

Building Diverse College Campuses Starts in Kindergarten

In the wake of the Students for Fair Admissions decision, an urgent call to take on the “excellence gap”

By MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE ANNOUNCEMENT of the Supreme Court’s decision outlawing the use of race in college admissions (see *legal beat*, “High Court Decision in College Admissions Case Has K–12 Implications,” page 6), the Biden Administration released a U.S. Department of Education plan to “promote educational opportunity and diversity in colleges and universities.” It includes forthcoming guidance to higher education institutions on how to use still-lawful practices to promote diversity, particularly new “measures of adversity” that consider what applicants may have had to overcome. The department also will consider expanding data collections and transparency around admissions factors and convene an “educational opportunity” summit to bring colleges and universities together with students, advocates, and researchers to discuss a way forward.

That’s all well and good, but it’s worth noting what was left off the department’s laundry list: *anything* having to do with K–12 education. That’s a huge missed opportunity and one that the Administration should urgently work to address. One of the most effective ways to boost college diversity is by building broader, more inclusive paths to educational excellence. And that work starts in kindergarten.

A Stubborn Gap

Imagine if, instead of or in addition to looking at adversity and other proxies for race, our nation dedicated itself to creating a more diverse pipeline of high-school graduates with the ability to do advanced-level work. Imagine a world where college admissions offices didn’t rely on loopholes and complicated backdoor policies to create diverse student populations. Imagine that the top high-school students in the United States were already racially and socioeconomically

representative of our great nation—without the need for affirmative action of any kind.

Sadly, we are a long way from that today. On virtually any measure, there’s an “excellence gap” among students coming out of 12th grade. Students reaching the highest levels of performance—whether measured by test scores,



The bronze sculpture of a cherub holding a book sits outside the U.S. Supreme Court building, evoking the commitment the U.S. owes to the equitable education of all American children.

grade-point average, or the number of Advanced Placement courses—are more likely to be Asian or white than Latino or Black. This excellence gap means that white and Asian teenagers are disproportionately represented among the top 10 percent of U.S. students, while Latino and Black students are significantly underrepresented.

Closing this gap will not be easy. It is related to a complex mix

of social and historical conditions, including the impact of centuries of systemic racism, sharp socioeconomic divides between racial groups, and big differences in school experiences, family structures, and parenting practices. But frankly, as a nation, we've never really given it the "old college try." If we focused on what schools can do to recognize and nurture excellence in all students, instead of just trying to work around the gaps at the end of their high-school careers, we could make significant progress toward the inclusive college campuses we all want to see.

That's the message from a new report from the National Working Group on Advanced Education, an ideologically and racially diverse set of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners convened by the think tank that I lead. Its most important message: Rather than wait until kids are leaving high school to try to even the playing field, we must start in kindergarten to identify our most academically talented students of all races and backgrounds and give them the support they need to excel.

The working group makes three dozen recommendations for states, schools, districts, and charter networks, with specific opportunity-building actions that start in the earliest grades and continue through high school. It is a clear roadmap for building this wider, more diverse pipeline of advanced students.

The first step is called "frontloading," a type of enrichment provided to young children before they are old enough to be assessed for advanced learning opportunities like gifted and talented programs. Because poor children tend to come to school with limited vocabulary and less knowledge about the world compared to their more affluent peers, they typically earn lower scores on most traditional academic assessments—even if they have the intellectual horsepower to take on rigorous academic work. High-quality enrichment programs can help young students build knowledge and vocabulary to improve their reading skills and get them on the path to success.

The next step is to use "universal screening" to find every single child who could benefit from enrichment, acceleration, and other advanced learning opportunities. Schools and districts can use valid and reliable assessments—such as IQ tests, diagnostic exams, or state achievement tests—to identify all kids with the potential to do advanced-level work. That's a big change from how many school districts do things today, which is to ask parents or teachers to nominate children for their gifted programs (or later, Advanced Placement courses). It's not hard to see how that approach can bring with it racial and socioeconomic biases. Affluent, college-educated parents tend to be more aware of these programs and know how to advocate for their kids. And classroom teachers, however

fair-minded, might overlook some talented students because they don't fit a stereotype of a high achiever.

Opportunity Starts in Elementary School

Once students are identified as highly capable, they need the programs and opportunities that can help them realize their potential. School-based programs that do this can take many forms, but most share several key features: They allow students to study and engage with academic materials more broadly and deeply than the typical class, including doing above-grade-level work. They allow students to skip an entire grade if that's what a child needs and can handle. And once students get to middle and high school, they automatically are enrolled in honors and Advanced Placement classes. In other words, no more gatekeeping that tends to dissuade kids on the bubble from giving these tougher classes a shot.

Doing this work and doing it well will take leadership and commitment from district and charter network leaders. Educators will have to view greater equity in education

as crucial—and not just for their lowest-achieving students, but also for their highest-achieving ones. They will have to reexamine how a student's potential is measured, and when. And they will have to focus on supporting more students to excel, including by looking closely at how students are identified to participate in advanced coursework and enrichment programs. The absolute worst thing schools could do is to eliminate advanced learning opportunities, like gifted and talented programs or honors classes, which have disproportionate white and Asian enrollments that mirror the "excellence gap." True equity demands that we mend, rather than end, such programs—and extend these opportunities to many more kids.

Universities might object that there's not much they can do about K–12 educational practices. But that's simply not true. Institutions of higher education can make sure that their schools of education prepare future teachers and school leaders to recognize and serve every student who can do advanced-level work, especially students from low-income families. And universities can lend their expertise and money to local school districts and charter networks that need assistance in putting these kinds of initiatives in place.

The Biden Administration should widen its action plan to include the K–12 system. Starting in kindergarten isn't the fastest way to college diversity, but it is probably the sturdiest.

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