

Selective Bias

Asian Americans, Test Scores, and
Holistic Admissions

2021

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Introduction

For more than six years, Harvard University has been in court fighting allegations that it discriminates against Asian American¹ applicants in admissions.² A US District Court judge ruled in favor of Harvard in 2019, the US Court of Appeals upheld the ruling in 2020, and the case has since been appealed to the US Supreme Court.³ The accusation of unfair treatment of Asian American students is not a novel development. In the past, selective colleges, including Harvard, have been accused of discriminatory practices against Asian American students, and several have even admitted fault.⁴

The Harvard case is part of a more recent series of legal challenges aiming to upend race-conscious admissions policies, widely called affirmative action.

Under US law, strict limitations control when and to what extent colleges can consider an applicant's race or ethnicity in making admissions decisions.⁵ Practically speaking, colleges can consider race (race-conscious admissions) among a variety of other factors (a process known as holistic admissions), but they cannot ensure a predetermined racial distribution through quotas (racial balancing). However, critics of affirmative action contend that holistic admissions in practice amounts to a sleight of hand concealing racial quotas and racial balancing. These critics argue that Asian American applicants are being penalized to maintain illegal racial quotas.

1. Unless otherwise noted, our use of the term Asian American does not include individuals who identify themselves as being of Pacific Islander heritage. When referring to older data sources that historically combined these two groups, we use the term Asian American and Pacific Islander. See the appendix for a more detailed explanation.
2. The complaint in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College*, 308 F.R.D. 39 (D. Mass. 2015) (No. 14-cv-14176), alleges that Harvard violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by holding Asian Americans to an unfair admissions standard.
3. Jaschik, "Appeals Court Backs Harvard on Affirmative Action," 2020.

4. In the early 1980s, a number of selective institutions, including Harvard, were accused of intentionally discriminating against Asian American applicants. By the start of the 1990s, Brown University, Stanford University, and the University of California, Berkeley, publicly apologized; the US Education Department's Office of Civil Rights cleared Harvard, but ordered the University of California, Los Angeles, to offer admission to five Asian American applicants who were unfairly rejected. See Takagi, *The Retreat from Race*, 1992.
5. See *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 US 265 (1978).

Why the focus on Asian Americans? It is indicative of the complex place Asian Americans have in US society. These court cases come at a time of increased attention to assaults against Asian Americans. Many of the attackers have scapegoated their victims as spreaders of the deadly COVID-19 virus.⁶ Conversely, the use of Asian American rather than White plaintiffs in the college admissions cases is meant to evoke a sympathetic reaction. This plays upon the widespread belief that Asian American applicants are penalized in college admissions. Anecdotal stories abound of students believing that admissions staff docked their SAT scores for being Asian American—the so-called Asian penalty.⁷ In fact, nearly half of college admissions directors believe that some colleges (not necessarily their own) hold Asian American applicants to a higher standard.⁸

Claiming that Asian American applicants are discriminated against at selective colleges seems like an odd way to win this argument, since Asian American adults are just 6 percent of the college-age population, but constitute 18 percent of enrollment at the most selective colleges and a quarter of enrollment at Harvard.⁹ Affirmative action critics hold that Asian American students should have even more places at the most selective colleges because of their high standardized test scores. They argue that race-conscious admissions policies are keeping Asian American enrollment numbers unfairly low because Asian American students are held to higher admissions standards than applicants of any other race or ethnicity.

The mission of Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), the group suing Harvard, is to end affirmative action.¹⁰ SFFA has actively sought Asian American plaintiffs to sue a number of colleges,

and it currently has lawsuits pending against the University of North Carolina and the University of Texas at Austin in addition to Harvard. These challenges share a common purpose and revolve around a common litany of points of evidence allegedly illustrating that race-conscious admissions policies perpetuate systemic bias against Asian American applicants. Separately, the US Department of Justice under the Trump administration brought suit against Yale University in October 2020, also alleging bias against Asian American applicants. The Yale case has since been dropped by the Biden administration.¹¹

All these cases allege that Asian American college applicants are being held to an unfair standard and claim that if colleges considered only academic merit, Asian American applicants would gain a greater number of seats. SFFA and other affirmative action critics often base their arguments on three points which they believe illustrate bias:

- stagnant enrollment shares for Asian American students
- relatively low acceptance rates of Asian American applicants
- differences in SAT scores between Asian American and non-Asian American students at the most selective colleges

We consider each of these arguments. Because the question of admissions bias is not just limited to Harvard or Yale, we explore whether a systematic admissions bias exists among the 91 most selective colleges and universities (out of the 3,000 four-year colleges in the United States), and reach the following conclusions:

6. Cai et al., "Swelling Anti-Asian Violence," 2021.

7. Chow, "As College Apps Are Due, Asian-American High Schoolers Consider Affirmative Action," 2018; Mak, "The Price of Admission," 2017; and Hwang, "Opinion: As an Asian American, I'm Running the College Admissions Race with a Handicap," 2019.

8. Jaschik, "The 2018 Surveys of Admissions Leaders," 2018.

9. Harvard announced that 27.2 percent of its Class of 2025 will be Asian American. See *Harvard Gazette*, "1,968 Total Accepted to the Class of 2025 as Regular-Decision Letters Go Out," 2021.

10. According to the SFFA website, its mission is "to support and participate in litigation that will restore the original principles of our nation's civil rights movement: A student's race and ethnicity should not be factors that either harm or help that student to gain admission to a competitive university." See [studentsforfairadmissions.org](https://www.studentsforfairadmissions.org).

11. Williams, "In Biden Administration Reversal, Justice Dept. Drops Discrimination Suit against Yale," 2021.

1 Stagnant enrollment shares do not, by themselves, mean Asian American students are discriminated against at selective colleges.

Yes, the Asian American enrollment share at the most selective colleges has remained quite stable over the past decade, but the proportion of students whom critics contend are highly qualified (i.e., have high test scores) who are Asian American has also remained remarkably consistent. There is no strong evidence of colleges adjusting how many Asian Americans they admit to maintain a specific long-term racial balance.

2 Asian American students indeed face a lower rate of acceptance at the most selective colleges than other racial and ethnic groups, but they are also much more likely to apply to these colleges, regardless of their test scores.

Potential Asian American applicants with top scores (in the top quartile) are more likely to apply to the most selective colleges than their similarly high-scoring non-Asian American peers. At the same time, Asian American applicants with lower test scores are more likely to apply to the most selective colleges than their similarly low-scoring non-Asian American peers. As a result of their disproportionately high rates of application, the lower rate of acceptance for Asian American students is not necessarily evidence of discrimination.

3 Even if standardized test scores were the only factor considered in admissions, the Asian American share of enrollment at the most selective colleges would increase by no more than 2 percentage points.

We evaluated how enrollments would change if colleges considered only test scores in their admissions processes. Test-only admissions would increase the Asian American enrollment share at the most selective colleges from 12 percent to 14 percent. This possible difference of 2 percentage points is a far cry from the dramatic changes implied by affirmative action critics, who point to the selective University of California system, in which more than one-third of undergraduates are Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders.¹²

Why wouldn't the percentage of Asian American students increase more? Asian American students are not monolithic. They are diverse in background, interests, accomplishments, and test scores. Nearly half of Asian American college students attend open-access institutions,¹³ and 40 percent of Asian American college students have standardized test scores that are below average.¹⁴

Rather than artificially suppressing the number of Asian American students, a holistic admissions approach actually seems to benefit many of these applicants. In our admissions simulation, one in five of the Asian American students attending these colleges would not have been admitted under a test-only admissions policy. And, further, the Asian American students who would be displaced by such a policy are almost twice as likely as non-Asian American students to have low test scores (in the bottom quartile of the applicant pool). Our finding is supported by other research indicating that some Asian American students, such as low-income students, receive noteworthy favorable treatment under race-conscious policies.¹⁵

The current holistic admissions system helps ensure more diversity on college campuses, at least to a limited extent. Researchers have found that racial diversity itself provides tangible benefits (including academic) to the entire student body.¹⁶ Moreover, test scores and other academic benchmarks have limited value on their own, meaning that a student applying for admission to college needs to be considered in a broader context.¹⁷

12. See the University of California system's enrollment dashboard, "[Fall Enrollment at a Glance](#)."

13. Carnevale et al., *Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges*, 2018.

14. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 2016.

15. Espenshade and Walton Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal*, 2009.

16. Denson and Chang, "Racial Diversity Matters," 2009; Park, "Asian Americans and the Benefits of Campus Diversity," 2015.

17. Burton and Ramist, "Predicting Success in College," 2001.

PART 1.

Enrollment Trends Do Not Prove Use of Racial Balancing



Over the past two decades, the Asian American enrollment share at the most selective colleges has remained stable. Critics of affirmative action point to this as evidence that these institutions maintain a predetermined racial balance. We do not find that to be the case.

Affirmative action critics believe that Asian American enrollment is suppressed because we have not seen the following:

- a sharper increase in the Asian American enrollment share at the most selective colleges because of demographic changes, and
- more year-to-year changes because applicant pools are different every year.

Our analysis shows the following:

1 The Asian enrollment share at the most selective colleges has increased to match demographic changes.

Between 1999 and 2018, the total number of first-time Asian American and Pacific Islander students enrolling at four-year colleges doubled, but the enrollment share of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at the most selective colleges has remained relatively flat.

Some critics point to this as evidence of enrollment balancing or racial quotas,¹⁸ but headcounts and shares tell different stories. In fact, the number of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at Harvard and at the 90 other most selective colleges has increased sufficiently to keep up with their growing share of the four-year college-going population (Figure 1).

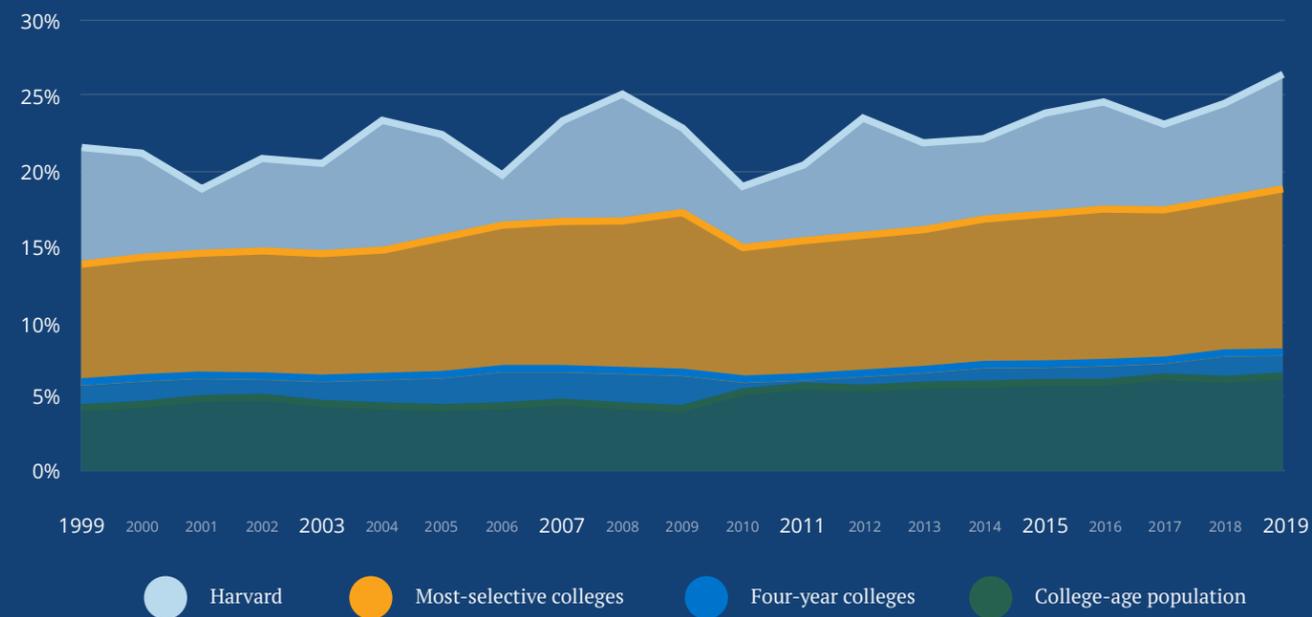
Consider that between 1999 and 2018,

- the proportion of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at all four-year colleges grew from 6 percent to 8 percent;
- the proportion of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at the most selective colleges grew from 14 percent to 18 percent; and
- the proportion of Asian American and Pacific Islander students at Harvard varied somewhat, but grew from 22 percent to 24 percent.



Figure 1.

The enrollment share of Asian American and Pacific Islander first-time students at the most selective colleges (including Harvard) has kept pace with their population share growth at all four-year colleges.



Source: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce Analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, 1999 to 2018. Note: Data presented are first-time fall enrollments. International students and students with an unknown race/ethnicity are excluded. Asian enrollment was combined with Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander enrollment due to data limitations.

18. Mak, "The Price of Admission," 2017.

Notably, the Asian American and Pacific Islander share of enrollments at the most selective colleges grew by 4 percentage points even while their enrollment share at all four-year colleges grew by just 2 percentage points. The data from Harvard are particularly instructive. Between 2000 and 2018, the likelihood that an Asian American or Pacific Islander four-year college student would be attending Harvard declined at the same rate as the likelihood that a four-year student of any race or

ethnicity would be attending Harvard. The number of seats at Harvard is relatively stable, so if Asian American and Pacific Islander applicants were being disproportionately excluded from Harvard as their total enrollment at four-year colleges doubled, their chances of attending Harvard would decrease more quickly than those of the general population. But we find that is not the case (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

The likelihood of attending Harvard has declined at the same rate for Asian American and Pacific Islander students as for students of all other racial and ethnic groups.

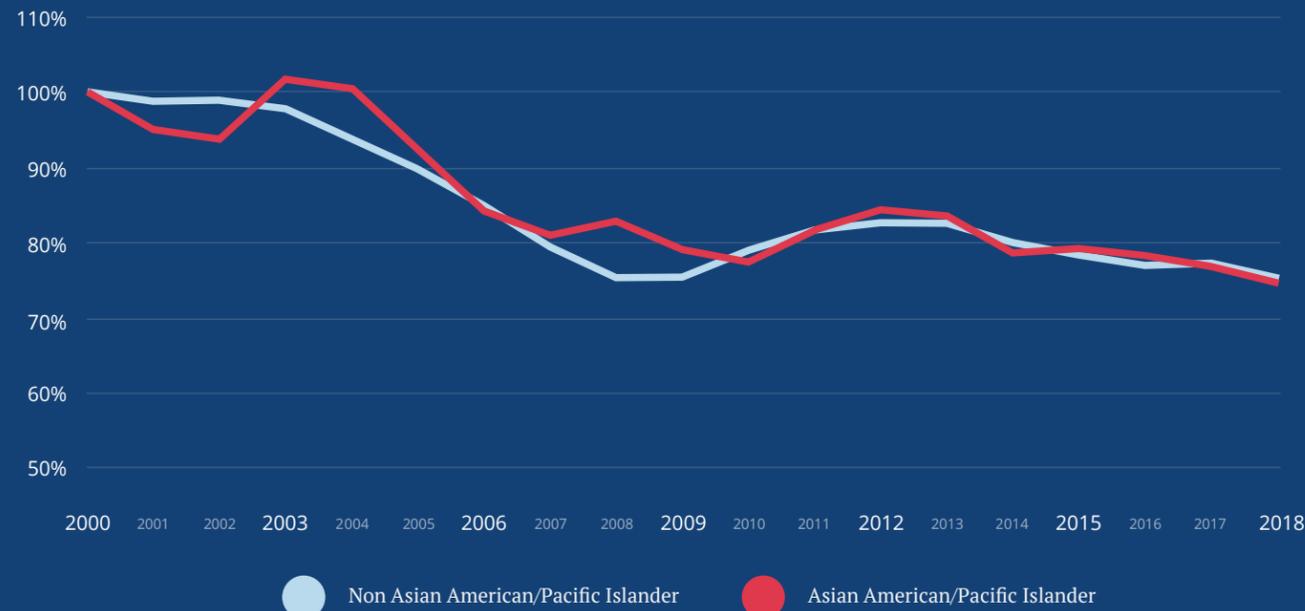


Figure 2
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 1999 to 2019.
Note: The likelihood of attending is the proportion of a group's first-time, full-year enrollment at a four-year institution attending Harvard. This trend line was then smoothed using a three-year moving average. The chart above shows how that ratio has changed relative to 2000 over time. International students and students with an unknown race or ethnicity are excluded. Asian American enrollment was combined with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander enrollment due to data limitations.

Figure 3
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2000, 2008, 2012, and 2016; and the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 2000, 2008, 2012, and 2016.
Note: The public-use 2004 NPSAS data did not include the composite SAT variable. Foreign students are excluded. IPEDS data presents 12-month enrollments. Additionally, Asian American enrollment was combined with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander enrollment due to data limitations. The orange bars represent the 95 percent confidence interval in the share of SAT scores above 1350 held by Asian American students in the NPSAS survey.

2 Year-to-year enrollment changes do not suggest that admissions limits are being placed on different groups of students.

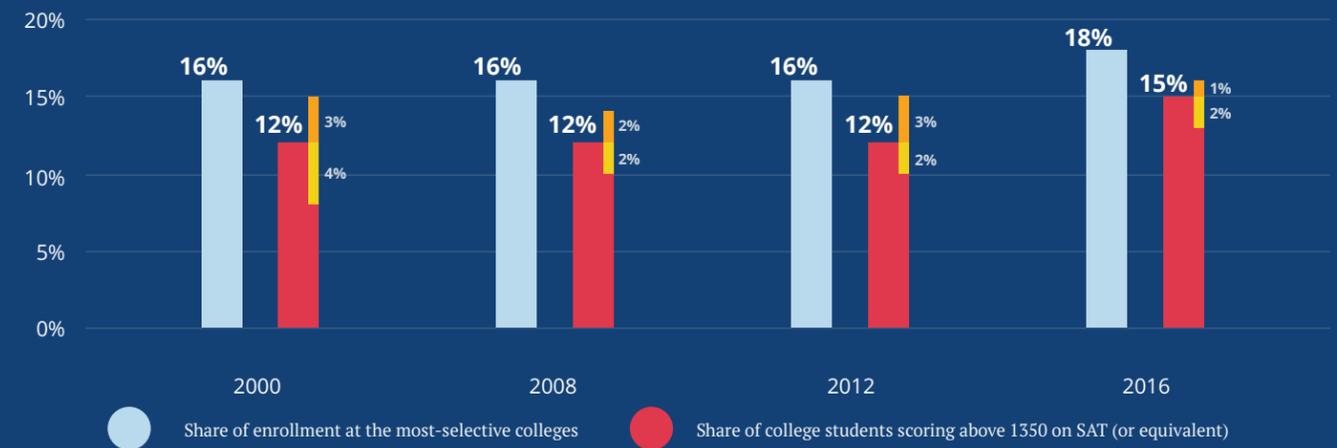
Enrollment balancing is an effort to maintain racial quotas by adjusting year-to-year admissions decisions to correct for previous high or low enrollments of different racial groups. At Harvard, it does not appear that high (or low) Asian American and Pacific Islander student enrollments in some years are being offset by countervailing lower (or higher) Asian American and Pacific Islander student enrollments in other years.¹⁹ Variation from year to year is not uncommon because of the inherent uncertainty in the admissions process. Both the variation in enrollments for Asian American and Pacific Islander students and the fact that their enrollment trends generally followed the trajectory in overall enrollment cast doubt on allegations of an overall consistent bias.

Looking at the 91 most selective colleges, there is little year-to-year change in enrollment share for Asian American students. Critics argue that such stability is suspect, because applicant pools change every year. To the contrary, the applicant pool is quite stable when considering a measure that affirmative action critics like to employ: test scores.

Generally, only about 4 to 6 percent of students who take the SAT score above 1350 (out of 1600). Over the past two decades, the most selective 91 colleges have accounted for 6 to 8 percent of all four-year college enrollment, so enough students generally score above 1350 to fill a majority of seats at these colleges.²⁰ The share of these top scores held by Asian American and Pacific Islander college students has been remarkably consistent: around 12 percent in 2000, 2008, and 2012. In 2016, Asian American and Pacific Islander college students held 15 percent of these scores—and their share of seats at the most selective colleges increased commensurately (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

The Asian American and Pacific Islander share of college students scoring above 1350 on the SAT has remained stable over the past two decades.



Overall, the relatively stable enrollment share for Asian American students at the most selective colleges reflects trends in the college-going population.

19. If this countervailing enrollment behavior occurred, there would be negative autocorrelation among the year-to-year enrollment changes over time. In essence, autocorrelation describes the relationship of the same variable (enrollment shares) with itself at different points in time. Negative autocorrelation in the year-to-year enrollment changes means an increase (decrease) in one year is correlated with a decrease (increase) in another. However, there is no statistically significant negative autocorrelation, and therefore no evidence of enrollment balancing.

20. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2000, 2008, 2012, and 2016; and the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 2000, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

Are Asian American applicants more likely to be rejected by selective colleges than other students?

Looking at enrollment shares tells us who ends up at selective colleges—not how they got there. After all, colleges do not consider every prospective student. They can only accept those who apply.

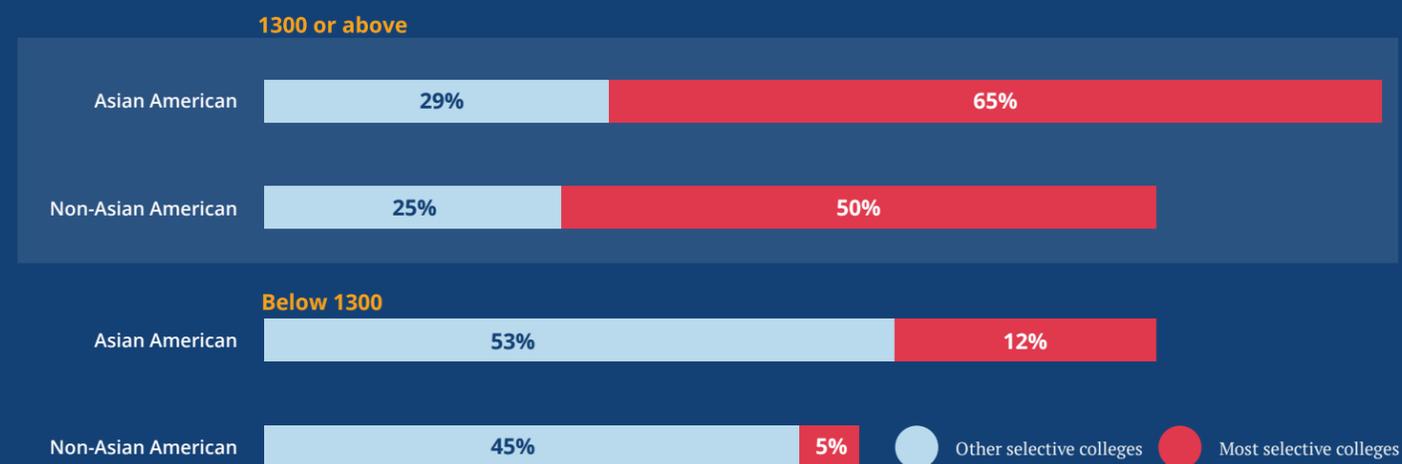
The SFFA complaint cites statistics showing that on average, 27 percent of Harvard’s applicants are Asian American, but only 17 to 20 percent of those who are admitted are Asian American. SFFA presents this discrepancy as evidence that Asian American applicants are held to a higher standard, and face a test-score “penalty” in college admissions.

This comparison relies on an unstated assumption that Asian American and non-Asian American applicants with similar backgrounds apply to selective colleges at similar rates. But that is not true—our evaluation shows that Asian American applicants with below-average test scores are more likely to apply to highly selective colleges than non-Asian American students with similar scores. This means that regardless of test score, Asian American students apply far more frequently to selective colleges than members of any other racial or ethnic group.

Among students who scored 1300 or above on the SAT (the top quartile of test scores among applicants to selective colleges), 65 percent of Asian American students applied to one of the 91

most selective colleges in the country, while just 50 percent of non-Asian American students did the same. And among students who scored below 1300, 12 percent of Asian American students took a chance and applied to one of the most selective colleges, but only 5 percent of non-Asian American students did the same (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Asian Americans are more likely to apply to the most selective colleges, regardless of their test scores.



This observed difference in college application behavior between Asian American and non-Asian American students may in part be explained through a cultural lens. Research has found that East Asian²¹ students are more likely to prefer being a “small frog in a big pond” (attend an elite institution, even if they are at the bottom of the class) compared to European American students, who are more likely to prefer being a “big frog in a small pond” (attend a less selective school and be at the top of the class).²²

The fact that Asian Americans face higher rates of rejection is not, by itself, evidence of an unfair standard. It is evidence that Asian Americans take more chances in applying to top colleges, and therefore have a greater chance of rejection.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (restricted-use data), 2018.

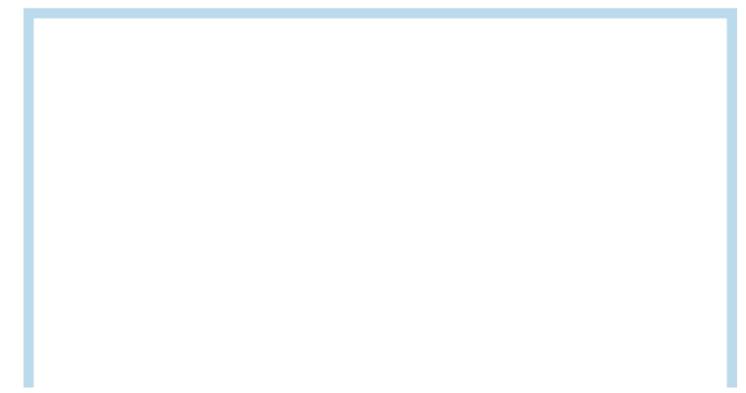
Note: SAT scores of 1300 and above represent the top quartile of test scores among applicants to the most selective colleges. Scores are out of 1600, and include ACT scores converted to the SAT scoring scale.

21. East Asia refers to the area that includes the modern states of China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan. East Asians refers to people who trace their ancestry to this region.
 22. Wu et al., “Frogs, Ponds, and Culture,” 2018.



PART 2.

The So-Called Asian Penalty



One widely quoted 2009 study seemed to imply that Asian American college applicants had to score 140 points higher on the SAT than non-Asian American applicants in order to have the same chance of admission.²³ This finding has animated the grievances of some opponents of race-based affirmative action. The SFFA complaint in the Harvard case paints a picture of Asian American applicants getting docked 140 points strictly because of their race.²⁴ This idea that Asian American applicants need to score a certain number of points higher on the SAT to have an equal chance of admission is sometimes referred to as the Asian penalty.

While the 2009 study considered a wide range of factors used in admissions decisions, including high school grade point average (GPA), SAT and ACT scores, class rank, scores on Advanced Placement tests, athletic ability, National Merit Scholarship status, and legacy status, it still missed important parts of an application. One of the coauthors noted that the study was not proof of discrimination against Asian American applicants because it did not assess “softer variables,” such as personal statements and letters of recommendation.²⁵

Critics of affirmative action, including SFFA in its lawsuit against Harvard, give the impression that SAT and ACT scores are the most important consideration in assessing college applicants, but colleges rightly consider more than just test scores. The claim that Asian American students with high

test scores suffer a penalty in admissions decisions suggests that test scores should hold more weight in admissions than is justified by their ability to predict a student’s performance in college. To be sure, standardized test scores have some predictive validity, but it is far less than most people think—test scores alone explain as little as 15 percent of the variation in college graduation rates, and no more than 30 percent.²⁶

To illustrate their claim that the Asian American share of enrollment is too low, affirmative action opponents point to selective colleges, as well as secondary schools, that do not have race-conscious admissions and end up with large shares of Asian American students. They imply that if colleges had “fair” admissions processes that did not consider race at all, Asian American students would gain a great deal more seats. The very selective University of California, Berkeley, and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), are commonly used examples: the University of California system is barred by state law from using race-conscious admissions, and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up at least a third of the undergraduate student body at these two institutions.²⁷ The implicit argument of affirmative action opponents is that if all selective colleges were “fair” and considered only a race-blind measure like test scores, then those colleges would look much more like the University of California, Berkeley, and UCLA.

We tested this claim with a thought experiment. In our simulation, admission to the most selective colleges was determined solely by standardized test scores.²⁸ The simulation found that if colleges did not consider race, legacy status, athletics, extracurricular activities, academic interests, ability to pay, GPA and other academic achievements, likelihood of attendance, or anything else that goes into admissions besides test scores, Asian American enrollment still would not change much.

Of the 4.1 million students who were high school freshmen in 2009, 120,000 attended one of the 91 most selective colleges. When ranking everyone from this freshman class who applied to one of the most selective colleges by their test scores alone,²⁹ and admitting those with the highest 120,000 scores (randomly selecting students to resolve ties), there are a few notable characteristics of the hypothetical class at the most selective colleges when compared to the actual class of students.

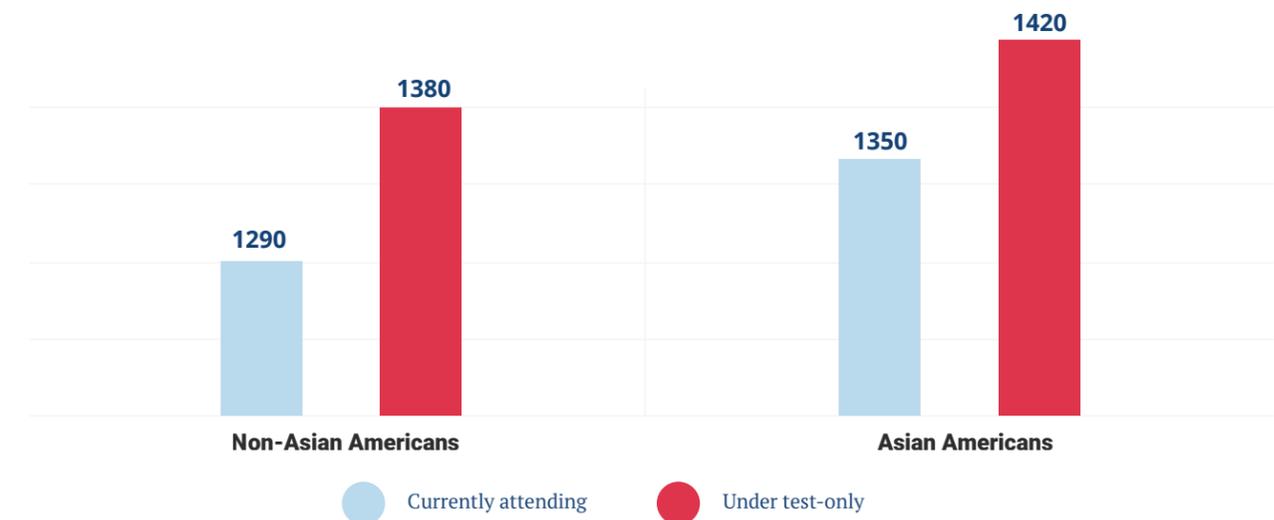
Under this test-only admissions scenario, Asian American students still have higher scores than non-Asian American students. This is notable because critics of affirmative action, including SFFA, point to the fact that Asian Americans at the

most selective colleges have higher test scores on average than their peers as evidence of bias. But under our simulation, when race is not an explicit factor, Asian Americans still have higher test scores on average.³⁰ If race-blind admissions would not eliminate the test-score differential for Asian American students, then their higher test scores cannot be sufficient evidence of unfair treatment.

Our thought experiment also found that under a test-only admissions system, the median SAT scores for accepted students would increase by 70 points for Asian Americans and 90 points for non-Asian Americans, suggesting that any so-called Asian penalty is closer to 20 points than 140 points (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

In a hypothetical admissions process based solely on SAT scores, admitted Asian American students would still have higher scores than admitted non-Asian American students.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (restricted-use data), 2018.

23. Espenshade and Walton Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal*, 2009.

24. The SFFA complaint, on page 44, cites the 140-point statistic from the Espenshade–Walton Radford study in support of its claim that there is decisive statistical evidence that Harvard is discriminating against Asian Americans.

25. Espenshade has said that findings from the Espenshade–Walton Radford study are not conclusive evidence of discrimination against Asian American applicants. See Jaschik, “The Power of Race,” 2009.

26. Burton and Ramist, “Predicting Success in College,” 2001.

27. See the University of California system’s enrollment dashboard, “[Fall Enrollment at a Glance](#).”

28. We had previously conducted a similar thought experiment in Carnevale et al., *SAT-Only Admission*, 2019 in which we considered a wider range of colleges, and a wider pool of prospective students.

29. The HSL:09 survey asks students for the top three colleges they applied to. We assume that if students were earnestly applying to a selective college, it was at the top of their wish list, but that is not necessarily the case.

30. This is likely a result of ethnic economics that reinforce the high participation in test preparation programs by East Asian Americans. See Park, “It Takes a Village (or an Ethnic Economy),” 2012.

Overall, Asian American college applicants would gain some seats in a test-only system. In our simulation, the share of Asian American high school students going on to the most selective colleges would increase by 2 percentage points,

from 12 percent to 14 percent (Table 1). Overall, however, this would result in an increase of fewer than 3,000 seats for Asian Americans at the most selective colleges in a given admissions year.

Table 1.

If college admissions had been based only on SAT scores, the Asian American share of students at the most selective colleges in 2013 would have increased from 12 percent to 14 percent.

	High school freshman 2009 cohort	
	Most selective college enrollment share (current)	Most selective college enrollment share (under test-only simulation)
Asian American	12%	14%
Non Asian American	88%	86%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (restricted-use data), 2018.

The holistic admissions process is larger than race-conscious admissions.

While moving to a test-only admissions process might look like a way to eliminate any bias against Asian Americans—even a test-score penalty of 20 points—colleges have a competing goal in mind: to assemble a class with multifaceted accomplishments that go beyond test-taking skills. The purpose of holistic admissions is to consider the entire student, assessing his or her achievements within the context of individual experience and the needs of the college. College officials consider high school GPA, class rank, and test scores, but they also weigh talents, interests, and background when forming a new class.

Colleges are not simply considering numbers, but people. Letters of recommendation, statements of purpose, and lists of extracurricular activities help admissions officers construct a more wide-ranging understanding of each applicant. Colleges also consider things that have nothing to do with accomplishments or diversity, such as the students' ability to pay, likelihood of attendance, and legacy status.

Because of the many factors considered in the college admissions process, it would be a mistake to ascribe the differences between actual enrollment and the results of our test-only simulation solely to affirmative action. Beyond their race or ethnicity, there are other ways in which groups differ on important admissions requirements. Yes, there are group differences in test scores—but there are also group differences

in participation in athletics or the arts, intended major, and other areas.³¹ One may argue that the combined influence of these differences amount to a bias against (or even for) Asian Americans, but it is important to note that any such bias is separate from an explicit race-conscious policy.

To illustrate how these group differences could matter, consider application behavior. We previously noted that Asian American students are more likely to apply to the most selective colleges regardless of their test scores. If Asian American and non-Asian American applicants with the requisite scores applied at the same rates, the 2-percentage-point change would be halved: the enrollment share of Asian American students at the most selective colleges would only increase from 12 percent to 13 percent, which is within the margin of error.

A 1- to 2-percentage-point difference in enrollment alone is not compelling evidence of bias against Asian American applicants.

31. According to data from the HSLs 2009 survey, Asian American students seem to have a slightly higher ability or willingness to pay for college than the overall average (as a group, Asian Americans were less likely to say financial reasons were why they did not attend a college), and they are more interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors than other students (41 percent vs. 20 percent), less likely to have participated in organized sports (38 percent vs. 47 percent), and more likely to have participated in music or dance (42 percent vs. 35 percent).

Many Asian American students benefit from the current holistic admissions system.

Comparing the status quo to our simulated distribution tells us how much Asian American and non-Asian American students are benefiting from holistic admissions, but it does not tell us if Asian American students are uniformly put at a disadvantage.

Simulating an admissions system based only on test scores shows that certain students currently attending the most selective colleges would not

have been admitted: 21 percent of Asian American students as well as 39 percent of non-Asian American students would be displaced and their seats would be given to students who had higher test scores. On average, the Asian American students who would be displaced have higher median test scores than non-Asian American students who would be displaced.

However, at the same time, Asian American students who would not make the cut in a test-only approach are nearly twice as likely as non-Asian American students who would be displaced to have the lowest scores among the selective college applicant pool (Table 2). This means that Asian American students are also disproportionately represented in the group that is farthest from the hypothetical score cutoff. Thus, some Asian American students are greatly benefiting from the holistic admissions process.

Table 2.

Asian Americans who would be displaced by test-only admissions have higher scores on average, but are more likely to have the lowest scores among applicants.

	Students at the most selective colleges who would be displaced by test-only admissions		
	Median SAT	Share	Share with SAT scores in the bottom quartile of the applicant pool
Asian American	1190	8%	40%
Non Asian American	1120	92%	23%
Total	1120	100%	24%

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (restricted-use data), 2018.

Our finding that some Asian American applicants are benefiting greatly from holistic admissions is not unique. In fact, the same 2009 study that reported the alleged 140-point “Asian penalty” statistic tells us that low-income Asian Americans, like other non-White groups, have a much higher chance of admission than their test scores or

grades alone would imply.³² While critics are using Asian American students to argue for elimination of affirmative action, the evidence suggests that some Asian American students are gaining entrance to selective colleges specifically because of race-conscious holistic admissions.

32. Park, *Race on Campus*, 2018.

Conclusion

Selective colleges matter: not only do they provide more resources to students and generally better outcomes, but they also serve—for better or worse—as a symbol of what society views as meritorious. Competition for a seat at these institutions is fierce, and few will actually attend one. Disproportionate exclusion of certain groups from these colleges results in disparate access to economic opportunities, but perhaps a larger concern is what such bias signals, and more importantly, whom our system values.

The story that Asian American applicants are at a disadvantage in college admissions is widespread. The media routinely reports anecdotes of young Asian American high school students who feel

pressured to downplay, or conceal, their heritage.³³ Pricy admissions advisors and books even promote this behavior.³⁴

We do not find compelling evidence of a significant “Asian penalty” under the current holistic system. Critics of affirmative action like to point to examples of institutions, such as UCLA, that do not follow race-conscious admissions policies and have dramatically different student demographics. The implication is that if other selective colleges were treating applicants fairly (i.e., considering only standardized test scores), then Asian Americans would gain a tremendous number of additional seats in the most selective institutions. We tested that claim, and found that if colleges pursued

a test-only admissions approach, the gain in enrollment share for Asian American students would be minimal at the most selective colleges. Further, about one-fifth of Asian Americans currently admitted to these institutions would not be admitted in a test-only system, demonstrating that Asian American students benefit from holistic admissions just as other students do.

Colleges rightly consider more than just standardized test scores, including letters of recommendation, high school GPA, the rigor of each applicant’s high school curriculum, extracurricular activities, and so on. Test scores alone provide limited predictive value for first-year college GPAs, and even less for graduation rates.³⁵ For example, a student who scores just above

average on the SAT (1000–1099) has a 79 percent chance of graduating from a selective college, while a student who scores in the top quartile (1200 and above) has only a slightly higher chance (85 percent) of graduating.³⁶

However, test scores do have a compelling if superficial egalitarian appeal—and the fact that Asian American students tend to have higher test scores has led critics of affirmative action to use them as a racial wedge to undermine race-conscious admissions.

Nevertheless, the argument that Asian Americans would benefit greatly by a test-only admissions system is not strongly supported by the data, leading to an increase of no more than 2 percentage points. Further, this focus on test scores masks how many students benefit from holistic admissions. In our test-only admissions simulation, 21 percent of Asian American students and 39 percent of non-Asian American students would be displaced and their seats would be given to students who had higher test scores. The Asian American students who would not make the cut in a test-only approach to admissions are about twice as likely as non-Asian American students who would be displaced to have the lowest scores among current enrollees. In other words, those Asian Americans who do benefit are helped considerably by the current holistic admissions approach used by selective colleges.

In the end, we don’t find that Asian American applicants are held to an unfair higher standard under holistic admissions. Rather, we find that a holistic admissions process uplifts many students, including Asian Americans.

33. Chow, “As College Apps Are Due, Asian-American High Schoolers Consider Affirmative Action,” 2018; Mak, “The Price of Admission,” 2017; and Hwang, “Opinion: As an Asian American, I’m Running the College Admissions Race with a Handicap,” 2019.
 34. Otani, “Tips from the Princeton Review: Act Less Asian, Add Pics If You’re Black,” 2014.
 35. Burton and Ramist, “Predicting Success in College,” 2001.
 36. Carnevale et al., *Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges*, 2018.

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Appendix: Data Sources and Methodology

This report uses data from four sources: Barron's rankings, obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Files: 1972, 1982, 1992, 2008, 2014; the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS); the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS); and the restricted-use data set from the second follow-up of the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09).

Defining Selectivity

We define "most selective" and "selective" using NCES-Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index Files data. The most selective colleges are those identified as "Most Competitive," the top tier, in Barron's 2014 ratings. Selective colleges are those identified as "Most Competitive" or "Highly Competitive," the top two tiers, in Barron's 2014 ratings.

Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges 2015* defines these categories using the following criteria:

- **Most Competitive:** These colleges usually require admitted students to have a high school rank in the top 10–20 percent, and to have grade point averages (GPAs) of B+ or above. The median SAT scores of admitted students are between 1310 and 1600, and median ACT scores are above 29. These schools usually admit less than one-third of applicants.
- **Highly Competitive:** The highly competitive colleges look for students with GPAs of B and above and positions in the top 20–35 percent of their high school class. Median SAT scores are between 1240 and 1310. Median ACT scores are 27 to 28. Admissions rates are generally between 33 percent and 50 percent.

Selective Enrollment Trend Data

Enrollment and trend data used the selectivity definitions above, and IPEDS data from 1998 to

2019. Four-year institutions include all degree-granting four-year institutions in the given IPEDS reporting year. During this time period, IPEDS changed the racial classifications used in its data reporting. For consistency with historical data, Asian American student enrollments were combined with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students. Further, our analysis excluded foreign national students and students of an unknown race.

In 1997, the Office of Management and Budget issued revisions to Policy Directive No. 15, which included separating the Asian American or Pacific Islander category into two distinct groups, Asian American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI), given these groups' different histories and socioeconomic experiences. Because federal agencies were slow to reflect these changes in data collection and reporting, historical data on the Asian American population has inappropriately conflated Asian American people with NHPIs. For the purposes of this report, when dealing with trend data (IPEDS), we refer to Asian American and Pacific Islander students, which includes NHPIs as Asian Americans, but in the more recent cross-sectional data (NPSAS and HSL:09) we exclude NHPIs.

Admissions Data and the Thought Experiment

The application data and the data in the test-only admissions thought experiment relied on the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09). HSL:09 is a representative survey of the freshman high school class of 2009. The most recent follow-up survey was conducted in 2016, about three years after these students would have been expected to graduate from high school. We assumed that students who enrolled in a selective college were likely to have graduated high school on time, and that most would have enrolled within two years of completing high school.

The survey includes a composite college-

admissions test score that is presented in SAT-equivalent scores, but is in fact derived from SAT and ACT scores. However, many students who attended selective colleges did not report their scores. Since we are interested in the students who are displaced from selective colleges under test-only admissions, we created estimated SAT scores for those who did not have them.

The estimate used a simple conditional regression model that was based on parental socioeconomic status and scores from an 11th-grade high school mathematics assessment. The R squared of this model was 62 percent. Alternative models were considered (with race and gender factors), but they would not have significantly changed the results.

Overall, imputed test scores do not change the distribution. The 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles remain the same for Asian American and non-Asian American students, with or without this adjustment. The only finding that would be noticeably affected without this adjustment is displacement. Namely, without the adjustment,

more Asian American students would be displaced.

The data include the top three colleges to which each student applied and the outcome. We assumed that if a student applied to one or more of the most selective colleges (or a selective college, depending on the case under consideration), then a selective college would have been included in their top three choices. It is of course possible that a student might have applied to a selective college knowing it was a long shot, and might not have considered it a top choice.

For the thought experiment, we sorted the entire sampled cohort of freshman who applied to one of the most selective colleges in descending order by their adjusted composite SAT score (as described above). We then used a running count of the weighted sample, until we reached the same number of freshmen who were enrolled at the most selective colleges. The minimum score of this group served as a cutoff point—and all racial distributions presented included everyone who scored above it.



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can be accessed online at cew.georgetown.edu/selectivebias.