

Study finds racial diversity of students beneficial in higher education

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(Phys.org) -- A racially diverse law student body provides educational benefits for students, their institution and society, according to a 10-year multidisciplinary research study conducted by four professors, including two faculty members at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

An article on the study's results, "Does Race Matter in Educational Diversity? A Legal and Empirical Analysis," will be published in the summer issue of "*Rutgers Race & the Law Review*." The article is available online at Social Science Research Network:

ssrn.com/abstract=2101253 .

The study's release is particularly timely since the U.S. Supreme Court announced that it will hear arguments in the fall on *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, a case involving the consideration of race in college admissions. Today UNC filed an amicus brief in the case, one of about 10 universities expected to do so.

"The question of whether race may be considered in admissions of students to professional programs, as well as undergraduate schools, has been a subject of controversy at least since 1978 when the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, upheld limited use of race in admission decisions," said study co-author Charles E. Daye, Henry Brandis Professor of Law at the UNC School of Law and deputy director of the UNC Center for Civil Rights. "This is an important educational, political and societal question and one that is still being raised."

When retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote in a 2010 essay that “further social science research is needed in order to refine our appreciation of diversity’s value,” the researchers for this study – the Educational Diversity Project – had already been collecting data on the value of diversity in education for eight years.

“It’s so gratifying to see a study that is rigorously designed, multidisciplinary and involving data from many sources to address a critical issue in higher education today,” said study co-author Abigail T. Panter, Bowman and Gordon Gray Professor of Psychology at UNC. “Collaborative groups like ours can produce data that are useful for people to evaluate, which is especially important in the current climate when the [Supreme Court](#) will be involved.”

The research team was itself diverse, coming from the disciplines of law (Daye), psychology (Panter), sociology (Walter R. Allen of the University of California, Los Angeles) and educational research methodology (Linda F. Wightman of UNC Greensboro).

Over a decade, the researchers examined links of race (and other factors) with educational diversity, tracking law students from their enrollment in law school through graduation. The study used national data from more than 6,500 incoming law students attending a random representative sample of 50 American Bar Association-approved U.S. law schools.

The researchers found that many observed racial differences among students contribute to learning because differences foster richer interactions and positive educational outcomes that benefit students, institutions and society. In addition, when a law school’s racial diversity was significant and group interaction was high, graduating [law students](#) perceived their law school as more open and respectful of diverse ideas.

This exposure to a diversity of viewpoints prepares the students to be better lawyers, making them more “culturally competent,” the researchers found. “Unless you plan to practice [law](#) in a box, you’re going to be dealing with all kinds of races when you graduate, so you better have some of that respect or that appreciation that people can think differently,” said Aaron, a Northern California student quoted in the article.

“Our conclusion is that, because race matters and contributes to educational diversity, it would be a tragedy if educational institutions were told that the [race](#) of applicants could not be in any way considered,” Daye said. “There is no other factor that will adequately target the qualities needed in a student body in which the [students](#) can interact and learn from each other and learn the ways the others see the world.”

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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