

Do Asian Americans Benefit From Race-Blind College Admissions Policies?¹

Opponents of affirmative action in the Fisher Supreme Court case² claim that race-conscious admissions policies discriminate against Asian American applicants and impose a “higher bar”³ in college admissions than for other students. In their amicus brief supporting the plaintiff in the Fisher case, 80-20 states that, “Asian American enrollment rises dramatically when race-conscious admission standards are eliminated. When Californians ratified Calif. Const. art. I, § 31 (“Proposition 209”), barring all invidious racial discrimination in college admissions, [University of California] Berkeley saw Asian freshman enrollment rise from 37.3 percent in 1995, to 43.57 percent in 2000, to 46.59 percent by 2005.”⁴ Like 80-20, the Asian American Legal Foundation (AALF) also presents undergraduate enrollment data at California public universities as evidence that Asian Americans benefited from race-blind policies in their amicus brief.⁵ This research brief evaluates the claim that Proposition 209 caused an increase in Asian American enrollment numbers in the University of California (UC).⁶ An analysis of empirical data indicates there was no direct causal relationship between increased Asian American enrollment numbers in the UC and the implementation of race-blind admissions policies in 1998.

Enrollment Statistics & Evaluations of Admissions Policies

While AALF and 80-20 claim that race-blind admissions policies led to an increase in the number of Asian American students in the UC system, enrollment alone is not an appropriate gauge for evaluating effects of admissions policies. Enrollment statistics are the direct result of complex and diverse college choice processes engaged by students. Various factors including but not limited to financial aid,⁷ geographic location of residence,⁸

culture and economic class⁹ can significantly influence students’ college-going opportunities and choices, which directly shape an institution’s enrollment statistics and demographics. At the University of California, for example, admitted Asian American applicants are more likely than other applicants to ultimately enroll at a UC campus.¹⁰ These determining factors must be taken into account when comparing enrollment data by race, and point to why it is problematic to assume a direct causal relationship between admissions policies and enrollment numbers.

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² e.g., the Asian American Legal Foundation (AALF) and the 80-20 National Education Foundation (“80-20”).

³ S. B. Woo, College Admission Battle. (2 of 3 articles). [Web log] Retrieved from: <http://8020politicalpower.blogspot.com/2012/04/college-admission-battle-2nd-of-3.html> (April 23, 2012).

⁴ Brief of Amici Curiae for the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, the 80-20 National Asian-American Educational Foundation, et al., In Support of Fisher, Abigail Noel Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, et al., (May 2012) (No. 11-345).

⁵ Brief of Amici Curiae for the Asian American Legal Foundation and the Judicial Education Project, In Support of Fisher, Abigail Noel Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, et al., (May 2012) (No. 11-345).

⁶ The University of California is composed of nine comprehensive university campuses, which enroll undergraduate and graduate students, and one graduate school campus (UC San Francisco).

⁷ Dongbin Kim, The effect of financial aid on students’ college choice: Differences by racial groups, 45 *Research in Higher Education* 43 (2004).

⁸ Ruth N. Lopez Turley, College Proximity: Mapping Access to Opportunity, 82 *Sociology of Education* 126 (2009).

⁹ Robert T. Teranishi, Miguel Ceja, Anthony L. Antonio, Walter R. Allen, & Patricia M. McDonough. The college-choice process for Asian Pacific Americans: Ethnicity and socio-economic class in context, 27 *The Review of Higher Education* 527 (2004).

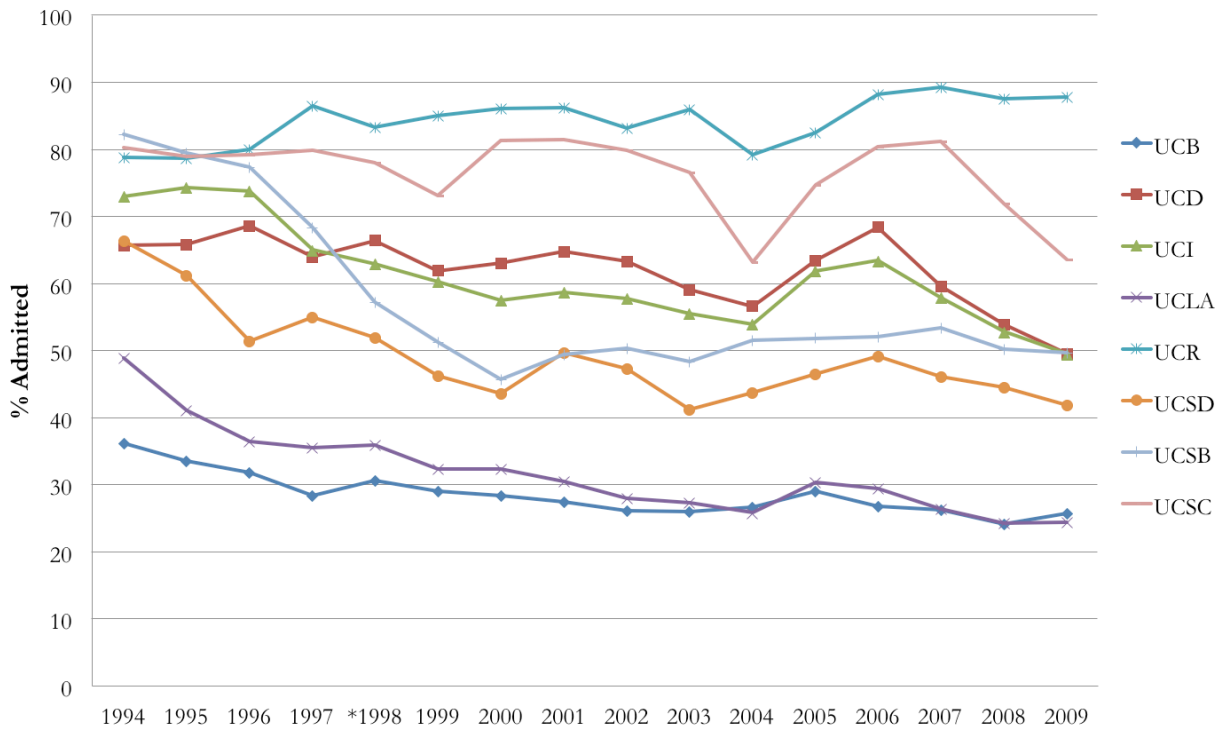
Analysis Of University Of California Admissions Rates

The following analysis examines institutional rates of admissions, which is a more accurate statistical measurement for evaluating the impact of admissions policies. The rate of admissions is the percentage of applicants admitted in a given admissions review cycle. Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)¹¹ admissions rates at each UC campus between 1994 and 2009. With the implementation of race-blind policies in 1998, there were declines in admissions rates for AAPIs at five of the eight UC campuses.¹²

While UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UC Davis experienced increases in admissions rates for AAPIs between 1997 and 1998, the rate of admissions for AAPIs decreased significantly for all UC campuses from 1998 to 2009, with the exception of UC Riverside (Table 1).¹³

These results demonstrate that the rate of admissions for AAPIs, the number of admitted AAPIs over the number of AAPI applicants, has actually decreased since the UC system changed to a race-blind admissions policy. Accordingly, the end of race-conscious admissions policies corresponded with a decrease in the rate of admissions for AAPI applicants.

Figure 1: AAPI Freshmen Admissions Rates by UC Campus (1994-2009)



¹⁰ According to data from the UC StatFinder (<http://statfinder.ucop.edu/statfinder>), 56.9 percent of admitted AAPI students chose to enroll at a UC campus in 2009. This statistic is nearly 10 percentage points higher than the enrollment yield rate for all admitted students (47%) in the same year.

¹¹ Although Asian Americans are the primary population of interest in this brief, aggregated data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, two distinct racial groups, were utilized because publicly available UC StatFinder data combines data on the two groups. Given the relatively small number of Pacific Islander students applying to the UC, this statistical amalgamation does not significantly affect the utility of these data to comment on Asian American admissions.

¹² UC Merced was not included in this analysis because it only started admitting students in 2005.

¹³ Admissions rate declines in the UC starting in the mid-1990s can likely be explained by a combination of population increase in California and limited institutional expansion in the state's higher education system. Around the turn of the 21st century, California experienced an extraordinary population growth among high school graduates known as "Tidal Wave II," which led to an increase in the number of college-ready state residents prepared to apply to the UC. At the same time, the state's financial investments into public higher education declined, limiting the capacity of the public university system to meet the population's demand for post-secondary education. Thus, the growth in applications from eligible California high school graduates outpaced the availability of seats in the university system, consequentially leading to declines in the rates of admissions. For more information on Tidal Wave II and its effects on higher education in California, see: David W. Breneman, and Colleagues. Tidal wave II: An evaluation of enrollment projections for California higher education, (September 1995), <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED391453.pdf>.

Table 1: Change in AAPI Admissions Rates, 1998-2009

Campus	Change in AAPI Admissions Rates, 1998-2009
Berkeley	-16.3%
Davis	-25.4%
Irvine	-21.3%
Los Angeles	-32.0%
Riverside	+5.4%
San Diego	-19.3%
Santa Barbara	-13.3%
Santa Cruz	-18.5%

Data source: UC StatFinder

Conclusion

The use of enrollment numbers to evaluate the effects of admissions policies is methodologically erroneous. The correlation between increased Asian American undergraduate enrollment on UC campuses and the implementation of race-blind admissions policies in California does not suggest a causal relationship between the two occurrences, as demonstrated by the decline in the rate of admissions for AAPI applicants at UC campuses since 1998. The increase in AAPI enrollment at UC campuses was most likely caused by significant demographic shifts in the state and a higher yield rate among admitted AAPI applicants. Thus, California does not provide adequate evidence that Asian Americans benefit from race-blind college admissions policies.