
Meritocracy Stalled

Diversity, Higher Education, and America's Leadership

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There are close to 3,000 four-year colleges and universities in the United States. A small percentage are considered elite institutions of higher education. Degrees from these particular institutions are golden tickets, giving the recipients special access to the best opportunities in the American workforce.

Who, exactly, gets the opportunity to receive these golden tickets? This is a country where the demographics are changing rapidly. By 2050, the U.S. Census projects non-Hispanic whites will no longer be the majority. Today, of all 18-24-year-olds, 45 percent are minorities.

We should expect the country's rich diversity to be reflected in all our educational institutions and certainly at our top colleges. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The U.S. Department of Education shows that those receiving bachelor's degrees in the 2009-2010 school year were 73 percent white. Over the past 50 years, the college-going rates for Blacks and Hispanics have remained below the college-going rates for whites and Asians. (The exception to this 50-year rule occurred in the late 1970's when a number of factors, including the implementation of affirmative action policies, the GI Bill, the establishment of the Pell Grant, and the lower cost of college, made it possible for Blacks, Hispanics and whites to attend college

at equal rates.) The same is true for college completion rates. White and Asian students continue to graduate from college at higher rates than Black and Hispanic students.

The reasons for these discrepancies are numerous and complicated. To begin with, a disproportionate number of children from Black and Hispanic backgrounds start life with less. Close to one-third of the American population is living in poverty or what is called "near" poverty. But, according to a recent Pew Research Study, nearly 40 percent of all Black children in America are poor.

High School Inequalities

The percentage of Americans graduating from high school has increased significantly over the past decade and is today at an all-time high of 81 percent. But a high school diploma means much less than it used to mean. It is much more difficult today to find a job that can pay enough to support a family with only a high school diploma in hand. In addition, the quality of K-12 education varies enormously by district and by school. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are heavily disadvantaged by the mere fact that they live in communities

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with under-resourced schools. Many poor children go to school in the morning hungry. According to hungerinourschools.org, three out of four public school teachers say that students regularly come to school hungry. Eighty-one percent say this happens at least once a week.

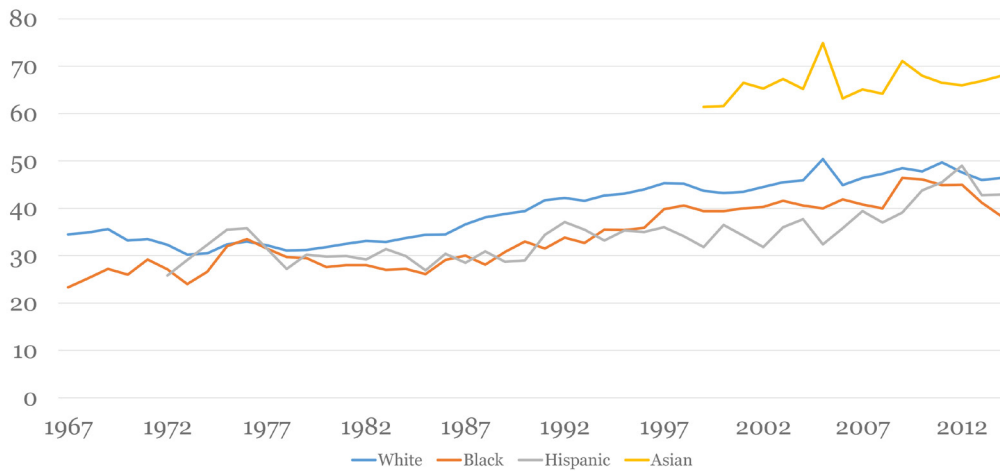
By the time young people enter their junior year in high school, ready to take the SAT, they are starting from radically different places. This is reflected in the results on college entrance exams. Yet the scores from these tests play an enormously significant role in whether or not a student will be admitted to an elite

institution of higher education.

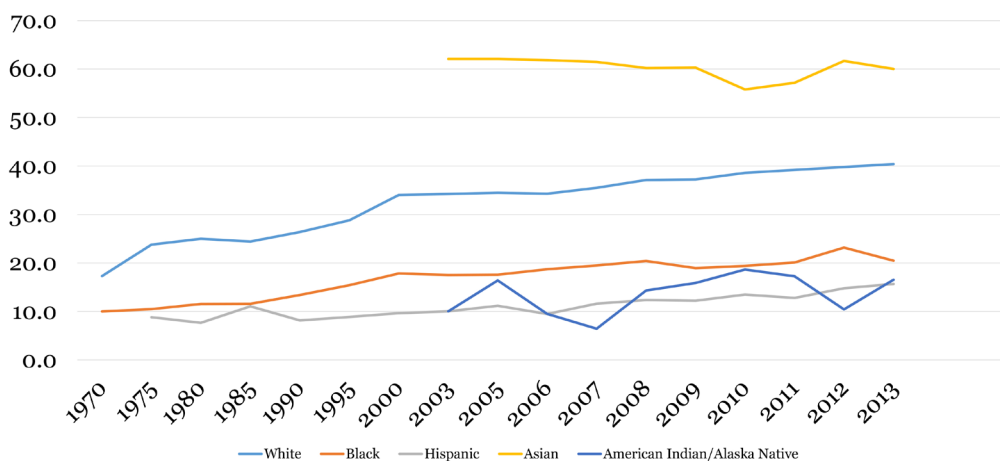
Unfortunately, people still see test scores like the SAT as one of the most important parts of a college application. Many believe (incorrectly) that a higher score is equal to greater intelligence or ability. And many want the SAT to be the arbiter in who deserves most to be admitted. Though the College Board defends the SAT as a good predictor of first-year GPA and even persistence in college, its most recent report shows that students with lower scores can and do compete in many instances with the same success as their high-scoring counterparts.

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ENROLLMENT RATES OF 18-TO-24 YEAR OLDS (WITH HIGH SCHOOL DEGREES) IN COLLEGE, BY RACE/ETHNICITY 1967-2014



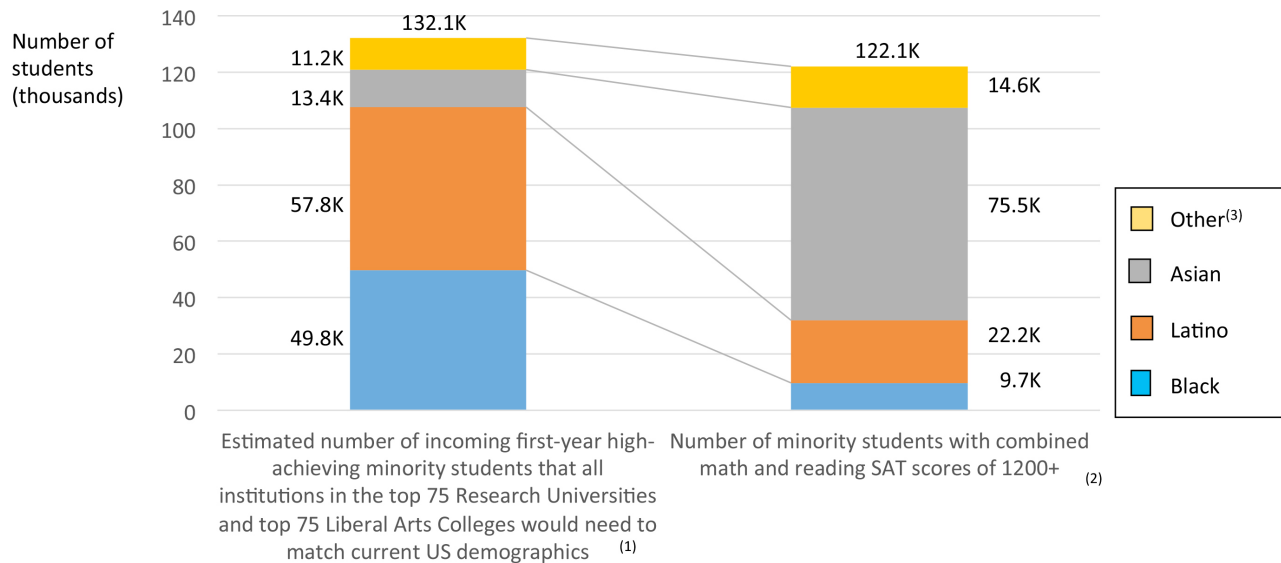
PERCENTAGE OF 25- TO 29-YEAR-OLDS WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER, BY RACE/ETHNICITY: 1970-2013



Sources:
 Top: U. S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1967 to 2014;
 Bottom: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, U.S. Census of Population: 1960, Vol. I, Part 1; J.K. Folger and C.B. Nam, Education of the American Population (1960 Census Monograph); Current Population Reports, Series P-20, various years; and Current Population Survey (CPS), March 1970 through March 2013. (This table was prepared October 2013).

FEWER UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY STUDENTS MEET TRADITIONAL CRITERIA THAN ARE NEEDED IN TOP-TIER INSTITUTIONS

High-achieving underrepresented minority students and enrollment in top colleges and universities



- (1) Calculated as the total number of undergraduates at the top 75 national research universities and liberal arts colleges divided by 4 years and multiplied by the percentage of the population 18-24 year olds of a given race/ethnicity (15.8% Black or African-American, 4.2% Asian, 18.3% Hispanic or Latino, 3.5% Other)
- (2) 10,303 students scoring 1200 or above on the SAT chose "No Response" for race or ethnicity; these students are excluded from the total
- (3) Includes Native American or Alaskan Native, and other underrepresented populations not categorized elsewhere

The SAT vs. Diversity

In 2014, The Posse Foundation took a look at the top-ranked colleges and universities in the United States to determine how many Black and Hispanic students they would need to admit each year if they were to reflect the percentage of Blacks and Hispanics in the American population. We found that the top-ranked 150 liberal arts colleges and national research universities (combined) would need approximately 50,000 Black students and 58,000 Hispanic students entering their first-year classes each year in order to achieve this goal.

Then we looked at how Black and Hispanic students were performing on the SAT. Since the SAT is still today a heavily weighted criterion for admission to the most selective colleges and universities, we wondered how these underrepresented students would stack up. The College Board reported in 2014 that 9,700 Black students and 22,000 Hispanic students scored 1200 or more on the math and reading sections of the SAT. The data made one issue clear: If these top institutions continue to rely too heavily on

SAT scores, they will never achieve the kind of representational diversity they say they hope to achieve.

Because this country seems to be resistant to the discussion of the role that race plays in our decision-making processes directly, other strategies to build diversity on campuses have emerged. These strategies include a move towards expanding socioeconomic diversity on campus with the assumption that this will also result in racial diversity. At state institutions, percent plans are implemented, which guarantee admission to a certain percentage of top-ranked students from each high school and rely on the fact that so many high schools are still segregated by race. But these efforts have generally failed to produce the kind of diversity our student bodies need if they are to reflect the diversity of the American population—and Blacks and Hispanics are still getting left behind.

No Room at the Top

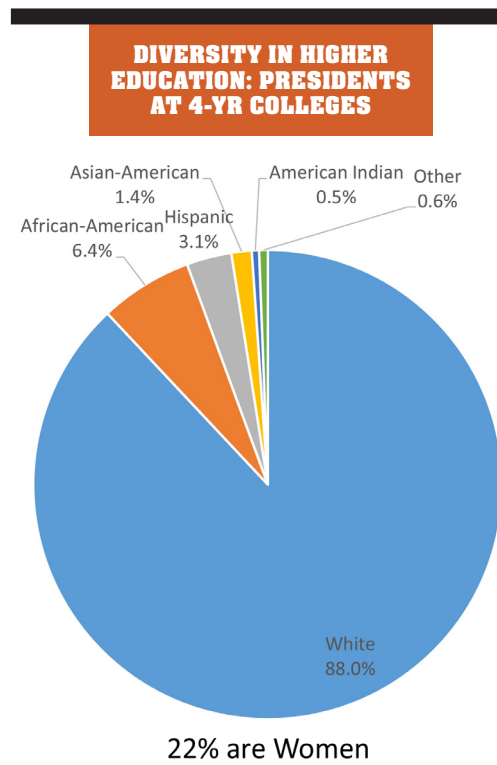
The most selective institutions of higher education are gatekeepers to the most lucrative opportunities in

Source:
College Board;
US Census; US
News America's
Best Colleges;
collegeresults.com;
Wellspring Analysis

the workforce. Those that care about race and also understand that students who merit admission may show their talents and capabilities in myriad ways, achieve greater diversity. In the absence of this, we see an unfair reliance on test scores, which helps to perpetuate a power structure in the workforce that is race-based. Managers who are white are still overrepresented when compared to laborers who are majority people of color. It is no secret that industry-leading companies recruit from the most selective institutions of higher education. (And, unfortunately, some major corporations and firms ask for SAT scores when interviewing candidates to help eliminate applicants.) If the student bodies from which they are recruiting are mostly white, it is not surprising that those companies are mostly white as well. This combined with persistent race biases in hiring and promotion sets the stage for segregation in the workforce.

While we resist acknowledging this reality, there is still tremendous and persistent race bias in hiring and promotion. No one thinks they are guilty of it and no one wants to take responsibility for it. Instead, we hear comments like, "If there was more talent, I'd be the first to hire a diversity candidate." The conventional wisdom is that the pool is too shallow or that there are too few qualified Black or Hispanic candidates or women. That is the belief, but it is not the truth. As a result, we have a country that is led by mostly white men.

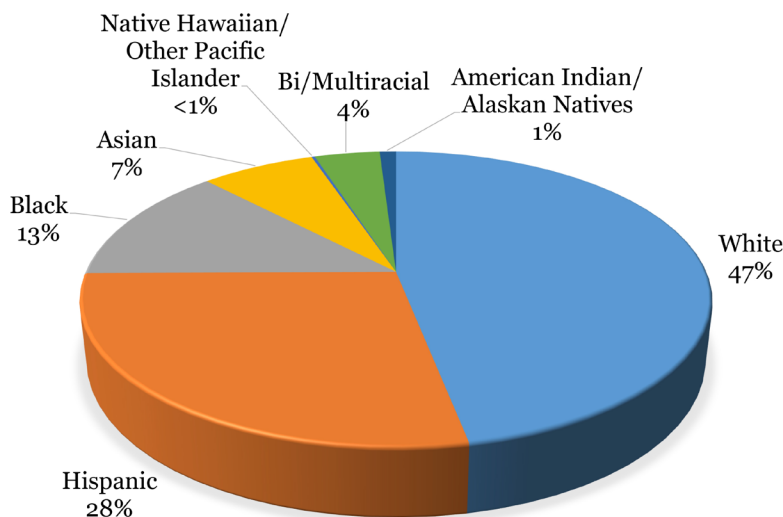
The U.S. Senate, in 2016, is 93 percent white. The nation's Fortune 500 chief executive officers are almost all white. Six are Black, ten are Hispanic, nine are Asian and only 21 are women (and some of



these overlap). California State Sen. Ed Hernandez completed his annual study in 2014 that looked at the senior executives in Fortune 100 companies, wondering if maybe a more diverse leadership was trickling up. He found that 88 percent of the executive teams of these companies were white.

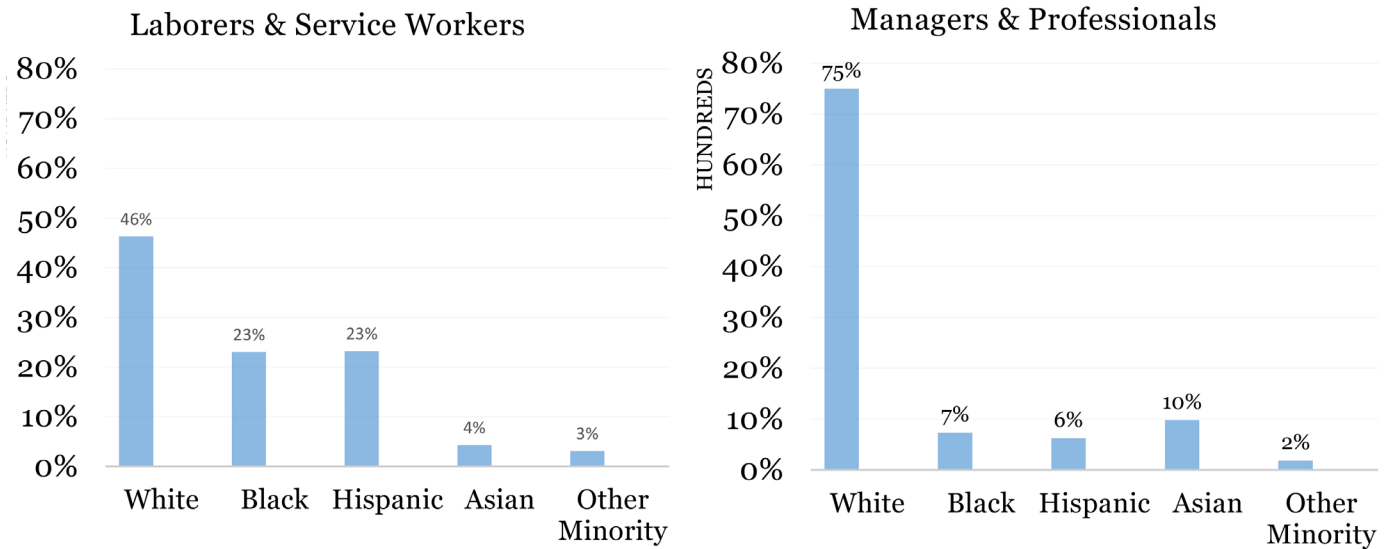
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PROJECTED U.S. POPULATION 2050



Sources:
 Top: On the Pathway to the Presidency 2013: Characteristics of Higher Education's Senior Leadership, 2013; Bottom, from left: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Projections, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). The Condition of Education 2012 (NCES 2012-045), Table A-47-2.

U.S. PRIVATE SECTOR EMPLOYMENT BY RACE (2014)



In 2014, The American Lawyer took a look at the racial breakdown of the partners at the big American law firms and found that 92 percent of them are white. In fact, in the year 2000, 88.8 percent of attorneys at these firms were white and in 2010, a decade later, that number had hardly changed: it was 88.1 percent. Those who own the teams in the NBA, the NFL and MLB are 98, 97 and 98 percent white, respectively (Yet look at who the players are.) And of the country's four-year college and university presidents, 88 percent are white.

Race Matters

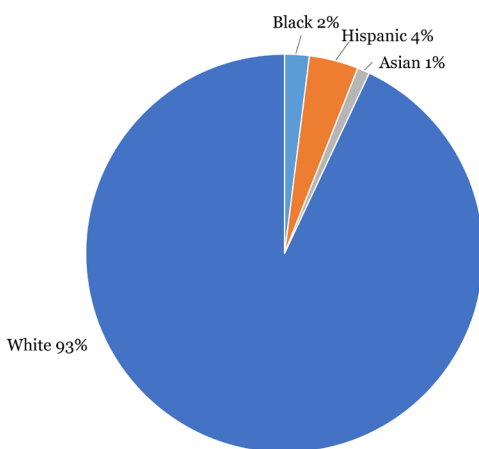
We have been way too slow in addressing the inequities that exist within the American population, a population that becomes more diverse every year. We have failed to deliver on the promises we made during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Lyndon B. Johnson's remarks when he delivered the commencement speech at Howard University in 1969 are still relevant today:

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "You are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.

The perception that test scores like the SAT should be the most important defining factor in whether or not a student is admitted to an elite college is dangerous. The college admission process is, as it should be, a subjective one.

When putting together a new class of students, admissions experts think about establishing a community. Do they need violinists for the orchestra, a strong running back for the football team, students interested in physics or French literature? These considerations are valid. But no less important is the consideration of diversity.

RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF THE 114TH U.S. SENATE



Sources:
 Top: The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport; Graphics from FiveThirtyEight;
 Bottom: Congressional Research Service, Membership of the 114th (2015-2016) Congress: A Profile, March 31, 2015.

DIVERSITY IN THE NBA

As of October 2013

	Players	Head coaches	Majority owners	League office staff
White	19%	53%	98%	64%
African-American	76	43	2	18
Latino	4	3	0	6
Asian	<1	0	0	11
Other	<1	0	0	<1

DIVERSITY IN THE NFL

As of October 2013

	Players	Head coaches	Majority owners	League office staff
White	30%	88%	97%	72%
African-American	66	9	0	9
Latino	<1	3	0	5
Asian	1	0	3	10
Other	2	0	0	3

DIVERSITY IN THE MLB

As of October 2013

	Players	Managers	Majority owners	League office staff (2012)
White	61%	87%	98%	69%
African-American	8	10	0	10
Latino	28	0	2	15
Asian	2	3	0	3
Other	<1	0	0	3

Source: The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport; Graphics from FiveThirtyEight

We must consider race in college admissions. We must believe that admitting and graduating diverse student bodies from our best colleges and universities is critically important for the nation as a whole. We must act on this belief. Otherwise, we perpetuate a kind of segregation that breeds severe inequities. And these inequities directly lead to the divisions and discontent we see in our country right now. The needs of a very diverse population cannot be adequately understood or met by a homogenous group of generally white men. We need our leaders in every industry to represent the diversity of this nation, in research and science and medicine. We need it in corporate America, in non-profits, and in government. Diverse voices at the tables where decisions are made bring the interests of everyone to the table, better represent the experiences of different groups, and result in more thoughtful, comprehensive, solutions to complex social problems.

The United States embraces the idea that it can be a meritocracy, that everyone can have the same chance to succeed if they work hard, if they study, and if they care. We cannot be content with a system that promotes stratification and exclusion. We have to figure out a way to be a national community and make sure that the American dream remains a possibility for all of its citizens.



Deborah Bial is the president and founder of The Posse Foundation, a college success and youth leadership development program that works with top colleges and universities. She is also a MacArthur Fellow.

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