

## ENDING COLLEGE ADMISSION QUOTAS AGAINST ASIAN-AMERICANS

Increasing numbers of college applicants are receiving rejection letters from schools that otherwise would admit them. Their problem: they are Asian-Americans. Not too many decades ago, other American minorities faced similar exclusion. So-called "gentleman's agreements," for example, limited the access of American Jews, Hispanics, and Blacks to many public facilities — including hotels, clubs, restaurants, and schools. Such restrictions are illegal under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race or ethnicity in any institution that receives federal funding. Yet ample evidence suggests that some of America's finest colleges and universities may be explicitly limiting admissions of Asian-Americans.

At the University of California at Berkeley, for example, officials recently admitted that their policies effectively had imposed a quota on the number of Asian-Americans accepted into the school. Said Berkeley Chancellor Ira Michael Heyman: "It is clear that decisions made in the admission process indisputably had a disproportionate impact on Asians." This triggered widespread complaints from Asian-American groups that other colleges and universities also discriminate against Asian-Americans in their admissions policies. Bowing to this criticism, Berkeley announced that it would substantially revamp its policies beginning in 1991.

**Putting Congress on Record.** Representative Dana Rohrabacher, the California Republican, meanwhile has introduced H.Con. Res. 147, a bill that would put Congress on record against college admission ceilings based on racial or ethnic origins (including particularly Asian-Americans). Cosponsored by 23 House members of both political parties, his resolution urges the Justice Department to investigate charges of such discrimination. Rohrabacher also has written to Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos, urging him to speed and complete the Department's investigation of alleged quotas against Asian-Americans at Harvard University and the University of California.

The current controversy casts a new wrinkle in the long-running debate over the merit of ethnic and racial quotas. Public attention has tended to focus upon the quota-as-floor aspect of the issue. Asian-Americans, however, are finding themselves bumping up against the more often overlooked quota-as-ceiling. Example: At Yale University, the admission rate for Asian-Americans fell from 39 percent to 17 percent over the past decade. Example: At the University of California, Los Angeles, 82.4 percent of Asian-Americans applying in 1980 were admitted, compared to 38.2 percent in 1987. Example: At Brown University, 20 percent of all applicants are admitted, compared to only 14 percent of Asian-Americans. A report by the Corporation Committee on Minority Affairs at Brown found "cultural bias and stereotypes

which prevail in the admissions office.” Said a Brown admissions officer: “Asian-Americans should be concerned. We call them enrollment goals, but it works out the same as a quota.”

**Skills the U.S. Needs.** Limiting Asian-American admissions to colleges penalizes them — and also America. Evidence suggests that the most gifted Asian-American students are particularly interested in scientific, technological, and professional studies such as engineering and medicine. These are skills sorely needed by the United States to keep (or regain) its global competitive edge, yet Asian-Americans are being denied entrance to the very laboratories and classrooms where their abilities could be developed, trained, and used.

Nor are academic skills all that Asian-American students bring to American universities. Against the common rejoinder that strictly academic criteria are not all a college should consider in its admissions process, John Bunzel and Jeffrey Au, researchers at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, reviewed the research on the extra-curricular activity patterns of Asian-American high school students. The data refute the stereotype that such applicants have only grades and test scores to offer in support of their request to be admitted.

**Defining Appropriate Diversity.** At the core of the quota issue is many universities’ goal of “ethnic diversity.” Yet if ethnic diversity is the goal, the question is what is the standard that defines the appropriate diversity? As Bunzel and Au ask, is the standard the “applicant pool, the [state] population, the national population, or none of those?” Is the institution “trying to achieve ethnic diversity because it is good for [society]... or because it is fair and therefore good for the society at large, or because it is mandated, or popular, or what?” And what other factors should be weighed against this goal? Until these questions are answered, American universities will continue to be haunted by the specter of qualified individuals who are pushed aside by administrators striving to meet an ill-defined social goal.

Before stepping down as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, William Bradford Reynolds in December 1988, attacked as “legally and morally wrong” college admissions practices that impose ceilings on admissions of Asian-American students. Since then, complaints have been filed with the Justice Department by Asian-Americans claiming that they have been denied admission to universities on account of race. Rather than continuing the practice of forwarding such complaints to the Education Department, the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department should investigate such allegations for possible violations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Justice Department investigation should determine the extent to which formal or informal ceilings are being used to exclude Asian-Americans at colleges and universities.

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For further information:

John H. Bunzel and Jeffrey K. D. Au, “Diversity or Discrimination? Asian Americans in College,” *The Public Interest*, Spring 1987.

John H. Bunzel, “Affirmative-action Admissions: How It ‘Works’ at UC Berkeley,” *The Public Interest* Fall 1988.