

## Regional

# U.S. Supreme Court takes on Affirmative Action

The issue of race in higher education has once again become a topic of public discussion, this time provoked by a statement made by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia during the hearing over a case on affirmative action at the University of Texas early last December.

During the hearing Scalia asked whether it might be better for black students to go to “a slower-track school where they do well” than to go to a highly selective college like The University of Texas with the help of affirmative action.

The argument is based on an educational idea known as the “mismatch theory of college admissions.”

According to this theory beneficiaries of affirmative action who are admitted to very competitive colleges may do worse academically and socially than if they enrolled at less selective colleges that wouldn't have considered their race or ethnicity.

In other words, affirmative action can be bad for minorities. S

Supporters of this theory also claim that allowing certain minorities into selective schools will damage the quality of the education in general for those institutions.

This topic is the kind that generates a lot of discussion and debate, one in which facts often-times get lost in the fog of politics.

So let's take a look at what we know.

To begin with, there is a vast body of research

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showing that minority students who benefit from affirmative action get higher grades at the institutions they attend, leave school at lower rates than others and are generally more satisfied in higher education.

Attendance at a selective institution is also associated with higher earnings and higher college completion rates.

This contradicts the tenets of the mismatch theory.

For example, according to researchers at the University of Michigan when one looks at graduation rates or future earnings, minorities who are admitted via affirmative action to more selective schools do at least as well as – and often better – than they could have been expected to do had they gone to less selective institutions.

These researchers conducted a thorough study that examined nearly three decades of data on how affirmative action policies had worked at their university and found that minority students who entered the university through the affirmative action policy earned as much over their careers as white students.

In another study conducted by researchers from the University of California and the

University of Wisconsin, minority students were found to be less likely to drop out of an academically challenging school than a less demanding institution.

And these are just two examples of this kind of research.

According to the Century Foundation, a progressive think tank, roughly half of government leaders and half of corporate leaders are graduates of just 12 selective colleges, providing them a network of contacts and career opportunities.

More minorities attending these selective colleges would result in them also having this kind of access to professional connections.

In the case involving The University of Texas, the lawyers arguing in favor of maintaining some sort of affirmative action at that institution presented data showing that students admitted using race as one of many criteria fare better academically over time than those admitted from the top 10 percent of their high school class, without regard to race.

If the Supreme Court strikes down any type of affirmative action, the consequences can be dire for the future of this country because it could lead us back to a form of the “separate but equal” doctrine of education.

It will also fail to prepare all students, regardless of race, to succeed in a world that is more and more diverse.

This argument also resurrects the old and dis-

credited idea that there is a correlation between race and IQ.

Studies conducted since World War I among Army recruits have shown that the differences in IQ performance observed among different ethnic groups are due to environmental factors such as socio-economic and educational disparities and not inherent to race.

That is why the U.S. Army became the first public institution in this country to eliminate discrimination based on ethnicity.

Also, despite numerous studies, no genetic factor has been found to have a causal relation with group difference in intelligence test scores.

Also, let's remember that elite schools that admit minorities do not do it blindly, but use a number of criteria to accept those students most likely to succeed.

It is interesting that these doubts about affirmative action are taking place in the Supreme Court.

Among the beneficiaries of this policy is one of Scalia's fellow justices, Sonia Sotomayor, whose admission through affirmative action to Princeton opened doors that ultimately led to the nation's highest court.

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