

Erasing race

Californian and Texan universities struggle with admissions policies.

California and Texas are both large states that are home to a growing population of minorities. They also share another trait. In a blow to the policy of affirmative action, public universities in the two states were forbidden, a decade ago, from using race as a factor in college admission decisions—by a federal court, in Texas's case, and by state law in California's.

Texas stalled, guaranteeing admission at the state university of his or her choice to any student graduating in the top 10% of their high-school class. This helped students from predominantly minority high schools who excelled relative to their peers. The University of California (UC), on the other hand, altered its admissions standards in 2002 to require a "comprehensive" review of applications. Under that system, students win points not just for academic criteria such as grades and test scores, but also for overcoming "life challenges". Affirmative action by the back door, some critics say.

Both policies have had modest success in maintaining diversity. But now policymakers in both states are about to shake the kaleidoscope again. William Powers, the president of the University of Texas (UT) at Austin, has sounded an alarm. The number of students in the top tenth of fast-growing Texas's high-school classes will have climbed from some 20,000 in 1998 to over 30,000 by 2015. Last year more than 80% of Texas freshmen at UT Austin came from this group. By 2013 it will be 100%.

Mr Powers has urged lawmakers to amend the law by capping the number of students who can be admitted under the rule at half of a state university's class. As for the other half, he wants the university to retain discretion over which students to admit, including the discretion to consider race. Without this change, Mr Powers says, the proportion of minorities at his university will decline: the top-10% plan yields only about 25% black and Hispanic students, but the university could admit far more if it retained control over the other half of its class. The Texas legislature almost passed such a change last year; a version of it is likely to pass this year.

Meanwhile, university officials in California voted earlier this month to overhaul their current admissions system, which guarantees a student a place at a UC campus if he ranks in the top 4% of his high-school class or in the top 12.5% of the graduating class statewide. The new plan alters the ratios so that the top 9% of students from each high school would be guaranteed a spot, as well as students who rank in the top 9% of the state as a whole. The overall effect is to make California's system resemble the system Texas now wants to give up.

This part of the California proposal has been met with little resistance. But a second aspect troubles critics of affirmative action. The plan would create a new category of applicants: those entitled to a "review" of their applications, though not to guaranteed admission. Under the new plan, students from roughly the top 20% of the state's graduating class would be required to receive a review of the "comprehensive" sort at any campus to which they chose to apply. University officials estimate that this entitled-to-review pool will contain more whites, blacks and Hispanic students, but significantly fewer Asians, than the pool of students currently eligible for admission. Critics have accused admissions officers of using the review process as a means to reinstate racial preferences in violation of the law. Nothing is ever easy.

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