

Race matters on college campuses

November 3 2015

Affirmative action bans not only contribute to the decline of student body diversity, but also negatively influence the success of students of color on campus, according to higher education researchers at Penn State and Columbia University.

Liliana M. Garces, assistant professor of [higher education](#), and Courtney D. Cogburn, assistant professor, Columbia School of Social Work looked qualitatively at how higher education professionals at the University of Michigan understand the influence of Proposal 2. This ballot initiative passed by Michigan voters in 2006 amended the state constitution to prohibit the consideration of [race](#) at public institutions in the state. The researchers interviewed 14 administrators responsible for campus diversity. The researcher published their results in the *American Educational Research Journal*.

Before Proposal 2, Michigan universities could use race as one among many factors in choosing which students to admit, but after the law passed the institution was prohibited altogether from looking at race in admissions.

"We were looking at it from the perspective of administrators at the institution who are charged with addressing diversity-related issues, who support students and enact initiatives related to diversity and who make the admissions decisions," said Garces, who is also a research associate at the Center for the Study of Higher Education. "We wanted to understand from their perspective, how they understood the influence of this law on their efforts to support racial diversity on campus."

Garces said she found that the law has shaped the work of these administrators on campus in ways that can be detrimental for supporting diversity-related efforts on campus.

"I found that after the law, the very people who were supposed to be supporting students felt disempowered and that they could not talk about race or racism," said Garces. "That's problematic because the research shows that supporting racial diversity on campus requires active, sustained work on campus for students to be supported."

The study examined the context specifically at the University of Michigan, a place, Garces said, that already had sought to support racial diversity in defending against prior lawsuits that ended with a landmark Supreme Court decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003. "Some of my past research examined the impact of these laws from a quantitative perspective (impact of numbers), but the only way to understand their influence more deeply was through a qualitative study," she said.

Being barred from considering race in college applications can have broader consequences on campus when talking about race relations and even

people's ability to talk directly about race. These consequences could harm the [campus](#) climate for students of color who feel like race can be a prominent part of their identity, according to Garces.

"Especially if they're on campuses with little [racial diversity](#) where it becomes very prominent to you that you're not like other people around you," she said.

"That kind of environment requires support around facilitating conversations and facilitating a positive racial climate, and my findings show that that support can be undermined with laws that tell

administrators they can't look at race at all, even when that prohibition is limited to college admissions."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Race matters on college campuses (2015, November 3) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-college-campuses.html>

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