

October 25, 1998

## Affirmative Action: The Fact Gap

*Two teams of scholars explore the consequences of college admission policies in America.*

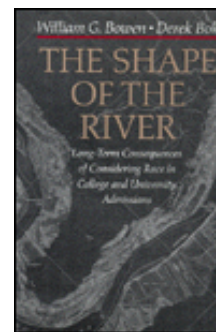
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- [First Chapter: 'The Black-White Test Score Gap'](#)

By ALAN WOLFE

In "The Shape of the River," William G. Bowen and Derek Bok -- former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities -- seek "to build a firmer foundation of fact" under America's affirmative action debate. Amen. Facts have been sorely missing in accounts of the role played by race in admissions to institutions of higher education. To some degree the fact gap exists because both those who defend affirmative action and those who oppose it argue from positions of high principle: a commitment to diversity on the one hand or a defense of individual merit on the other. When principle is at stake, facts become conveniences to be cited when helpful and to be explained away when harmful.

But the absence of hard information is also due to the policies of educational institutions themselves, which keep secret the kinds of data which would shed light on who gets admitted to them and who does not -- and why. (Even Bowen and Bok are obligated not to reveal the names of the five institutions whose admissions policies they examine in detail.) With the publication of their book, and of "The Black-White Test Score Gap," edited by Christopher Jencks, the Malcolm Wiener Professor of Social Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and Meredith Phillips, an assistant professor of policy studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, the fact gap has closed considerably. Both volumes are



### THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER

**Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions.**

By William G. Bowen and Derek Bok in collaboration with James L. Shulman, Thomas I. Nygren, Stacy Berg Dale and Lauren A. Meserve.  
472 pp. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.  
\$24.95.

TO PURCHASE ONLINE  
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### THE BLACK-WHITE TEST SCORE GAP

Edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips.

masterly in their technical use of data and sensitive to the limits of what data can reveal. It detracts nary a whit from the accomplishments of either to say that even with the facts they present, the roles race should and does play in college admissions will remain hotly contested.

523 pp. Washington:  
The Brookings Institution  
Press.  
Cloth, \$44.95. Paper, \$18.95.

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As Thomas J. Kane, who teaches public policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, points out in his contribution to the Jencks and Phillips collection, roughly 60 percent of America's institutions of higher education admit nearly all who apply and therefore do not give preference to any particular race. At the best schools, by contrast, efforts to diversify the student body translate into a 400-point bonus for minority students on the SAT tests. The bonus is so large because, in 1995, 70 African-Americans scored over 700 on the verbal portions of the SAT; 221 more scored over 650. (The corresponding numbers for whites were 8,239 and 16,216.) The five or six most competitive colleges, in other words, fight over the 300 or so African-Americans with the highest scores; the next 20 or 30 colleges, still top ranked, have to drop down to those scoring in the 1200's or below if they want their student bodies to reflect the percentage of the population that is black or Hispanic -- all the while rejecting many white applicants with much higher scores.

One effect of taking race into account into account in the admissions process is that among applicants with combined SAT scores in the low 1200 range, a black applicant is three times as likely to get into an elite college as a white applicant. Bowen and Bok argue that both the colleges and the black students who attend them still benefit. We ought not to forget, they write, that although whites with very high scores may be "spectacularly well qualified" for college, blacks with somewhat lower scores are anything but unqualified. In addition, SAT scores, while important, are not a one-to-one stand-in for merit; not only do they predict academic performance poorly, they also say little about who will contribute most to other students or will become eventual leaders in their fields.

Critics of affirmative action say that it is unfair to black students to be forced to compete against whites who are better prepared for demanding academic work. Some of the evidence collected by Bowen and Bok confirms this; in less selective institutions, black graduation rates six years after entering college are significantly lower than white graduation rates. Black students nearly always perform less well than white students, and also perform below the levels predicted by their SAT scores. A chapter in the Jencks and Phillips collection calls this "disturbing" and adds that "most sobering of all, the performance gap is greatest for the black students with the highest SAT's." A co-author of that chapter is William G. Bowen. Still, Bowen and Bok conclude that the overall picture proves that minority students are not "overmatched" in comparison with whites admitted with much higher SAT scores to the nation's top schools. The picture improves even more if one examines the years after college. Despite their lower SAT scores, black graduates of the nation's selective colleges are active participants in civic life. They report high degrees of satisfaction with their experiences in college.

In their most impressive finding, Bowen and Bok show that of the 700 or so black entering students from the class of 1976 who would not have been admitted to one of the nation's more selective institutions had strictly race-neutral criteria been applied, 225 obtained professional or graduate degrees, 70 became doctors, 60 became lawyers, 125 became business executives; and as a body, they earned an average of \$71,000 annually. Bowen and Bok interpret these facts to mean that an increase in the size of the black middle class justifies racial preferences. They may well be correct. There is no more important step to be taken along the road to racial justice than building and strengthening a black middle class. Every African-American who enters a profession or buys a house in the suburbs gives the lie to two pervasive cynicisms -- one that blames black Americans for their own inequality and the other that in blaming white racism for all the ills of America ends up excusing self-defeating black isolationism.

But it would be wrong to conclude from "The Shape of the River" that affirmative action works. What Bowen and Bok have proved is that going to a top college works. Their book unintentionally fuels rather than quenches the passions over affirmative action. For if a degree from a top college benefits those who receive it as much as Bowen and Bok clearly demonstrate, then those passed over for admission to those colleges really do have cause for complaint.

And because Bowen and Bok's data are limited to the more selective institutions, they have little to tell us about the fates of minority students who never make it to the level of applying to those colleges. The material assembled by Jencks and Phillips helps explain why that group is so large. A gap between blacks and whites on intelligence tests appears when children are 4 years old. By the age of 6, black vocabulary scores match those of whites who are 5. By the age of 17, black scores are equal to those of white 13-year-olds. This means that African-Americans who show up in the Bowen and Bok study have already won some of life's biggest battles. By scoring in the 1200 range on SAT tests, they are most likely either middle-class already or will push themselves into the middle class through their determination and effort.

The real problem arises among those black high school graduates who never fully recover from their initial disadvantage in testing and who therefore wind up scoring in the 800-1000 range on SAT's. The best of these students will attend colleges that are somewhat selective, and which therefore still exercise some degree of racial preference in admissions. But while the preference is smaller than at the most selective colleges, the impact on many students is larger (Thomas Kane's data indicate that black and Hispanic students receive an 8 percent to 10 percent preference at the most academically selective fifth of four-year institutions, but only a 3 percent preference at schools ranked in the fourth of the five tiers). Getting into and graduating from one of these colleges may well play a more significant role in the life prospects of a medium-range SAT scorer of either race than graduation from a top college plays for a high scorer of either race, for these are the colleges that historically made it possible to move from the working class into the middle class. The benefits gained by minority students at the top colleges, in other words, could come at the price of greater conflict between black and white applicants to those less selective colleges where middle-class aspirations meet head on.

An even greater number of minority high school students will score so low on the SAT's or equivalent tests that they will not go to college at all or will attend technical schools and community colleges. Should they lose out because they test so badly? Are the tests biased? There is, as Jencks points out, a "labeling" bias: "People hear statements like . . . 'blacks have less academic aptitude than whites' as claims that blacks are innately inferior." The pervasive use of such tests, he adds, constitutes a "selection system bias," because relying on the tests rather than performance will invariably discriminate against blacks and Hispanic applicants.

Nonetheless, Jencks writes, "the skill differences that the tests measure are real." They also matter. In their chapter in "The Black-White Test Score Gap," William R. Johnson, who teaches economics at the University of Virginia, and Derek Neal, a professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, show that wage differentials between black and white male workers can be attributed largely to differences in the acquisition of basic verbal and mathematical skills. Between 1971 and 1996, according to Meredith Phillips and her colleagues, the gap between black and white test scores narrowed considerably, even though minorities were still underrepresented at the very highest levels. This closing of the gap, moreover, was due to rising black scores, not falling white ones, indicating that something -- perhaps the War on Poverty, perhaps increased black expectations, perhaps improved schooling, especially in math -- was working. If such improvements dramatically undercut genetic explanations of intelligence, the fact that the gap appears once again to be growing is a great puzzle for social policy.

Chapters in "The Black-White Test Score Gap" explore the influence of parents, teachers, peers and society as a whole in explaining why blacks and whites perform differently on such tests. Firm conclusions are hard to come by, and some of the authors disagree with the hypotheses suggested by others. Still, the bulk of the material in this book leaves the reader with the sense that the causes are deep and difficult to overcome. As Phillips and her colleagues point out, we could eliminate at least half, and probably more, of the black-white test score gap at the end of the 12th grade by eliminating the differences that exist before children enter first grade. Such is the disparity between the races that a frightening number of African-Americans lose a good shot at entering the middle class even before they enter kindergarten. There are nonetheless good reasons to do our best to overcome this gap. "Eliminating racial differences in test performance," Jencks and Phillips write, "would also allow colleges, professional schools and employers to phase out the racial preferences that have caused so much political trouble over the past generation." Of all the facts presented in these two sobering books, the most important is this: When we debate using racial preferences to admit more black and Hispanic students to the nation's best colleges, we are considering the fate of a shockingly small number of people.

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*Alan Wolfe's most recent book is "One Nation, After All."*

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