

Percent Plan Admissions: Their Strengths and Challenges in Furthering an Equity Agenda

Admisiones por planes de porcentajes: sus fortalezas y desafíos para promover una agenda de equidad

Catherine Horn

University of Houston, USA

Abstract

United States has a history of discrimination against non-whites. Colleges and universities have played an important role against segregation and promoting equal opportunities. Within these actions, this article highlights the case of experiments in admissions to college in Texas, California and Florida, through percent plans that offer an alternative “race-neutral”. This paper seeks to serve four purposes. First, it provides a broad overview of the college choice and admissions processes as well as the most commonly considered “race-neutral” strategies. Next, it provides a detailed description of the three percent plan policies in place in the United States, noting the similarities and, importantly, the distinctions between and among them. Third, it summarizes the empirical literature produced over more than a decade describing the effectiveness of these percent plans on various outcomes of interest. Finally, in the context of that research base, the paper reflects on the strengths and challenges of a percent plan in furthering an equity agenda.

Keywords: higher education, college admission, admissions based on percent plans, equity in access to higher education

Post to:

Catherine Horn
University of Houston, Educational Psychology Department, USA
4800 Calhoun, Farish Hall 491, Houston, TX 77004
Email: clhorn2@uh.edu

© 2012 PEL, <http://www.pensamientoeducativo.org> - <http://www.pel.cl>

ISSN: 0719-0409 DDI: 203.262, Santiago, Chile
doi:10.7764/PEL.49.2.2012.4

Resumen

Estados Unidos tiene una historia de discriminación en contra de la gente que no es blanca. Las instituciones de educación superior han jugado un rol importante, aminorando los efectos de la segregación y promoviendo igualdad de oportunidades. Dentro de estas acciones, este artículo destaca el caso de las experiencias de admisión a la educación superior en Texas, California y Florida, a través de planes de porcentajes que ofrecen una alternativa que no considera diferencias raciales. Este artículo busca cumplir cuatro propósitos. Primero, proporciona una amplia visión de la elección de las instituciones de educación superior y los procesos de admisión, así como también las estrategias para proporcionar el acceso a la educación superior sin considerar diferencias raciales más comúnmente utilizadas. Segundo, entrega una descripción detallada de las tres políticas de planes de porcentajes implementadas en Estados Unidos, destacando las similitudes y las distinciones entre ellas. Tercero, resume la literatura empírica que durante más de una década ha descrito la efectividad de estos planes de porcentajes. Finalmente, en el contexto de esos resultados, el artículo considera las fortalezas y desafíos de los planes de porcentajes para promover una agenda de equidad en el acceso a la educación superior.

Palabras clave: educación superior, admisión, admisión basada en planes de porcentajes, equidad en el acceso a la educación superior

Since its inception, the United States has been a country defined by contradictions between idealized theory and reality. In their declaration of independence from the British, for example, the founders of this nation proclaimed “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” As the original Constitution clarified, however, “all men” (a literal use of the term) included only whites, mandating that black slaves be counted as “three fifths of all other Persons.” Angela Browne Miller (1996) defines these kinds of contradictions as *cyclical egalitarianism*, “when it is politically fashionable, we are egalitarians.” When such egalitarianism is not practical, profitable, or socially convenient, however, “equality is interrogated for its significance and authenticity, and its biological validity or invalidity” (p. 6). This clash between the idealism of an egalitarian society and the practical ramifications of supporting such a society has haunted our history and ultimately complicated the day-to-day endeavors of politics, law, education, business, and even popular culture.

Perhaps the most contentious and consistent source of cyclical egalitarianism in the United States has been race/ethnicity. Given a long history of discrimination against non-whites (e.g., overt slavery, “Jim Crow” laws, and prejudiced hiring policies), the United States has, at various times, attempted to redress such practices through legislation or legal action. Historically, many of these efforts have focused on ending segregation and discrimination in the workplace. Within these historically broader struggles for desegregation and equal opportunity in the workplace, colleges and universities have been compelled to actively consider their roles in this movement and their use of affirmative action measures to achieve those functions.

Like those related to employment, affirmative action issues of race, diversity, and access related to education have been hotly contested in American legal, political, and social arenas. Proponents of affirmative action policies argue that race/ethnicity-based discrimination continues to permeate American society and that such policies simply ensure equal access to social opportunity (Frederickson, 1998). Critics of affirmative action often argue that the imposition of some external idea of equity or fairness acts “as an inefficient substitute for the more rational market processes of selection” (Feinberg, 1998, p. 18).

These competing perspectives fundamentally reflect two dominant philosophical frameworks that have shaped U.S. higher education. First, a belief in the rationality of markets has perpetuated a system of American colleges and universities that “vie for students, faculty, and funding under the assumption that diversity and high quality are best achieved through competition” (Eckel & King, 2004, p. III). Second, in recognition of the increasing importance of a college education for social mobility, colleges and universities have, over time, come to “view broad access to higher education as a necessary component of the nation’s ideal as a ‘land of opportunity’” (Eckel & King, p. III). As a result, serious policy, legal, and

political debates have been ongoing about who has access to what type of college education and how those decisions are made. In particular, several recent and ongoing U.S. Supreme Court Cases (*Gratz v. Bollinger and the University of Michigan*; *Grutter v. Bollinger and the University of Michigan*; *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*) have drawn back to the center of the equity discussion the relative effectiveness of various types of admissions practices at expanding access for traditionally underserved students.¹

A bold set of experiments begun initially in Texas in 1998 gives us long and deep insight into the effects of one such practice, guaranteed admissions. While varied in their guarantees, such policies, colloquially referred to as percent plans,² offer an alternative “race-neutral” path to college admissions in Texas, California, and Florida. This paper seeks to serve four purposes. First, it provides a brief and broad overview of the college choice and admissions processes, as well as the most commonly considered “race-neutral” strategies. Next, it provides a detailed description of the three percent plan policies in place in the United States, noting the similarities and, importantly, the distinctions between and among them. Third, it summarizes the empirical literature produced over more than a decade describing the effectiveness of these percent plans on various outcomes of interest. Finally, in the context of that research base, the paper reflects on the strengths and challenges of a percent plan in furthering an equity agenda. It turns now to each, in order.

College choice, college admissions, and race-neutral alternatives

The comprehensive set of processes to access college or university is complex. To capture the progression, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-phase model representing the stages through which a student moves. The ultimate enrollment decision is first impacted by a student’s desire to attend college leading into a search phase, which results in a formulated “choice set”—the group of institutions to which a student will actually apply. In the final stage, a student chooses which school he/she will attend. Within these phases, internal and external influences interact to create the resulting outcomes.

In understanding how students wend their way through these phases, research suggests several general factors that repeatedly act as those internal and external influences (DesJardins, Dunbar, & Hendel, 1999). Family socioeconomic status is associated with the quality or selectivity of the universities to which students apply and attend, but not with the cost of the universities they select (Braxton, 1990). The perceived quality of the institution, as well as the courtship process by which a university “lures” someone in further influence a student’s choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Additionally, the financial aid packages offered are often associated with where a student ultimately enrolls (Scannell, 1992). Myriad other factors (e.g., educational level of students’ parents, distance of university from home, size of student body, special academic programs) come into play as well (Braxton, 1990). Moreover, research has identified that the influences on the college choice process differ by demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004) and income status (Heller, 1997). In short summary, then, comprehensive college choice is one that often provides “a distinctly different set of destinations” (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 47) for students, too often based on inequitable factors.

College admissions broadly conceived

While the full college choice process is an interactive one, the college admissions process is much more unidirectional (conditional on student choice to apply). In understanding the individual characteristics considered in making decisions about who will gain entrance to a particular university, the College Board has created a taxonomy of admissions practices. This framework disaggregates the multiple lenses through which choices about students are made.

¹ For a detailed discussion of these court cases, please see Ancheta (2008) and Schmidt (2012).

² Throughout the paper, the terms percent plan, percent rule, and guaranteed admission are used interchangeably.

Table 1
College Board Taxonomy of the Admissions Decision Making Process

Taxonomy	Description
Entitlement	Higher education is an inalienable right and should be made available to everyone.
Open Access	College is a natural progression after high school and should be made available to everyone who is qualified.
Meritocracy	Access to higher education is reward for those who have been most academically successful.
Character	Access to higher education is a reward for personal virtue, dedication, perseverance, and hard work.
Enhancement	The goal of higher education is to seek out and nurture talent.
Mobilization	Higher education is the “great equalizer” and must promote social and economic mobility.
Investment	Access to higher education should promote the greater good and further the development of society.
Environmental/Institutional	The admissions selection process is designated to meet the enrollment goals and unique organizational needs of the admitting institution, while promoting the overall quality of students’ educational experience.
Fiduciary	Higher education is a business, and access must first preserve the institution’s fiscal integrity.

Note: Adapted from *Toward a taxonomy of the admissions decision-making process: A public document based on the first and second College Board conferences on admissions models*, by College Board, 1999, New York.

In summary, these dimensions represent two important meta-perspectives relevant to understanding the effectiveness of a guaranteed admissions process from an equity framework: eligibility and selection. Eligibility-based admissions “are driven exclusively by public and objective criteria; they carry no ambiguity in terms of the outcome for a particular student” (College Board, 1999, p. 8). In most cases, though, “eligibility is a preliminary step to a selective admission process during which the prospective student is qualitatively evaluated on additional criteria and in competition with other prospective students” (College Board, 1999, p. 8). In the case of the guaranteed admissions policies, critics and supporters alike draw from both of these perspectives to justify their positions, a discussion in detail subsequently in the paper.

Race-neutral alternatives

The 1990s and early 2000s brought several significant pieces of legislation that directly impacted higher education admissions decision making in the United States. In July of 1995, the California Board of Regents passed SP-1, a resolution that ended the university system’s use of race, religion, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in admissions considerations, effective January 1, 1997 (Hurtado, Haney, & Garcia, 1998). Concurrently, then Governor Pete Wilson introduced the California Civil Rights Initiative (also known as Proposition 209) into legislative session. In November, 1996, the California voters passed Proposition 209 into law, amending their state’s constitution and ending the preferential use of race/ethnicity, gender, color, or national origin in education, employment or contracting (Ratliff, Rawlings, Ards, & Sherman, 1997).³

Several states followed California’s lead and put into place initiatives similar to Proposition 209 and SP-1. Washington voters, for example, passed Initiative 200 in November 1998, which restricted the use of race/ethnicity in employment, education, and contracting decisions.⁴ Similarly, Florida Governor Jeb Bush put his One Florida Initiative into place. This legislation, adopted by the Florida Board of Regents in February 2000, also eliminated consideration of race/ethnicity in admissions procedures.⁵

³ A legal challenge of Proposition 209 was put into place the day after voters passed the measure. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found that the measure was not a violation of the Constitution (Anderson, 1999).

⁴ Michigan voters passed similar legislation in 2006 (Proposal 2).

⁵ Similar race/ethnicity neutral policies applicable to contracting were also included in the One Florida Initiative.

One Florida encourages the replacement of such criteria with “other factors that will enhance diversity” including socio-economic background, geographical diversity, first generation college student, and high school quality, that is, whether the applicant has attended a low-performing secondary school (Marin & Lee, 2003).

The same decade also brought several legal challenges related to higher education admissions and affirmative action.⁶ In 1992, Cheryl Hopwood and three other “nonminority” applicants who had been denied admission filed suit against the University of Texas law school, challenging that its use of racial/ethnic preferences in admissions procedures was a violation of their Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection (*Hopwood v. Texas*). Rejecting the argument that the law school’s race/ethnicity-based considerations withstood strict scrutiny of the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause because they “remedy the present effects of past discriminatory practices” (Goring, 2000), the 1996 majority decision of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals placed its support in favor of race/ethnicity-neutral policies. This landmark decision represented an important moment in the evolving role of affirmative action and higher education admissions. Given the legislative buildup that had been growing (i.e., SP-1 and Proposition 209) against race/ethnicity conscious considerations, *Hopwood* added legal fuel to the fire.

In 2003 the U.S. Supreme Court heard companion cases (*Gratz v. Bollinger and the University of Michigan* and *Grutter v. Bollinger and the University of Michigan*) that challenged the admissions practices of the University of Michigan undergraduate and graduate admissions policies, respectively. Writing for the majority in the *Grutter* decision, Justice O’Connor upheld the constitutionality of the consideration of race/ethnicity as a component of a holistic admissions practice. Most recently, a similar challenge to the undergraduate admissions practices at the University of Texas at Austin (*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*) has been accepted and is scheduled to be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in Fall 2012. The plaintiff argues that the effectiveness of a race-neutral policy (i.e., the Texas Top Ten Percent Plan) in creating a diverse student body negates a need for race-conscious considerations.

Given these efforts to end race/ethnicity-conscious affirmative action admissions, then, much has been written about viable admissions criteria alternatives to race/ethnicity for maintaining “diverse” college and university student bodies. In the case of attempting to sustain racial/ethnic diversity, the most prevalent suggestions have centered around class-based affirmative action admissions policies and X percent rules where a certain percentage of a state’s high school graduates are granted guaranteed admission into the university system. Each is discussed in more detail below.

Increased reliance on standardized test scores.

When a race/ethnicity-neutral admissions policy is used, colleges and universities often increase the weight placed on standardized tests (Orfield, 1998). In a survey (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011) of undergraduate admissions policies, practices and procedures, for example, 54 percent of responding selective institutions attribute considerable importance to test scores in the admission decision, and 55, 61, and 58 percent of the decreasingly selective institutions (by acceptance rate categories) give them similar weight, respectively. The logic of such policies that rely more heavily on the SAT or ACT is that these tests provide an “objective” measure (arguably to compliment or balance the more “subjective” measures such as high school grade point average that may vary in interpretability from one high school to the next or recommendations that may not present a “true” picture of the applicant) of how a student may fare in his/her first year of college and beyond (Lederman, 1999). But, as many have documented, substantial performance gaps exist across racial/ethnic (Koretz, 2000) and economic (Campbell, 2009) lines. As such, as Koretz (2000) notes, “unless test scores are given very little weight or are offset by other factors on which minority students have an advantage relative to whites, the average test-score disparity will generally have a severe impact on admission to selective colleges” (p. 12).

⁶ Although not directly related to admissions policies, *Podberesky v. Kirwan* challenged the validity of a merit-based, black-only scholarship program at the University of Maryland. In 1994, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals found that program was unconstitutional under the strict scrutiny interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment (Scanlan, 1996).

Class-based affirmative action policies.

Proponents of class-based affirmative action policies argue that such considerations are a legally-defensible alternative in the efforts to create racially/ethnically diverse college student bodies. The logic of such policies that place increased emphasis (to varying degrees) on class-based characteristics such as socioeconomic status and secondary school quality is that minority applicants are disproportionately represented among the disadvantaged and would therefore benefit from such considerations (Cancian, 1998).⁷ Proponents further argue that such strategies can withstand court challenge because they would not be subject to strict scrutiny; these considerations do not implicate a fundamental right or a traditionally suspect class (Scanlan, 1996).

In discussing such considerations, though, proponents and opponents must confront the complicating issue of defining what “class-based” affirmative action means. Kahlenberg (1996) suggests that three definitional tiers exist. In its most simple definition, family income would suffice to define class. A moderately sophisticated definition might include parents’ income, education, and occupation. Finally, a sophisticated look at “class-based” considerations might consider such variables as income, education, occupation, wealth, schooling opportunities, neighborhood influences, and family structure. Of course, variations of these classifications could emerge. One of the challenges to such a policy, then, is arriving at an agreed-upon strategy from which to work.

X percent rules

Another alternative admissions procedure currently in place in several states is the use of an X percent rule. Texas, California, and Florida have each put policies into place guaranteeing admission to a certain percentage of their high school graduates (details of which will be discussed later in the paper). Many praise the approach as a distinctly egalitarian means by which to diversify both the applicant and admitted student pool (e.g., *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*), but guaranteed X percent admissions policies are not without their critics. Some cite issues such as penalization of second decile students at more demanding high schools (e.g., Rhodes, 2000), while others note that X percent rules create racially/ethnically diverse student bodies most effectively in systems where racially/ethnically segregated secondary schools exist (Horn & Flores, 2003; Sullivan, 1998). Finally, in the case of an X percent rule such as that in place in Texas, from the onset many have worried that controlling enrollments in higher education institutes may be virtually impossible (e.g., Scott & Kibbler, 1998). To explore each of these issues in more detail, then, the paper turns next to the specific guarantees of the current Percent Plans in the United States.

Percent plan guarantees in Texas, California, and Florida

The percent plans currently being implemented in Texas, California, and Florida share some overlap, but are largely divergent in guarantees and processes. Table 2 presents a summary of the key components of each.

⁷ The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, for example, suggested in its Hopwood ruling that these “less suspect” considerations are legally acceptable (Scanlan, 1996).

Table 2
Percent Plan Guarantees in Texas, California, and Florida

	Texas	California (original)	California (revised) ^b	Florida
Who gains admission?	Top 10%: public and private	Top 4%: comprehensive public and private	Top 9%: comprehensive public and private	Top 20%: public
To what does the policy grant admission?	Texas public university of student's choice ^a	A UC system university, but not necessarily of student's choice	A UC system university, but not necessarily of student's choice	A state university system campus, but not necessarily of student's choice
What are the coursework and other requirements?	Since 2004, recommended or advanced high school program or portion of program available to students	"a-g" system eligible coursework requirements	"a-g" system eligible coursework requirements	State-mandated coursework
Does the policy allow for or address race-conscious scholarships and outreach?	No; high school-based scholarships and outreach	No; high school-based scholarships and outreach	No; high school-based scholarships and outreach	Yes, both allowed at time of implementation

Note: Adapted from *Percent plans in college admissions: A comparative analysis of three states' experiences*, by C. Horn and S. Flores, 2003, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University; *Appearance and reality in the sunshine state: The Talented 20 program in Florida*, by P. Marin and E. Lee, 2003, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University; and *UC regents adopt changes to freshman eligibility*, by University of California Office of Strategic Communications, 2009.

^aIn 2009, the Texas legislature amended the law to cap the guaranteed admissions to UT Austin at 75 percent of the entering class (League of United Latin American Citizens, 2009).

^bIn 2009, the UC Board of Regents modified the original Eligibility in Local Context (ELC) parameters (University of California Office of Strategic Communications, 2009).

Sources: Horn & Flores (2003); Marin & Lee (2003); University of California Office of Strategic Communications (2009).

Texas

Eligible Texas students must graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class, a determination made at the local school district level and at the end of the junior year or beginning of senior year in high school, depending on university requirements (College for All Texans, 2012). Amendments to other state higher education admissions law (Texas Education Code [TEC] 51.803-51.809) has added the requirement that students graduate with a recommended or advanced high school program of study or have completed the portion of program available to them through their high school.⁸ While the percent plan policy does not address the use of race-conscious scholarships and outreach, several universities, as well as the state's Higher Education Coordinating Board, maintain either individual or community-based grant opportunities for percent plan students who have demonstrated financial need. For example, the UT Austin Longhorn Opportunity and Texas A&M Century scholarships target percent plan students who attend an identified set of traditionally underrepresented high schools (Horn & Flores, 2003). The College for All Texans 10% Plan Scholarship, in comparison, is managed by the state and eligible to anyone with identified need (College for All Texans, 2012).

⁸ The code also allows for students who do not meet "uniform admission standards" through curricular means to qualify on the basis of SAT or ACT test performance.

California

The original parameters for the University of California's (UC) Eligibility in Local Context (ELC) plan provided guaranteed admission to a UC system institution for students graduating in the top 4 percent of their respective high school class. Students may indicate particular campus preference, but unlike in Texas, the guarantee does not extend to that level. Recent revisions to the policy, however, now make eligible the entitlement to students in the top 9 percent of their high school class.⁹ Eligibility is determined by completion of a specific set of 11 UC-approved "a-g" courses prior to the senior year and a UC-calculated GPA that meets or exceeds the benchmark set by the university system for that high school (University of California, n.d.). Similar to Texas, UC's policy does not address financial aid or outreach requirements. But unlike Texas, scholarships have not been directly associated with the admission guarantee.

Florida

Florida's Talented 20 program provides guaranteed admission to one of the state university system campuses for students graduating in the top 20 percent of their high school classes after the 7th semester of high school. Students are required to complete a set of 18 courses (Florida Department of Education, 2005) in line with the standard high school curriculum for the state. While no specific financial aid packages are attached to the Talented 20 program, priority is given to those students in awarding funds from the Florida Student Assistance Grant (Florida Department of Education, 2005). A distinguishing feature of the Talented 20 Program is the original design maintained the ability to undertake race-conscious outreach efforts (despite the One Florida's overt prohibition of such efforts in the admissions process) (Marin & Lee, 2003).

In considering the percent plans admission policies currently implemented in the United States, then, several important points are worth noting in summary. First, while packaged in similar rhetoric of transparent eligibility, the three plans offer substantially divergent opportunities to access public higher education in the respective states. On one extreme, Texas offers the least restrictive set of guidelines, while California on the other offers much more reserved benefits for eligible students. Second, the supplemental services (e.g., financial aid, outreach) directly associated with implementation of the policy also vary by state, thus contextualizing any understanding of the impacts of the plans on outcomes of interest. Finally, as the next section will address in detail, the extent to which these policy-driven opportunities serve as sufficient in efforts to extend an equity agenda is an important empirical question to which careful analytical attention has been paid and continues to be required. In that spirit, then, the paper now turns to what research has identified as the various outcomes of the three percent plans in implementation.

Empirical understanding of percent plan effectiveness

Over more than a decade, substantial analytical attention has been given to the effectiveness of the percent plans in creating diverse student bodies and will be discussed in turn. Much of the earliest research percent plans used simulated to assess the extent to which access was enhanced, particularly for traditionally underrepresented students. For example, Geiser (1998) used College Board data for California high school graduates who took the SAT in 1996 to simulate the impacts of using various X percent rules on the racial/ethnic makeup of those eligible for UC system admissions. He found that with a 4 percent plan it would have a modest impact, concluding that the 4 percent rule would increase the number of underrepresented minorities by about 10 percent as compared to a pool given no policy.

As plans became implemented, however, opportunities for both richer descriptive and inferential understanding¹⁰ have become readily available and most often focused on the changes in outcomes of

⁹ The change to a 9 percent threshold was recommended "to increase the quality of the students admitted to the University and the fairness of the process by which they are identified and selected" (University of California Office of the President, 2009, p. 1)

¹⁰ Some of the most important work has come as part of the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project directed by Dr. Marta Tienda at Princeton University. This multi-year study tracked a representative random sample of 10th and 12th graders in Texas through key college decision-making points and concurrently assembled administrative application, admission, enrollment, and performance data from seven public and two private universities in the state. For more details, see <http://www.texastop10.princeton.edu/>

interest by either race/ethnicity, high school type, geographic location, or type of institution at which a student matriculated. The synthesis of empirical work, then, is presented below in two broad sections: impacts on access and impacts on longer-term college outcomes. Each is discussed in turn.

Impacts on access

The studies that have sought to understand percent plan impact on access have generally centered either on changes in representation at the application or admissions/enrollment phases. While the two are obviously related, the findings are presented separately here.

Changes in application behavior.

Across studies of Texas, California, and Florida, several connected findings have emerged related to changes in application behavior of percent plan-eligible students. First, the eligibility signaling through the plan itself, as well as through aggressive outreach and recruitment efforts of universities and systems related to the percent plan, (University of California, 2002) has had a positive effect on increasing aspirations of traditionally underrepresented students. Domina (2007), for example, found that the percent plan (along with specific and related university scholarship programs) functioned effectively as a K-16 reform mechanism. He demonstrated that these efforts redistributed college-related efforts in high schools and increased students' academic engagement. Similarly, Lloyd, Leicht, and Sullivan (2008) determined that "at least in Texas, just the knowledge of a percent plan has played a role in raising the sights of students who might not otherwise consider college. We also show that individual student academic preparation, families, peers and high school context play an important role, especially for minority students, but the law itself has an effect regardless of these other factors" (p. 1128). In California, ELC policy prompted greater a-g course availability in California high schools that had previously lacked them, as well as increased exposure for students in underserved high schools to UC eligibility and admission policies (Grotsky & Kurlaender, 2010).

But, importantly, policy signaling has had more tempered direct impacts on application patterns, particularly for underrepresented students. The University of California (2002) found that about 81 percent of eligible ELC eligible students applied in the first two years of policy implementation; the presence of traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups among ELC and non-ELC applications was almost identical at about 25 percent. The earliest years of Florida's Talented Twenty saw only 72 percent of eligible students applying to a state university system school (Marin & Lee, 2003). In Texas, the number and shares of represented high schools, by geography, among University of Texas at Austin applications increased as a result of the percent plan, but similar outcomes were not seen at the state's second flagship, Texas A&M University (Long, Saenz, & Tienda, 2010). Long and Tienda's work (2010) suggests Texas policy's disregard for test scores had a positive effect on applications to UT Austin from top-decile minority students. Koffman and Tienda (under review) determined, though, that "[percent plan] graduates from affluent schools are significantly more likely to seek admission to one of the public flagships compared with their cohorts who graduated from high schools that served students of low to moderate socioeconomic status" (p. 19). Such findings, then, contextualize the subsequent work related to admissions and enrollment.

Changes in admission/enrollment patterns.

Conditional upon application, many studies have also sought to understand percent plan policy contributions to admission and enrollment decisions. Several studies (Atkinson & Pelfrey, 2004; Long, Saenz, & Tienda, 2010; Montejano, 2004; University of California, 2002) have found that, at a subset of flagship campuses, not only did the percent plan increase representation of students from high poverty schools and schools with greater shares of minority students, but also that the longevity of the sending power of those high schools increased. But, as Niu, Tienda, and Cortes (2006) found (see also Horn & Flores [in press]), "among top decile seniors, we observe disparities in high school type, as well as by race/ethnicity in their responsiveness to the selectivity of their first college preference, but enrollment decisions are uniform across groups" (p. 269), reinforcing the fact that percent plan effectiveness is highly

influenced by the application behaviors of beneficiaries. Fletcher and Tienda (2011) found that enrollees from the middle quartiles of an aggregated income distribution accounted for the largest increases in students after the percent plan policy was enacted. At UT Austin that distributional shift was “at the expense” of highest income quartile high schools, but at Texas A&M, students from poor high schools were the ones displaced.

Moreover, admission and enrollment studies have also consistently found that the plans have not had success in increasing racial/ethnic diversity on campuses (e.g., Horn & Flores, 2003; Lloyd, Leicht, & Sullivan, 2008; Marin & Yun, 2003). Further, in California especially, it remains unclear the extent to which the ELC percent plan guarantee has had a substantial effect on increasing admissions and enrollments for students who were not already qualified under the state’s eligibility Master Plan guarantee. As Atkinson and Pelfrey (2004) describes, “there has been much more overlap between students in the upper four percent of their local high school and students in the top 12-1/2 percent of high school seniors statewide than initially anticipated” (p. 5), calling into question the direct net value added. In short summary, then, although varying in scope and rigor, the majority of findings related to racial/ethnic representation among admitted and enrolled students indicate that such policies did little to enhance diversity. The findings related to high school type (e.g., and geographic location), however, have been more mixed.

Impacts on outcomes

A smaller body of research has also sought to understand the longer-term implications of the guaranteed admissions policies on student success. In related studies, Fletcher and Tienda (2010, 2011) consider whether racial/ethnic college performance disparities exist and the extent to which they can be explained by high school economic attributes. While they do not address the percent plan directly, they test indirectly one of the important critiques raised, namely that percent plan students from “weaker” high schools will underperform relative to their peers from more substantially resourced schools. Comparing performance, by race/ethnicity, of students who graduated from the same high schools, they find “that minority students at UT outperform their white counterparts who graduated from the same high school, but also reveal that race and ethnic gaps in freshman grades differ by school quality” (2011, p. 19). Further, they find that achievement gaps, both by high school type and race/ethnicity, exist in terms of longer-term performance and graduation. In exploring the possible reasons for these disparities, Niu and Tienda (2011) turn to survey data from the THEOP project. Nearly 7 out of 10 graduates from the lowest income quartile high schools and more than 5 out of 10 graduates from the interquartile range of high schools identified that they withdrew from college in order to work. This is in comparison to less than 1 in 10 of their affluent high school counterparts.

In contrast, Horn and Flores (in progress) found that percent plan students at the University of Texas at Austin were as likely as their non-percent plan colleagues to graduate, controlling for gender, race, SAT score, high school rank, and a time-varying GPA covariate. Alon and Tienda (2007) demonstrated that the likelihood of graduation actually rose, although only statistically for African Americans. Studies have also sought to understand the affective outcomes associated with percent plan policies. A study of ELC students (Brint, Douglass, Flacks, Thomson, & Chatman, 2007) found that they were more academically engaged than their non-ELC students. In particular, “They spent more time in academic pursuits and less time in social activities than non-ELC students. ELC students achieved higher GPAs than their non-ELC counterparts, were more likely to say that they ‘belonged’ at a UC, were more active in community affairs, and were more likely to indicate that they were aiming for advanced graduate education than non-ELC students” (p. 22). In total, then, the limited number and conflicted nature of the findings related to long-term outcomes suggest that much work remains to clearly understand percent plans and their extended impacts on student success.

The strengths and challenges of percent plans in furthering an equity agenda

A long-standing set of challenges in North American higher education centers on issues of equitable access to and success in college for all students. Differential trends exist across gender, race, ethnicity, and economic class lines, and those lines are even brighter when you concentrate on elite colleges and

universities (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Further, the cost of college has also become an increasing barrier to access and success, particularly for students from low- and middle-income families (Geiger & Heller, 2011). The percent plans and, in some cases, their associated aid, offer a seemingly palatable solution to a long-entrenched problem then, namely that of equitable access that is transparently available to all. As the studies presented in this paper identify, though, even in their perceived simplicity, percent plans bring as much complexity as they resolve.

Perhaps the most consistently identified strength of these plans is the signaling structure it creates with high schools in the states. Koffman and Tienda (under review) summarize the benefits well. First, percent plans offer a mechanism through which postsecondary aspirations among highly qualified students from all types of schools may be raised. This conclusion falls squarely in line with the related literature documenting the importance of early and sustained development of “college knowledge”, a foundation for accessing college (Antonio, Venezia, & Kirst, 2004). Percent plans have had the further benefit of signaling similar messages to high schools in order that they might understand the opportunities and expectations provided by guaranteed admission and, in some cases, those efforts have served as catalysts for improved secondary school experiences. There is also more modest, but compelling available evidence that percent plans serve to both broaden and alter college choice sets for benefitting students, as well as reduce anxiety about admissibility relative to more traditional criteria (e.g., standardized tests).

Finally, such plans serve to create deeper and stronger ties between secondary schools and universities. From a broader equity policy perspective, this effort may be most important of all as the United States Higher Education system is increasingly blurring boundaries between the secondary and postsecondary sectors. For example, opportunities such as early college high schools and concurrent courses (sometimes in the form of dual credit courses, as well as more traditional Advanced Placement exams) that allow students to receive credit toward both high school and college completion are being broadly implemented as a means of enhancing both secondary and postsecondary success (Hoffman et. al, 2007; O’Keaffe et al., 2010). Percent plans have the demonstrated potential to fall into a larger category of cross-connected efforts to make clearer and more effective pathways to and through college for all students, and particularly for those who have been traditionally underserved by the educational system.

While they carry much promise, though, percent plans do not serve as a single-policy solution to equity challenges. First and importantly, the empirical research in the United States documents that most effective means of achieving racial and ethnic diversity on college campuses is, where possible, to consider those characteristics directly. In comparison with the outcomes of holistic admissions policies that consider race, research has consistently documented that percent plans do not create similarly diverse campuses (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Howell, 2010; Long, 2004; Reardon, 2012). This finding is particularly important for an international community that is not constrained by the same legal restrictions as many states are currently in the U.S. Further, where modest diversification is achieved by percent plans, it is most often on the back of an isolated secondary system. Offering even tacit condoning of such conditions may have longer-term unintended consequences for both the elementary/secondary and postsecondary sectors.

Third, percent plan effectiveness relies heavily (perhaps almost exclusively) on the contributions of the institutions and systems they support. Where success has been seen, universities have invested substantial and sustained time, human and capital resources in implementation of the plan, and, in the most efficacious cases, they have gone beyond the original parameters of the policy to extend into peripheral supports needed for success. Unfortunately, even with such efforts, equity of access and outcomes has not been achieved along economic or racial/ethnic lines. Finally, success of the percent plans in Texas has pushed to the brink the carrying capacity of one institution, the University of Texas at Austin. To the extent that institutions seek autonomy to make admissions decisions in line with their missions, models similar to the most progressive of the percent plans may substantially impede such efforts.

Discussion

In total, what more than a decade's worth of research on the percent plans requires us to consider is the balance in relationship between the student and his or her personal context, the institution, and the policies that create "opportunity." In their recently submitted amicus curiae brief, for example, the plaintiffs in the *Fisher* case wrote, "UT's treatment of Hispanics as 'underrepresented' renders its use of race over-inclusive because the high level of Hispanic enrollment at UT demonstrates that Hispanic students are not underrepresented on campus in any educational sense" (*Fisher v. University of Texas*, 2012, p. 38). In 2010, Hispanics comprised one-quarter of the total enrolled freshman class (and 28 percent of the enrolled percent plan students), a statistic that sits against the backdrop of a state that where almost half of the school-age population is Hispanic. This example serves simply to highlight the fact that the research brings us full-circle to the place where this paper began. One of the fundamental issues that policy makers and university leaders alike have to address is underlying purpose(s) of admissions and how to assess whether those purposes are being met through the strategies being used.

As both those in the middle of percent plan implementation and those watching on the wings consider the next steps, the paper concludes with a recommended set of four simple questions to help guide that process. First, how can or will the implemented policy contribute to better and more meaningful connections between the primary, secondary, and postsecondary sectors? A strong K-20 sector benefits all students. Second, in what ways does or can the policy account effectively for the additional contributions that play substantially in the real provision of access to college? Deliberations about this question might, for example, include issues such as early access to information, development of effective financial support for benefitting students, and creation of comprehensive academic and emotional support services that carry through the duration of a student's time at the university. Third, to what extent is a university or system willing to trade autonomy for transparency and to what end? The ELC and Talented 20 plans are designed to maintain decision-making authority at the institutional level, a characteristic distinctly different from the plan in Texas, where 76 percent of UT Austin's most recently admitted class came in through the percent plan. Serious data-driven discussion needs to be undertaken to understand how much universities are willing to give to gain.

Finally, how are or will outcomes be defined, measured, and evaluated, and in what disaggregated contexts? Much has been discussed throughout the studies presented here about the foundational contributions of application to the understanding of success, but the policy narratives have situated on admissions instead. Further, identification of the relevant longer-term outcomes is also an important undertaking for policy developers and for those in university leadership positions being called on to implement the policies. To disaggregation, I go back to the *Fisher* brief where plaintiffs provide aggregated information to demonstrate the "effectiveness" of the percent plan at creating a racially diverse campus at the University of Texas. What their statistics mask, though, is the fact that of the 52 percent of the enrolled freshmen who were non-white, only 5 percent were African American. Nor does the brief identify that for Texas A&M, the second of four identified Tier One institutions in the state, only 26 percent of the 2010 freshmen were non-white, and only 3 percent of the class was comprised of African Americans.

These simple examples nestled in the broader empirical literature described underscore the importance, then, of having a clear and shared policy and implementation understanding of disaggregation, where fine-grained income status and geography more complexly understood also proved important qualifiers to understanding policy success. Part of what will allow for this serious work to be done is to build, maintain, and put to use seamless p-20 data systems with adequate flags that let policy makers and educators carefully track the progress of all students through the full educational pipeline (Hoffman et. al, 2007). As the international community contemplates percent plans as a possible mediator of the global equity crisis, then, there is much to be learned from the case studies available in the United States and much work left to be done to cultivate their success.

The original article was received on June 18th, 2012
The revised article was received on August 31th, 2012
The article was accepted on September 26th, 2012

References

- Alon, S., & Tienda, M. (2007). Diversity, opportunity, and the shifting meritocracy in higher education. *American Sociological Review*, 72(4), 487-511.
- Ancheta, A. (2008). *Bakke*, antidiscrimination, jurisprudence, and the trajectory of affirmative action law. In P. Marin and C. Horn (Eds.), *Realizing Bakke's legacy: Affirmative action, equal opportunity, and access to higher education* (pp. 15-40). VA: Stylus Publishers.
- Antonio, A. L., Venezia, A., & Kirst, M. (2004). *Addressing the development of college knowledge: Concepts to improve student transitions from high school to college*. CA: The Stanford Bridge Project.
- Atkinson, R., & Pelfrey, P. (2004). Rethinking admissions: US Public universities in the post-affirmative action age. *Center for Studies in Higher Education Research and Occasional Paper Series*. CA: University of California, Berkeley.
- Braxton, J. (1990). How students choose colleges. In D. Hossler and L. Bean (Eds.), *The strategic management of college enrollments* (pp. 57-67). CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brief of Merit as *amicus curiae* for Petitioner (2012). *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, No. 11-345.
- Brint, S., Douglass, J. A., Flacks, R., Thomson, G., & Chatman, S. (2007). *A new generation: Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, immigration, and the undergraduate experience at the University of California*. CA: Center for Studies in Higher Education.
- Browne Miller, A. (1996). *Shameful admissions: The losing battle to serve everyone on our universities*. CA, USA: Jossey Bass.
- Campbell, C. (2009, August 27). SAT and family income. *New York Times*. Retrieved June 1, 2012 from <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/sat-scores-and-family-income/>
- Cancian, M. (1998). Race-based versus class-based affirmative action in college admissions. In J. Weiss (Ed.), *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 17(1), 94-105.
- Carnevale, A., & Rose, S. J. (2003). *Socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and selective college admissions*. Washington, DC: Century Foundation.
- Clinedinst, M. E., Hurley, S. F., & Hawkins, D. A. (2011). *2011 state of college admission*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of College Admissions Counselors. Retrieved April 4, 2012 from <http://i.bnet.com/blogs/nacac-report.pdf>
- College Board (1999). *Toward a taxonomy of the admissions decision-making process: A public document based on the first and second College Board conferences on admissions models*. NY: Author.
- College for all Texans (2012). *Top 10% scholarship program*. Retrieved June 1, 2012 from <http://www.collegeforalltexas.com/apps/financialaid/tofa2.cfm?ID=385>
- DesJardins, S. L., Dunbar, H., & Hendel, D. D. (1999). Modeling the college application decision process in a land-grant university. *Economics of Education Review*, 18(1) 117-132.
- Domina, T. (2007). Higher education policy as secondary school reform: Texas public high schools after Hopwood. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 29(3), 200-217.
- Eckel, P. D., & King, J. E. (2004). *An overview of higher education in the United States: Diversity, access, and the role of the marketplace*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.
- Espenshade, T., & Walton, A. (2009). *No longer separate, not yet equal: Race and class in elite college admission and campus life*. NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Feinberg, W. (1998). *On higher ground: Education and the case for affirmative action*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Fletcher, J., & Tienda, M. (2010). Race and ethnic differences in college achievement: Does high school attended matter. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 627(1), 144-166.
- Fletcher, J., & Tienda, M. (2011). *High school quality and race differences in college achievement*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management. Washington, D.C.
- Florida Department of Education (2005). *Talented 20*. Retrieved June 1, 2012 from <http://www.fdoe.org/talented20/>
- Frederickson, G. (1998). A liberal defense of affirmative action. In R. Post and M. Rogin (Eds.), *Race and representation: Affirmative action* (pp. 339-340). NY: Zone Books.
- Geiser, S. (1998). *Redefining UC's eligibility pool to include a percentage of students from each high school*. CA: University of California Regents.
- Goring, D. (2000). Private problem, public solution: Affirmative action in the 21st century. *Akron Law Review*, 33(2), 209-288.
- Grodsky, E., & Kurlaender, M. (Eds.) (2010). *Equal opportunity in higher education: The past, present and future of California's proposition 209*. MA: Harvard Education Press.

- Heller, D. (1997). Student price response in higher education: An update to Leslie and Brinkman. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 624-659.
- Hoffman, N., Vargas, J., Venezia, A., & Miller, M. S. (Eds.). (2007). *Minding the gap: Why integrating high school and college makes sense and how to do it*. MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Horn, C., & Flores, S. (2003). *Percent plans in college admissions: A comparative analysis of three states' experiences*. MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.
- Horn, C., & Flores, S. (in press). *When policy opportunity is not enough: The complexity of college access and enrollment*.
- Horn, C., & Flores, S. (in progress). *Does receipt of the Top 10 Percent Plan benefit affect likelihood of college completion? A quantitative case study analysis*. Paper in progress presented to the Center for Public Policy Seminar, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, March, 2009.
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policy makers. *College and University*, 62(3), 207-221.
- Howell, J. (2010). Assessing the impact of eliminating affirmative action in higher education. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 28(1), 113-166.
- Hurtado, A., Haney, C., & Garcia, E. (1998). Becoming the mainstream: Merit, changing demographics, and higher education in California. *La Raza Law Journal*, 10(2), 645-690.
- Kahlenberg, R. (1996). Race-based remedies: Rethinking the process of classification and evaluation: Class-based affirmative action. *California Law Review*, 84(4), 1037-1100.
- Kinzie, J., Palmer, M., Hayek, J., Hossler, D., Jacob, S. A., & Cummings, H. (2004). *Fifty years of college choice: Social, political, and institutional influences on the decision-making process*. IN: Lumina Foundation.
- Koffman, D., & Tienda, M. (under review). *Admission guarantees, high school economic composition, and college application behavior*. Retrieved June 2, 2012 from <http://www.texastop10.princeton.edu/publications/wp.asp>
- Koretz, D. (2000). *The impact of score differences on the admission of minority students: An illustration*. MA: National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy.
- League of United Latin American Citizens (2009). *The top ten percent plan: Essential facts for parents, students, school administrators, and counselors*. Retrieved June 1, 2012 from http://www.txlulac.org/TTTP_essential_facts_NP_FINAL.pdf
- Lederman, D. (1999). Persistent racial gaps in SAT scores fuels affirmative-action debate. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 45, A36-A37.
- Lloyd, K. M., Leicht, K. T., & Sullivan, T. A. (2008). Minority college aspirations, expectations, and applications under the Texas Top 10% law. *Social Forces*, 86(3), 1105-1137.
- Long, M. (2004). Race and college admissions: An alternative to affirmative action? *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86(4), 1020-1033.
- Long, M., Saenz, V., & Tienda, M. (2010). Policy transparency and college enrollment: Did the Texas top ten percent plan law broaden access to public flagships? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 627(82), 82-105.
- Long, M., & Tienda, M. (2010). Change in Texas universities' applicant pools after the Hopwood decision. *Social Science Research*, 39, 48-66.
- Marin, P., & Lee, E. (2003). *Appearance and reality in the sunshine state: The Talented 20 program in Florida*. MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.
- Montejano, D. (2004). *Access to the University of Texas at Austin and the ten percent plan: A three-year assessment*. TX: University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved June 2, 2012 from <http://www.utexas.edu/student/admissions/research/montejanopaper.html>
- O'Keffe, L., Hayes, D., Easton-Brooks, D., & Johnson, T. (2010). Advanced placement, dual credit, and four-year college graduation. *Enrollment management journal: Student access, finance, and success in higher education*, 4(3), 69-88.
- Orfield, G. (1998). Campus resegregation and its alternatives. In G. Orfield and E. Miller (Eds.), *Chilling admissions: Affirmative action crisis and the search for alternatives* (pp. 1-16). MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.
- Ratliff, C., Rawlings, H., Ards, S., & Sherman, J. (1997). *State strategies to address diversity and enhance equity in higher education*. CO: Education Commission of the States.
- Reardon, S., Baker, R., & Klasik, D. (2012). *Race, income, and enrollment patterns in highly selective colleges, 1982-2004*. CA: Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis. Retrieved August 31, 2012 from <http://cepa.stanford.edu/content/race-income-and-enrollment-patterns-highly-selective-colleges-1982-2004>

- Rhodes, F. (2000). College by the numbers. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 16(24), 88.
- Scanlan, L. (1996). *Hopwood v. Texas*: A backward look at affirmative action in education. *New York University Law Review*, 71, 1580-1633.
- Scannell, J. (1992). *The effect of financial aid policies on admission and enrollment*. NY: The College Board.
- Schmidt, P. (2012, February 21). Supreme court takes up challenge to race-conscious admissions at U. of Texas. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved June 2, 2012 from <http://chronicle.com/article/Supreme-Court-Takes-Up/130885/>
- Scott, F., & Kibler, W. (1998). A case study: The effects of the *Hopwood* decision on student affairs. In D. D. Gehring (Ed.), *Responding to the new affirmative action climate* (pp. 57-70). CA: Jossey Bass.
- Sullivan, K. (1998). The future of affirmative action: After affirmative action. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 59(3), 1039-1054.
- University of California (n.d.). *Eligibility in local context*. Retrieved June 1, 2012 from <http://www.ucop.edu/sas/elc/>
- University of California (2002). *Eligibility in local context program evaluation report prepared for May 2002 Regents meeting*. CA: Author.
- University of California Office of the President (2009). *Proposal on eligibility reform*. CA: Author. Retrieved August 31, 2012 from <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/regents/regmeet/feb09/e2.pdf>
- University of California Office of Strategic Communications (2009). *UC regents adopt changes to freshman eligibility*. Retrieved June 1, 2012, from www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news