Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data

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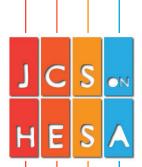Part of the Higher Education Commons

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Book Review

Race on Campus
Debunking Myths with Data

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— **Abstract** —

There are many myths revolving race and diversity on college campuses. Are students of color choosing to isolate themselves in ways that hurt them? Did your friend from high school only get into Harvard because she's Black? Does the SAT inherently favor rich kids? In *Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data*, Julie Park describes and deconstructs racial myths in an incredible contribution to the higher education literature on race, racism, and diversity issues on campus.

Keywords: race, racism, diversity

Park, J. J. (2018). *Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.

Review

Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data (2018) is essentially a written, longform TED Talk on the racial myths that permeate America's college and university campuses. Julie J. Park, an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park, is an expert on diversity and equity in higher education and author of a variety of academic publications who covers testing, affirmative action and Asian Americans, race and racism, and frequently contributes to popular venues such as Inside Higher Ed. *Race on Campus* attests to that and is a clear and accessible contribution to both the literature on race in higher education, and the broader sociocultural conversations about race and how it impacts our nation's campuses.

Park capitalizes on what makes TED Talks successful and engaging: her book is research driven, anecdotal enough to attract readers outside of academia, and relatable to a broad spectrum of readers, though her frequent allusions to popular culture may only be relatable to a younger, U.S.-based audience. Park writes from the assumption that her readers aren't field experts, which makes her writing clear, engaging, and concise, as well as around terms that she also defines, which makes the text feel both accessible and interdisciplinary. She covers weighty topics like student "self-segregation," affirmative action and race-conscious admissions, and what Guinier (2015) calls the "testocracy." Park relies on her own research and the research of field experts in and out of education, including dissenting voices, to move away from analysis that centers on hunches and anecdotal evidence, and towards diversity work that is both humanizing and empirically legitimate. The thrust of the book is most evident in the author's introduction of Nobel Prize-winning, behavioral psychology and economics giants Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's *availability heuristic*. Understanding how people make snap judgments based on what they know and are most invested in is central to *Race on Campus*'s mission to challenge anecdotally-constructed myths.

The book is structured in three parts. Part one explores the myth of student of color self-segregation. Park describes the populations that make up the "college cafeteria" and how they might interact with each other. Park explains that homophily – a desire to group by trait similarity – is likely on college campuses, and that students of color are far more likely to engage in cross-racial interaction and with the diversity of the greater campus than their white peers. She then asks the reader, "Who is really self-segregating?" Turns out it is the students participating in historically-White Greek Life and ethnically-homogenous, religious student organizations that replaced the *de facto* exclusion of the past with the *du jour,* subtler, and unspoken exclusion of the present and called it inclusion. She elaborates that students of color participate in inter- and intragroup interactions as forms of "recharging" at predominantly-White institutions and that, though it may look like self-segregation, it's just because we (society) are looking past the all-White groups (Greek Life) and asking why the groups of color are not friendlier.

Part two demythologizes affirmative action and race-conscious admissions policies by critically examining the rhetoric and research in opposition and questioning the racial mascots used to oppose these policies. This part is framed by the question: "If Malia Obama is at Harvard, do we really need affirmative action anymore?" Park emphasizes that affirmative action, as well as holistic review, is crucial for narrowing inequality gaps, and that the statistics often used to defend, or attack, race-conscious policies are subject to creative interpretation. She cites the work of Thomas Espenshade (2009), which has been used to attack affirmative action and race-conscious policies through the misleading presentation of statistics favoring one side. She introduces the term *bikeshedding*

– finding a simple solution to a difficult problem and calling it a day – and details that considering both race and class is necessary to adequately address access and attainment gaps. She then examines the ties between affirmative action and Asian Americans and their support of race-conscious policies, contextualizes the current *SFFA v. Harvard* case involving Asian American students, and demonstrates that Asian Americans are not penalized by race-conscious policies. Park negotiates her own relation to race throughout the book, points out her own "bias blind spot," and asks, "How does someone who studies this stuff for a living miss the critical finding that low-income Asian Americans receive some benefit at elite private institutions?" (p. 94).

Part three dives right into testocracy, the "problem of mismatch," and where we can go from here in terms of resolving racial myths in higher education. Park builds upon and synthesizes the broad literature on test prep, the trouble with test scores as success metrics, and breaks down the "habitus of the wealthy" (p. 104). She notes that research, including her own, has uncovered that the SAT, among other standardized tests, is largely indicative of student wealth and not an unimpeachable arbiter of student success. The admissions playing field is unequal; intensive cramming cannot undo disparate academic preparation, and test prep has only a marginal effect in narrowing the gaps. Interrogating the "habitus of the wealthy" – that wealthy students are more likely to engage in an academic arms race with Ivy League admissions in mind and that their ability and likelihood to access test prep, leverage college counseling, and consider donating their way into a school facilitates this - Park explains test prep as a "sorting hat" (p. 101) for postsecondary pathways and argues that mediocre, middle-of-the-pack rich kids can functionally buy themselves into elite colleges.

Of course, legacy admissions and all the special interest, admissions-hook groups Daniel Golden (2006) details in *The Price of Admission* aren't under attack, affirmative action and race-conscious admissions policies are. While the gaps identified by anti-affirmative action and race-conscious admissions camps aren't that wide, they are imagined as wide achievement ravines and used as evidence to argue against the mythologized "underprepared" minority student. Positioning selective admissions as a narrowing of the best and brightest, rather than a winnowing of the elite who have the habitus to game and navigate the system, brainwashes its beneficiaries and race-conscious admissions policies opponents into believing that it is the imagined meritocracy that Park and other scholars have debunked as fiction.

Park explores the problem of mismatch by squaring the fiction of meritocracy against the patronizing fiction of mismatch, that race-conscious admissions are doing minority students a disservice by placing them into schools they aren't qualified for. Here, she notes that mismatch suffers from *group attribution error* and *construct validity*, that the characteristics of an individual representative of a group are often conflated to represent the group and that the outcome of a measurement may contradict what the measurement purports to measure. With this foundation, Park debunks the myth of the mismatch by leveraging the bulk of research on student success and institutional structures (the educational pipeline, Bowen and Bok's *The Shape of the River*) to explain that students aren't the problem, the structures that inhibit their success are. The crux of the argument lies in Park's analysis of Richard Sander's statistical presentation of mismatch, noting that Sander (and coauthor Stuart Taylor Jr.) disprove their own theory: when given the opportunity to thrive, minority students do. This reiterates the problem with using anecdotal evidence to support sweeping claims about topics of race on campus by offering both qualitative and quantitative counternarratives (white law students flunk the bar all the time, but their presence at top law schools isn't questioned in the way that minority students' existence is), and foreshadows the call to empirical action in the book's conclusion.

Race on Campus concludes with a cautionary

tale and a call to action, as it was published at a crucial point in the debate over affirmative action and race-conscious policies. While the Supreme Court most recently upheld previously and well-established case law in *Fisher I* and *II*, Edward Blum and the Students for Fair Admissions' case against Harvard, as well as the UNC case, reflects a continued assault on the necessity and legality of race-conscious programs. Park calls for us to cut through the hype, anecdote, and emotion, and engage directly with actual, empirical research on diversity. She vulnerably notes her own blind spots throughout the text, including detailing her own position as a Harvard reject. She is self-aware and self-deprecating throughout, which lends an air of humor to an otherwise serious topic and asks that further research be constantly aware of the blind spots its authors might have.

The myths debunked in *Race on Campus* are largely a result of the *continued influence effect*, that we hold on to misinformation, even when we are corrected. She encourages readers to know that excellence can often be bought, and that looking at students holistically can offer a much richer story than subjectively interpreted statistics can ever provide; that, without looking at the whole picture, a commitment to diversity is often "window dressing" (p. 153). *Race on Campus* challenges us to move from inclusion to antiracism and emphasizes what so many others have previously identified, that we can't ever "achieve" diversity; it is a process and a journey, not a destination, and that diversity work must be grounded in the knowledge that our past "persistently permeates our present" (p. 155).

The greatest strength of *Race on Campus* is the narrative that Park curates and advances throughout the text. Affirmative action and race-conscious admissions policies, as well as more general race-conscious policies in higher education and the umbrella topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion, have been a contentious site of debate for decades. It would be impossible for a single author to collect and analyze the data necessary to defend and discuss all the topics

in *Race on Campus*, and Park doesn't approach that task with the delusions of grandeur that could have hamstrung her analysis. By collecting and synthesizing empirical research, journalistic coverage, popular discourse, and weaving in her own research and witty, insightful commentary, Park offers the reader an appetizing smorgasbord of information that is compelling, easily consumable, and comprehensive. The text simultaneously covers topics relevant to folks interested in race on campus generally or educationally, and breaks them down into digestible yet detailed subsets of the larger literature usable in focused research and writing. Park's work deftly straddles academic and popular writing.

Race on Campus contributes to the current literature on the impact of race on college campuses, however, it is limited by its focus on undergraduate education and nominal or referential inclusion of graduate and professional education. Further research should consider the impact of the myths detailed and debunked on graduate and professional education, as the analysis of campus climate and organization is not limited to undergraduate students. But undergraduate students are often the focus of higher education scholarship, and *Race on Campus* will be assigned in courses covering topics of diversity on college campuses, affirmative action and race-conscious policies, and should be promptly read, cited, and expanded upon by any faculty, student affairs practitioners, and students interested and invested in diversity work in education. Furthermore, I believe it should also be read and written about by journalists covering the topics the book details, as it is an excellent primer on contentious issues that aren't going away anytime soon. Finally, it should be read by any graduate student looking for examples of academic writing that people outside of academia will want to read and use – it certainly is one for me.

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