

Race on Campus

Debunking Myths with Data

Julie J. Park

HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

(2018)

Black Students and the Cafeteria— What’s the Big Fuss?

ALTHOUGH NOT A COLLEGE CAMPUS, an early scene in the 2004 movie *Mean Girls* sums it up well. On entering her high school cafeteria for the first time, the heroine of the story quickly identifies the complex social arrangements reflected in the tables of students, noting the ones that fall along racial lines. She assesses the scene: “You got your Freshmen, ROTC Guys, Preps, JV Jocks, Asian Nerds, Cool Asians, Varsity Jocks, Unfriendly Black Hotties, Girls Who Eat Their Feelings, Girls Who Don’t Eat Anything, Desperate Wannabes, Burnouts, Sexually Active Band Geeks, The Greatest People You Will Ever Meet, and The Worst. Beware of The Plastics.”¹ Stereotypes and all, you have to appreciate her ability to distinguish between the tables of nerdy Asians and cool Asians.

When people hear that I study racial diversity on college campuses for a living, the reactions are generally a mix of surprise (“You get paid to do that?”) and then lament, which is usually something about how colleges are diverse but what good is it if “students don’t mix.” If you visit a college dining hall at 12:00 p.m. on any given weekday, it’s easy to assume that mixing across race is rare behavior. There are tables and tables of students,

but the ones that stick out are those that are filled with students seemingly of the same race or ethnicity eating, laughing, and studying together. In the entire college setting, the college cafeteria is probably the most colloquially cited example of how students “stick to themselves” or “don’t really interact much with each other.”

There’s even a book written about it. I still remember the first time I heard about *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum.² I was attending a summer program in high school and walking with two (Black) friends who burst into laughter in instant recognition of Tatum’s clever title. I laughed along, a little confused since there were so few Black kids to begin with back home in my suburban Ohio cafeteria. But once I got to college, I understood much better. And once I got plugged into the Asian American student community at Vanderbilt, it was easy for me to take my tray upstairs to see if anyone I knew was in the usual spot where people hung out. Downstairs, clusters of other racial/ethnic groups occupied the usual spots, as well as athletes, artsy sorts, and the like.

The racially divided cafeteria evokes a powerful image in our collective consciousness and is also an easy target for those bemoaning the lack of “real” engagement across racial/ethnic lines. A term I often hear is *self-segregation*, as in “students are so self-segregated,” or “they choose to self-segregate,” as if the system of segregation is one that any group of students would willingly hoist on themselves. Still, the term is casually thrown around, as evidenced by a quick Google search of campus newspapers and media outlets: “Stanford’s Silent Segregation,” “UF Promoting Racism with New Self-Segregated Housing,” and “What to Do About Self-Segregation on Campus?”³ It’s also the subject of many an earnest collegiate town hall meeting. I have memories of sitting in such meetings at multiple campuses and hearing students propose things like a Sit Outside Your Comfort Zone Day, when people are encouraged to sit with someone who they do not ordinarily sit with, as if one day of sitting somewhere else in the dining hall is going to fix the world’s racial conflicts. As silly as these proposals feel, they speak to the significance of the cafeteria as a

symbol to many of racial balkanization on campus, as well as to the simplistic idea that changing the cafeteria is the key to racial harmony.

The problem with relying on the cafeteria as a primary means of understanding the state of race relations is that it is generally just one (or two, counting dinner) hours of a day that the last time I checked has a full twenty-four hours. What we see in the cafeteria may fall along racial/ethnic lines, but it’s also just a slice of students’ days. What people often forget are the other hours of the day, the times when students mix across racial/ethnic lines in other spheres of campus life: attending classes that are racially diverse, living in residence halls, engaging in service learning, working in part-time jobs, attacking problem sets in study groups, and getting involved in campus organizations. They may not all be best friends, but something is undeniably going on there.

A consistent finding from studies of interracial contact and friendship is that students of color have markedly higher rates of cross-racial engagement than their White peers.⁴ Even when controlling for factors such as students’ race/ethnicity, actual interest in diversity issues, gender, socioeconomic status, and other key factors, statistical analyses of thousands and thousands of students tell us that students of color are mixing across races at a rate that outpaces their White counterparts. Even when you use methods like asking students to name their friends one at a time and then to list their friends’ races/ethnicities, which avoids the issue of being primed to think about race when recalling key relationships (e.g., “How many African American friends do you have?”), White students are significantly less likely to have close friends of other races. In a study I did utilizing this method, I found that more than half (51.5 percent) of White students had no close friends of other races. In contrast, only 25.7 percent of African American, 7.7 percent of Latinx, and 15.8 percent of Asian American students had close friendship groups that were racially homogeneous.⁵

Going back to my own cafeteria experience—I still can visualize it well, but there were still plenty of times when we mixed across racial/ethnic lines. I got involved in coalitions with other student of color

organizations, some of which I felt more at home in than I did in the Asian American community. Vanderbilt shoved a lot of student groups into a single office, so we became friends and interacted all the time, volunteering for each other's events and cheering one another on. I ended up living in a residence hall with a lot of those artsy-looking folks (and their philosophy-loving compatriots), and they were pretty nice people. The student athletes tended to pop up in my sociology classes. So which was the real Vanderbilt—the racially divided cafeteria at lunchtime or the full twenty-four hours of the day, which usually included a decent amount of time with my closest friends (mostly Asian American), as well as plenty of time mixing across racial/ethnic boundaries? The truth is it was probably somewhere in the middle, but that had more to do with some of the dynamics of that particular campus than anything else.

Why is the cafeteria such a powerful image? Turning to the tools of cognitive science, we can think about the availability heuristic from Tversky and Kahneman, which describes how we revert to the information that can be most easily recalled, or what's "available" in our minds.⁶ Not only that, but we use this tendency as a mental shortcut to assess the relative importance of information. If we can remember it, we believe that it's something worth remembering and therefore important and relevant. For many of us, the cafeteria is an image that sticks out, perhaps because it's a space where a wide spectrum of people are thrown together, and yet we can see where people are congregating by race/ethnicity. Or at least we think we see it; indeed, we may be seeing only part of the picture. When people comment on the cafeteria, it's usually the question of why Black folks, or Asian folks or whoever, are all sitting together, when there are probably just as many all-White or mostly White tables, depending on the demographics of the institution. I mean, when I taught at Miami University in Ohio, which at the time was well over 80 percent White, mystified people still asked why Black students sat together, even though the campus was full of White students clustering together at cafeteria tables, in sororities or fraternities, and in other spaces.

We are used to thinking of White folks as the norm, so much so that we (especially those in the majority) are conditioned to not notice clusters of White people or White people gathering together as unusual. In contrast, people of color, and especially groups of people of color, stick out—to the point where they're often perceived as threatening. An example of this in the news is when a group of Black women was kicked off a tour of Northern California's Napa Valley because they were laughing.⁷ Yes, laughing. Their laughter was somehow seen as threatening and disruptive because—well, I really have no idea why. For whatever reason, "Driving While Black" or "Flying While Brown" or "Laughing While Black and Female" are real things. So sometimes the very action of "Existing as a Minoritized Person/People" is deemed exceptional and therefore memorable and worthy of attention. Another example that comes to mind from religious circles is when White people ask me why I go to a predominantly Asian American church. When I flip the question back and ask why so many White people go to church together, let's just say that awkwardness often ensues.

So back to the cafeteria—in short, because Whites are seen as the norm, tables of students of color pop out glaringly, while Whites tend to fade into the background.⁸ Tables of students of color becomes a dominant image that seems definitive of student experiences instead of being just a slice of a student's day. It becomes easily recallable information that we associate as the state of campus race relations. Availability heuristic—voilà.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT HOW WE SIT TOGETHER

Something critical to consider is that interracial contact and friendship do not happen at random. First, the demography of the campus matters quite a bit. Research studies show that the more racially diverse the student body is, the higher the likelihood of interracial interaction

and friendship.⁹ Americans generally have a high value for individualism and we think, “Darn it! I can be friends with whomever I want!” We view friendship as a matter of personal preference, not as being shaped by broader social forces. Rarely do we think about how the demography of environments and institutions facilitate or constrain these opportunities.¹⁰ Take the classic admissions brochure photo featuring smiling students of different races. It’s a lovely image, but one that is statistically unlikely on many college campuses. If you have a student body of fifteen thousand and a Black enrollment of 3 percent, and you randomly select five students at a time for your photo, 86 percent of the time your photo ends up with zero Black students in it.¹¹ Your probability of selecting a Black student goes up if you have more Black students in your student body, but this example highlights how these smiling moments that everyone wants—diverse admissions photos and racially mixed cafeteria tables—are deeply shaped by who’s actually enrolled in college, which in turn is shaped by patterns of inequality.

Additionally, students are shaped by the subcultures of the university in which they spend the most time. Once again, demography matters, and it has the potential to influence behavior. So certain environments, such as fraternities and sororities dominated by a particular racial/ethnic group (White students), are linked with significantly lower rates of close interracial friendship and, in some studies, lower interracial contact.¹² These types of groups can function as bubbles that shield their members from engaging with the broader diversity of the campus. What is even more worrisome is that this isolation can potentially damage students’ attitudes. For example, after being involved in fraternities and sororities for a few years, White students were less likely to support interracial marriage and had higher levels of symbolic racism.¹³ Greek organizations function as incubators for student culture—at their best they can foster a value for leadership or community, but at their worst participation is linked with increases in binge drinking, prejudiced racial attitudes, and lower rates of interracial friendship.¹⁴ Organizations are powerful venues

in which members can push their peers in one direction or another, making it harder to swim against the current.¹⁵ Yet for whatever reason, fraternities and sororities are rarely named in discussions of who is supposedly self-segregating. Rarely does anyone ask why all of the White students are sitting together in the cafeteria, perhaps because of the way the White majority operates as the default setting for our understanding of what is normal, versus a gathering of students of color, which seems less the norm. These are some of things that get lost—when we’re focused on other things.

ETHNIC STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS— SELF-SEGREGATION OR NOT?

There are some surprising research findings out there on the ethnic student organizations that populate college campuses. From a South Asian American acapella group to the local Black Student Union chapter, these groups provide social, academic, and emotional support for their members. They also work to raise awareness on campus about their particular population, often hosting signature events such as a Lunar New Year Celebration or Holi Festival. Such groups are often at the forefront of campus activism, incubating and launching movements to rally for ethnic studies programs and additional support for students of color.

In a more insidious way, these organizations are also often accused of fostering self-segregation, as did the *Georgetown Voice* columnist who lamented how such groups are “counterproductive to the values Georgetown wants to instill.”¹⁶ Although that editorial appeared in 2016, public worries around the phenomenon of self-segregation date back to the early 1990s, when headlines warning of “Separate Ethnic Worlds” appeared in the *New York Times*.¹⁷ Reviewing news articles on self-segregation from the past three decades, I uncovered a common theme: the presentation of self-segregation as a catch-all scapegoat for racial problems in higher education. These articles claim that so-called self-segregation is both a

symptom and a cause of higher education's deficiencies and that without it college campuses would be the racial utopias they were meant to be. Something tells me that the vision of "racial utopia" held by some of these writers might be pretty different from my own. . . .

Despite the worries around self-segregation fracturing campus life, recent studies indicate counterintuitive findings: involvement in ethnic student organizations is actually linked with significantly higher levels of interracial contact and, in particular, the same casual type of interracial contact that is most consistently linked to the educational benefits of diversity.¹⁸ (I'll explain how these benefits come about in a bit.) Being involved in ethnic student organizations is also linked with significantly higher rates of interracial interaction (more casual contact) for students overall, and Black and Latinx students in particular, when analyses are conducted separately by racial/ethnic group. This finding is especially critical to challenging the myth of rampant and static self-segregation, showing that students involved in ethnic student organizations are engaging with the broader diversity of the campus.

In terms of closer types of relationships, research findings also suggest that ethnic student organizations do little to hurt race relations. When simply controlling for any sort of participation in an ethnic student organization, some studies, including my own work, find that these groups are associated with lower odds of having a close friend of another race.¹⁹ Two other types of clubs do as well: Greek life and, surprisingly, religious student organizations, which we'll discuss in the next chapter. However, for students involved in ethnic student organizations, lower rates of closer interracial friendship tend to be accompanied by higher rates of interracial contact, which is a really good thing. Let's break it down.

First, a different story emerges when controlling for the level of involvement in these groups, instead of just indicating membership in these groups. It's a subtle but important difference. Counterintuitively, in a study published in the *Review of Higher Education*, Young K. Kim and I found that being more involved in ethnic student organizations had no link

with close interracial friendship; there was no negative effect associated with being more involved in an ethnic student organization.²⁰ However, the negative effect between Greek life and religious student organization membership persisted, meaning that students more involved in fraternities, sororities, and religious groups were significantly less likely to have close friends of other races.

Later on we looked at patterns for students of different racial/ethnic groups. This series of studies was one of the very first to test ideas about who is self-segregating using data on actual friendship groups from a national dataset of thousands of college students, instead of a set of hunches or anecdotes. We found that Latinx students who were more involved in ethnic student groups were actually more likely to have close friends of other races during college.²¹ While the type of statistical method that we used does not prove causality (we cannot say that clubs make or guarantee interracial friendships), Latinx students who were more involved in ethnic student groups actually had significantly more interracial friendships, even when controlling for other key background characteristics. Importantly, for other racial groups, being more involved in ethnic student organizations had no net effect, meaning that students who were more involved were no more likely to have (or not have) close interracial friendships. While results that are statistically significant are usually the ones that receive the most attention, sometimes a lack of statistical significance is just as noteworthy, especially when it contradicts conventional wisdom about a potential relationship between two variables. In this case, the finding that more involvement in ethnic student organizations had no negative effect on interracial friendship for students is quite remarkable given the reputation of these groups as promoting self-segregation.

These studies on ethnic student groups and close interracial friendships are important, but they consider a very specific outcome that has some limitations: the racial/ethnic composition of one's four closest friends. Altogether the research suggests that we derive more benefits from interacting continuously within a broader network of diverse peers

than simply having a limited number of closer interracial friendships.²² While our most intimate friendships are important (after all, is there anything like someone who knew how weird you were in high school?), we know that in regular life we often rely on a variety of networks that extend beyond our “big four.” When we rely on only our closest friendships for news and information, there is a high likelihood that we will hear the same information over and over again. Ultimately, it becomes less novel and less likely to make you look at the world in a totally different way. However, interracial interaction among a broader network of diverse acquaintances and friends—the kind linked with participation in ethnic student organizations—is especially valuable because these networks can open the door to a catalyzing agent in cognitive development: nonredundant information.²³ Even a close interracial friendship, life-impacting as it may be, represents an *n* of 1. Having one Asian American friend may enlighten you to some of the challenges of the model minority myth, or the “bamboo ceiling”; but having more Asian American friends might show you that a lot of Asian Americans don’t go to college or attend community college.²⁴ You might be pushed to consider why many Asian Americans identify as Democrat and others as Republican, and even the few who are holding it down with the Green Party. You would learn about Asian Americans who grow up in refugee families versus those whose parents signed up to come over. You’d hear the perspective of the Asian American who was the prom queen, the class clown, the animal lover, the car whiz. You get the idea. Add in friendships and acquaintanceships from other racial/ethnic groups and other backgrounds, and you get a fuller understanding of how people are experiencing life.

SO WHY DOES INTERRACIAL INTERACTION MATTER?

To elaborate, with a broader network of interracial interactions we get exposed to sources that can challenge our thinking and help us reconsider preconceived notions. This exact pattern is a huge reason why racial

diversity in college campuses matters and how the educational benefits associated with diversity work. Navigating modern life takes a tremendous amount of effort, and most of us spend our day on autopilot to conserve mental energy. Psychologist Ellen Langer called this state “mindlessness,” and, frankly, we’re in it a lot.²⁵ Our brains rely on mental shortcuts (like the availability heuristic, for instance) to help us make sense of the world. On top of that, we are socialized in a world to identify patterns and associate them with various people, groups, or situations, which leads to the persistence of stereotypes, both the supposedly positive ones and the more unkind ones. These patterns and assumptions also become part of life on autopilot, as we have to quickly categorize and generalize our observations. It’s not all bad, and we need some of it to function. But with too much mindlessness we can miss out.

When we really stop to listen—something that is getting increasingly harder in an age of technology saturation—encountering a nonredundant, novel piece of information can really take us off autopilot. All of a sudden we have to be present and mindful that this new piece of information does not neatly fall into the boxes and silos of our preconceived notions. Our brain has to work a little harder as we digest this information and how it challenges the way we understand the world around us. In young adulthood, these types of encounters spur cognitive development and complexity as young people move from seeing the world in more black-and-white terms typical of earlier stages of development to more gray and contextual, nuanced understandings of the world.²⁶

In the college environment, interacting across race has a proven track record of being linked with this type of critical development. In fact, interracial interaction during college has been linked to a wide array of important outcomes like cognitive skills, academic skills, lower rates of prejudice, increased comfort with people of other races, social agency and civic development, retention, sense of belonging, cultural understanding and engagement, leadership and teamwork skills, and satisfaction in college.²⁷ In the last few Supreme Court affirmative action cases, the Court has

ruled repeatedly that universities have a compelling interest in bringing together racially diverse student bodies which foster environments that can spur these types of benefits. This definitely isn't the only justification for affirmative action. The effects of past and current discrimination and disenfranchisement are real, but it is the justification that the Court has preserved as legally viable for now. At the same time, part of why the educational benefits linked with diversity are particularly compelling and critical is because society remains segregated by race, which is the enduring legacy of both past and current discrimination.

WHY DO STUDENTS IN ETHNIC STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS HAVE HIGHER INTERRACIAL INTERACTION?

Good question. It's counterintuitive, given everything we know (or think we know) when it comes to Black, Asian American, or Latinx kids sitting together in the cafeteria. As I mentioned earlier, the cafeteria really only represents a portion of a day that otherwise contains many hours and opportunities to cross paths across racial/ethnic lines. Seeing a large group of Black, Asian American, or Latinx students sitting in a room together for a meeting of ____ (fill in the blank with your favorite ethnic/cultural student club) may also give the impression that ethnic student organizations lead to persistent racial clustering on campus. Yet, those meetings are also just another fraction of a student's day when it comes to campus life.

Part of the reason why ethnic student organizations are linked with higher levels of interracial interaction is that these communities give students of color some space to breathe and recharge, enabling them to go back out and engage across race. Many of these students spend most of their day interacting across race, and research has documented how these experiences can be taxing and depleting in their own way.²⁸ Students may encounter challenges like racial microaggressions—well-meaning, subtle

comments that reinforce their minority status.²⁹ On top of highlighting stereotypes, racial microaggressions are taxing because they make the hearer question whether they are overreacting or reading too much into the original comment, which can really make you feel crazy over time. Remember, these are usually split-second comments that are well-intentioned. Students may also encounter more blatant acts of racism and ignorance, but more subtle slights can be quite disorienting on their own.

Marginalization can happen for students of color without a word being spoken. Imagine the African American student walking into the engineering classroom where she is the only person of her race. As an Asian American, I am sorely aware of situations where I am the lone (or one of very few) Asian Americans or people of color at a gathering or a meeting. More equitable representation of different racial/ethnic groups does not guarantee a positive environment for diversity, but these environments rarely exist without such representation. In other words, numbers matter. I once heard a comment by Louis Martin-Vega, the dean of the College of Engineering at North Carolina State University and a trailblazer in his own right, about how having more faculty and scientists of color is critical not just to provide role models but to stand as "existence proof." *Existence proof*—his words struck me. When campuses lack racial/ethnic diversity among faculty and administrators, there is a literal lack of existence proof for our students. And the feeling that you don't exist—that no one like you exists in the immediate space you inhabit—can be deeply draining both in the moment and over time.

And then let's not forget the pressure that students of color, women, and other traditionally disenfranchised groups experience when they are one of the few in an environment. The pressure to succeed, counter stereotypes, and show others that you do not fit into their neat assumptions of who you are—all while keeping it real enough to not forget who you are in the first place. This all wears on the spirits of many students of color. For instance, study after study has confirmed the effect of stereotype threat—how the standardized test performance of underrepresented

minorities and women are hurt when their social identities are made salient in a negative way.³⁰ All told, stereotype threat is just one manifestation of the burdens that many students carry in a society saturated by inequality. So doesn't it make sense that students of color could use some space to not have to deal with this stuff 24/7?

Even when interacting across race leads to positive connections—the types of deep conversations where students have “Aha!” light bulb moments as they consider new ways of understanding the world—these interactions still take effort. Remember that the entire idea behind why racial diversity affects cognitive growth is because our default mode of automatic thinking takes very little effort, whereas the effort involved in considering a divergent perspective spurs active learning and development. The upside is that you learn something new; the slight downside is that going off mental cruise control takes effort. However, in an unequal society, the burden is even greater for students of color, who often take on a teaching role. Chances are they inhabit this role on multiple occasions, even within a single day, depending on the campus environment. In contrast, a White or majority-status student can experience some disorientation from inhabiting the learner role or engaging in a complex exchange, but they generally have the privilege of going back to enjoying their majority-status role for the rest of the day. The scenario I have described is purposefully overgeneralized. Of course, there are times when the roles are reversed, or the majority-status student has chosen to engage in displacement more than the average majority student. But the fact remains that even the decision of a majority-status student to align with the minority is a choice, an option—a choice unavailable to students of color in most situations.

So there are more than a few reasons why students of color may value a place to breathe, unwind, and recharge with people who share their racial/ethnic identity. Ethnic student organizations—and yes, sitting together at the cafeteria—can provide those spaces where students do not have to second-guess themselves as much, for at least a period of time.

There still may be plenty of disorienting moments—one should definitely not assume homogeneity within any particular community—but there is something valuable about having times when you don't have to wonder whether the disorientation is stemming from inhabiting the position of “official racial minority.”³¹

The exciting thing about spending time with people of the same race/ethnicity is that for college students overall, and Black and Latinx students in particular, being involved in various types of ethnic student organizations is linked with significantly higher rates of overall interracial contact. Having time to recharge, socialize, and enjoy fellowship among peers of a similar racial background is associated with higher rates of crossing racial/ethnic lines during the other hours of the day. Ethnic student organizations play a vital role in not just helping retain students of color; they also contribute to the broader campus racial climate by promoting interracial interaction, giving students of color space to recharge their batteries and navigate a diverse and at times racially charged campus environment.³²

Researchers have identified other positive outcomes from involvement in ethnic student organizations. Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton of the University of California, Berkeley, and Elizabeth Page-Gould of the University of Toronto have conducted a number of studies on the value of interracial friendships.³³ They have also found that

efforts to foster out-group contact need not come at the expense of promoting the benefits of in-group contact. For example, in a previous study, we . . . demonstrated that on days following attendance at ethnically centered events (e.g., attendance at a meeting of the Black Students' Organization), minority students' sense of belonging at the university increased. Together, the findings of these studies suggest that efforts to increase crossgroup friendship are not incompatible with institutional efforts to clearly communicate acceptance of the minority group by supporting organizations or activities centered on the ethnic or racial background of that group.³⁴

Score another point for ethnic student organizations. The authors found that participation in these groups and other ethnically based activities for students of color is actually linked with an increased sense of belonging at the institution, instead of feelings of alienation and isolation. And that's good news for everyone.

WE NEED BOTH *INTERRACIAL* AND *INTRARACIAL* ENGAGEMENT

One reason why the image of the racially zoned cafeteria (or the ethnic student organization) has imprinted itself on the public's consciousness as an example of what is wrong with diversity is that we have the misguided tendency to think that diversity is an all-or-nothing concept. Well-intentioned people take statements like Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and uncritically envision a racially mixed society as a static, fixed picture. If pervasive, state-mandated racial segregation was certainly bad, then the opposite—people-chosen 24/7 integration—can only be good. Perhaps we lack the language to think about both the middle ground and the complex processes that support a more diverse society. And without this understanding, when we see some degree of people-chosen congregation along racial/ethnic lines, we jump to conclusions and put it in the same category as state-mandated racial segregation ("bad").

In reality, supporting diversity is a more fluid process in which most individuals benefit from a balance of both intergroup (interracial) interaction and intragroup interaction. One does not necessarily come at the expense of the other, especially for students of color. Interracial interactions among a broad network of friends and acquaintances are critical, both to expose people to a constant flow of nonredundant information (avoiding groupthink) and to support interracial cooperation. They are also crucial for needs like finding a job or getting the word out about your ideas. Mark Granovetter of Stanford University summed up the importance of having a broad network of acquaintanceships in his seminal

article "The Strength of Weak Ties."³⁵ Counterintuitively, he found that successful job contacts are more likely to come from more casual social ties than close friendships, in part because the greater number of casual ties will serve as a source of nonredundant information. Similarly, it is generally fine to have a close-knit network of friends of the same race/ethnicity who can provide emotional support and intimate friendship, as long as students have a broader and more diverse network to advance them in the workplace and other spheres of life. Now more than ever, racially diverse neighborhoods, schools, and communities play a critically foundational role in supporting our country's diverse democracy.

In short, for students of color, spending time with one's own racial/ethnic group is something that may actually help interracial contact in the long run. It seems paradoxical, but when we remember that people have the ability to manage both interracial and intraracial relationships, we realize that these types of relationships are a both-and, not an either-or, trade-off. Since White students tend to have lower rates of casual interracial contact and interracial friendship, it is imperative that universities typify communities where White students engage in environments that do not shelter them from engaging across racial/ethnic lines. While interracial contact is basically unavoidable for students of color in most collegiate settings, White students can more easily opt out of this type of engagement, especially at predominantly White universities. The next chapter presents some of the environments (historically White Greek life) that are shaping these experiences for White students.

Is Class-Based Affirmative Action the Answer?

I REMEMBER CHECKING OUT *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action* during graduate school. It sounded so good. In its pages, Richard Kahlenberg promised readers a simple solution to the equity issues that plague US higher education.¹ To him, a race-conscious admissions process was unnecessarily divisive, violating many people's ideas around what was fair and equitable. But class-based admissions? Smooth like butter. Folks across the political spectrum supported it, even those who stalwartly opposed the version of affirmative action that takes race into account. It was a simple formula: a large percentage of people of color qualify as being low-income; give them a bump up in admissions, and you'll get a twofer—racial diversity without the mess and economic diversity to boot. What's not to like?

Fast-forward two decades and Kahlenberg is having a moment. With race-conscious admissions cases going to the Supreme Court twice in recent years, the public has been more open to his ideas, perhaps feeling that the demise of race-conscious admissions was inevitable. (Spoiler: It wasn't.) Kahlenberg has also been joined by reputable scholars like Sheryll Cashin, who has written about the potential of using zip codes and other data to assess an applicant's opportunity to achieve and the limitations of considering race.² But something else happened that made the basic idea of class-based affirmative action a fighting contender again. Malia Obama.

In 2008, the United States made history when we elected Barack Obama to the presidency. It was a shining moment for our democracy. One of Obama's most attractive features was his family, his wife, Michelle, and two daughters, Malia and Sasha. The election of President Obama, writ large, provided fuel to the idea that we were somehow now a postracial society, a claim that exploded in the years to come with Trump and his words about Mexicans and Muslims, Charlottesville and the rise of White supremacy, the BlackLivesMatter movement spotlighting police violence, and the list goes on. But to many, putting a Black family in the White House in 2008 seemed to declare that the problem of racial inequality was now solved—a perfect example of confirmation bias, or interpreting information in a way that confirms what you believe already, if there ever was one.

With that, Malia Obama became a symbol in the affirmative action debates on why race-conscious admissions practices were no longer needed. As Atlantic columnist Conor Friedersdorf wrote in 2011, "The notion of advantaged people like Sasha and Malia Obama benefiting from racial preferences is a much better argument against the policy than the experience of their father."³ In this line of thinking, someone of Barack or Michelle Obama's generation had some legitimacy toward benefiting from affirmative action, as both came from working-class families. But "advantaged people" like the Obamas' children? Since they have it made in the shade, they are prime evidence of why the utility of race-conscious admissions is long over.

Now, I don't doubt that the Obama daughters lead really great lives, benefiting from both the abundant love of their parents and the material advantages that come from having been a First Family. But I do have a problem with the Obama daughters, and Malia in particular (since she was the first to go to college), becoming emblematic of every Black girl in America applying to college. Folks like Friedersdorf might challenge this, arguing that they only mean that "advantaged people" who also happen to be Black should be out of the running for affirmative action. But there are key problems with that line of thinking.

Number 1, we have no way of knowing who "gets in" via affirmative action, and the idea that all students of color are attending their respective colleges due to affirmative action is erroneous. Affirmative action isn't something that's sprinkled indiscriminately on students of color—"You're Black! Let's give you some admissions fairy dust!" On the contrary, affirmative action is a system of holistic admissions that allows reviewers to assess every single applicant as an individual person with an array of traits—personality, accomplishments, life opportunity, goals, leadership potential, social class, and, yes, race/ethnicity. That includes White students, Black students, Asian American students, Latinx students, Indigenous students, multiracial students. And defenders of race-conscious, holistic admissions maintain that yes, in a country where race/ethnicity is a critical determinant of everything from what type of school you attend to the likelihood that you received SAT coaching to whether you have a higher chance of getting harassed by the police, knowing a student's race/ethnicity is part of being able to assess a student's opportunities for achievement, as well as their broader life story.

Number 2, a wake-up call: the median African American family has 6 percent of the accumulated wealth (assets, savings, property, income) that the median White family has.⁴ Six percent. And it's 8 percent for Latinx families. Demos, the think tank that researched this, crunched numbers from the US Census Bureau and found that within each respective community, the median Black household had \$7,113 in wealth in 2011. It was \$8,348 for the median Latino/a household. The median household wealth for Whites was \$111,146. Yes, those are medians—for those of you who slept through stats class, that's the cut-off point for 50 percent of the population. In other words, it's not the crazy 1 percent that's tipping the average for Whites. It's the median figure, \$111,146. So \$7,113 versus \$111,146! (Did you drop this book after you read that? Let me give you a minute to find your place again and absorb this information.) Even though I've heard these statistics a million times, the shock value never gets old, especially

in a country where people eagerly point to the Obamas and think that racial inequality is a thing of the past.

When it comes to assessing advantage versus disadvantage in an applicant, many URM students have situations that either veer toward some level of relative disadvantage or are less clear cut than being the daughter of the president of the United States. But let's not forget that the Obamas were still paying off student loans right before they landed in the White House. (I'm pretty sure that wasn't the case for any of the Trumps) Yearly income versus accumulated wealth varies dramatically for African American versus Whites in this country due to decades and decades of systemic discrimination against Black people that affected whether they were able to buy property and the value of that property. One word: redlining. The foreclosure crisis, which disproportionately affected URM families, is a reminder of how fragile first-generation wealth or assets are for many people of color.

SO WHY NOT BAN RACE TO HELP LOW-INCOME MINORITIES?

Let me play devil's advocate. Couldn't this all be evidence that class-based affirmative action really is the best solution? In this line of thinking, the stunning Black-Brown-White wealth gap means that low-income URM students—along with low-income Whites who also need a leg up—will stand out and receive the special consideration they deserve. People might think that the race-conscious system does little to help low-income students and that low-income URMs get bumped out by their wealthy peers from minority backgrounds (e.g., Malia Obama). Or that race-conscious affirmative action is the reason for why we have this entire rampant class inequality in higher education, with, in the country's most selective institutions, 74 percent of students coming from the top quartile of income and only 3 percent from the bottom quartile.⁵

It's seductive logic. It's also wrong.

First, the current system already gives weight to social class for low-income URM students. A study conducted by Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford found that private institutions give considerable preference to low-income African American, Latinx, and Asian American applicants. (Yes, Asian Americans—they do benefit!) Could they give more? Probably. But the idea that race-conscious and class-conscious approaches are mutually exclusive is false. Espenshade and Radford found that “Black applicants who come from lower- or working-class families can expect a favorable admissions decision in 87 percent and 53 percent of their cases, respectively. The expected chance of being admitted falls to just 17 percent for upper-class black students. Strikingly similar patterns characterize the admissions chances by social class for Hispanic and Asian applicants to private institutions.”⁶

While this finding is probably not going to change the mind of anyone who believes that race is irrelevant to life opportunities, it clearly challenges the idea that the current, race-conscious system helps only wealthy applicants of color. In reality, the opposite is true: affirmative action helps low-income students of color at private institutions. The issue of why low-income students are still underrepresented at elite institutions extends beyond the point of admissions and taps into the makeup of the applicant pool, inequities in college access, and the complexities that influence college choice.

Could there still be more low-income students of all races/ethnicities attending elite institutions? Absolutely. But eliminating consideration of race is not the way to get there. Institutions can and should address both race and class to boost opportunities for low-income students of color.

THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP: WHEN RACE AND CLASS COLLIDE

Claims that the African American student population is disproportionately “advantaged” also ignore the influence of the wealth gap in assessing

the life opportunities and experiences of Black students in K–12 education. One example of this claim appears in the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's (JKCF) report *True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities*.⁷ I deeply admire the work of JKCF, which has worked aggressively to provide exceptional opportunities for high-achieving, low-income students. I have seen their staff go above and beyond the call of duty to make sure that their scholars have the resources and support to do great things. But while the *True Merit* report highlights important objectives for expanding opportunity for low-income students, throughout it there are subtle digs against race-conscious admissions—which makes sense given that Richard Kahlenberg, who's been beating the drum for class-based affirmative action for the last two decades, is a coauthor. For example, in its commentary on race-conscious admissions, the report states: "As more minority families successfully break through segregated glass ceilings and establish themselves in the middle and upper classes, it is increasingly their children who gain admittance to selective institutions, not the children of minorities living in impoverished, underprivileged neighborhoods. Indeed, 86 percent of Black students at selective colleges are middle or upper-class. This was far from the original intention of race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions."⁸ This rhetoric is similar to Friedersdorf's, the suggestion that race-conscious admissions used to have its place (perhaps when society was more blatantly racist) but now works to favor the advantaged.

So let's unpack that statistic of 86 percent of Black students at elite institutions supposedly being middle or upper class. Tracing the footnotes, the original source is William G. Bowen and Derek Bok's classic *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College Admissions*, a key piece of evidence supporting the long-term success of race-conscious admissions.⁹ Yes, it is ironic that Bowen and Bok's text is being used to argue that race-conscious admissions has lost its "original intention." Looking at the table cited by the report, it appears that the 86 percent figure is a strategic cherry-picking and collapsing of statistics. Bowen

and Bok provide three ways to categorize being from a low socioeconomic status background in their sample of students from elite universities. The first criterion is the percentage of students who are first-generation college students; neither parent has a bachelor's degree. Here, Black students outnumber White students more than 2 to 1 (36 percent vs. 15 percent). The second criterion is being from a low-income household (under \$22,000 in 1989, the year of data collection). Once again, Black students in the sample are much more likely (20 percent) to come from a low-income background as compared to the White students (3 percent). Let me repeat: Black students are six times more likely to come from a low-income background than White students. The last criterion is the percentage of students who meet both of the other criteria—are both first-generation college students and from low-income households. It is from this category that the JKCF report pulls the 86 percent statistic, since only 14 percent of Black students in Bowen and Bok's study meet this third criterion. Conveniently, the report seems to miss that only 2 percent of White students are also both first-generation students and from low-income households, which means that Black students are seven times more likely to come from a low socioeconomic background than White students.

Saying that 86 percent of Black students in Bowen and Bok's study come from middle or high socioeconomic statuses is technically correct, but it omits the context of how the percentage of Black students who are first-generation students outnumbers the percentage of White first-generation students more than 2 to 1 and how a full 20 percent of Black students at elite schools come from low-income backgrounds, versus only 3 percent of White students. The other problematic issue is the collapsing of middle-SES and high-SES categories to get to that 86 percent. According to Bowen and Bok's analysis, a full 71 percent of Black students come from families that can be classified as middle class, and only 15 percent come from families that are considered upper class. In contrast, only 54 percent of White students come from middle-class families, and a whopping 44 percent come from upper-class families. So yes, White students are

three times more likely than Black students to come from high-income families. But those aren't the numbers that you hear, because in the JCKF report categories are collapsed in a way that masks the educational and income disparities between Black and White students at elite institutions.

Contrary to popular belief, statistics on their own do not lie—unless, of course, you blatantly make them up. There are, however, ways of presenting statistics that are misleading, and combining the numbers for middle- and upper-income Black students definitely has that result. It also ignores the context of the racial wealth gap, where the assets (e.g., property, generational wealth) of a middle-class Black family are likely significantly less than those of a middle-class White family. Comparing yearly income to yearly income to gauge who is advantaged or disadvantaged falls short when we know that the average Black family has 6 percent of the overall wealth of the average White family.

Much more than income makes up the complex portrait of social class. Knowing this, it makes sense to not ditch consideration of race in favor of class alone but, instead, to allow institutions to continue to consider both in order to capture the unique intersectionality that affects people of color. Let institutions evaluate students on an individual basis with as much available information as possible, examining their achievements and experiences in the context from which they come.

WHY DO PEOPLE OVERESTIMATE BLACK WEALTH?

Before diving into more data, we need to make a quick detour to look at research on cognitive bias to better understand why people underestimate the extent of socioeconomic disadvantage that operates along racial/ethnic lines. In other words, why are some people hung up on thinking that race-conscious admissions is the devil? I gave the Malia Obama example, so now let's think about the principles behind why our brains take that particular mental shortcut.

We could think back to the concept of the availability heuristic, where we can mentally summon Malia Obama as an easily recallable example of Black economic and educational achievement. In turn, when people claim that the racial equity gap pales in comparison to the economic one, we think, "Oh yeah, the Obamas, they're doing great!" Let's not forget that the Obamas are memorable—they're the only non-White First Family in American history—and so their success sticks in our brain to bolster the messaging that (supposedly) "minorities are doing just fine."

Another possible explanation is the concept of *anchoring*, the brain's way of overweighing certain information when making decisions, which is often the first piece of information that a person has learned about a particular subject and what they come to rely on. In other words, we get anchored into thinking that something is the way that it is, making it hard to look beyond that. In everyday life, anchoring can make us overvalue or undervalue certain traits because, for whatever reason, we come to think of them as important. In one study, people from the Midwest and California thought that Californians were happier because—hey, sunshine, the beach—but both groups measure up the same in happiness, in part because people underestimate the influence of the pleasantness of day-to-day life (the Midwest has a lot of it) and overestimate how much sunshine really makes you happy (it's there all the time so you take it for granted).¹⁰

So when it comes to the class versus race issue around admissions, a plausible explanation for why people overestimate Black wealth and, hence, overlook the continued need for race-conscious admissions is that people easily get anchored into believing some piece of information, such as the image of Malia Obama's existence, or incomplete, misleadingly presented data, such as the idea that 86 percent of Black families at elite institutions are middle or upper income. Never mind that Black students far outpace White students among low- and middle-income students and that White students are three times more likely to come from

upper-income families. These lines of thinking become “anchors” in people’s minds, serving as filters through which they process other evidence.

In a column for the Institute for Policy Studies, attorney Antonio Moore suggests that people severely underestimate the Black-White wealth disparity because the prominent presence of Black celebrities in the NBA, NFL, and entertainment industry have, for many, become mental anchors for the state of African American wealth and economic stability.¹¹ However, in reality, Black celebrities make up a miniscule percentage of the overall African American population. Moore explains that African Americans are severely underrepresented among the country’s wealthiest, being only 1 percent of the S&P 500 CEOs. To top it off, White families own 98 percent of the land in the United States, and African American home ownership is lower now than it was in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Moore comments that “wealth in America is simply not diverse, and that reality remains true no matter how many times we are shown LeBron James in his mansion in feel-good commercials.”¹² LeBron, Malia Obama, and others (*The Cosby Show* anyone?) are powerful anchors. Ironically, while many people overestimate Black wealth, they also overestimate the rate of crimes committed by Blacks. A study led by Justin Pickett at the University of Albany found that Whites overestimated the rate of violent crimes committed by African Americans by more than 2 to 1.¹³ Clearly, something is messed up about the public’s general anchors for how we think about Black America.

So that’s a stab at what’s going on in people’s minds. Now let’s get back to the data.

THE DATA SAY WE NEED RACE TO GET TO CLASS—REALLY

The assessment of social class itself without the context of race/ethnicity is incomplete. Indeed, considering race is necessary to assessing the full extent of socioeconomic disadvantage, which is ironic since Kahlenberg,

Edward Blum (the guy behind both of the University of Texas, Austin, Supreme Court affirmative action lawsuits), and others claim that affirmative action based on class alone is the only way to help the “truly disadvantaged.” The role of race in properly assessing socioeconomic disadvantage is backed up by recent cutting-edge statistical analyses led by Sean Reardon and colleagues which shows that colleges and universities get the most socioeconomic diversity by giving strong consideration to both race and social class.¹⁴ In other words, all other things held constant, an admissions model that weighs race/ethnicity and social class as favorable attributes results in more low-income students than a model that ignores race but still gives a strong preference based on social class. Are you tracking with me here? The best way to get to more low-income students in higher education is not to ditch race but to strongly consider both race and class. Even for a researcher like me, who has seen time again that race-neutral models do not produce sufficient racial diversity, to see that race-conscious models can get more socioeconomic diversity than class-based affirmative action is surprising. Nerd moment: This is the beauty of data upturning our preconceived notions.

Let’s dig into the data. Reardon and colleagues reviewed admissions data for forty colleges and universities to simulate what kind of admissions and enrollment outcomes would come from a variety of scenarios; they even combined various levels of preferences related to race/ethnicity with different levels of class-based preferences. So, at one end of the spectrum is a simulation of giving no weight at all to race or social class, and at the other end is a simulation that gives strong preference to both. In the middle are different combinations of these scenarios—for example, giving no weight to race but moderate weight to class or giving moderate weight to race and moderate weight to class.¹⁵

The study improves on previous simulations of admissions in a variety of ways. First, the sample includes forty colleges, which is way more than high-profile studies like Espenshade and Radford’s or Matthew Gaertner’s simulation of admissions at the University of Colorado.¹⁶ (Interestingly,

class-based affirmative action proponents love drawing on Gaertner's very interesting work to argue that racial diversity can be achieved without race-conscious admissions. But why are we trying to make national policy decisions for the country's highly selective universities based on a simulation from a university that has an 80 percent acceptance rate?) Okay, back to Reardon and colleagues. They use a fancy method called agent-based simulation, which takes into account all the quirks in trying to estimate the decision-making processes of high school seniors and colleges. Trust me, it's good stuff.

In their analysis, they divide students into five quintiles based on socioeconomic status, where Q1 represents students from the lowest quintile and Q5 is the highest. I'll classify Q1 and Q2 as representing students from a low-income background. The simulation that produces the highest percentage of low-income representation came from the model that gave a strong preference based on both race and class, resulting in 23 percent lower-income students from Q1 and Q2 combined.¹⁷ It surpasses the model that gives no bump to race/ethnicity but gives a strong preference to social class (21.6 percent low-income students). These numbers, 23 percent versus 21.6 percent, may not seem too different, but the "strong race, strong class" model results in a notably higher representation of students from the lowest socioeconomic quintile (Q1): 16 percent versus 7.6 percent. In other words, a race-conscious model that also gives strong weight to social class results in more than twice as many of the lowest-income students enrolling.

It's worth a detour to discuss how strong or moderate preference was defined in the study. After all, some folks may not be comfortable with the idea of a "strong" preference related to race. However, never fear, it's not much more than what's already being done. According to Reardon and colleagues, "Strong racial affirmative action is slightly stronger than the average used by highly selective colleges today; moderate racial affirmative action is half as strong."¹⁸ For class-based preference, "strong" is equated with two to four times the preference currently used by selective

colleges. So for this scenario to work, colleges would need to be more assertive around social class, as they should be. But it is compelling to note that maximizing socioeconomic diversity requires attention given to race—and not much more than what is already given, wherein colleges give some consideration to race/ethnicity in combination with numerous other traits demonstrating excellence.

Although Reardon and colleagues' model isn't perfect, it helps us understand how the socioeconomic composition of institutions would vary in different scenarios when other factors are held constant—a valuable service. While giving moderate preference to both race/ethnicity and social class results in only 16.5 percent representation from the lower two quintiles, that scenario exceeds the one where no consideration is given to race/ethnicity and moderate preference is given to social class (13.3 percent).¹⁹ Consistently, considering race/ethnicity in combination with social class bolsters socioeconomic diversity.

What do these scenarios mean for racial/ethnic diversity? Not only does a scenario giving strong preference to both race/ethnicity and social class result in the most socioeconomic diversity, it also results in the most racial/ethnic diversity, a predicted 43.1 percent representation of students of color.²⁰ The next highest representation, at 24.7 percent, comes from institutions that give moderate preference to both. The number drops even further, to 17.6 percent, for a scenario that gives strong preference to social class but no consideration to race. This isn't that far from the percentage of students of color, 14.4 percent, if no consideration at all were given to race or social class. It's notable that giving strong preference to social class but no consideration to race only results in a 3.2 percentage point increase in students of color over the model that completely ignores social class. As Reardon and colleagues summarize, "Kahlenberg (1996) has argued that 'class-based preferences provide a constitutional way to achieve greater racial and ethnic diversity.' Yet, based on our simulations, SES-based affirmative action policies do not seem likely to be effective at producing racial diversity."²¹

The complexities of these race-based and SES-based findings challenge the assertion that class-based affirmative action would directly boost racial/ethnic diversity, as claimed by Kahlenberg and other proponents. Not only is the percent of students of color higher under scenarios that give moderate or strong consideration to race, the percentage of students of color under a “strong class no race scenario” barely exceeds the number who would attend selective colleges if these schools wholly ignored class and race altogether. In other words, even strong consideration of social class does not appear to have much of an additive effect for racial diversity.

It’s not that the world is neatly divided into advantaged versus disadvantaged students of color, and that you can seamlessly ensure that you’re admitting all the disadvantaged ones by ignoring race and considering only class. Socioeconomic diversity increases when you weigh not just class alone but class and race. The same goes for racial diversity, where we see the most racial diversity in scenarios that consider both race and class strongly. Older analyses suggest that part of the reason why class-based affirmative action is ineffective for boosting racial diversity is because low-income White students outnumber low-income students of color, even if a higher percentage of URM students identify as low-income.²² While this pattern still holds, newer analyses suggest that class-based affirmative action is also limited in boosting socioeconomic diversity because class-alone preferences fail to capture the full extent of socioeconomic disadvantage within communities of color.

ADDRESSING UNDERMATCH: AN IMPORTANT, BUT NOT A FIX-ALL, SOLUTION

Another deterrent to equity in higher education is the issue of undermatch, the phenomenon of students, disproportionately from low-income backgrounds, attending less selective institutions than they are potentially qualified for. With undermatching, a talent pool eligible to

attend more selective and prestigious institutions misses out on that opportunity. And because selective institutions tend to be feeders to elite graduate programs and careers, these students are possibly missing out on a chance for accelerated social mobility. So, a student might attend Towson College when they would be competitive at the University of Maryland, College Park, or a valedictorian of a rural high school ends up at a lower-ranked commuter institution when they might be Ivy League material. By estimates, as many as 25,000 to 35,000 high school seniors are undermatched each year.²³

This trend presents a real challenge. Low-income students have much to bring to more selective institutions. In turn, they could benefit from those institutions’ resources, such as small class sizes and the abundance of cocurricular opportunities. However, class-based affirmative action advocates have presented fixing undermatch as being best remedied by class-based affirmative action, posing race-conscious admissions strategies and addressing undermatch as either-or propositions. In their spin on the issues, persistent racial inequality is more a thing of the past, and undermatch is a reflection of the current problem of class inequality. Hence, they view race-conscious admissions as an outdated strategy for addressing the “real” problem of undermatch, which they view as a class-based phenomenon.²⁴ To the class-based affirmative action advocates who push for solutions to undermatch, there is a ready pool of talented, low-income students ready to attend elite institutions—and part of the problem is that their spaces are being filled with ostensibly less-qualified students who are admitted via race-conscious admissions policies.

There are two problems with this way of thinking. First, addressing undermatching is more complicated than it looks. According to those who lobby that eradicating race is the key to solving undermatch, if you didn’t admit all those URM students who benefit from race-conscious admissions, you’d have more room to admit the low-income kids who have higher SAT scores but currently attend less selective colleges. Yet admissions is much more complicated than a formulaic process of simplistic

matchmaking where you have certain low-income students with a certain SAT score, and if you just admitted them they would come and everyone would be happy.

Michael Bastedo of the University of Michigan has done some of the most thoughtful writing on undermatch, highlighting other factors for why it's not actually so predictable where a student, even one with a good SAT score, may land for college. In particular, he notes that the nature of holistic admissions and selective admissions means that a strong SAT score does not guarantee admission to the country's top colleges. Bastedo and colleague Allyson Flaster note that "given this complexity, undermatching researchers are simply overconfident in their ability to predict who has access to selective colleges."²⁵ These complex processes are not a reason to ignore undermatch altogether; undermatch is a more complicated phenomena than simply the formula of "Well, if we got rid of race in admissions, these students would get swept up into more selective colleges and the world would be all better."²⁶ For Bastedo and Flaster, claims that "fixing" undermatch is the golden ticket to eradicating class-based inequality are overstated:

Yet research that examines the evolution of institutional stratification suggests that adhering more strongly to an education based meritocracy in college admissions does not reduce gaps in college access between advantaged and disadvantaged students . . . High-income students benefit disproportionately in the competition for academic achievement throughout their lives. The tournament system of mobility practiced in the United States allows ample time for class-based disparities in financial and social capital to influence the distribution of "merit" that matters for college admission, and thus for eventual placement in the occupational hierarchy. As a result, even if students were "perfectly matched" to institutions, low-income students would not benefit systematically.²⁷

To echo their words: it's not that undermatch isn't a problem worth addressing, it's just that even if we fix it, we're not going to wipe away all class inequality in education. Undermatch has gained traction because it's an easy, tangible issue to understand (or think you understand), and some folks have proposed a "simple," tangible solution: just ban race in admissions. In chapter 5 we'll learn more about a term called *bikeshedding*, a phenomena that explains why our brains latch on to simple solutions that inadequately address the big problem. Unfortunately, class inequality extends way beyond undermatch, and critically addressing it remains a worthy endeavor.

Pitting undermatch against race-conscious approaches as mutually exclusive options does everyone a disservice because race-conscious approaches are part of the solution to reducing undermatch. The racial wealth gap indicates that systemic inequality is not solely a class-based issue; it operates along both racial and economic lines. Giving strong consideration to both race and class would likely result in student bodies that are not just more racially diverse, but more socioeconomically diverse, as shown by Reardon and colleagues. Undermatch is not going to be solved from one broad-brushed policy solution of eliminating race-conscious admissions altogether; rather, it's going to take conscious targeting of local populations. This means that admissions officers need all the information they can get—including, but not limited to, race/ethnicity—to understand the full context of where a student is coming from. The operation of race-conscious admissions, which does not exclude the consideration of social class, utilizes approaches that are highly institution specific and contextual. In other words, what works at the University of Colorado will not work at Harvard. UCLA has different needs than the University of Oregon. And likewise, addressing undermatch is going to involve careful attention to local context and institutional dynamics.

Reducing undermatch is an important goal for higher education, but it is not an either-or trade-off that the class-based affirmative action

proponents would like you to believe. It is a complex combination of widening the applicant pool so that the most talented students apply, attend, and persist. It requires addressing financial aid and, yes, giving greater consideration to the multiple dimensions of social class. And none of these things preclude the additional consideration of race/ethnicity during the admissions process, which is a necessary tool to maximize both socioeconomic and racial diversity and address the persistent inequality in our country.

SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY AND THE CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE— ADDRESSING BOTH RACE AND CLASS

Just as we need to consider race to get to more economic diversity, sometimes we need to pay attention to social class to support a positive racial climate. Socioeconomic diversity exists within racial/ethnic groups and can promote “relative equal status” between students, one of the conditions needed for healthy intergroup interaction, as established by pioneering social scientist Gordon Allport.²⁸ The assumption for too long has been that students of different races share relative equal status because they are all, well, students. However, this approach misses the inequalities linked to both race and class that permeate students’ lives both prior to and during college. Students do not leave that structural inequality behind when they enter college; the perniciousness of racial stereotypes and economic disparities do not magically disappear on enrollment. Students of color often encounter a campus climate that is isolating and unfriendly to them, where there are frequent reminders and symbols of that inequality—everything from an offensive “ghetto”-themed party being thrown by a White fraternity to the feeling that comes from being the only woman of color in a large lecture hall. Perhaps not paying attention to the nuances behind relative equal status is one reason colleges

continually struggle with how to get students to interact with each other across racial/ethnic lines.

Fostering socioeconomic diversity within racial/ethnic groups can help bridge some of the inequality that exists between majority- and minority-status groups. A certain amount of social distance (inequality) usually exists between White and URM students; however, this gap can be widened when, for instance, White students disproportionately come from upper-class backgrounds and URM students come almost solely from lower-income backgrounds. Class inequality is layered on racial inequality, strengthening existing racial/ethnic boundaries. However, if there is greater socioeconomic diversity within each racial/ethnic group, racial inequality does not totally disappear, but there is less opportunity for balkanization to exist along both racial and economic lines, as there are low-income, middle-income, and upper-income Whites and their URM counterparts. Low-income Whites may serve as a bridge between the two groups, just as middle-income URM students may find commonality with peers of other races who share an economic background.

Interacting across race in a society that is deeply segregated by race is taxing. It’s simply easier to be with your own kind, which is why the status quo of human relations is something called *homophily*—birds of a feather flock together. On a college campus, social distance and inequality don’t just exist along racial lines (Black versus White) or along economic lines (rich versus low income) but along identities that are intersectional: there is more social distance between, say, a low-income URM student and a rich White student than there is between a middle-income URM student and a middle-income White student. Don’t get me wrong—in a society characterized by racial inequality, where, yes, walking around campus as a Black male could get you questioned by the police with potentially disastrous or even life-threatening results, there is still categorical inequality that exists between middle-income URM students and their middle-income White peers. But there is arguably even more social distance to

bridge when vast economic inequality is layered on already existing racial inequality.

When we have students of different racial/ethnic groups of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, we have a more fluid, porous environment for interracial interaction.²⁹ Instead of having balkanization that is based on the intertwined forces of race and class, we have greater fluidity when we have students of different socioeconomic backgrounds who can help bridge the gap between various racial/ethnic groups. Think of how it's easier to interact with someone who's different in one respect (say, race/ethnicity) when they share something in common with you—maybe religion, a passion for science, or knowledge of what it's like to grow up in a rural community. These commonalities are critical to help build bridges between students of different race/ethnicities, and socioeconomic background can be one of these traits. So instead of a campus where you have majority status (White and East Asian American students) coming from almost all higher-income backgrounds and URM students coming from almost all lower-income backgrounds—a scenario where there is much social distance to be bridged across race—you have White, East Asian, Black, Latinx, you-name-it students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This is what sets the stage for a more fluid environment for interracial interaction because there are more opportunities for bridging social distance and enhancing opportunities for relative equal status among students.

So yes, we need to pay more attention to social class, but in combination with race. In an article in the *American Educational Research Journal*, Nida Denson, Nicholas Bowman, and I found that socioeconomic diversity on its own neither subsumes nor replaces the positive effects linked with having racial diversity in the student body when it comes to triggering the educational benefits of diversity.³⁰ Racial diversity in a student body is irreplaceable, and race-conscious policies are needed to help make that happen. But attention to socioeconomic status in combination with racial diversity can hopefully create a more fluid environment for interracial interaction, benefiting students across the spectrum.

WRAPPING IT UP ON RECOGNIZING BOTH RACE AND CLASS IN ADMISSIONS

By now you probably know more about the perils of solely relying on class-based affirmative action than you ever wanted to know. To recap, addressing race and addressing class is not an either-or proposition. Campuses are best served by admissions policies that help them understand a student's context for educational opportunity and potential to contribute to the diversity of the student body, and this means considering both race and class in admissions. In fact, policies that give strong consideration to both race and class would likely result in greater socioeconomic diversity than policies that only address social class. All of this is because of the unique ways that inequality cuts across not just economic lines but racial and economic lines.

Don't believe the falsehood that the Black middle class and the White middle class are on equal terms. Wealth for the median White family exceeds wealth for the median Black family by 15 to 1.³¹ Yes, that's fifteen times more wealth! So while the Obamas may be doing pretty well, the existence of some affluent Black families does not negate the reality that the wealth gap in America is still deeply racialized. And both low- and middle-income African American families would still benefit deeply from race-conscious admissions policies, because the persistent negative conditions affect schooling and life opportunities for even middle-class Black families.³²

The need to address both race and class goes beyond admission to an institution, however; it affects race relations once students arrive on campus. To maximize interracial engagement (and, more specifically, to strengthen relative equal status between students), we need considerable socioeconomic diversity within racial/ethnic groups.³³ We want to challenge the consolidation of privilege that occurs when universities are dominated not just by White students but White wealthy students, leading to campus spaces that are balkanized not just by race but by race and

class. Extending race-conscious admissions to include middle-income URM students is also vital to boost the critical mass of students of color needed to challenge the isolation that occurs all too easily due to limited representation of a particular racial/ethnic group. Remember: being middle class and Black can look really different from being middle class and White due to the racial wealth gap. Boosting critical mass by fostering socioeconomic diversity within racial/ethnic groups is also critical to challenge stereotypes that link race and class (e.g., the assumption that all URM students are from poor backgrounds).

And while we do need to pay greater attention to social class in admissions, it should not, and need not, come at the expense of knowing a student's race. Excluding the consideration of race could have serious negative consequences for campus diversity and the racial/socioeconomic composition of the student body. So, don't believe the false choice that you have to pick only one. The Supreme Court has affirmed repeatedly a system that is holistic and considers both, as well as an array of other factors and traits. There is no formula that guarantees admissions for anyone; admissions officers need as much information as they can get to make decisions. And don't believe the lie that economic inequality is only remedied through race-neutral policies. The tentacles of inequality are, unfortunately, much more complex than that, and we need policies and practitioners that adequately address that complexity.