

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

FOR REASONED SCHOLARSHIP IN A FREE SOCIETY

Is Campus Racial Diversity Correlated with Educational Benefits?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Michigan is distorting and misrepresenting the research findings at issue in a momentous constitutional question now before the federal courts. In defending its use of racial preferences in undergraduate and law school admissions, the University asserts that there is a positive connection between racial diversity and beneficial educational outcomes. In fact, the very database on which the University of Michigan relies shows that there is no such connection. This was first pointed out in the *amicus* brief submitted by the National Association of Scholars in *Gratz v. Bollinger* in July 2000. Our present report comprises the first full, in-depth explication of the errors on which the University of Michigan has based its case.

To test the claim that racial diversity produces educational benefits, one needs extensive student data from a nationally representative sample of campuses with sufficient variance in the proportions of minorities. There is one (though only one) such data set, a product of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which was founded in 1966 by the American Council on Education (ACE) under the direction of Alexander Astin. This database now belongs to the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, though the ACE continues to be a principal sponsor. The empirical evidence in this case involves the application of a standard statistical methodology (called multiple regression analysis) to the CIRP data.

Our central point is this: the appropriate statistical analyses show that one should reject the claim that campus racial diversity is positively connected with educational benefits. That is, after controlling for other explanatory variables, there are no educationally significant positive relationships between the racial diversity of an institution and any of the 82 cognitive and non-cognitive student outcomes included in the study. Astin says this himself on p. 362 of his book *What Matters in College*, his account of the findings of the 1985-89 CIRP longitudinal undergraduate study.

When the University of Michigan became a defendant in *Gratz v. Bollinger*, it commissioned Patricia Y. Gurin, Chair of the Department of Psychology and Interim Dean of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts to write a report making the case for the educational benefits of racial diversity on campus. This report, which relies mainly on the CIRP data, to which Gurin was granted access, comprises the core of the University's defense of its racially preferential admissions policies, at least as far as all empirical questions are concerned.

Gurin claims that diversity has significant effects, but her claims are based on models that fail to control for all relevant explanatory variables simultaneously. Instead of using the full set of explanatory variables in each of her regressions, each regression includes at most one of four key explanatory variables. Gurin's 850 pages of defective regression models were introduced into the public record while *Gratz v. Bollinger* was being argued. Using these models, we can show that even if one accepts Gurin's models, "diversity activities" have only a trivial impact on educational outcomes.

How does Gurin deal with the highly embarrassing fact that the very national database on which she relies actually refutes the claim that she is defending? As explained above, she runs regressions that leave out variables, which has the effect of making other variables appear significant.

But her larger strategy is to change the subject. The issue is the impact of diversity -- the proportion of minorities among students -- on final outcomes. Gurin tries to shift the focus of attention to what Astin called "diversity activities," and which Gurin calls "campus experience variables." But campus diversity experiences are not the issue. The University of Michigan was not sued because it offered ethnic studies courses or racial awareness workshops, or because of campus discussions of race or interracial socialization. It was taken to court because its admissions policies employ racial classifications that are designed to increase the proportions of certain minorities.

Astin's study, which employed the full database of which Gurin uses a subset, found educationally and statistically significant relationships between these kinds of diversity activities and some educational outcomes. (We are, however, investigating the question whether these "diversity activities" were properly controlled.) In any case, Astin found no relationships between diversity itself -- the proportion of minorities on a campus -- and these same outcomes.

Gurin has tried to deflect this fundamental objection to her methodology by claiming that it is still useful to consider diversity experiences, because some educational benefits are positively correlated with diversity experiences, and diversity experiences are "in turn" positively correlated with campus racial diversity -- the implication being that educational benefits must be positively correlated with diversity. But this is an unsound statistical argument. It can be shown mathematically that it is possible that A and B are positively correlated, that B and C are positively correlated, and yet A and C are negatively correlated. In order for an argument of this form to work, the first two correlations (between A and B and between B and C) have to be very high, over 0.7 -- much, much higher than any correlations reported by Gurin.

To test whether diversity is positively related to educational outcomes one must test this directly, as Astin did, not indirectly, using campus experience variables as proxies for diversity, as Gurin tries to do. Astin's regressions do control for Gurin's campus experience variables, and the result, it bears repeating, is that diversity has no discernable beneficial effect on any outcomes. Two of Gurin's campus experience variables (taking an ethnic studies course or attending a diversity workshop) are not even rough proxies for campus diversity, since neither requires the presence of minorities on campus. While socialization with minorities and having minority friends does require the presence of minorities, minorities will be present even without preferences. Gurin's models fail to show that the impact of her campus experience variables depends on the proportion of minority students.

There are other problems with Gurin's analysis and with the role it is playing in the debate over preferences. The following list is not exhaustive:

First, if public policy is going to be set on the basis of a statistical analysis of empirical data, the least one ought to expect is that the database be released to the general research community. We would like to do our own analyses, not just to criticize Gurin's. We have hypotheses that we would like to test. But HERI's policy has been one of not releasing the CIRP database. To our knowledge, exceptions to this policy have been made only for "friendly" researchers who favor racial preferences in higher education.

Second, Gurin emphasizes statistical significance, and ignores the question of how large her predicted effects would be. Virtually all elementary statistics texts point out the difference between statistical and practical significance. In large data sets, like Gurin's, meaningless differences may be statistically significant. Differences are statistically significant when they cannot be explained by chance, but that doesn't make them important. Astin, in contrast, identifies as important those variables whose regression coefficients are statistically significant and whose beta coefficients -- a measure of the size of the impact of the variable -- are at least 0.15. Gurin presented tables with black boxes denoting relationships that were significant in her models, without regard to the size of the effect. In this, Astin follows the best statistical practice. Gurin, stretching to make a case for the University's contentions, does not.

Third, Gurin's claims are further impeached by the fact that her outcome variables are soft student self-assessments, many of which are non-cognitive "democracy outcomes." Many would question whether Gurin's "democracy outcomes" are genuine academic outcomes. Even among the self-reported cognitive outcomes, very few (e.g., college grade point average) ask the student to report the University's assessment as opposed to the student's self-assessment. We do not have a lot of confidence in a student's ability meaningfully to assess his or her own "critical thinking skills." (One might even doubt the reliability of the students' self-reports of their GPAs.)

Conclusion

The University of Michigan is ideologically and institutionally committed to racial preference in admissions. It is entitled to advance what it sees as moral and legal arguments that support its position. But there is no justification for a misleading statistical analysis. There is no justification for twisting data that refute claims about the educational value of diversity in order to make it appear that these data support such claims.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS ? 221 WITHERSPOON STREET, 2ND FLOOR ? PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08542

TEL: 609-683-7878 ? FAX: 609-683-0316 ? E-MAIL: NAS@NAS.ORG ? URL: <http://www.nas.org>