

College Attendance and the Texas Top 10 Percent Law: Permanent Contagion or Transitory Promise?

Marta Tienda, Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, Princeton University;
Kalena Cortes, Research Associate, Office of Population Research, Princeton University;
Sunny Niu, Research Associate, Office of Population Research, Princeton University

Study Description

In the wake of the historic June 2003 ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case, which affirmed that universities can consider race in admissions decisions, there is growing support for the repeal of H.B.588. Passed in 1997 and implemented in 1998 in response to the 5th Circuit Court's ruling in *Hopwood v. U. of Texas Law School*, this law was designed to maintain or improve campus diversity by guaranteeing automatic admission to Texas public institutions to students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their class.

But in a new study, "College Attendance and the Texas Top 10 Percent Law: Permanent Contagion or Transitory Promise?", Marta Tienda, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, with co-authors Kalena Cortes and Sunny Niu of Princeton University's Office of Population Research, have considered whether, for whom, and how knowledge and awareness of the Texas Top 10 percent law influences high school students' intentions to go to college, and if the law impacts enrollment at two- versus four-year institutions of higher education.

The researchers analyzed survey data from the Texas Higher Educational Opportunity Project (THEOP). Based on a representative sample of Texas high school seniors first interviewed during spring, 2002 and re-interviewed a year later, Tienda and colleagues found that students who knew a lot about the Texas Top 10 Percent law were *nearly five times as likely* as their counterparts who did not know about the law to indicate that they planned to attend a four-year college, relative to not attending.

Further, the researchers found confirmation that students' knowledge of the Top 10 Percent law was related to enrollment: students very familiar with the law were *almost 6 times as likely* to enroll in a four-year college; and almost *twice as likely* to enroll in a two-year institution compared with their student counterparts who did not know about the law.

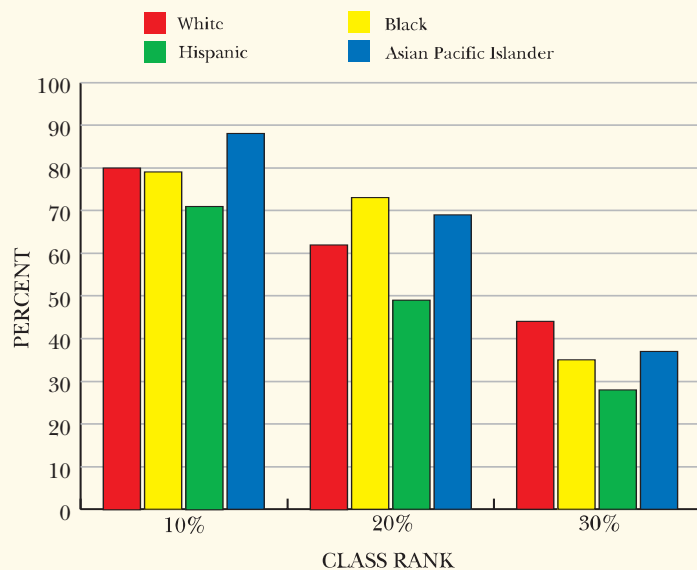
The study illustrates the need to analyze the factors that promote high school students' college aspirations and enrollment, particularly blacks and Hispanics, and to draw lessons from the experience with the Texas Top 10 Percent plan.

Study Findings

The results of the study by Tienda and colleagues highlight stark differences by race, ethnicity, rank in class, and economic advantage when it comes to college aspirations and actual enrollment in an institution of higher education.

Overall minority and non-minority students differ in their college intentions and application behavior. Nearly 90 percent of Asian seniors reported they were college bound compared with three in four blacks and whites, but only 62 percent of Hispanics. Race and ethnic disparities are smaller among students ranked in the top 10 percent of their senior class, but widen among lower ranked students.

College Application to Four-Year Institutions Only by Race, Ethnicity, and Class Rank



Regarding college application behavior, 60 percent of Asian, 46 percent of white, 40 percent of black and 30 percent of Hispanic seniors had actually applied to one or more four-year colleges by spring of their senior year. Although graduates in the top 10 percent of their graduating class are more likely than lower ranked students to set their sights on four-year institutions of higher education, only 71 percent of the highest ranking Hispanic graduates aspired to four-year colleges compared with approximately 80 percent of similarly ranked black and white graduates, and versus 88 percent of Asian origin students.

Tienda and colleagues also found that *when* students begin to think about going to college has a direct impact on their college aspirations. Compared with students who always planned to pursue higher education, seniors who did not begin thinking about college until middle school were less likely to report concrete plans to do so, and those who only began thinking about post-secondary education in high school were even less likely to report college intentions. There are also large race and ethnic differences in college orientation: only 53 percent of Hispanic seniors reported they had always aspired to attend college, compared with 71, 68 and 61 percent of Asian, white and black seniors, respectively.

The researchers identified other key factors that influence type of college preferred, namely cost and geographical distance. Cost is the most salient consideration in deciding between two- and four-year institutions. College bound seniors who reported that cost was a consideration in establishing their preferences were just over two times as likely as those with unspecified preferences to name a community (two-year) college as their intended destination. Moreover, seniors who reported that cost and distance were important considerations in their college choice were 1.7 and 1.5 times as likely as students who did not consider these factors to *enroll* in a two-year college.

Policy Implications

Given the changing demographic composition of the state of Texas, and evidence that minority students are especially likely to form their college aspirations late, the researchers identify an urgent need to develop strategies to cultivate college orientations in elementary school, particularly for Hispanic students, who exhibit the lowest college-going rates despite their rapid growth as a share of the state's population.

And as cost remains a strong disincentive, the study authors recommend that Texas and other states make college affordable for high achieving students from low-income families who desire to attend either two- or four-year institutions. Tienda and colleagues recommend developing incentives for school districts

with weak college traditions to raise their college going rates. For example, legislators and educators should encourage the strengthening of partnerships between schools and universities, like the Longhorn Opportunity Scholarship and Century Scholars programs initiated by the University of Texas and Texas A&M, respectively, which provide financial support that bring college attendance within the reach of low income students.

Because minority students are more likely to enroll in two-year institutions than their white counterparts, it is also imperative that policy makers, in tandem with university administrators, focus on strengthening the transition to four-year institutions so that the numbers of college graduates match enrollment rates.

“The Texas top10% law has expanded opportunities, but policy makers need to go further to provide college opportunities for the state’s high school graduates, especially Hispanics, blacks and the economically disadvantaged,” noted Tienda in a recent press release.

While there is growing evidence that the top 10% law appears to have broadened educational opportunity throughout the state, there is dissatisfaction with the saturation of the public flagship with top 10 admits. “As Texas considers what to do about the Top 10% law in response to the Supreme Court’s affirmative action decision, it may be a mistake to rescind the law altogether. Instead, given the strong association between knowledge of the law and college-going behavior, it may be prudent to remove the provision allowing students to select their institution of choice and allow the UT and A&M systems to determine where students are placed, as done in California and Florida,” continued Tienda.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Ford Foundation for their support of the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project on which this research is based, and institutional support from the Office of Population Research at Princeton University.

A copy of the policy brief can be found at:
<http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~policybriefs/xxx.pdf>

The website for the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs:
<http://www.wws.princeton.edu>

For a copy of the complete paper or media inquiries, please contact
Steven Barnes, (Ph.) 609.731.5094,
email: sbarnes@princeton.edu