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The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions

By Tyler Pruett

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In recent years, affirmative action in higher education has been challenged in courts, legislatures, and public referendums. California has eliminated race as a consideration in admission decisions for public colleges and universities. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals (which covers Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas) wrote in *Hopwood vs. Texas* that “the use of race to achieve a diverse student body...simply cannot be a state interest compelling enough to meet the steep standard of strict scrutiny.”¹ Recently, a series of advertisements appeared in college newspapers around the country accusing colleges and universities of using racial preferences illegally in admission decisions. The newspaper ads, by the Center for Individual Rights, are headlined “Guilty by Admission” and charge that nearly every elite college in the United States violates the law.²

In this environment, William Bowen and Derek Bok (the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard universities, respectively) have written *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. For the first time in an often-contentious debate, an empirically-based study looks at data dealing with affirmative action policies and their effects on students and society. Bowen and Bok applied multivariate regressions to a dataset from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that includes information for 93,660 students at 34 different colleges and universities. The authors looked at variables that effect “student performance, receipt of advanced degrees, and later life outcomes.”³

Financial aid administrators will find *The Shape of the River* interesting and informative. The introduction provides a clear and concise historical review of affirmative action. This alone may be worth the cost of the book. The authors do not directly address financial aid to students. However, the discussions of fairness, equity, and socioeconomic status will keep financial aid professionals interested.

One of the central points that the authors make is that merit must be defined by the school’s educational mission. In addition to test scores and grade point averages, admissions officers must “consider who will take full advantage of what the college has to offer, contribute most to the educational process in college, and be most successful in using what they have learned for the benefit of the larger society.” Bowen and Bok further argue that “admissions processes must, be ‘fair,’ but ‘fairness’ has to be understood to mean only that each individual is to be

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judged by a consistent set of criteria that reflect the objectives of the college or university."⁴

Setting aside the argument of institutional mission, the positive long-term consequences of affirmative action policies for the students and society are impressive. Students who were admitted under affirmative action policies graduated in much higher numbers than in NCAA Division I schools. Seventy-five percent graduated in six years compared with 40% of black students and 59% of white students during the same period at NCAA Division I schools. In addition, they were five times as likely to go on to graduate or professional school. As one would expect of graduates of elite schools, the student cohort studied enjoyed tremendous economic success and were extremely satisfied with their chosen careers. Bowen and Bok also demonstrate that the students participate in community, social, service, youth, and school organizations as leaders. In fact, the "ratio of black male leaders to white male leaders is even higher than the ratio of black male participants to white male participants."⁵ Clearly there are significant personal and societal benefits to affirmative action in higher education.

In the preface to *The Shape of the River*, Bowen and Bok state, "Our country respects individual achievement, but it also recognizes that what people have achieved often depends on the families they have grown up in, the neighborhoods in which they have lived, and the schools they have attended, as well as on their own ability and hard work. People rightly seek a society in which racial prejudice no longer limits opportunities. ...[S]ociety cannot help but see the many ways...racial differences...continue to thwart aspirations for an open and just society." *The Shape of the River* provides readers with the information necessary to help us continue on the path to an open and just society.

¹ Bowen, W., & Bok, D., *The Shape of the River*, 1998, p. 14.

² Washington Post, Jan. 27, 1999.

³ Bowen and Bok, *Op. Cit.*, p. xxxi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.