

Opinion: Opponents of affirmative action are using a flawed theory

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Jheanelle Wilkins, of New Castle, Delaware, (right) and Neo Moneri, of Beltsville, Maryland, participate in a rally outside the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., Oct. 10, 2012, supporting the University of Texas while the highest court in the land heard arguments in *Fisher v. University of Texas*. AP/Susan Walsh

The U.S. Supreme Court is once again considering the case *Fisher v. University of Texas*. It first sent the case back down to a lower court in 2013. Now the Supreme Court has decided to take the case back up, and will have to decide if colleges may consider race when choosing which students to admit.

The case began when white student Abigail Fisher sued the University of Texas. Fisher claimed the university had denied her admission because of her race. She said she had been passed over in favor of a less qualified black student.

Is The Mismatch Theory Right?

Fisher blamed so-called affirmative action policies for the fact that she was not admitted. Such policies require colleges to admit a certain percentage of nonwhite students. Fisher said affirmative action policies should be struck down as unconstitutional. She claimed they unfairly favor one group over another.

Justice Antonin Scalia so far seems to be siding with Fisher. He has also gone beyond her claim that affirmative action is unfair to whites. In his arguments Scalia has referred to the so-called mismatch theory.

The mismatch theory holds that affirmative action places black students in schools that are “too fast” for them. The result is a mismatch between their true qualifications and the schools they attend. Many treat this theory as fact even though serious doubts have been raised about it.

Minority Students And Stress

Critics say affirmative-action policies give preference to students of color even when they are less qualified. Students are defined as less qualified when they have lower pre-college test scores and grades. The fact that achievement gaps persist in college is often mentioned as proof that this idea is correct. In other words, if black students with lower SAT scores than their white peers also receive worse grades in college, then surely they were less college-ready to begin with.

However, the mismatch theory rests on an unproven assumption. It assumes that lower grades indicate lower ability. It ignores a large piece of the puzzle: many minority students face problems and pressures that white students do not. These can lead to mental attitudes that make performing well in school much more difficult.

Threatened By Stereotypes

We and many other scientists have conducted experiments to try to determine how much of a role such attitudes play. We have been able to measure the effect certain kinds of pressures have on students' academic achievement. We have done so by observing what happens when those factors are removed.

One psychological strain faced by students of color is stereotype threat. A stereotype is a widely held but false image of a particular group of people. Years of research have shown that widespread stereotypes of certain groups as less intelligent have a damaging effect. Students from these groups often worry they will be seen as less qualified. This threat makes them anxious. It can undermine their ability to learn and do well. It can make them more likely to avoid or switch out of difficult majors like math or science.

When we give students exercises designed to reduce stereotype threat, we see strong results. The students soon earn better test scores and grades. Moreover, recent research of ours shows that students who have been given such exercises are also more likely to stick with difficult majors.

Build Trust, Raise Scores

Many black and Latino students also face another problem: They expect to be treated differently than white students. This fear is not without cause, as racial bias still exists today in the education system. For example, black grade school students are more harshly punished and less kindly treated by teachers than their white peers. When students observe such differences, they may come to expect rejection from their professors. Such assumptions can undermine their trust, feelings of belonging, and motivation in school, and — in turn — their performance.

To combat these effects, we and other researchers have given black students exercises that promote trust in teachers. For example, students are taught that teachers criticize their work not because they think they are stupid, but because they want and expect them to do well. Such exercises reduce the difference in the scores of black and white students 40 to 50 percent. Moreover, the black students' scores continue to go up over time.

If these basic exercises have such a powerful effect, it cannot just be a lack of ability or preparation that is holding students of color back. Instead, it is likely that test scores and grades underestimate their ability. They may instead reflect the worries and fears such students have.

An Important First Step

Affirmative action takes one very important step: It increases the chances that students of color will be accepted to schools that match their true ability level. Many such students are fully capable of doing high-level college work despite their lower high school test scores and grades.

However, this is only part of the solution. We also need to make sure that minority students can thrive once they are admitted to top colleges and universities.

As an important first step, the Supreme Court must uphold affirmative action. Doing so will help ensure racial equality in education. Teachers and scientists must also continue to find ways to make colleges more supportive. Only then will students of color be able to realize their hidden abilities.