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William G. Bowen

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Derek Bok

Harvard University

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RESPONSE TO REVIEW BY TERRANCE SANDALOW

*William G. Bowen**
and *Derek Bok***

Mark Twain tried to convey the size and complexity of the Mississippi by explaining to his readers that the river draws its water from every state between Delaware and Idaho, discharges 338 times as much water as the Thames, and is fed by 54 subordinate rivers each of which was large enough for steamboat travel. We borrowed Twain's image of the Mississippi for the title of our book (*The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*) because we were trying to convey the complexity of the college admissions process, the college experience, and the myriad effects of the educational process on the subsequent lives of black and white students. While there is much of interest in Professor Sandalow's thoughtful and deep reading of our book, we would like to correct a major misunderstanding about the admissions data and the admissions process itself that lurks beneath one of Sandalow's main critiques of our research — his complaint that we should have (or could have) done more to disentangle the streams that feed the river, to distinguish, in particular, "special admits" from "regular admits."

The line of thinking with which we cannot agree first appears in Sandalow's discussion of graduation rates of black and white students and reverberates through his article. "Oddly," he writes, ". . . [Bowen and Bok] seem to have made no effort to determine the graduation rate of 'specially admitted' students" (presumably in contrast to those who might be regarded as "regularly admitted").¹ Professor Sandalow goes on to suggest that our failure to distinguish between these two groups biases major conclusions; in his words, "the evidence bearing upon the success of the policies and the wisdom of retaining them is a good deal more ambiguous than

* President, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York. A.B. 1955, Denison University, Ph.D. 1958, Princeton University.

** Professor, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. B.A. 1951, Stanford University; J.D. 1954, Harvard University; M.A. 1958, George Washington University.

1. Terrance Sandalow, *Minority Preferences Reconsidered*, 97 MICH. L. REV. 1874, 1885 (1999).

[Bowen and Bok] seek to persuade readers.”² His argument is that lumping together the outcomes of individual black students who would have been admitted under a race-neutral admissions process with those of students who were admitted only because of a race-sensitive policy has the effect of inflating the outcomes for “specially admitted” minority students.³

But both Sandalow’s argument and his inference are wrong. First, it is important to understand why it is impossible, even with the reasonably complete admissions records available to us for five academically selective schools, to identify the particular students who were admitted because of race-sensitive admissions policies. All that an observer of the admissions data can know is that the *probability* of having been admitted was, say, 50 percent, for an African-American student with SAT scores in the 1100-1200 range, that roughly 35 percent of black applicants with SAT scores between 1000 and 1100 were admitted, and that an average of about 75 percent of black applicants with test scores in the 1300-1500 range were admitted (p. 27, Fig. 2.5)⁴ In choosing to admit particular individuals within each of these ranges, the admissions offices of the schools in our study presumably took into account a multitude of other factors including high school grades, courses taken, socioeconomic status, letters of recommendation, region of the country, athletic skills, other extracurricular activities, leadership potential, and on and on and on. We chose the term “race-sensitive admissions” precisely to connote the fact that race is considered as one factor, alongside other factors.

There is absolutely no way of knowing when race was and was not dispositive (or, to put the question another way, which African-American candidates would have been admitted had they been white). And, in fact, even framing the question this way is to chase a will o’ the wisp. As one admissions dean put it in a recent conversation,

people have to understand that we look at all the attributes of a candidate *together*; we view the race of a candidate in conjunction with so many other things — what school the student attended, where and how he or she grew up, leadership potential, ‘drive,’ and so on. Moreover, in deciding whether or not to admit a particular candidate, we also consider who else has already been admitted to the class.

2. *Id.* at 1877.

3. *See id.* at 1885-91.

4. These are all combined Verbal and Math scores *before recentering*; comparable scores today, after recentering, would be about 100 points higher.

This admissions officer went on to say that, even with all the information he has (far more than would ever be available to any outside student of the process), he himself could not say which candidates were and were not admitted solely because of their race. To return to the imagery of the river, the problem we face here is akin to sitting on a dock in Baton Rouge and attempting to decide which droplets in the Mississippi came from the Missouri and which came from the Chippewa.⁵

Of course, exactly the same comment applies to every applicant to highly selective schools. In thinking again about the character of the admissions process — which is inevitably dependent on the judgments and sensibilities of individual admissions officers — we were struck by the real-life circumstances of three of our collaborators on the research. One is the son of missionary parents, grew up in Pakistan, and was admitted to Stanford. As he put it, “growing up in Pakistan must surely have helped my application, but is that why I was admitted?” Another collaborator is the son of a faculty member at the university he attended, a fact that surely helped his application; but of course he too had many other attributes. Precisely what weight did his father’s job have in the admissions decision? This is not a question anyone can answer. A third collaborator was (and is) an excellent tennis player. She was admitted to the University of Michigan, but not necessarily because of her tennis prowess (even though it is no doubt true that highly recruited athletes in big-time sports programs are probably closest to being “special admits”). The essential point is that it is impossible to tag students at most highly selective schools. They can’t be divided neatly into categories based on “the” factor that was decisive in their admission. Each applicant has a *composite* of qualities that were weighed together; and each was considered in the context of efforts by the admissions staff to assemble a class whose members, considered collectively, would best serve the educational purposes of the school, both while they were on campus and in later life. As one experienced practitioner of the art of admissions put it, “[w]hen you are considering so many outstanding candidates, all of

5. One of our collaborators reminds us that in the opening scene of *MacBeth*, Banquo asks the witches why, if they can predict so much about *MacBeth*’s future, they hadn’t provided him with some details as well: “If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then to me.” Professor Sandalow asks the same question of us as Banquo asked of the witches — if you can see so much, why can’t you see everything? Deciphering the admissions process with the degree of precision that Professor Sandalow seeks would require a method of analysis (“eye of newt and toe of frog”) that is beyond the capability of our database.

them well above threshold, each one is a 'special admit'; there are no 'regular admits.'"

While it is impossible, for the reasons just given, to identify particular individuals who were admitted because of race-sensitive admissions, it is possible to comment on the "average" characteristics of those whom we *estimate* would have been excluded from the class had race-neutral policies been in effect. We performed this exercise by adopting an operational definition of "race-neutrality" that assumes that each school had been required, retrospectively, to admit the same percentage of white and African-American applicants from each 100-point SAT range. The result is, as one would have expected, a very substantial reduction (more than half) in the number of black matriculants. A more surprising finding, relevant to Sandalow's concerns, is that the average SAT score of the retrospectively rejected group is quite similar to the average SAT score of the "survivors" — 1145 versus 1181. Thus, imposition of this form of race-neutrality would not, as some critics seem to imply, have removed an easily identified bottom group of black applicants. The academic profile of the much smaller group of black students whom we estimate would still have been admitted is very, very similar to the profile of the entire group prior to its having been "pruned" in this way.⁶

There is a corollary that is even more "on point" in terms of Sandalow's suspicion that our outcome measures are biased. While, to repeat, we cannot identify those individuals who would have been rejected under race-sensitive policies, we can estimate from which SAT intervals they would have come, and we can then estimate the overall characteristics of this retrospectively rejected group by assigning each member the average characteristics of all those in the SAT cell from which the individual was drawn (pp. 281, 359). The conclusion is striking: the graduation rates, fields of study, patterns of advanced degree attainment, earnings, civic contributions, and satisfactions with school are so similar between the two groups that no significant differences can be noted. Our analysis suggests that, of the roughly 700 African American matriculants in 1976 who would have been retrospectively rejected, 225 went on to attain professional degrees or doctorates, 70 are now doctors,

6. See pp. 42-44. This modest difference in average test scores between those in the group that we estimate would have been "retrospectively rejected" and those who would have been "retained" is a direct result of admissions processes that take many factors into account besides race and SAT scores. As Figure 2.5 in *THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER* illustrates, these policies lead to the admission of large numbers of students of all races who had SAT scores that were lower than those of applicants who were admitted.

well over 300 are leaders of civic activities, and so on — essentially the same pattern of results we found for all African-American matriculants.

The explanation is two-fold. First, there is, as we saw above, little difference in SAT scores (which is the variable we are using to predict outcomes) between the entire group of actual black matriculants and the hypothetical subset whom we estimate would have been rejected under a race-neutral regime. Second, within the range of SAT scores relevant at these schools (the high end of the distribution), modest differences in SAT scores are not strong predictors of these outcomes. Professor Sandalow should be reassured by these findings. They do not support the conjecture that we have exaggerated the outcomes achieved by black matriculants who might not have been admitted in the absence of race-sensitive policies.

Professor Sandalow's review also raises one or two other issues that invite brief comment. He argues that "the contribution of racial and ethnic diversity to student learning may be quite limited."⁷ But in a review in which he praises our work for its attempt to bring data to bear on these questions, he cites his own classroom experiences to support his claim that "[b]lack students do, at times, call attention to the racial implications of issues that are not facially concerned with race, but white and Asian-American students are in my experience no less likely to do so."⁸ While we would never question Sandalow's interpretation of his own classroom experience, we doubt that any one professor's impression of the contribution (or lack of contribution) of a racially diverse student body should be the yardstick by which the impact of such programs is measured.

Sandalow also suggests that while "'[g]rade inflation' is not, of course, solely attributable to minority admission policies . . . they are surely one of the factors that have contributed to it."⁹ We wonder. The argument that the admission of students with lower SATs "has had an important influence on academic standards" needs more support than the presentation of anecdotal evidence. Our data show that equal percentages of black and white students major in engineering, mathematics, chemistry, and biology. The similarities in patterns of difficult majors chosen by black and white stu-

7. Sandalow, *supra* note 1, at 1906.

8. *Id.* at 1907.

9. *Id.* at 1903.

dents is the strongest argument we have seen against the notion that underqualified black students are getting by due to grade inflation and “liberal guilt” on the part of professors. There are many issues in higher education that deserve close scrutiny — grading standards among them — but we would encourage faculty, in particular, not to be too quick to assign lead roles to race-sensitive policies in the absence of evidence.

Professor Sandalow admirably fits our book into a discussion of the historical, legal, and cultural contexts within which selective colleges and universities have considered race in the admissions process. And while the haunting presence of an imprecise process carried out by human beings exercising judgements may well lead to some self-doubt among admittees of all kinds (Do I belong? Am I smart enough?), it also allows institutions to define their own missions and then to carry them out as they deem appropriate, rather than rely on any rigidly defined metric of “fair,” as “fairness” may be defined by external authorities or internal formulae. The cost of keeping this process human (for violinists, second basemen, and trustees’ children, as well as black applicants) is an inability to assign one-dimensional labels to students. The pluses of such ambiguity — which are seen, at least in part, in the empirical results we report — are, to our minds, entirely sufficient to justify continuing to rely on complex judgments made by fallible human beings.