

Study: After affirmative action bans, underrepresented student enrollment lags demographic trends

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In states that have banned affirmative action, the share of underrepresented minorities among students admitted to and enrolling in public universities has steadily lost ground relative to changing demographic trends among those states' high school graduates, according to new research.

The study, by Mark Long at the University of Washington and Nicole Bateman at the Brookings Institution, was published today in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

While prior research has looked at the immediate effects of affirmative action bans, this study evaluates the long-term changes, including the effects of admissions strategies that universities have implemented as alternatives. California, Texas, Washington, and Florida banned affirmative action in the late 1990s, and were followed later by Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Oklahoma.

Long and Bateman analyzed trends in minority representation among applicants, admittees, and enrollees in 19 selected [public universities](#) in the states with affirmative action bans, from the time their bans went into effect through 2015. The researchers further evaluated a subset of those institutions that are considered flagship universities within their states and then those that are considered elite, based on their admissions

criteria.

Averaging across the 19 universities studied, in the year prior to the affirmative action ban the share of underrepresented students (Black, Hispanic, and Native American students) among enrolled U.S. students was 15.7 percentage points below these students' share among [high school graduates](#) in the universities' states. However, this gap rose to 16.8 percentage points, on average, in the year immediately after the ban, and the gap increased in subsequent years to 17.9 percentage points.

Among the nine flagship universities in the study, the underrepresentation gap grew from 11.2 percentage points to 13.9 percentage points immediately after the ban and to 14.3 percentage points by 2015.

For the subset of 10 "elite" universities, the same pattern held, with the underrepresentation gap widening from 18.7 percentage points to 21.7 percentage points immediately following a ban and growing to 21.9 percent points by 2015.

Results from the study indicate that alternative policies—such as automatic admission for a certain top percentage of students from each [high school](#) (which leverages de facto racial and ethnic segregation of high schools), inclusion of socioeconomic factors in admission decisions, increased outreach and financial support for low-income students, and the elimination of admission preference for the children of alumni—have not been able to fully replace raced-based affirmative action.

"While the share of underrepresented minorities among enrolling undergraduate students has increased since the implementation of alternative policies, this growth is slower than the growth of underrepresented minorities in high schools," said Long, a professor of

public policy and governance at the University of Washington. "When the changing demographics of state high schools are considered, the underrepresentation of Black, Hispanic, and Native American youth in the higher education system is worsening, not improving."

"Alternative policies and administrative decisions have, so far, been unable to fully replace race-based [affirmative action](#)," Long said.

The researchers note that improvement in many of the underlying conditions that generate underrepresentation in colleges—such as differences in household income, test scores, and incarceration rates—has occurred, but at a slow pace.

"The very slow rate of progress in these underlying conditions is surprising and concerning," Long said. "For example, if the past 20 years is a guide for future progress, it will take over a thousand years for the Black-White gap in median household income to close. It's clear that university leaders and state policymakers cannot rely on improvements in the underlying conditions to solve underrepresentation in higher education for many decades to come."

"University administrators need to rigorously evaluate their policies and be mindful of practices that show promise," said Long. "They should be challenged to do more and do better."

"But we should also recognize that many of the underlying conditions are outside of the control of these administrators," Long added. "If we expect flagship public universities to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of their states, then policymakers must work harder and better to alleviate these pre-college disparities and improve college readiness for underrepresented students."

More information: Mark C. Long et al, Long-Run Changes in

Underrepresentation After Affirmative Action Bans in Public Universities, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2020). DOI: [10.3102/0162373720904433](https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720904433)

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