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## NOT 'JUST BLACK' POLICY CONSIDERATIONS: THE INFLUENCE OF ETHNICITY ON PATHWAYS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONGST BLACK UNDERGRADUATES AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

*Aisha Cecilia Haynie*

This study attempted to determine the ethnic background of 170 non-international black students who attended Harvard College during the 1999-2000 academic year, and to identify the influence of ethnicity on the paths that they took to reach Harvard. Results indicate that Harvard College enrolls a disproportionately large number of biracial/biethnic students, and first and second-generation immigrant students from the Caribbean and Africa. The following themes were important in establishing the influence of ethnicity on the paths that students took to reach Harvard: Self- and cultural identity patterns, the presence of opportunities to excel academically during the pre-college years, and familial educational ideologies. Ethnic differences in these areas may help to explain why relatively few black American students are enrolled at Harvard College. The conclusion of this paper poses several policy recommendations that address the ethnic and racial concerns raised by this research.

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*Aisha Cecilia Haynie, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs,  
Princeton University*

## INTRODUCTION

Little has been said in sociological literature about the reality of ethnic diversity within America's black population. Research instead tends to focus on racial categories which are, in actuality, naïvely formed on the basis of an assumed similarity in culture derived from skin color. Over the last few decades, American sociologists have sought to decrease society's tendency to make broad racial generalizations by arguing that differences in class between black Americans also have a great impact on formation of self-identity, status, and the presence of opportunities for social mobility (Wilson 1978).

Room still remains, however, for more discussion about the role of ethnicity in determining status-attainment amongst black Americans. To be sure, the post-1965 mass immigration from countries in the Caribbean and Africa has added complexity to the definition of "African-American." In fact, almost six percent of blacks currently residing in America are foreign-born, and about the same percentage are either second or third generation immigrants (Edmonston and Passel 1994)<sup>1</sup>. The numbers of first and second-generation Caribbean and African immigrants continue to climb, only highlighting a sociological need to reinterpret the significance of these groups within American society, and to acknowledge their struggle to maintain a cultural identity that is viewed separately from that of blacks native to the United States (Kasinitz 1992).

In 2000, black students made up approximately 8 percent of the total undergraduate population at Harvard, and were identified through the college's use of the "Common Application" form for admissions.<sup>2</sup> On this Common Application form, there is no opportunity for a black student to express his/her ethnic identity or country of origin, even though Asian and Latino ethnic groups are encouraged to do so.<sup>3</sup> All black students are forced to select the single category, 'African-American, Black.' With Harvard's present system of classification, ethnic identity within the black student population (relative to the proportions that exist within the larger black American population) is impossible to ascertain.

While attending Harvard College between 1996 and 2000, I discovered that within the black population, there were considerable numbers of students of biracial and Caribbean origin. Not only did I personally notice this phenomenon, but many other black students (immigrants, biracials and native blacks alike) at Harvard also believed that these various ethnic groups proportionately outnumbered the native black American population.<sup>4/5</sup> Working with the hypothesis that ethnic differences must have influenced the paths taken by black students to reach Harvard, I attempted

to delve more deeply into the subject.

The ultimate goal of the study was to answer two questions: 1) What are the exact ethnic proportions amongst black students at Harvard College?<sup>6</sup> and 2) Did students of different ethnic backgrounds follow different paths to get to Harvard? I believed that answering these two questions would shed light on what was perceived to be a disproportionately high enrollment for certain groups at the college and also increase awareness about the meaning of ethnicity within America's black population.

I formulated the design of this research project with the presumption that the ethnic disparities found in America's black population may help to explain the ethnic composition found at Harvard. What this study did not (and could not) answer is the *extent* to which ethnic differences in the American population contributed towards the ethnic differences seen amongst the students at Harvard. Indeed, the strict qualifications that a Harvard student must possess in order to gain acceptance may mean that ethnic differences would not be visible *at all* within the population that managed to gain acceptance. Findings, however, did show that there were significant ethnic differences between black students at Harvard, and that these differences greatly influenced the paths that they took to reach Harvard.<sup>7</sup>

## FINDINGS

The following pages include an analysis of survey and interview data collected from black undergraduates at Harvard during the school year 1999/2000. This data was collected over a period of approximately three months (November 1999 through January 2000). There were 170 respondents who returned questionnaires, which constituted a 71.4 percent response rate. The 170 students surveyed made up approximately one-third of the non-international black student population at Harvard (32.2 percent).<sup>8</sup> Note, however, that not all respondents answered every single question. Because of the sensitive nature of some of the questions, respondents had the option of skipping any questions that they felt uncomfortable answering. Thirty of the 170 surveyed respondents were selected for in-depth personal interview.<sup>9</sup>

Survey and interview data led to the following findings about the various black ethnic groups represented at Harvard College. Because of the limits of this analysis, it is difficult to ascertain whether proportionately fewer black Americans apply to Harvard in the first place, or whether proportionately fewer are accepted amongst a representative sample of applicants. In addition, the small number of black students within the

undergraduate population limited the scope of the quantitative analysis, which may or may not have been unduly biased by a relatively small sample size.

### Research Observations:

#### *1) Black Americans were proportionately outnumbered within Harvard College, relative to other ethnic groups.*

Survey data show that non-biracial/biethnic black Americans, making up only a little over one-third of the black student population at Harvard, were proportionately outnumbered relative to other ethnic heritage groups.<sup>10</sup> The second largest ethnic group was the biracial/biethnic group, with over one quarter of the black student population. Immigrants and recent descendants of immigrants were especially well-represented, with over half (55 percent) of the black student population having at least one parent or grandparent who was born overseas. Note also that the percentages of first and second generation students at Harvard (which comprise the Caribbean and African heritage groups) are significantly larger than in the United States as a whole (Table 2):

**Table 1: 'Heritage' of Harvard Respondents**

Heritage	American	Caribbean	African	Biracial/Biethnic	Other	Total
Percentage	37.65 %	22.94 %	12.35 %	25.88 %	1.18 %	100 % (N = 170)

**Table 2: Respondents' Generational Status Compared to Aggregate U.S. Status**

Status	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> Generation	4 <sup>th</sup> (+) Generation	Total
Percentage of Blacks at Harvard (%)	8 %	41 %	6 %	45 %	100 % (N = 170)
Blacks in America <sup>11</sup> Projected in Year 2000 (%)	6.1 %	3.3 %	0.9 %	89.7 %	100 %

#### *2) Students of recent foreign heritage had different perceptions of their own identity within the American societal context than those with only American heritage.*

On the survey questionnaire, students were asked to 'check all that apply' amongst a list of various ethnic groups. Most students who were ultimately classified as Caribbean, African, Other or biracial/biethnic (based on responses about place of birth of themselves, parents or

grandparents) did not check 'black American' on their survey forms. Biracials/biethnics were least likely to identify as black Americans when compared to other ethnic groups:

**Table 3: Respondent's Ethnic Self-Identification**

<b>Ethnic Identity</b>	<b>Black-American</b>	<b>Afro-Caribbean</b>	<b>African</b>	<b>Biethnic/ biracial</b>
<b>Percentage of Total (N = 169) Choosing each Response</b>	57.1% (N = 97)	21.2% (N = 36)	13.5% (N = 23)	25.9% (N = 44)

Furthermore, interviews with respondents suggested that biracial/biethnic students and those students with an immigrant background associated with a more diverse group of friends in high school than black Americans. Indeed, if one has traveled to foreign countries, or even grown up hearing stories from parents who lived abroad, one is much more likely to have had diverse social interactions than someone who has grown up in the same town or state as his/her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Similarly, if one is a biracial American and has one parent who is white (or Jewish as in the case of many biracial/biethnic students at Harvard), one is more likely to feel comfortable around other non-black ethnic groups than someone who has less daily personal contact with people of other ethnic groups.

***3) Students of Caribbean and African heritage were more likely to have kinship networks spanning the globe than students of American heritage.***

Asking interviewees where their immediate and extended families live, I found that most of the students with an immigrant background have family scattered around the globe. Many of these students have traveled abroad to visit relatives overseas, and have been exposed to a wide variety of cultures. This phenomenon further emphasizes the idea that students of Caribbean and African heritage not only identify as descendants of Jamaican or Ghanaian national origins, but also as members of a world society. These students have been influenced by world travel and foreign cultures on a personal level. With family members living around the globe, the world is their home.

It is likely that the comfort level of a Caribbean-American or African-American (i.e. of recent African heritage) interacting with a diverse group of people is greater than that of a person of only American ancestry. Again, it is this increased contact with non-localized sources of education and

culture that may give students with an immigrant heritage an advantage in terms of psychological preparation in applying to a highly selective *and* world-renowned institution. Although there is little literature to support this claim, and no means to test the ethnic proportion of applicants to Harvard, interviews do suggest that this may be a salient phenomenon that influences students' paths towards Harvard.

***4) A majority of respondents, regardless of ethnicity, were likely to reside in the Northeastern region of the United States, but the advantages of living in this resource-rich region benefited some ethnicities more substantially than others..***

Although many respondents resided in the Northeast, students of Caribbean and African heritage were more likely to reside in urban areas than were students of American heritage:<sup>12</sup>

**Table 4: Respondent's Residential Region by 'Ethnicity'**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>North-east</b>	<b>Mid-west/Central</b>	<b>Mid-Atlantic</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>South-west</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>American</b>	32.89 %	14.47 %	9.21 %	21.05 %	11.84 %	10.53 %	100 % (N=76)
<b>Caribbean</b>	51.85 %	7.41 %	9.26 %	25.93 %	1.85 %	3.70 %	100 % (N=54)
<b>African</b>	40.00 %	24.00 %	24.00 %	0.00 %	8.00 %	4.00 %	100 % (N=25)
<b>Other</b>	33.33 %	16.67 %	16.67 %	8.33 %	8.33 %	16.67 %	100 % (N=12)
<b>Total</b>	40.12 %	13.77 %	11.98 %	18.56 %	7.78 %	7.78 %	100% (N=167)

$$\alpha = .045, \chi^2 (15) = 25.3918$$

Specifically, Caribbeans were much more likely to be concentrated in the New York area than other groups. As argued by many sociologists, immigrants choose to come to the Northeast because of family connections and the belief that greater opportunities are available in the region. Given that the largest percentage of all Harvard students hail from the Northeast in comparison to other regions, it is entirely possible that this region contains specific advantages not found in other regions.

Prep for Prep, for example, which is an organization that prepares minority youth for introduction into private schools, only operates in New York City. Since about half of the respondents who claimed to have been involved in high school preparatory programs attended Prep for Prep, it is likely that Harvard students hailing from New York, who were

disproportionately Caribbean, had greater access to opportunities for educational advancement than students from other areas.

Data confirms that almost twice as many Caribbean respondents compared to any other ethnic group claimed to have participated in a high school preparatory program.<sup>13</sup> What is most compelling, however, is that of the 10 Prep for Prep scholars in my survey sample, 7 of them were Caribbean.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, over one half of Caribbean-Americans, compared to slightly over one-third of black Americans, attended private high schools. The significance of this finding is that even with the slight regional clustering of the students of Caribbean heritage, proportionately more Caribbeans than black Americans attended private schools and participated in college preparatory programs.<sup>15</sup>

Through interviews, I also noted that many Caribbean students found out about these preparatory programs through Caribbean relatives or friends. This finding is consistent with the network theory of immigration in which immigrants and their children reside in ethnic enclaves and use extended networks of family and friends to learn how to negotiate the American system and ultimately find “The American Dream.”

Note: When I asked one interviewee about his high school preparatory academy and its ethnic makeup (to discover whether preparatory academies also had ethnic disproportions), he immediately tried to interpret my reasoning behind the question:

*Carter<sup>16</sup> is a Jamaican-American from Florida whose father works as a registered nurse and mother as a customer service representative. He was an ABC (A Better Chance) scholar and attended a private boarding school in New Hampshire. He proudly proclaimed that the ethnic phenomenon he observed within his prep school is due to an immigrant philosophy held by the first- and second-generation Caribbean immigrants to America. He made the following comments:*

*Carter: I don't think we [Immigrants to America] form a significant percentage of the African-American population, however, um, I mean, I knew there were gonna be a lot of Jamaicans here [at Harvard]... I just kind of laugh when African-Americans come up to me and they start asking “well, where are your parents from,” you know? And, I'd be like, “well my parents are from Jamaica,” and they'd shake their heads and be like, you know, “I never realized how few African-Americans there actually are, I mean African-Americans as in roots here before the Civil War,” and then I just laugh because, I mean, at Exeter [an exclusive*

*private boarding school in the Northeast], I guess that's where I first saw it, where at least half the population was either Caribbean or African, and um, I think, you can attribute that to just basically the immigrant philosophy of working hard. I mean, Um, there's nothing particular about Jamaica, it's more the whole immigrant philosophy ... now you have black immigrants who, who want to succeed in the country, and that idea gets transferred to their kids, that they have to succeed, and one of the major ways, of course, is through education. I think that is why you find that, and it's just, it's something that, obviously I've seen it first hand.*

*I don't know, sometimes I think sometimes there's friction between the two communities. I mean, you don't see it much here, but I know back in south Florida, maybe, especially between like Haitians and the rest of the black community...*

***5) Students of African heritage had parents who were much more highly educated than the parents of students with Caribbean or American heritage.***

The students of African heritage were much more likely than any other group to have parents that were highly-educated and working in professional or paraprofessional occupations. It is rarely contested that children born to socio-economically privileged families tend to fare better in education than children born to poorer families. It is therefore not surprising that there was an overrepresentation of students of African heritage at Harvard. Naturally, these students, who have parents who are highly-educated and have greater knowledge or access to knowledge about good schools and educational opportunities, as well as the money to pay for these opportunities, are more likely than other ethnic groups to achieve academically high standards. They are also more likely to be educationally and psychologically prepared for entry into a selective and rigorous college like Harvard (See Appendix for tables on maternal education and occupation).



**Table 5: Father's Education by Ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Below High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Graduate/ Professional Degree	Total
American	2.70 %	9.46 %	27.03 %	14.86 %	45.95 %	100 % (N = 74)
Caribbean	3.64 %	10.91 %	14.55 %	29.09 %	41.82 %	100 % (N = 55)
African	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	9.09 %	90.91 %	100 % (N = 22)
Other	0.00 %	18.18 %	18.18 %	27.27 %	36.36 %	100 % (N = 11)
<b>Total</b>	2.47 %	9.26 %	18.52 %	19.75 %	50.00 %	100 % (N = 162)

$\alpha = .013, \chi^2 (12) = 25.3752$

**Table 6: Father's Occupation by Ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Managerial/Administrative	Professional/Paraprofessional	Sales and Related	Clerical and Admin. Support	Service	Production, Construction, Material Handling	Unemployed	Total
American	19.40 %	46.27 %	4.48 %	1.49 %	13.43 %	13.43 %	1.49 %	100 % (N = 67)
Caribbean	11.76 %	64.71 %	1.96 %	7.84 %	1.96 %	9.80 %	1.96 %	100 % (N = 51)
African	17.39 %	82.61 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	0.00 %	100 % (N = 23)
Other	0.00 %	55.56 %	11.11 %	0.00 %	11.11 %	11.11 %	11.11 %	100 % (N = 09)
<b>Total</b>	15.33 %	58.67 %	3.33 %	3.33 %	7.33 %	10.00 %	2.00 %	100 % (N = 150)

$\alpha = .044, \chi^2 (18) = 29.3895$

**6) Students from different ethnic backgrounds were motivated to achieve for different reasons.**

When I asked interviewees whether or not they felt that their ethnicity played a role in their feelings about education, there were clear differences in the responses that separated along ethnic lines. Biethnics/biracials were not at all likely to feel as though their ethnicity played a role in their educational values. A few seemed quite defensive in arguing that their feelings about education would have been the same regardless of their ethnicity. A few of these interviewees said that they did not really think much about their ethnicity to begin with, and therefore could not really say whether or not it had anything to do with their educational values. This accurately reflects why so many of these interviewees did not give an affirmative response.

Black Americans, for the large part, felt as though their ethnicity played a large part in their feelings about education. They argued that because their parents and grandparents were not allowed educational opportunities due to racism and discrimination, they were even more motivated to achieve academically and take advantage of any educational opportunity. Many said that present-day racism and the stereotyping of blacks as unintelligent also urged them to prove white Americans wrong and to show them that a black person can achieve. These students, unlike the biracials/biethnics, qualified their motivations to succeed with the legacy of being black in America.

(Interview Excerpts)

*Karen<sup>17</sup> is a black American student from New Jersey who was raised by her mother who is a social worker. Karen, like a few other black Americans, felt that her ethnicity shaped her education because of all of the disadvantages and lack of opportunities afforded her ancestors.*

*Q: Do you think that your ethnicity plays a role in your feelings about education in general or the path that you've chosen? How?*

*A: (Karen) Definitely. Definitely.*

*Q: And why is that?*

*A: Well, another one of the reasons that eventually pushed me into coming to Harvard is just thinking that my mother, and all the generations in my family, you know, before her, either didn't get into schools because of their race, or because of financial circumstances couldn't have attended even if they had gotten into certain schools. And black students haven't been at Harvard and Radcliffe for that long, and, I mean, it's an opportunity that I really, I just, I felt like I would be letting people down if I gave it up.*

*I've grown up listening to my mother, my aunts, my grandmothers and uncles tell stories of the things they did during, like, the Civil Rights movement and how, like, I mean, the things they fought for, that I take for granted just, you know, like lunch counter sit-ins or whatever. I have a lot of family members who did things like that. And, um, my family, all their effort was so that I wouldn't have to do that, and so I should take advantage of everything I get now, and I saw attending Harvard as one of those opportunities that they wouldn't have had...*

*And also I was gonna say in how I think my ethnicity plays a role in how I feel about education 'cause um, a lot of times I feel*

*as though the stereotypes are so prevalent, and they're just so strong, that people look at blacks and automatically think that they are of inferior intelligence, so I feel like my succeeding academically is proving them wrong and sort of justifying and speaking up for my race. I feel like I have to do a little better just to prove that I started out on an equal level.*

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*Veronique<sup>8</sup> is a black American student from Oklahoma whose mother works as a secretary and father as an insurance sales representative. She claims that she works hard because her parents always told her that blacks have to be "ten times better" than everyone else to succeed. She outlines some of her own experiences with racism as part of her response:*

*Q: Do you think that your ethnicity plays a role in your feelings about education in general or the path that you've chosen?*

*A: (Veronique) I think it does. I mean, my parents have always, well I mean, my parents were brought up in the South, and um, dealing with racism, like head on, and knowing from a personal basis the Ku Klux Klan, and things that have happened to their family and um being involved with the Civil Rights Movement and things like that. Like they've always told me, you know "You're black, you must be ten times better, ten times faster, ten times smarter than your white counterpart," and that's always been drilled into my head. So in that sense, yeah, race has always been apparent to me no matter what the situation is.*

Although the Caribbeans and Africans also felt as though their ethnicity played a large part in their feelings about education, the motivating factor was different from that of the black Americans. The Caribbeans and Africans tended to place a high value on education because their ethnicity as Jamaican-Americans or as Ghanaian-Americans reflects a history of immigration in which their parents gave up a lot to come to the United States. None of the Caribbeans or Africans noted that they were motivated to achieve because of the legacy of discrimination towards blacks in the United States. This is a significant point in that it illuminates a difference in mindset between those who are black American and those who are not. Many of the black American students grew up with stories about discrimination and racism that their parents and grandparents faced, and they incorporate this knowledge in their approach to daily life.

Their experiences with racism today are very much seen as a continuation of the same racism (although less prevalent) that their parents faced before the civil rights era. Black Americans were therefore more likely to internalize present-day racism as an obstacle to success in much the same way as it was an obstacle for their ancestors.

The students of Caribbean and African heritage, in contrast, grew up knowing that although there is racism and discrimination in the United States, there is still an abundance of opportunity relative to their countries of origin. Their parents taught them to achieve academically, not in order to prove that stereotypes about blacks are wrong, but in order for them to take full advantage of the opportunities provided to them.

Immigrants and the children of immigrants do not appear to carry the same cultural 'baggage' that plagues many of the black Americans. Along with their more diverse associations with friends and family members who live around the globe, the students who are of African and Caribbean heritage seem less likely to be hindered by localized racism and discrimination, because their view of the world extends beyond a localized identity.

[Interview Excerpts]

*Carter's views on education stem from his being a son of immigrants, and he feels that Jamaicans in America work very hard to succeed because they have given up so much to come to America.*

*Q: Do you think that your ethnicity plays a role in your feelings about education in general or the path that you chose in particular? How?*

*A: (Carter) Definitely, yeah, Definitely. Because being an immigrant, or the son of immigrants, it was always made clear to me that, you know, you have to succeed.*

*As a Jamaican, it was always made clear to me that we need to succeed, and going to a good college is one, if not the most important thing you can do, one of the most important things you can do to succeed, and I think that, I mean, you only have to go around and ask how many people are Jamaican here [at Harvard] and you'd just be shocked because there's just, there are a ton. Like pretty much most of the people I know from south Florida are Jamaican. In fact, there's only one person from south Florida—all the black people I know from south Florida are Jamaican, except for this one kid who's Haitian, and it's basically the same thing with him too. I think just being an immigrant in general, it's made clear to you that you need to succeed.*

*And I think that my parents have passed that along to me through education, cause I mean, they work extremely hard here, you know. They worked hard at their job, you know, to support us, and then I think they passed that along to us in school where we need to work hard in school to attain what we need to, so we can later in life, we can be comfortable, and so we'd be prepared for later life to be I guess well off, or at least financially independent... Being an immigrant, you just don't say, "Well, I'm going to leave my country so I can just sit in America and do nothing." I mean, no, that's not how it works. It's like well, if I'm gonna leave this country then I'm definitely going to work for something better, and they want something better. They want a better life for themselves and more importantly, for us.*

Given the ethnic differences behind educational achievement that are present at Harvard, it appears likely that the pool of Caribbeans and Africans in America who are able to cope with racism and discrimination and use it to their educational advantage at a highly selective institution may be larger than the pool of black Americans who are able to do the same. This may be due to a legacy of discrimination that places a large amount of cultural 'baggage' on black American students that hinders their motivation to achieve.

This difference in ideology between the ethnic groups may affect the way in which these groups motivate themselves to prepare for academic success. The same difference may later translate into higher proportions (relative to their numbers within the United States) of Caribbeans, Africans and biracials/biethnics applying to a school such as Harvard, and/or higher proportions of these populations being academically successful enough to also gain acceptance.

***7) Students of Caribbean and African heritage were motivated to apply to Harvard for different reasons than students of black American heritage.***

When I asked interviewees to identify who influenced their decision to apply to Harvard the most, many of the black American students said that they themselves or their friends motivated them the most. When they said that their friends motivated them, this was qualified by the statement that they wanted to prove that they were just as smart and able to gain acceptance to "the best" college as their peers. The black Americans, more than any other group, appeared to have a personal reason—motivated in

large part by their ethnic heritage—for applying and eventually enrolling at Harvard. For them, going to Harvard meant not only getting a good college education, but also proving to others who may see them as inferior that they are also able to achieve. In other words, the desire to learn more and have a successful life were not the only motivating factors for black Americans, while this was the key motivation for many of the students who were of biracial/biethnic, Caribbean or African heritage.

[Interview Excerpt]

*Rashawn<sup>9</sup>, a black American from New York, said the following:*

*Q: Why did you choose to apply to Harvard?*

*A: (Rashawn) I applied to Harvard just to see if I was gonna get in.*

*Q: So, were other people at your school applying to Harvard?*

*A: Yes.*

*Q: Was it a competitive school?*

*A: Not really, it didn't seem to be too competitive.*

*Q: So your parents weren't the ones saying Harvard, or?*

*A: No they weren't. They encouraged me in whatever decision I made, but I came up with whatever schools I was gonna apply to.*

*Q: So, who do you think influenced your decision the most to apply?*

*A: The most? Probably other students, because I saw that they were applying and I wanted to prove that I was better than them.*

*Q: Why did you want to prove that you were better?*

*A: I wanted to prove, not so much that I was better, but more that I was on a level playing field and that I could do it also. It was more of just to see if I could.*

*Q: Were these white students?*

*A: Yes.*

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The limited survey data presented above do not prove that there is an ethnic disproportion amongst blacks at Harvard, or that these findings are generalizable to other institutions of higher education. It is noteworthy, however, that many of the black students attending Harvard indeed believe these ethnographic findings to be accurate and true for other competitive colleges. Furthermore, interviewees who attended selective private boarding schools in the Northeast all cited ethnic proportions at their high school that were similar to those found at Harvard. Interview findings tend to support the idea that schools that are highly selective—at least within the northeastern region of the United States—tend to have

a disproportionately high number of students who are of biracial/biethnic, Caribbean, and African heritage.

So what if black American students are underrepresented at highly selective schools? As long as they are likely to attend college anyway, what does it matter that they do not choose to attend or gain admission to the most selective schools?" Kingston and Lewis point out a quick and easy answer to this question:

Although the American higher-education system may not be dominated by a discrete institutional elite on the order of England's Oxford and Cambridge, a relatively small group of well-known colleges has produced since colonial times a disproportionate share of the national leadership in industry, politics, education, and the professions" (Hearn 1990, 121).

This statement is further substantiated by Derek Bok (former president of Harvard University) and William Bowen's findings that black students, in particular, who attend selective schools are much more likely to be both economically successful and more likely to participate in civic and community activities later in life than those students who attend non-selective four year institutions. In fact, they found that:

"black men who graduated from these selective colleges earned an average of \$82,000—twice the average earnings of all black men with BAs nationwide; black women graduates of C&B [schools used in the *College and Beyond* study] schools earned an average of \$58,500—80 percent more than the average earnings of all black women with BAs." (Bok and Bowen 1998, 258)

Clearly, if certain ethnic groups have greater access than others to these selective institutions, and thus more opportunities for economic success and the advantages leading to civic participation, then there will be an ever-widening gap in the long-range economic success of these groups.

The significance of the ethnic enrollment patterns found at Harvard is that executive legislation such as affirmative action may not currently be doing a fair job of creating equal educational and professional opportunities for all citizens. The American ideal of equal opportunity appears to be somewhat undermined when it is found that black Americans, who endure not only present-day racism, but also the burden of dealing with the psychological disadvantages caused by discrimination, benefit the least from affirmative action relative to other blacks at selective institutions.

Although it is inevitable that the most advantaged individuals within any group will benefit from affirmative action programs the most,

institutional goals should be to take whatever precautions are necessary to ensure that equality of opportunity is maintained both between the larger "racial" groups, and within these groups. Ethnic recognition for Asians and Latinos already exists and is reflected on the widely used 'Common Application' for college admissions (which Harvard uses). Both Latinos and Asians are encouraged on this form to indicate both their ethnic affiliation and also their country of origin for admissions purposes.<sup>20</sup>

Harvard, and (especially) many of the selective schools within the Northeastern region, should recognize the fact that black students are not "just black" but ethnically diverse. This ethnic diversity is accompanied by ethnic differences in achievement patterns that are related to self-identity, access to educational opportunity, and educational ideology. Because all black students applying to these schools are in essence competing for the same limited number of places, black American students have become an ethnic minority relative to the other ethnic groups at Harvard. The remedy for this situation is indeed to simply take ethnic heritage into account when making admissions decisions.

The above analysis and research findings prompt the following policy recommendations:

- 1. A nationwide restructuring of university affirmative action programs (especially those located in the Northeast) to reflect the increasing diversity of America's black population.**
- 2. The timely inclusion of biracial and ethnic subcategories on university application forms and other "high stakes" application forms that ask for racial/ethnic identification. This should be done in a similar fashion for blacks as it has already been done for Latino and Asian groups.**
- 3. Acknowledgment and record-keeping of black ethnic enrollment at all American universities, such that ethnic enrollment may be monitored and/or adjusted according to appropriate standards set by the university.**
- 4. Focused attention and federal funding for 1) increasing the fairness of affirmative action programs and 2) improving the quality of elementary schools, high schools, and other programs designed to prepare youth for college, specifically targeting the psychological needs of black Americans.**
- 5. Further study on the topic of black ethnic achievement that successfully incorporates the idea of psychological advantage/disadvantage into the discourse.**



This is not to say that blacks who identify as Caribbean-American or African-American should not benefit from affirmative action, or that Harvard should strive to achieve proportional representation amongst the various ethnic groups. Harvard should, however, 'take ethnicity into consideration' when making admissions decisions, in the same way that it does race. Each of these ethnic groups suffers from contemporary forms of racism and discrimination along with black Americans and therefore should receive some type of special consideration. In fact, research shows that even though there are large differences within the 'black' group in terms of achievement patterns, the larger differences are still found between the various racial groups.

Although I am a firm proponent of affirmative action and its ability to increase the opportunities available to minorities, implementation of this policy by itself is inadequate in addressing the educational challenges facing minorities in this country. In order to truly increase educational opportunities available to minorities, one must also focus on the quality of elementary and high school education, as well as concentrate on the social and psychological factors that contribute to lower academic achievement.

Affirmative action cannot mend the causes of lower educational achievement of minority groups, but it does aid in opening the doors of opportunity to those minorities who have been advantaged enough to reach the college application stage. America's promise, therefore, should be to keep the doors of opportunity open to minorities from all ethnic groups, and to make modifications such as those suggested in this study that will aid in maintaining the integrity of the ideals of affirmative action within the American educational system.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 5.6 percent of the non-Hispanic blacks are foreign born. Approximately 7 percent of all blacks (including black Hispanics) are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau 1990). According to Edmonston and Passel, the projected percentage of first, second and third-generation immigrants is approximately 10.3 percent of the total black population. This percentage is expected to rise to 19.9 percent of the black population by the year 2040 (U.S. Census Bureau 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Statistic obtained from the Harvard University Office of Budget and Financial Planning, which is responsible for maintaining demographic statistics for the University (Harvard University 1999).

<sup>3</sup> When Harvard completes its demographic analysis subsequent to admissions decisions, it does, however, acknowledge a distinction between Hispanic and

non-Hispanic blacks in that Hispanic blacks are considered Hispanic rather than black. What remains unclear, however, is how they determine whether or not their black students are Hispanic, given that the 'Common Application' form that Harvard uses does not make this distinction, and only asks applicants to select *either* 'Latino' or 'African-American, black' and not both. There is an 'other' category which applicants can select, however I suspect that most black Latino students would rather choose 'black' or 'Latino' given the apparent advantages that such identification will bring these minority students during the admissions process (Harvard University 1999).

<sup>4</sup> When using the term 'black American' here and in the pages to follow, I connote an ethnicity that seeks to define those Americans who are descended of slaves originally imported from Africa to America during the slave trade six or seven-plus generations ago. Due to the limitations of this particular study, however, 'black American' refers to all blacks who are not first, second or third-generation immigrants.

<sup>5</sup> In comparing ethnic representation at Harvard with that in the United States, I use the most recently published U.S. Census data published on the Internet (U.S. Census Bureau 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Educational success is measured by their acceptance into Harvard.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that although this study did find significant ethnic differences amongst the black students at Harvard, I am not arguing that the same ethnic composition exists within all colleges, or within all Ivy League colleges. However, I do suggest that the findings of this limited study are not spurious or unique to Harvard, but indeed representative of a pattern seen at many highly selective Ivy League colleges in the Northeast.

<sup>8</sup> This is an approximation because the total number of black students did not include black students of Hispanic origin. The definition of non-Hispanic black is ambiguous, however, as the 'Common Application' used for admissions does not make a color distinction between Hispanic students. Black Latinos are thus free to choose 'African American, Black' or 'Hispanic/Latino.' Enrolled during the year 1999/2000 were 528 (out of 6663 total full time students) self-identified black undergraduates at Harvard. This number does not include black international students as Harvard does not collect racial/ethnic information on their international students. For this reason, international students are *not* included in my study sample (Harvard University 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Although I initially wanted to interview a pool of respondents that reflected the ethnic proportions within the Black student population, time constraints did not allow for this. I interviewed nineteen freshmen and eleven sophomores. I chose sophomores as the upper age limit for interviewees because I wanted respondents to be sufficiently close to their high school experiences to be able to provide

detailed answers to my interview questions. Of the thirty students interviewed, sixteen were female and fourteen male. The ethnic distribution of the interviewees was as follows: 12 were black American, 7 were of Caribbean origin, 2 were of African Origin, 8 were Biracial/Biethnic of varying national backgrounds, and 1 was of 'Other' background.

- <sup>10</sup> The American category consisted of respondents who classified themselves as 'black American' and did not have a single parent or grandparent who was born overseas. The Caribbean category consisted of respondents who were born in the Caribbean or South/Latin America or had at least one parent or grandparent who was born in the Caribbean or South/Latin America. The African category was constructed in a similar fashion to that of the Caribbean category. Those classified as biracial/biethnic were those who identified themselves as such when asked in question number one of the survey. The 'Other' category was composed of all those respondents who were not biracial/biethnic but had a parent or grandparent (in this case both respondents had at least one grandparent born overseas in Europe) who was born outside of the United States but not in the Caribbean or in Africa.
- <sup>11</sup> Data taken from Edmonston and Passel's 1990 Census projections for the year 2000 (Edmonston and Passel 1990, 342). Figures for the year 2046 are expected to rise to the following percentage of the total black population: 1st generation = 9.4 percent, 2nd generation = 7.3 percent, 3rd Generation = 3.2 percent.
- <sup>12</sup> Harvard generally draws approximately 44 percent of its total undergraduate population from the Northeast (Harvard University 1999).
- <sup>13</sup> This percentage is not statistically significant because of the low total number of students who participated in preparatory programs.
- <sup>14</sup> While this is a very small sample, and it is possible that seven out of 10 Prep for Prep Scholars were Caribbean by pure coincidence, this finding is worth further investigation and analysis.
- <sup>15</sup> Nine students were involved in Prep for Prep, one student in Prep for Prep Nine, the program attached to Prep for Prep, and three students in A Better Chance. The other programs that were represented by the respondent pool were: Albert G. Oliver Program, Daniel Murphy Scholarship Fund, H-Prep Minority Health Profession Recruitment and Enrichment Program (Yale), IB placement, LEAD (Leadership, Education, and Development), MS<sup>2</sup>, SAT Prep, and Saturday Science.
- <sup>16</sup> I asked most interviewees to supply a pseudonym so that they could identify themselves within the text of this research paper. I assigned names to the ones who did not supply their own (generally those who I first surveyed before deciding to allow them to choose their own names). Actual names are not used due to the sensitive nature of the research, and the ease by which certain students

may be identified, given the detailed personal characteristics disclosed in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> See above.

<sup>18</sup> See above.

<sup>19</sup> See above.

<sup>20</sup> See Harvard's application for Undergraduate admissions on its website: (Harvard University 2002).

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## APPENDIX

Table 7: Mother's Education by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Graduate/ Professional Degree	Total
<b>American</b>	5.26 %	23.68 %	26.32 %	44.74 %	100 % (N = 76)
<b>Caribbean</b>	16.36 %	14.55 %	36.36 %	32.73 %	100 % (N = 55)
<b>African</b>	0.00 %	4.76 %	28.57 %	66.67 %	100 % (N = 21)
<b>Other</b>	0.00 %	27.27 %	45.45 %	27.27 %	100 % (N = 11)
<b>Total</b>	7.98 %	18.40 %	31.29 %	42.33 %	100 % (N = 163)

$$\alpha = .026, \chi^2 (9) = 18.9331$$

**Table 8: Mother's Occupation by Ethnicity**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Managerial/Administrative</b>	<b>Professional/Paraprofessional</b>	<b>Sales and Related</b>	<b>Clerical and Admin. Support</b>	<b>Service</b>	<b>Not in Labor Force</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>American</b>	23.68 %	44.74 %	0.00 %	17.11 %	5.26 %	9.21 %	100 % (N = 76)
<b>Caribbean</b>	3.64 %	61.82 %	1.82 %	18.18 %	9.09 %	5.45 %	100 % (N = 55)
<b>African</b>	8.33 %	75.00 %	0.00 %	12.50 %	4.17 %	0.00 %	100 % (N = 24)
<b>Other</b>	9.09 %	54.55 %	9.09 %	9.09 %	0.00 %	18.18 %	100 % (N = 11)
<b>Total</b>	13.86 %	55.42 %	1.20 %	16.27 %	6.02 %	7.23 %	100 % (N = 166)

$\alpha = .025, \chi^2 (15) = 27.4995$