

Affirmative action doesn't hurt less-prepared students, researchers say

June 27 2013, by Todd Finkelmeyer

(Phys.org) —Those who oppose affirmative action sometimes argue that such policies do far more harm than good to students who are admitted to competitive colleges or universities without the academic preparation of their peers.

But a forthcoming article in *Sociology of Education* indicates this may not be the case.

Based on data from the University of California system, professors Michal Kurlaender of the University of California, Davis and Eric Grodsky of UW-Madison find that those relatively weak students who were admitted to elite University of California institutions under an unusual arrangement typically fared about as well as their better-prepared peers.

Kurlaender and Grodsky base their claim on a "natural experiment" in which students initially denied admission to UC Berkeley, UCLA and UC San Diego due to budgetary constraints were subsequently admitted at the urging of the UC system office.

"These students were clearly at the bottom of the admit pool," says Grodsky, who is an associate professor of sociology, an affiliate of the Department of Educational Policy Studies, and a researcher with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. "They had substantially lower grades and test scores than regular admits and, since they were not initially admitted, probably did not have other things about them that

admissions officers saw to counter balance their academic deficits."

Kurlaender and Grodsky followed the students in their study for four years, comparing their grades, credits and likelihood of dropping out to two groups: their better prepared peers at elite UC campuses and students more like them who choose to attend less competitive UC campuses.

The authors found that although mismatched students were at a slight disadvantage relative to their better prepared peers, that disadvantage is almost entirely accounted for by high school grades and entrance exam scores.

Even without adjusting for differences in [academic achievement](#), mismatched students were substantially less likely to leave their initial college than students who attended less competitive UCs -13 percent of mismatched students left by their fourth year, compared to 20 percent of otherwise similar students attending less competitive campuses.

"Some people have suggested that comparing students of similar level of academic preparation misses the point of mismatch," said Grodsky. "But that's not right. Hardly anyone is 'average.' Most students are above or below the mean level of academic readiness for their class. Mismatch says that once you get far enough away from the mean, you experience problems that are greater than would be predicted based on your academic preparation. In the data we have, we just don't find that to be the case."

Kurlaender suggests that their findings are particularly important for understanding the arguments against [affirmative action](#).

"The plaintiffs in the (U.S. Supreme Court's) Fisher case claim that the beneficiaries of affirmative action are actually among the victims

because of mismatch," says Kurlaender. "Our study shows just the opposite; mismatched students are more likely to persist in college at elite UCs and do not pay a penalty in terms of grades for doing so."

More information: A working paper version of the article is [available online](#).

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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