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306, 331 (2003).