

COLLEGE ACCESS, GEOGRAPHY, AND DIVERSITY

by

TERESA SULLIVAN

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Paper forthcoming in Daniel Little and Satya P. Mohanty, editors. *The Future of Diversity*. New York and London: Palgrave, 2009.

This research was supported by grants from the Ford, Mellon, Hewlett and Spencer Foundations and NSF (GRANT # SES-0350990), with institutional support from the Office of Population Research, Princeton University (NICHD Grant # R24 H0047879). Some of the data used for this study are restricted and therefore not available from the authors.

College officials throughout the United States have made repeated calls for diversity in their faculties and student bodies, often to the consternation of the general public. Few members of the public would object if the goal were stated in the negative: “Our college does not want to be homogeneous.” Most people can readily grasp that a homogeneous campus works against the objective of intellectual broadening that is a hallmark of a college education. Even in the decades in which a college education was limited to a small elite, the broadening objective was endorsed and sometimes sought through the “grand tour” or other travel. Thus, geography was associated with a broadened education, a fact to which I will return in this essay.

The word “diversity,” by contrast to the word “homogeneity,” is often disparaged as code language for an unacceptable racial or ethnic preference. To be sure, diversity can be defined in terms of differing individual endowments of talent and ability. Students gifted in athletics, music, art, leadership, and other pursuits may be selected for a college class even if their grades and test scores may be somewhat lower than the norm, and this use of diversity is rarely challenged as a basis for college admissions. More commonly, however, the concept of diversity is used to describe the deliberate inclusion of people from differing racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Why this inclusion should be unacceptable arises from two different reactions to American history.

In the history of the United States, as well as the history of many other countries, group membership has resulted in group treatment. The list is long and familiar: the African-American experience of enslavement and involuntary passage to the United States; the

Mexican-American experience of prejudice and discrimination; the 19th century exclusion of Asians as immigrants; the employment discrimination faced by 19th century immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. The heritage of these experiences included restricted civil and political rights, limited or inferior education, occupational restrictions, and poverty. Most visibly, the *de jure* segregation of Jim Crow separated African Americans from white society in the South, and some states also required the segregation of Mexican Americans and Asian Americans.

The first hostile reaction to inclusive diversity may arise from nostalgia for the old days, buttressed by anxiety about the continued entitlement of students from the majority group. As the competition intensifies for slots in the classes of the most prestigious institutions, the argument for “merit” over diversity may sound like a thinly disguised call for the most privileged students – often majority whites -- to be admitted. Certainly the proponents of diversity are inclined to attribute such motives to their opponents.

The second hostile reaction, however, has an opposite origin. Many Americans reject prejudice and discrimination, and view as shameful the differential treatment of citizens because of their skin color or ethnic heritage. For at least some of these people, consideration of ethnic or racial heritage in college admissions represents a continuation, however benignly intended, of the mindset associated with either the complete exclusion of minority groups or of their limited inclusion through offensive quotas. The two-judge majority in the decision *Hopwood v. Texas*, which struck down affirmative action in the Fifth Circuit in 1996, used such reasoning to conclude that affirmative action in

admissions violates the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Using this logic, any consideration of race or ethnicity by a state institution is not only suspect, but simply precluded. Similar reasoning and rhetoric underlie the state constitutional amendments adopted in California, Washington, and Michigan banning affirmative action.

The response of the diversity proponents has been that diversity benefits all students, and that the heritage of disparate treatment persists in educational disadvantage for some minority group members. The supporting arguments and research have generated hundreds of books and papers, opinion pieces and pamphlets, far more than I can review here. My objective here is different: I hope to show that the current conceptions of race and ethnicity derive from an interpretation of *geographic* diversity, what I call macro-geography, and that one solution to diversifying campuses may lie in the adoption of a strategy that emphasizes residence and school segregation, a kind of micro-geography.

The Geography of Origin -- Macro-geography

Scientists long ago concluded that a biological concept of race had little foundation, and more sophisticated studies using DNA have confirmed this conclusion. Regardless of skin color, humans share nearly all of their biological heritage with one another.

Nevertheless, there are physical differences that distinguish broadly among populations because of long centuries of relative isolation. In themselves, these variations in skin and eye color, hair, and so on are unimportant, but they took on social significance when

these long-isolated populations encountered one another, principally through voluntary or involuntary migration.

The physical variations, under conditions of a naïve ethnocentrism and xenophobia, marked group boundaries. “My people” could be visibly distinguished from “your people.” Racial labels were thus applied to people whose origins were from different continents. And for much of the past two centuries, racial categories were thought to have such a deep biological basis as to mean that racial groups were radically different as a matter of nature, with the implication that differences so deep-seated must be both immutable and significant. Although today the biological rationalization has been debunked, the remaining historical, social, and cultural differences reinforce a sense of “differentness.”

Ethnic distinctions were also associated with geography, although the geographic areas were typically smaller and closer at hand, such as regions or provinces. Ethnic distinctions prompted a similar we-versus-them response, but were often based on differences in language or dialect, religion, clothing, and so on. These distinctions are often indistinguishable to outsiders. For example early immigrants to the United States from the Italian peninsula thought of themselves as Florentines or Sicilians or residents of other fairly small areas; it was in America that they learned to think of themselves as Italians, because that was how the American public, unable to make the finer distinctions, labeled them. Today, American visitors to the Balkans, for example, are unable to understand ethnic tensions nor even detect the ethnic differences without aid. Recent

disturbances in Kenya, Turkey, and central America exemplify the kinds of unrest associated with ethnic differences.

Just as these differences arise from geographic difference, a geographic solution is often proposed as a method to solve the tensions. Partition represents a kind of segregation, but also the possibility for the political control of a geographic area. Religious partition of India and Pakistan or of Ireland are familiar examples. Some observers propose a religious/ethnic partition of Iraq among Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites as a means of reducing internal tensions.

My point is not that partition is either a good thing or a bad thing, but rather that the geographic solution to the ethnic problem reinforces my point that race and ethnicity are both social constructs with their origin in a real or putative geography. One fundamental dimension of the assessment about whether you and I are the same lies in our spatial relationship to each other and to others whom we consider similar. This real or putative origin is what I have termed macro-geography.

Empirically, macro-geography continues to have effects that are traceable in relations among some groups. Any analysis of census or representative survey data shows that on most indicators of social or economic data, there are persistent differences among groups. African-Americans, in particular, continue to be residentially segregated and to have lower incomes than other American groups. Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans have much lower levels of formal education than most other groups. Other

consequences, especially in terms of socioeconomic status, are easy to identify (Massey, 2007). A great deal of contemporary social science research has been dedicated to documenting and seeking to explain the persistent effects of race and ethnicity despite the legal guarantees of equality.

Normatively, many Americans believe that what I call macro-geography *should not have* any effect at all, because such effects might be discriminatory. Most non-discrimination laws and policies explicitly identify race, ethnicity, and national origin as illegitimate grounds for discrimination. Religion, language, and skin color – traits that are often associated with race or ethnicity – are similarly forbidden grounds for discriminating. The most extreme view is that the government should never even ask for such identifiers in birth certificates, driver's licenses, or census returns, because just for the government to have the information might lead to additional abuse or targeting of groups in the future.

Advocates of affirmative action see persisting conditions of discrimination as justifying the consideration of race or ethnicity in admissions decisions, especially for purposes of representing a wide range of backgrounds and experiences in the class, but also as a means of interrupting the long-term effects of prejudice and discrimination. They would indeed use racial or ethnic identifiers in making decisions about college admissions, but they would use the identifiers for a benign purpose: providing access to a selective college.

By contrast, many Americans would argue that the use of macro-geographic indicators such as race or ethnic origin in college admissions is both unfair and illegitimate. The Supreme Court in its *Grutter* decision permitted the use of race or ethnicity as one factor among many considered in admissions decisions. Faced with referenda on this topic, however, a plurality of Americans vote against affirmative action, rejecting the use of race or ethnicity even as one factor among many in the admissions decision. Whether those who vote against affirmative action are really operating from pure motives of non-discrimination is a matter of dispute; it is also alleged that they are really interested in reserving as many slots as possible at the most selective institutions for children of the white majority.

Regardless of the real or perceived motives for banning affirmative action, its use has been stymied in a number of states and referenda to ban it are being considered in several states. The continued use of macro-geographic indicators within the context of any government action remains controversial.

The Geography of residence – Micro-Geography

If macro-geography produces visible results in the lives of individuals, but if macro-geography is nevertheless deemed an illegitimate indicator in making decisions, then an alternative may be the use of micro-geography. Micro-geography refers to the smallest geographic divisions with which a person may be identified. In census data, these geographic areas might be the block or the census tract. In political divisions, the

geographic areas might be the precinct. In public education, the geographic area might be the attendance zone (Ornstein, 2007). The homes of most Americans may be characterized in terms of a number of overlapping, small geographic areas.

These small geographic areas may or may not correspond to a community. A small area such as a neighborhood may have a sense of itself, and may closely overlap attendance zones, precincts, or other divisions. Over time such a shared identity might be identified, both because of the density of everyday interactions among people who live with each other, and because they will come to share similar experiences in their treatment by others (Wilson and Taub, 2007). Famously, neighborhoods in Chicago were said to have developed a self-identity because sociologists at the University of Chicago had given names to the neighborhoods in a research project.

But it is not necessary for the use of micro-geography that the people in a small area know each other or have a sense of shared identity. It is only necessary that large-scale forces at work in our economy and society tend to reinforce homogeneity within small geographic areas (Frumkin, Frank, and Jackson, 2004). Residential segregation, zoning ordinances, rent controls, red-lining for mortgages and insurance, and many other institutional arrangements tend toward the same result: people live near others who are more or less similar to them. This fact is known to all marketers, who often use zip code as a short-hand method to identify the target audience for a product or service. The hit television series *Beverly Hills 90210* made that particular zip code well known for its association with affluence, but many other zip codes across the country carry a signal for

marketers. Sometimes the signal is positive, such as the 90210 association with affluence, and other signals are negative, such as the association of inner-city neighborhoods with economic instability and crime.

Economics helps to explain the similarities of neighborhoods. Housing costs, which are determined by such things as the age of a neighborhood, the zoning, proximity to jobs, and so on, tend to ensure a kind of financial homogeneity among neighbors. That financial homogeneity in turn makes it more likely that the neighbors will have jobs that are similar in pay, and probably also similar in terms of responsibility, prestige, and complexity. Because education is an important determinant of jobs, the educational levels of neighbors are likely to be similar. And finally, overlay over all of these things the fact that racial and ethnic minorities are also more likely to be financially disadvantaged, and it is not surprising that in most American cities there are still neighborhoods that can be readily identified as white, black, or Latino (Iceland and Wilkes, 2006).

School attendance zones are typically organized by neighborhood, with the result that many American schools have a fairly homogeneous socioeconomic profile – and often, a fairly homogeneous racial profile as well. Throughout the United States, central city high schools are the most likely to enroll a predominantly minority student body, and suburban high schools are the most likely to be nearly all white.

So although Americans are legally free to reside in any neighborhood, and to send their children to the attendance zone for that neighborhood, a variety of social and economic forces coincide in ensuring that macro-geographies are replicated in micro-geographies. If the central city schools are also more run-down with more problems and fewer resources, then the micro-geography reinforces the disadvantage that might have been implied by the macro-geographic origins. The overlap is by no means perfect, and there are certainly mixed neighborhoods and mixed schools and mixed workplaces throughout the country, but the power of geography – as marketers can attest – remains considerable.

Interestingly, the use of micro-geography has not been found objectionable by the courts. The rights of local areas to control their own schools, even if that leads to the segregation of central city schools, was upheld in the *Milliken v. Bradley* decision. The majority opinion in the *Hopwood* decision, while striking down the use of race or ethnic origin, explicitly endorsed geographic representation: “A university may properly favor one applicant over another because of his ability to play the cello, make a downfield tackle, or understand chaos theory. An admissions process may also consider an applicant's *home state* or relationship to school alumni.” [emphasis added; *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996)] It is a small step to the smaller geographic areas I have termed micro-geography.

The *failure* to consider micro-geography may actually add to the disadvantage experienced by some students. A telling example of this disadvantage is the recalculation of grade-point averages of applicants by the University of California System. Grades for honors and advanced placement courses were weighted, so that students who had taken

more challenging curricula could be rewarded for their ambition and experience.

Minority group advocates protested, noting that many of the central-city schools attended by their children offered no such courses, so that their grades were, in effect, capped as a result of their residence and attendance zones (Niu, Sullivan, and Tienda, forthcoming).

On the other hand, it is worth considering whether the *inclusion* of micro-geography could improve access by groups that were traditionally disadvantaged in macro-geographic terms.

Improving Access by Considering Geography

Just as geography once broadened an education through travel, today geographic diversity can broaden the experience of everyone on the college campus. There are a number of ways that one might consider micro-geography in comprising a freshman class. Here I will discuss two prominent examples: the Texas top ten percent law, and the University of Michigan's use of a marketing tool, Descriptor-Plus.

Affirmative action in college admissions was banned in Texas in 1996 as a result of *Hopwood v. Texas*. The Texas attorney general ruled that the case implied that financial aid targeted to women or minority groups was also illegal. The Texas state legislature in 1997 passed a statute now popularly known as the top ten percent law, which mandated that public institutions in the state must automatically admit any student who graduated in the top ten percent of an accredited high school in the state, provided that the student enrolled within two years of graduation and did not first enroll in any other college or

university. The student decides to which schools to apply. Even though affirmative action within the confines of the *Grutter* decision is now legal in Texas, the legislature has had several opportunities to repeal the top ten percent law and has failed to do so.

The top ten percent law creates an entitlement for each school district – indeed, for each high school – within the state. To the extent that attendance zones are residentially segregated, relatively more African-American or Mexican-American high school graduates may find themselves automatically admissible. And the large Rio Grande valley, which because of migration patterns from Mexico is predominantly Mexican-American, is guaranteed that the top decile of its graduates can attend the Texas public institutions of its choice (Lloyd, Leicht, and Sullivan, forthcoming).

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) designed its Longhorn Opportunity Scholarships to reinforce these micro-geographic aspects of the top ten percent law. The scholarships are available only to top ten percent graduates of particular high schools. These high schools are selected for specific characteristics: 1) a low fraction of the school's SAT or ACT scores were reported to the University of Texas, indicating that the high school was underrepresented within the UT student body; 2) the census tract in which the high school is located is low-income according to census data; 3) the school meets a minimum size threshold. Students from the Longhorn Opportunity Schools are also eligible for all other types of merit and need-based aid, but the Longhorn Opportunity Scholarships set aside for their schools are an inducement to apply and raise the likelihood that a student

will be to afford tuition once accepted. Texas A & M University at College Station has also developed a scholarship program that is similar.

The top ten percent law remains controversial because of the perceived disadvantage to private high schools and to high-quality suburban public high schools, but the racial and ethnic diversity of the UT student body has returned to approximately the same level as under traditional affirmative action in the pre-*Hopwood* days. In addition, an unanticipated consequence was the addition of rural white students to the student body, most of them from high schools that had not previously been represented in the freshman class. While not a perfect solution, the targeting of admissions and financial aid to smaller geographic areas – in this case, high schools and their surrounding census tracts - - was at least partially successful in improving access to the state's flagship public universities.

The efforts in Michigan are more recent and their success remains to be seen. The Michigan electorate amended the state constitution in November 2006 to ban the use of race, ethnicity, and gender in college and university admissions. The wording of the ballot initiative closely tracked the wording of Proposition 209 which was adopted in California in 1995. The University of Michigan is seeking to use information about whether applicants' high schools or residential neighborhoods are underrepresented in the student body. This information is applied in a holistic admissions evaluation that examines many aspects of a student's academic experience, extracurricular activities, and other accomplishments.

The tool being used, Descriptor PLUS, is marketed by the College Board and uses clustering algorithms of the type now common in many marketing applications. The student's high school is characterized in terms of the composition of its student body, and the student's neighborhood (determined from residential address) is characterized in terms of the composition of the neighborhood as revealed through census data (College Board, 2007).

A wealth of information about these smaller geographic areas is potentially available for such algorithms. For the school, for example, there is information about the fraction of students eligible for reduced-price lunches, the rate of success on accountability examinations, the resources per student, and so on. Depending on the state, the agency that oversees secondary schools may also provide information about high school graduation rates, the fraction of the school in college preparatory studies, the fraction of the senior class taking calculus, the proportion of students who are bilingual, and many other things that might be relevant indicators of disadvantage. The College Board has the advantage of its proprietary data base from the millions of students from every high school who have registered for its exams.

Data on residential neighborhoods is typically produced from U.S. Census Bureau sources. The decennial census provides information on geographic areas down to the city block. These data are carefully aggregated and the reports edited so that no information can be used to identify a household. Even with the editing constraints, however, the

census data permit identification of a wide range of characteristics of both housing and households, such as average housing value, general condition of housing, household incomes, size of households, proportion of immigrants, average age, and so on. From other sources, a variety of other indicators could be constructed. For example, disease rates and health indicators vary by small geographic area (Frumkin, Frank, and Jackson, 2004).

Such indicators are not simple substitutes for race or ethnicity. The majority of the population is also likely to be the majority of most subgroups in the country. Thus, most of the people in poverty are white, even though the likelihood of being in poverty is greater for African-Americans or for Latinos. But because of the geographic clustering of the population along socio-economic lines, there is some correlation with race and ethnicity.

These indicators are also not fool-proof guides to socioeconomic status. The poorest neighborhood may have the eccentric neighbor with extensive assets not hinted at by a family's modest home. An affluent immigrant family may prefer for reasons of language and culture to remain in a neighborhood with others whose salaries are much lower than theirs. Especially in neighborhoods undergoing rapid change, families may represent a wide range of backgrounds and any assumption of homogeneity will fail. Nevertheless, the use of small geographic groups – what I have called micro-geography – as an additional indicator in admissions may provide some additional source of diversity when conventional affirmative action is not permitted.

Conclusion

The positive claim that diversity is needed on campus encounters resistance, but campus leaders will persist in their efforts to diversify the campus because of the benefits diversity provides all students. Employers are coming to realize that a diverse work group can be more creative in problem-solving, and a similar analysis applies to college classrooms (Page, 2007). Legal restrictions on tactics such as affirmative action do not diminish the need for diversity, but they do make it harder to achieve by the means that is demonstrably most efficient, affirmative action (Laycock, 2004).

The consideration of micro-geographic origins, such as the composition of neighborhoods and high schools, offers one proxy means for increasing the diversity of public universities. Even increasing the number of high schools represented within a freshman class represents an important means of strengthening a university's links to its publics, and may contribute at least some of the diversity that is currently sought through affirmative action.

References

College Board. 2007. <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/highered/recruitment/descriptor-plus> (DescriptorPLUS information). Consulted on January 27, 2008.

Frumkin, Howard, Lawrence Frank, and Richard Jackson. 2004. *Urban Sprawl and Public Health: Designing, Planning, and Building for Healthy Communities*. Washington: Island Press.

Iceland, John and Rima Wilkes. 2006. "Does Socioeconomic Status Matter? Race, Class, and Residential Segregation." *Social Problems* 53,2 (May): 248-73.

Laycock, Douglas. 2004. "The Broader Case for Affirmative Action: Desegregation, Academic Excellence, and Future Leadership." *Tulane Law Review* 78(6):1767-1842.

Lloyd, Kim, Kevin Leicht, and Teresa A. Sullivan. 2008. "Minority College Aspirations, Expectations, and Applications under the Texas Top 10% Law." *Social Forces*, forthcoming, March.

Massey, Douglas S. 2007. *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Niu, Sunny, Teresa A. Sullivan, and Marta Tienda. Forthcoming. "Minority Talent Loss and the Texas Top Ten Percent Law." *Social Science Quarterly*.

Ornstein, Allan. 2007. *Class Counts: Education, Inequality, and the Shrinking Middle Class*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Page, Scott E. 2007. *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

University of Texas at Austin. 2007. <http://www.utexas.edu/student/admissions/research/> (research on effects of top ten percent law). Consulted on January 28, 2008.

Wilson, William Julius and Richard Taub. 2007. *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and their Meaning for America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.