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ABSTRACT

This report examines the affirmative action attitudes of 204,103 college freshmen from 473 colleges and universities nationwide and from four racial/ethnic groups: Whites, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans. The study addresses how and why student support for affirmative action in higher education admissions depends on how the issue is framed and on how college students of different races and ethnicities, backgrounds, and ideologies differ in their attitudes toward affirmative action. Data were obtained from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's 1995 Freshman Survey. The dependent variable was students' attitudes toward affirmative action in college admissions. Independent variables were gender; self-interest as expressed by socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and college choice; and ideology expressed as political view. No direct measure of prejudice or racism was included in the study. Results indicate that freshmen attitudes toward affirmative action vary depending on student characteristics and opinions such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, political ideology, and beliefs about discrimination. Variations within ethnic/racial groups were also investigated. Findings suggest that students may not clearly understand what affirmative action means or what it is intended to do. (Contains 40 references.) (NAV)

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**Student Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action in Higher Education:
Findings from a National Study**

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Introduction

Affirmative action in higher education admissions is currently under attack nationwide. With the 1996 presidential elections fast approaching, it has been brought strategically to the forefront of national debate. Although attacks on affirmative action have been spearheaded primarily by political conservatives, affirmative action in college admissions is in fact opposed by men and women from a diversity of ethnicities/races, social classes, and political ideologies.

Given that college freshman will be the newest population of voters, it is important to ask how today's entering college students—those who have most recently experienced the college admissions process—feel about affirmative action in college. What does the current population of entering college freshmen think of society's role in considering criteria such as race in college admissions? How do students' attitudes toward affirmative action vary by race/ethnicity, academic preparation, gender, social class, and political ideology? This study addresses these questions through an analysis of survey responses from 204,103 college freshmen from 473 colleges and universities nationwide.

Background of the Study

Research has suggested that the term 'affirmative action' is widely misunderstood (Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, and Casrnay, 1981; Kravitz & Plantania, 1993). It is therefore important to begin with an understanding of what affirmative action is, and perhaps more importantly, what it is not. This review of previous research is divided into two sections: (1) understanding affirmative action and (2) identifying arguments and theories which have been used to explain opposition to affirmative action and other race-based policies.

Understanding affirmative action

A common element of definitions of affirmative action is the notion of discrimination. As defined by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1977, affirmative action is "any measure, beyond simple termination of discriminatory practice, adopted to correct and compensate for past

or present discrimination or to prevent discrimination from recurring in the future.” This and other definitions consider affirmative action as both a reactive and proactive approach to combating discrimination. As described below, these dual roles of affirmative action are inherent in the inception and development of affirmative action policies.

Despite earlier efforts (e.g., President Kennedy’s Executive Order 10925), it is President Johnson who is often credited with having created affirmative action and making a serious effort to combat discrimination. In 1964, Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act which made it illegal to be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or to be subjected to discrimination under a federally funded program on the basis of race, color, or national origin. While this gave federal courts the power to compel affirmative action where unlawful practices were occurring (reactive), it was not until Executive Order 11246 was signed in 1965 that a more proactive approach was taken to level discrimination by allowing affirmative action to be implemented in the absence of specific documented discrimination (Crosby, 1994). Ultimately, when Title IX of the Educational Amendment was passed in 1972, discrimination on the basis of sex also became unacceptable in institutions receiving federal monies (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1975).

Most of the major affirmative action cases which have had a role in shaping affirmative action programs and policies have involved attempts to limit or abolish it, rather than attempts to widen or institute it. These efforts have also placed the notion of discrimination at the center of the debate, yet instead of viewing affirmative action as a defense against discrimination, affirmative action is often referred to as a perpetrator of discrimination. With respect to college admissions, one of the more well known cases is *Bakke v. University of California*. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme court ruled that Allan Bakke, a White male, had been unfairly discriminated against because of his race and was admitted to the UC Davis Medical School. Nevertheless, the court upheld the use of race based admissions stating that “while race could be considered as a [‘plus’ factor along with other factors deemed important] in admissions, it could not be used as a quota to set aside specific positions for minority candidates” (Newman, 1989).

More recent events have again brought affirmative action to the forefront of debate. On July 20, 1995, the University of California Board of Regents dealt a historic blow to affirmative action in higher education by abolishing affirmative action in admissions, hiring, and contracting on the UC campuses. Another major blow to affirmative action occurred quite recently, on March 19, 1996, when a Federal appeals court overturned the affirmative action program at the University of Texas Law School (i.e., *Hopwood v. State of Texas*). The case is considered likely to reach the Supreme Court, which could undoubtedly impact the status of affirmative action programs nationwide (Stout, 1996).

Sources of opposition to affirmative action

Current debates surrounding affirmative action tend to evoke strong opinions and emotions on both sides of the issue. While many strongly believe that some form of affirmative action is necessary to help improve social and economic opportunities for women and racial/ethnic minorities, many others demonstrate increasingly vehement opposition to affirmative action. This resistance to affirmative action in college admissions is supported by a diverse array of arguments, including:

1. Admissions decisions should be based solely on individual "merit" (as defined by traditional performance indicators).
2. Affirmative action based on race overlooks the financial disadvantages faced by people of all races.
3. Affirmative action does more to stigmatize highly qualified minorities than it does to provide opportunities to underprepared minorities.
4. Affirmative action based on race is no longer necessary because racial discrimination no longer exists or is no longer a major problem.
5. Affirmative action discriminates against the White male (i.e., reverse discrimination).
6. The actual victims of discrimination have been compensated and it is no longer necessary to pay for the mistakes of our ancestors.
7. Affirmative action beneficiaries are unqualified or under-qualified.
8. Affirmative action is nothing more than a quota system.

Although many of these arguments and attitudes result from a misunderstanding of what affirmative action is and what it is intended to do, they can also be understood through factors associated with opposition to race-related policy in general. Research on affirmative action and other race-based policies has described numerous factors that predict attitudes toward such race-based policies. These include theories on the role of self-interest, ideology, and prejudice. Since these were developed primarily from studies of Whites' racial attitudes, it is important to consider the applicability of these theories to other racial/ethnic populations.

Self-Interest. While some researchers (Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears, 1988) contend that self-interest is not a factor in resistance to race-related policy, studies have shown self-interest to be at least in part a determinant of racial policy attitudes, in particular affirmative action (Jacobson, 1985). The self-interest argument holds that Whites are not likely to support policies that will not benefit them or that may impose costs on them. Accordingly, since Whites with greater levels of education and higher incomes are more likely to be negatively affected by affirmative action, they are more likely to oppose such programs (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Costantini and King, 1985; Jacobson, 1983a). Although there is little research on the role of self-interest among African Americans, Jacobson (1983b) reported more support for affirmative action from African Americans with higher education levels.

Bobo and Kluegel (1993) distinguish between individual self-interest and group self-interest. Specifically, they note that "category membership and identification with a group and a sense of shared fate lead to group-based assessments of self-interest" (p. 445). The group self-interest theory suggests that, regardless of factors such as socioeconomic status, protected groups under affirmative action such as African Americans and Mexican Americans, would tend to be more supportive than Whites of race-based policies such as affirmative action.

Ideology. Numerous studies have linked opposition to racial policy with political conservatism and a concern for the status quo (Costantini and King, 1985; Sniderman, Brody, and Kuklinski, 1984; Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, and Kendrick, 1991). Sniderman and Hagen (1985) describe conservatives as those who believe that change is not the means to improvement,

and that inequality is natural; therefore, the existence of dominant and subordinate groups in society is to be expected. The more conservative one's ideology, the more likely he/she is to oppose a policy such as affirmative action, which challenges the status quo.

Prejudice. Traditional prejudice has been interpreted as a set of irrational beliefs that emerge through attitudes formed during childhood, as parents and society send messages that members of different racial groups are inherently different, and that it is acceptable to acknowledge these differences (Allport, 1954). These "irrational beliefs" are further described by Allport as "an antipathy based on a faulty and inflexible generalizations...(which) may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of that group." While modern theorists have moved beyond this traditional notion of prejudice, some have suggested prejudice as the source of opposition to race-based policies, such that Whites will oppose policies designed to assist African Americans simply because they do not like them, or because they subscribe to stereotypes about them (Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears, 1988; Sniderman, Brody, and Kuklinski, 1984).

Closely related to prejudice is the issue of racism, that is, "the belief or set of beliefs that one's race is superior to others" (Hudson, 1995, p. 16). While some would argue that this "old-fashioned" racism has declined, others would argue that it has just manifested itself in new ways (Jacobson, 1985; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985; Sears, 1988; Dovidio, Mann, Gaertner, 1989;). New forms of racism have been referred to as "new racism" or "symbolic racism." According to the symbolic racism theory (Sears, 1988; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985), overt racism is no longer socially acceptable. Therefore, Whites' negative feelings toward minority groups are expressed indirectly by resisting issues such as busing, welfare, and affirmative action. Thus, while racism is not expressed by blatant acts of discrimination, it is manifested symbolically by opposition to racial policies designed to promote racial equality, such as affirmative action (Jacobson, 1985). Although researchers point out that opposition to race-based policies may be used to reflect new forms of racism or prejudice, opposition to affirmative action cannot necessarily be construed as an act of racism (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985).

The importance of issue framing

While prejudice, self-interest, and ideology have each shown to have some effect on determining racial policy positions, support for race-based policies also depends on how these policies are defined, or “framed” (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lipset & Schneider, 1978). Bobo and Kluegel (1993) describe varying levels of support, and varying determinants of support depending on whether policies are presented as race-targeted or non-race-targeted, or whether policies are based on “opportunity enhancing” or “equal outcomes.” They suggest that race-targeted policies are more likely to be accepted if framed in terms of social need and social responsibility, and if the policies are seen as opportunity “enhancement.”

Similarly, studies have shown that individuals will support equal opportunity, but oppose affirmative action, because they favor selection based on ability, not “preferential treatment” (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Lipset and Schneider, 1978). Lipset and Schneider (1978) report that Whites will support “compensatory action” (an attempt to help the disadvantaged improve their status through programs), but not “preferential treatment” (applying different standards to different groups), because they believe more strongly in “equality of opportunity” than “equality of results.” However, in college admissions, they suggest the tension between these two ideals is especially problematic because college admission could be interpreted as both a “result” of effort and ability, as well as an “opportunity” to enhance one’s future. Further complicating the understanding of individuals’ affirmative action beliefs is whether such programs allow special consideration specifically for “minorities” or for the “disadvantaged.” Costantini and King (1985) showed that support for affirmative action increased when framed in terms of assisting the “disadvantaged.”

Objectives

In an attempt to untangle some of the many complex factors driving affirmative action attitudes, this study will assess how and why student support for affirmative action in higher education admissions depends on how the issue is framed, and more specifically how college

students of different races/ethnicities, backgrounds and ideologies differ in their attitudes toward affirmative action. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

- (1) To what extent do college freshmen support "affirmative action" in college admissions? How does this vary by factors such as race/ethnicity, academic preparation, gender, political ideology, family income, and parental education?
- (2) To what extent do college freshmen support "special consideration" of certain groups (e.g., African Americans) in college admissions?
- (3) What are the unique effects of variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, political ideology, and beliefs about discrimination on freshman attitudes toward affirmative action? How do these factors differ by race?

This study moves beyond previous research on affirmative action in several ways. First, while the affirmative action debate has spurred a number of thought pieces in this area (e.g., Hudson, 1995; Jackson, 1995; Jackson-Leslie, 1995; Josh, 1995), very few studies (e.g., Jacobson, 1985; Kravitz & Platania, 1993) have examined affirmative action attitudes empirically. Second, research that has been conducted on this issue tends to base findings on relatively small samples (e.g., Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994). The present study includes a nationally representative sample of over 200,000 individuals. Finally, while most previous research on raced-based policies has relied on predominantly White samples (e.g., Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985), this study examines predictors of affirmative action attitudes separately for different racial/ethnic groups.

Data Source and Methods

The data in this study are drawn from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) 1995 Freshman Survey, an annual survey of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Freshman Survey contains questions covering a wide range of student characteristics: parental income and education,

race/ethnicity, and other demographic items; financial aid; secondary school achievement and activities; educational and career plans; and values, attitudes, beliefs and self-concept.

The sample for this study includes 204,103 first-time full-time freshmen attending 473 colleges and universities across the United States. Students were selected from each of the following racial/ethnic groups: Whites (170,478), African Americans (16,305), Asian Americans (13,304), and Mexican Americans (4,016).

Variables

The variables included in this study are described below. Complete details on coding schemes for all variables are provided in Appendix A.

The dependent variable is students' attitudes toward affirmative action in college admissions. This is measured through students' level of agreement with the statement, "Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished." Students respond on a four-point scale from "Disagree strongly" to "Agree strongly," such that higher scores represent the belief that affirmative action should be abolished.

Independent variables first include student's gender. Previous research shows some conflicting findings in this area, with Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Drout (1994) describing more negative reactions toward affirmative action from men than women. Other research, however, has found women to be more supportive than men of affirmative action (Kravitz & Platania, 1993).

Three independent variables reflect aspects of *self-interest*: socioeconomic status (SES), academic preparation, and choice of college. Previous research (conducted on predominantly White samples) suggests that students of higher SES and higher levels of educational preparation will be less supportive of affirmative action, as it would be viewed as a policy not designed to benefit them personally. We know very little about how these variables will operate among non-White sample, except that Jacobson (1983b) found a positive relationship between level of education and African Americans' support for affirmative action. Based on this result, we might expect SES and academic preparation to have a different effect on African Americans students than

White students. The last measure of self-interest indicates whether or not the student attends his/her first choice college. Based on self-interest theory, students who are not attending their first choice college would be less supportive of affirmative action since they may blame affirmative action policies for their own attendance at a less-than-first choice college.

This study includes one measure of *ideology*, students' self-rated political view (from far right to far left). It is expected that more conservative political views will be associated with opposition to affirmative action.

The Freshman Survey includes no direct measures of *prejudice* or *racism*, in this study we include three variables that may shed light on students' general affect towards racial/ethnic groups: the belief that "racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America," personal commitment to "promoting racial understanding," and frequency of socialization with people of other racial/ethnic groups. It is expected that opposition to affirmative action will tend to come from students who believe that racial discrimination is still a major problem, who are less committed to promoting racial understanding, and who engage in cross-race socialization less frequently.

The role of *issue framing* is assessed through a comparison of attitudes toward affirmative action with attitudes toward the use of "special consideration" of African Americans in admissions. The belief that college admissions officers should give African Americans special consideration in admissions is not a direct measure of support for affirmative action per se, but it does address the issue of whether or not race should be considered in admissions decisions. As described earlier, research suggests that individuals are more supportive of policies designed to promote equal opportunity, rather than equal outcomes. It is therefore expected that students will be more supportive of "special consideration" than "affirmative action," since they may equate special consideration with providing an opportunity, and may view affirmative action as an attempt to ensure equal outcomes.

Analyses

Preliminary analyses describe student attitudes toward affirmative action by race/ethnicity. Responses are then compared with agreement that African Americans should receive "special consideration" in college admissions. Next, for each racial/ethnic group, affirmative action attitudes are crosstabulated with all other variables in this study.

A second set of analyses focuses on the independent effects of the following variables on freshman agreement that affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished: gender, SES (family income and parental education), academic preparation (SAT scores and high school grades), attendance at first choice college, political ideology, beliefs about discrimination, commitment to promoting racial understanding, and frequency of socialization with people from different racial/ethnic groups. A separate regression analysis is conducted for each of the four racial/ethnic groups included in this study. Variables are added to the regression equation in blocks according to the temporal order in which they may influence student attitudes toward affirmative action: (1) gender and SES, (2) academic preparation, (3) political views and beliefs about discrimination, commitment to promoting racial understanding, and socializing with other racial/ethnic groups, and (4) choice of college. Controlling for the same sets of variables within each racial/ethnic group allows us to more accurately compare the unique effects of each independent variable across the four groups.

Results

Descriptive analyses

The top half of Table 1 describes the percent of students within each of the four racial/ethnic groups who believe that affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished. Results indicate that Whites are most likely to oppose affirmative action (58.2%), followed by Asian Americans (49.9%), Mexican Americans (32.7%), and African Americans (22.7%). These results are consistent with Kravitz and Platania (1993), who found 'Blacks' and 'Hispanics' more supportive of affirmative action than Whites.

As discussed earlier, attitudes toward affirmative action may depend on how the issue is framed. Table 1 addresses that issue by comparing the belief that affirmative action should be abolished with another “anti-affirmative action” viewpoint—that African Americans should receive no special consideration in college admissions. Again, while this item does not refer to affirmative action specifically, it does address a central component of affirmative action policies—that race may be used as a plus factor in admissions (Newman, 1989).

The results in Table 1 show that when framed in terms of “special consideration,” the level of opposition declines within each racial/ethnic group. For example, while 58.2 percent of Whites believe that affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished, only 37.3 percent believe that African Americans should receive no special consideration in admissions. While “affirmative action” and “special consideration” are not synonymous, these results nevertheless provide some evidence that support for the use of race in admissions depends on how the issue is framed. It also suggests that respondents have a more negative reaction to the politically-loaded phrase “affirmative action” than to a phrase which is more suggestive of providing opportunity, such as “special consideration.” These results are consistent with findings from previous research that support for affirmative action and other race-based policies is dependent on how the issue is framed (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kinder & Sanders, 1990). Based on the above results, this paper’s focus on attitudes toward affirmative action should be considered in light of the possibility that attitudes towards this issue are driven by beliefs about the meaning of affirmative action as well as by reactions to the specific term “affirmative action.”

Table 2 examines the degree to which attitudes towards affirmative action vary by the following factors within each racial/ethnic group: gender, parents’ income and education, SAT scores, high school grades, attendance at first choice college, political view, the belief that racial discrimination is no longer a problem, commitment to promoting racial understanding, and socialization with people from different racial/ethnic groups.

Table 2 reveals that the relationship with affirmative action attitudes is similar across all four groups for the following variables: gender, political view, beliefs in discrimination, and

commitment to promoting racial understanding. Male students, those who identify themselves as politically conservative, those who believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major problem, and those who are not particularly committed to promoting racial understanding are more opposed to affirmative action within all four racial/ethnic groups.

Also demonstrated in Table 2 is that the relationship between affirmative action attitudes and parents' income, parents' education, and SAT scores is similar for Whites, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans. This suggests that for these three racial/ethnic groups, students with higher SAT scores or whose parents have higher levels of income and education are more likely to believe that affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished. Conversely, African Americans with higher SAT scores or whose parents have higher levels of education and income are less likely to want to abolish affirmative action.

The relationship between affirmative action attitudes and socializing with people of a different racial/ethnic group is similar for Asian Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. For these groups, those who socialize with other races are more supportive of affirmative action. For Whites, it appears that there is no relationship between cross-race interactions and attitudes toward affirmative action.

With respect to high school grades, both Whites and Asian American students with higher grades are more opposed to affirmative action, while African Americans with higher grades are less opposed to affirmative action. There is no relationship between high school grades and affirmative action attitudes among Mexican Americans.

Finally, for all four racial/ethnic groups there appears to be little relationship between choice of college and support of affirmative action.

Regression analyses

While these descriptive results shed light on the relationship between affirmative action and a number of student characteristics, it is important to examine the effects of these variables after the effects of the other variables are controlled. For each of the four racial/ethnic groups, Table 3 displays the simple correlations and standardized regression coefficients (Betas) for each

independent variable on the belief that affirmative action should be abolished. The difference in magnitude between the correlations and Betas represents the extent to which a particular variable shares predictive power with other variables in the equation.

Gender. For each of the four racial/ethnic groups, simple correlations reveal that women are less likely than men to oppose affirmative action in college admissions. For each group, the effect of gender is reduced somewhat by the entry of additional variables which are correlated positively with being female (e.g., political liberalism and commitment to promoting racial understanding). By the final step in the equation, gender remains a significant effect on affirmative action attitudes for three of four groups. White, Asian American, and African American women are more supportive of affirmative action than men from the same racial/ethnic groups.

Socioeconomic status and academic preparation. Simple correlations reveal significant relationships for all four groups between affirmative action attitudes and both SES and academic preparation. The relationship is positive for Whites, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans, revealing that freshmen from each of these groups with higher levels of SES and academic preparation are more strongly opposed to affirmative action. Conversely, among African Americans, those with higher levels of SES and academic preparation are more supportive of affirmative action. By the final step in the regressions, the magnitude of each of these relationships is reduced by the entry of other variables; all effects remain significant except the effect of academic preparation on affirmative action attitudes among Mexican Americans.

Choice of college. Whether or not students attend their first choice institution is a small but significant predictor of affirmative action attitudes for two groups. Whites and Asian Americans those who attend their first choice institution are more supportive of affirmative action than those who do not attend their first choice institution. There is no significant effect of attending a first choice institution on affirmative action attitudes for African Americans and Mexican Americans.

Political view. For all four groups, simple correlations describe political view as a significant predictor of affirmative action attitudes. Each of these effects remains significant as all

other variables are controlled, suggesting that for all four groups of freshmen, those who consider themselves more politically conservative are more likely to favor abolishing affirmative action.

Views on racial discrimination and promoting racial understanding. For all four racial/ethnic groups, simple correlations show opposition to affirmative action from those who believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America, and support from those who are committed to promoting racial understanding. Each of these relationships remains significant by the final step in the analysis, and in fact, these variables are the strongest predictors of affirmative action attitudes among African Americans and Mexican Americans.

Socializing with other racial/ethnic groups. Whether or not students have socialized with people from other racial/ethnic groups is not a predictor of attitudes toward affirmative action for Asian Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. While simple correlations suggest that African American students who socialize with students of other races/ethnicities are less opposed to affirmative action, this relationship disappears with the entry of other variables into the regression equation (e.g., SES and academic preparation). This suggests that African American students who socialize across racial/ethnic lines are more supportive of affirmative action because they also tend to have higher levels of SES ($r = .12$) and academic preparation ($r = .23$). For Whites, on the other hand, cross-race socialization has a slight positive association with opposition to affirmative action. Further review of regression results reveals that this positive relationship emerges once commitment to promoting racial understanding is controlled. In other words, once we control for the generally stronger commitment to racial understanding among those Whites who socialize with other racial/ethnic groups ($r = .21$), the actual effect of cross-race socialization is to increase opposition to affirmative action, albeit only slightly.

Limitations of the Study

Among the limitations, it is first important to note that the percentage of variance in affirmative action attitudes toward admissions that is accounted for by the variables in each equation is relatively low, ranging from 11.2% among Mexican Americans to 5.6% among African

Americans (see Table 3). The present study is clearly limited by its reliance on a pre-existing data set that was not designed to focus specifically on predictors of racial policy attitudes. Other research on affirmative action attitudes has been able to explain as much as 25 or 30 percent of the variance in this outcome by including measures such as racism and stereotypes about race (Jacobson, 1985), as well as additional views on how affirmative action should be implemented (Kravitz & Platania, 1993).

Second, as pointed out earlier, the term 'affirmative action' is not widely understood and often misunderstood to mean quotas and/or preferential treatment to unqualified individuals. In this study, though affirmative action in admissions was specified, a definition of affirmative action was not provided. Consequently, we cannot be certain if students in this study were in favor of abolishing affirmative action, the consideration of race in the admission process or in favor of abolishing quotas. The discrepancy between students agreeing that "affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished" and those believing that certain groups such as African Americans should be given some special consideration during admissions, seems to suggest that students may not be sure about what affirmative action is.

Summary and Discussion

The most recent Freshman Survey indicates that fifty percent of college freshmen favor abolishing that affirmative action in college admissions (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995). This study has shown how these attitudes vary depending on numerous student characteristics and opinions such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, political ideology, and beliefs about discrimination.

To what extent do college freshmen support "affirmative action" and "special consideration" of certain groups in college admissions? Affirmative action is most strongly opposed by White students, followed by Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans students. In fact, Whites and Asian Americans are more than twice as likely as African Americans to believe affirmative action should be abolished. Even when the use of race in

admissions is phrased in terms of “special consideration,” rather than affirmative action, Whites and Asian Americans still show the most opposition—African Americans and Mexican Americans show the least. Interestingly, opposition to affirmative action is stronger than opposition to the use of special consideration (of African American applicants, in this case). This discrepancy supports the notion that regardless of race, students are more likely to support policies perceived as promoting “equal opportunities” than those perceived as ensuring “equal outcomes.”

In addition to variation across racial/ethnic groups, this study describes variations in affirmative action attitudes within each racial ethnic group. These variations are dependent on a number of factors. Many variables such as gender, self-interest, ideology, and prejudice have been described in previous research which has, for the most part, relied on predominantly White samples. A question raised in the present study is whether the relationship between affirmative action attitudes and these many characteristics would be similar across all four racial/ethnic groups.

First, this study shows that the effects of gender are similar across all four groups, such that women are less likely than men to express opposition to affirmative action. However, this study is unable to explain why women are more supportive of affirmative action. It may be that women are more supportive of policies designed to promote racial equality or combat discrimination. It could also be that women’s support of affirmative action is driven by a sense of self-interest, since most affirmative action policies are designed to address both racial and gender discrimination.

Previous research has described SES and education as reflective of self-interest for Whites, such that those of higher SES and educational levels are less supportive of affirmative action since they may feel they are less likely to benefit from it. Findings from this study suggest that self-interest (or group-interest) may indeed be a factor influencing student attitudes, but not for all students and possibly not for the same reasons. For example, self-interest appears to operate in its expected manner for Whites and Asian Americans, both of which are less supportive of affirmative action at higher levels of SES and academic preparation. Among African Americans, the effects of SES and academic preparation are the reverse of their effects among Whites and Asian Americans.

In this case, African Americans at higher levels of SES and academic preparation are more supportive of affirmative action. On the one hand, these findings suggest that self-interest plays a role in African American attitudes toward affirmative action, such that middle and upper class African Americans are considered the most likely beneficiaries of this type of racial policy (see Wilson, 1978, 1987). On the other hand, self-interest may not be a valid explanation for these effects. Perhaps African Americans of higher SES and educational levels are more supportive of affirmative action because they are more aware of the history and purpose of affirmative action. This explanation would be consistent with earlier work suggesting that higher SES African Americans are more race conscious (Tate, 1993).

If group self-interest is an explanation of African Americans' support for affirmative action, it does not appear to be so for Mexican Americans. Based on the results for African Americans, we might have expected Mexican Americans of higher SES levels also to be more supportive of affirmative action. However, Mexican Americans whose parents have higher incomes and higher levels of educational attainment are in fact more opposed to affirmative action. In fact, SES has a stronger effect on Mexican American attitudes than on attitudes for any other group. There does not appear to be a simple explanation for this finding. One possibility is that higher SES Mexican Americans have been in the United States for longer periods of time than those of lower SES, and that those whose families have been here longer would more closely resemble the attitudes of Whites. While the Freshman Survey does not include a measure of generational status, it does measure whether English is the student's native language (this measure serves as a rough proxy for the amount of time a student's family may have been in the U.S.). Accordingly, regressions were re-run controlling for English as the native language, revealing that Mexican American students whose native language is English are more opposed to affirmative action than non-native-English speakers. If we use native language as a proxy for generational status, this suggests that newer generations of Mexican Americans are more in favor of affirmative action than those who have been here longer, and that this relationship is part (but not all) of the reason that higher SES

Mexican Americans are more opposed to affirmative action (since, in our sample, English-native Mexican Americans tend to be of higher SES ($r = .49$)).

Results for political ideology are consistent with those from previous research—that opposition to affirmative action is most likely to come from political conservatives. Our research has shown this to be true regardless of racial/ethnic group. Nevertheless, even the most conservative African Americans and Mexican Americans are more supportive of affirmative action than the most liberal Whites.

Support for affirmative action in admissions also tends to come from those freshmen who are more committed to promoting racial understanding and believe more strongly that racial discrimination is still a major problem in America. It is not surprising that those who believe discrimination still exists are more supportive of affirmative action, since affirmative action has been defined as a policy to expand opportunities for certain groups “where discrimination has proven to exist” (Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, 1995).

Interestingly, socializing with members of other racial/ethnic groups seems to have no significant effect on attitudes towards affirmative action, except for a very small negative effect among Whites. It is puzzling that Whites with more contact with other racial/ethnic groups would be more opposed to affirmative action (after controlling for commitment to racial understanding). Milet's (1992) review of Allport's (1954) theory of prejudice notes that “contacts that bring about knowledge and understanding are likely to bring about more accurate and stable beliefs concerning minority groups, and, as a result, tend to contribute to the reduction of prejudice” (p. 23). It is possible that certain types of cross-race interactions cause Whites to become more opposed to affirmative action, however the Freshman Survey data do not address what types of cross-race interactions occur. Clearly, future research should consider not only the impact of the frequency of cross-race socialization, but also the nature of this socialization.

Conclusion

This study has shown that freshman attitudes toward affirmative action vary not just by race, but within race by characteristics such as family background, educational background, political views, and race-related attitudes. These between-group and within-group differences emphasize the importance of studying affirmative action attitudes in greater depth. If a consensus is to be reached on the status of affirmative action in college admissions and in combating discrimination, policy makers would be well served by further research which explains how and when various groups are most receptive to affirmative action. Questions to be addressed include: How do individuals define affirmative action policies? Do attitudes toward affirmative action depend on how it is defined? Do these attitudes also depend on which groups are included in affirmative action policies? Do attitudes depend on what individuals believe to be the outcome of affirmative action?

This study provides some evidence that students may not clearly understand what affirmative action means or what it is intended to do. We must consider the implications of these results. First, if this country is to have any kind of constructive dialogue about affirmative action, its definition and purpose must be made clear. The biggest and perhaps initially most important leap in discussing affirmative action is simply to go beyond the negative buzzwords and connotations which seem to control our dialogue on this issue. For example, individuals often equate affirmative action with "quotas" without the knowledge that quotas are illegal. Other individuals believe that college admissions should be determined solely on the basis of individual "merit," without considering the possibility that merit may extend beyond traditional factors such as grades and standardized test scores.

Second, inasmuch as self-interest drives support for affirmative action, students need to be educated about who benefits from such policies. While the common perception is that only those students admitted to college through affirmative action are the beneficiaries, research shows that having a diverse campus or classroom helps to promote cross-race dialogues and interactions which themselves have positive effects on the personal and academic development of all students,

regardless of race or ethnicity (Astin, 1993). Further, Braun (1995) asserts that “in spite of the rhetoric and myths surrounding [affirmative action], the truth is that every American stands to benefit when each citizen is given a chance to contribute to the maximum extent of his or her ability” (p. 7). The possibility of these widespread benefits needs to be included in the dialogue on affirmative action.

Promoting informed discussion and debate is critical, particularly as major affirmative action programs are being attacked and dismantled nationwide. To be sure, anti-affirmative action rhetoric is strong and convincing, often resting on the meritocratic foundation of our society—that individuals should succeed only through demonstrating ability and effort. People need to be educated that affirmative action is not intended to violate this meritocratic ideal, but instead to broaden it by considering the notion of individual potential in spite of the racial, ethnic, gender, and class discrimination that continues to exist in this country.

Table 1.
Opposition to Affirmative Action and Special Consideration
in College Admissions by Race/Ethnicity

View	Percent among			
	White (170,487)	Asian Am. (13,304)	African Am. (16,305)	Mexican Am. (4,016)
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished	58.2	49.9	22.7	37.7
No special consideration should be given to African Americans in admissions	37.3	28.5	8.8	16.5

Table 2.
Correlates of Opposition to Affirmative Action in College Admissions by Race/Ethnicity

	Percent among			
	White (170,487)	Asian Am. (13,304)	African Am. (16,305)	Mexican Am. (4,016)
Gender				
Males	65.0	53.6	26.2	35.4
Females	52.5	46.7	20.6	30.7
Family Income				
High	61.5	52.8	19.7	40.7
Medium	58.1	50.4	20.7	35.3
Low	54.0	47.8	24.5	29.0
Parents' Education				
BA or higher	59.6	51.5	19.7	36.9
Some college	57.0	48.7	22.4	38.9
High school graduate	54.3	46.6	26.6	31.8
Less than high school	49.4	45.2	30.4	24.2
SAT Composite				
High	69.6	58.7	18.9	41.4
Medium	60.1	47.8	17.7	30.5
Low	46.3	44.5	29.2	29.8
High School GPA				
A- to A+	62.9	53.0	16.5	32.8
B+ to B	54.9	45.7	21.5	32.5
B- to D	52.6	46.2	29.1	32.8
Choice of College				
First Choice	57.7	49.1	21.7	32.8
Less than First Choice	59.6	50.9	24.3	32.4
Political View				
Liberal/Left	51.8	44.8	18.7	26.4
Middle of the Road	55.3	48.5	23.7	32.0
Conservative/Right	70.0	60.7	28.6	48.3
Racial Discrimination				
Is <u>not</u> a problem in U.S.	69.6	60.1	49.2	53.1
Is a problem in U.S.	55.6	48.4	20.5	29.8
Goal: Promote Racial Understanding				
Very Important or Essential	53.0	46.5	20.3	27.4
Somewhat or Not Important	60.4	53.7	28.4	39.1
Socialized With Someone of Diff. Racial/Ethnic Group				
Frequently	58.1	49.7	21.4	32.1
Occasionally	58.2	50.8	25.4	35.6
Not at all	58.7	53.3	35.4	36.5

Note: Neither the rows nor the columns should add to 100%. For example, among Whites, the percentage of high income students who believe affirmative action should be abolished is 61.5%, compared with 58.1% among medium income Whites and 54.0% among lower income Whites.

Table 3.
Predictors of Opposition to Affirmative Action in College Admissions by Race/Ethnicity

Variables	White		Asian Am.		African Am.		Mexican Am.	
	r	Beta	r	Beta	r	Beta	r	Beta
Gender: Female	-.15**	-.11**	-.08**	-.06**	-.07**	-.05**	-.06**	-.02
SES	.07**	.02**	.08**	.03*	-.11**	-.06**	.16**	.13**
Academic Prep.	.17**	.16**	.14**	.13**	-.14**	-.07**	.07**	.02
First Choice College	-.02**	-.02**	-.02*	-.02*	-.03**	-.01	.01	.00
Political View: Liberal	-.18**	-.15**	-.13**	-.11**	-.10**	-.08**	-.18**	-.12**
Racial discrimination no longer a problem	.14**	.10**	.09**	.07**	.23**	.18**	.21**	.17**
Goal: Promote Racial Understanding	-.12**	-.07**	-.11**	-.08**	-.14**	-.09**	-.21**	-.15**
Socialized with someone diff. racial/ethnic group	-.01*	.02**	.00	-.01	-.06**	.00	-.01	.00
R ²	9.4%		8.2%		5.6%		11.2%	

Note: Opposition to affirmative action refers agreement with the following statement: "Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished." Beta coefficients are those at the final step in each equation.

*p<.01, **p<.001

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Appendix A

Variable Descriptions and Coding

• Socio-economic status (SES). SES is a composite measure of parents' income and educational attainment. Parents' income is measured on a fourteen-point scale from less than \$6,000 to \$200,000 or more. Parents' education (calculated separately for mother's and father's education) is measured on two eight-point scales from Grammar school or less to Graduate degree.

• Academic preparation. Academic preparation is a composite measure of SAT scores and high school grades. SAT scores (or ACT scores converted to SAT), range from 400 to 1600, are divided by 100 in order to form a scale of 4 to 16. Academic preparation is calculated by adding this recoded measure of SAT to an eight-point scale of high school grades to form a 20-point scale of academic preparation.

• Choice of college. Choice of college is a dichotomous measure of whether or not the student attends his/her first choice college.

• Political view. Students' political view is determined from students' self-identified political view on a five-point scale from far right to far left

• Beliefs about discrimination. Students indicate their level of agreement with the statement, Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America. Students respond on a four-point scale from Disagree strongly to Agree strongly, such that higher scores represent the belief that racial discrimination is not a problem.

• Commitment to racial understanding. Students indicate their personal commitment to the goal of Helping to promote racial understanding on a four-point scale from Not important to Essential.

• Cross-race socialization. Students indicate their frequency of interaction with people of another racial/ethnic group on a three-point scale from Not at all to Frequently.

• Gender. Gender is a dichotomous variable where 2=female and 1=male.

• Special consideration. This item assesses how much special consideration college admissions officers should give to African Americans. Response categories include, None, Some, and A lot.