Study Challenges Assumptions About Affirmative-Action Bans

By PETER SCHMIDT

The results of a new study on the impact of bans on race-conscious admissions policies seem to confirm what many critics of affirmative action have long suspected: It is Asian-Americans, rather than whites, who are most disadvantaged by elite universities' consideration of ethnicity and race.

Left unanswered are the likely political ramifications of its finding that Asian-American enrollment has surged — and whites' share of enrollment has actually declined — at elite universities that were forced to abandon affirmative-action preferences.

The study, the results of which are to be published this week in *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, was based on an analysis of enrollment data from selective universities in three states: California, where voters passed a 1996 referendum barring institutions from considering applicants' race or ethnicity; Florida, where Gov. Jeb Bush persuaded the state university system to abandon race-conscious admissions in 2000; and Texas, where race-conscious admissions were prohibited under a 1996 federal court decision that remained in effect until the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of such policies in 2003.

The researchers behind the study, who characterize themselves as supporters of affirmative action, say in the report on their findings that the absence of any white enrollment surge at the institutions examined "can hardly be satisfying" to "those who campaigned for the elimination of affirmative action in the belief that it would advantage the admission of white students." Their report predicts a white backlash against race-neutral admissions policies if Asian-Americans continue to make gains.

In the past, many affirmative-action advocates have denounced assertions that Asian-Americans are harmed by race-conscious admissions policies. They say such claims are motivated by a desire to erode Asian-American support for affirmative action and drive a wedge between Asian-Americans and other minority groups.

On the other side of the issue, Roger B. Clegg, president of the Center for Equal Opportunity and a leading opponent of race-conscious admissions policies, said he suspected the new report was an attempt to undermine white opposition to affirmative-action preferences and to drive a wedge between whites and Asian Americans.

"Those of us who are campaigning against racial preferences are not doing so out of a desire to see an increase in the numbers for this or that group," Mr. Clegg said. "We are doing so because we think discrimination against members of any racial or ethnic group is wrong."

**Behind the Numbers**

The report's three co-authors are David R. Colburn, a professor of history and former provost at the University of Florida; Victor M. Yellen, a former director of institutional research at Florida; and Charles E. Young, who was chancellor of UCLA when California banned affirmative-action preferences and president of the University of Florida when public universities there were barred from considering applicants' ethnicity or race.
The study, which tracked freshman enrollment patterns from 1990 through the fall of 2005, examined the University of Florida, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of California's campuses at Berkeley, Los Angeles, and San Diego. To help pinpoint which of the trends they observed were clearly due to changes in affirmative-action policy, the researchers also studied five universities that had never been affected by affirmative-action bans: Cornell University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the Universities of Arizona, Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Maryland at College Park.

The report on the study's findings says that black students' share of enrollment at the California, Florida, and Texas institutions generally dropped — sometimes substantially — while the picture for Hispanic students was mixed.

In California, Asian-Americans "filled the gap as black and Hispanic enrollment fell following the elimination of affirmative action." The share of UC-Berkeley freshmen who were Asian-American rose from about 37.30 percent in 1995 to about 43.57 percent in 2000, several years after the state's ban on preferences passed. Their share rose again in the next five-year period, to 46.59 percent. Asian-American enrollments experienced similarly large jumps at the Los Angeles and San Diego campuses.

The share of University of Florida freshmen who were Asian-American rose from 7.50 percent in 2000 to 8.65 percent in 2005, while Asian-Americans' share of freshman enrollment at the University of Texas at Austin rose from 14.26 percent to 17.33 percent during that time frame.

The report notes that prohibitions against race-conscious admissions had put the colleges examined under pressure to curtail other admissions preferences given to applicants with some sort of connection, such as legacies, and that those other preferences may also have played a role in limiting Asian-American enrollments. But Mr. Colburn said in an interview last week that the study showed "Asian-Americans were discriminated against under an affirmative-action system."

Lee Cheng, a director of the Asian American Legal Foundation, which opposes affirmative-action preferences, said the study's findings simply confirmed what people in his organization had been saying for well over a decade. Because officials at selective colleges saw Asian-Americans as the most "overrepresented" group on such campuses, he said, "Asian-Americans were the most discriminated-against group when racial preferences were applied."

Aimee J. Baldillo, director of programs for the Asian American Justice Center, which has been supportive of affirmative action, said in a written statement issued last week that such studies need to take into account "the fact that the Asian-American population is very diverse and that many segments of our community struggle with issues of poverty, lack of basic education, and access to higher education."

**Mixed Picture for Other Groups**

The report says white enrollments, as a share of the student body, actually declined slightly at the universities examined, a trend partly attributable to the growing diversity of the states served by the institutions.

Mr. Clegg, of the Center for Equal Opportunity, said his own group's research had found that white enrollments would rise in the absence of affirmative-action preferences. He suggested that the new study would have reached similar conclusions if it had taken into account institutions that were not so selective.

"At some point down the line," Mr. Clegg said, "the student who is being discriminated against based on skin color is going to benefit if discrimination on the basis of skin color is eliminated." He called it "implausible" that admissions policies that disadvantaged white students did not have an impact on white numbers.

The report says that changes in black enrollments in the states examined varied greatly, depending on how aggressively state and university officials worked to mitigate the effects of affirmative-action bans.

In California, it says, black enrollment declines were "devastating," with the numbers for black men falling especially far.

At the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses, black students' share of enrollment dropped by more than half, about as much as the universities' leaders had feared it would. Berkeley's entering freshman class of 1995 had 149 black
students, accounting for 6.51 percent of first-year students; of those who entered in 2005, 109, or 2.97 percent, were black. At UCLA, black enrollment dropped from 7.31 percent to 2.67 percent during that 10-year period.

The decline was not as steep at San Diego, but the campus's black enrollment had been fairly negligible to begin with, accounting for 1.31 percent of the entering class of 1995 and 1.16 percent of the entering class of 2005.

Few of the University of California system's efforts to offset such declines had much effect. The system adopted a policy guaranteeing admission to students in the top 4 percent of their high-school class, but most black students who got in under the 4-percent rule had also been eligible under regular admissions criteria, the report notes.

The situation was different in Florida and Texas.

Black students' share of the University of Florida's entering class declined from 11.33 in 2000 — just before the end of race-conscious admissions — to 9.41 percent in 2005, not nearly as sharp a decline as that experienced by the California institutions.

The report says it helped that Florida adopted a policy of guaranteeing students in the top 20 percent of their high school a seat at one of the state's public universities. Florida, unlike the universities in California and Texas, was allowed to continue to consider race and ethnicity in recruiting and awarding financial aid. And even though black students' share of its entering classes declined, it was able to increase the number of black students on its campus by substantially increasing overall enrollment.

In Texas, Gov. George W. Bush helped reverse black enrollment declines by persuading lawmakers to adopt the "Texas 10 Percent Plan," guaranteeing students who graduated in the top 10th of their class at one of the state's high schools admission to the public university of their choice. Black students' share of enrollment at the University of Texas at Austin initially dropped from 4.89 percent in 1995 to 3.38 percent in 2002, but has since rebounded to 5.05 percent, surpassing 1995 levels.

Hispanic enrollments dropped substantially at Berkeley and UCLA, but rose substantially at UC-San Diego and at Florida and Texas.

The increases were driven partly by population growth. The University of Florida, Mr. Colburn said, did not have to take big steps to maintain Hispanic enrollments because Hispanic students "were consistently competitive," with many coming from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds.

The report notes that all five of the universities mitigated the effects of actual and potential declines in their black and Hispanic enrollments by increasing their five- and six-year graduation rates, so that higher percentages of their black and Hispanic students graduated in 2000 than had 10 years before.

Mr. Colburn said the information analyzed for his study did not shed light on whether graduation rates were bolstered by the better academic preparation of students admitted without the benefit of affirmative-action preferences. "My observation would be the jury is out on it," he said.