

How It Feels to Have Your Life Changed By Affirmative Action

Black and Hispanic college graduates, whose lives were directly shaped by race-conscious college admissions, have complicated thoughts about the expected Supreme Court decision.

By [Amy Harmon](#) [The New York Times](#) June 21, 2023

As a top student at his Philadelphia high school in 1968, Granderson Hale knew he stood a decent chance of admission at one of the historically Black colleges that typically sent recruiters to the school, where nearly all of the 2,700 students were Black. He had pinned his hopes on Lincoln or Morgan or Cheney. Howard University would be a stretch. So when his guidance counselor summoned him because “someone from Brown is coming,” Mr. Hale recalls, the Ivy League school did not register. “Brown?” Mr. Hale remembered thinking. “Brown who? Charlie Brown?”

Mr. Hale, who ended up accepting a full academic scholarship [to Wesleyan University](#) in Connecticut, could not have known then that he would be part of the first large cohort of high-school graduates to be shaped by race-conscious admissions. Or that the practice would become a lightning rod for decades-long debates about racial justice, meritocracy and educational inequities. Brown University was not the only college that fall to recruit for the first time from schools with high concentrations of Black students. In the spring of 1969, one year after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Yale enrolled a record 96 Black students, [according to the historian Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#), who was one of them.

The expectation that the U.S. Supreme Court will soon end or limit race-conscious admissions in cases against Harvard and the University of North Carolina has elicited an array of partisan reactions: dismay from some liberals who say that would represent a step backward for the country; hope from others that class-conscious admissions could make up for the loss, while easing racial tensions; and relief from conservatives, who believe that race-conscious admissions is unconstitutional.

But for many of the Black, Hispanic and Native Americans whose lives were shaped by affirmative action, this moment has prompted a more personal reckoning with its complicated legacy. In more than two dozen interviews with The New York Times, those who went to elite schools, where their race may or may not have given them an edge, expressed a swirl of emotions. A few concluded that the downsides of race-conscious admissions outweighed the benefits. Some spoke of carrying an extra layer of impostor syndrome. Many more grieved the closing of a path that led to rewarding careers and the building of wealth. Their experience may inform the present, as Americans continue to debate how to define — and align — the principles of fairness and merit, as well as address enduring racial disparities without deepening racial divisions. At least in the immediate future, Black and Hispanic enrollment is expected to [plunge](#).

Mr. Hale, 71, can sympathize with those who want the end of race-conscious admissions. He credits Wesleyan with paving the way to an M.B.A. from the Wharton School and a more comfortable life. But he would prefer to see investments in early education for Black and Hispanic students, who often attend low-performing K-12 schools. He said he had seen enough of how Black professionals were regarded by their white counterparts to feel that race-conscious admissions had not worked to their overall benefit. “People don’t respect you if they have to let you in,” he said.

That view is not widely shared by Black adults with a bachelor’s degree, who supported the consideration of race and ethnicity in admissions by more than a [2-to-1 margin](#) in a recent poll by the Pew Research Center.

Andrew Brennen, 27, is entering Columbia Law School this fall, perhaps the last class shaped by race-conscious admissions. He has no doubt that given his test scores and grades, being Black played a role in his admission —

for which he is unapologetic. Like Mr. Hale, he sees K-12 education as a key to racial justice, and has accepted a scholarship from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund that commits him to eight years of practicing civil rights law in the South after graduation. “As someone who is seeking to create the most change possible for Black students in Kentucky,” he said, “I sought the best education I could.”



Andrew Brennen, 27, is entering Columbia Law School this fall, perhaps the last class shaped by race-conscious admissions. Credit...Jon Cherry for The New York Times

Mr. Brennen’s family was upper-middle class; his father was a dean at the University of Kentucky law school. But he also grew up in small southern towns, his the only Black family in predominantly white neighborhoods. As a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he watched protesters fight to keep a Confederate monument on campus and felt guilt, as one of two Black students in a freshman writing class, for “not adequately defending my race” when the topic of affirmative action arose. Any self-doubt he and others like him feel on elite campuses, he said, stems from a sense of isolation, lack of institutional support and routine displays of racism, not “because our SAT scores aren’t as high as our white peers.”

Small in Numbers, but Mighty

Education is often invoked as the key to equality, but in many ways the numbers tell a story not of progress, but of falling behind. Almost seven decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, more than half of the nation's K-12 students are enrolled in districts where students are either more than 75 percent white or more than 75 percent nonwhite, [according to](#) a recent report by EdBuild, a nonpartisan education group. School districts serving mostly white students receive \$2,200 more in government funding per student, the authors found, than those that serve mostly nonwhite students. And the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the gold-standard federal exam, [shows](#) deep and persistent gaps by race. By high school, those differences have hardened: 58 percent of Asian American test-takers and 31 percent of white test-takers scored a 1200 or higher on the SAT in 2022, [according to the College Board](#), which runs the exam. For Hispanic and Black students, those numbers were 12 percent and 8 percent.

For supporters, the persistent inequities are proof that race-conscious affirmative action is still needed — and the reason those students come into elite institutions behind. Luis Acosta, who grew up in rural North Carolina as the son of Mexican immigrants, said he considered dropping out in his first year as an undergraduate at the state's flagship university at Chapel Hill. "I don't know if I can do it here, maybe I should go somewhere else," he recalled thinking. Encouragement from his chemistry professor helped him stick it out. He is now in his fourth year of medical school, applying for residencies in pediatrics.

His path, experts said, is consistent with [data that suggests](#) that Black and Hispanic students at elite schools are helped by affirmative action. They are [more likely to graduate](#) from [highly selective colleges](#) and earn more after graduation. Social scientists also credit race-conscious admissions with pushing back some of the compounding inequality. About 100 highly selective colleges are thought to practice race-conscious admissions, and they confer degrees on about 10,000 to 15,000 Black and Hispanic students each year whom they might not have otherwise accepted, according to a rough estimate by Sean Reardon, a sociologist at Stanford University.

That represents about 1 percent of all students in four-year colleges, and about 2 percent of all Black, Hispanic or Native American students in four-year colleges.

Though small in number, these students have a big effect, Dr. Reardon said, because of the "outsized role in social, economic and political decisions that graduates from the most selective schools play." Consider Justice Sonia Sotomayor, a graduate of Princeton and Yale and the first Hispanic member of the Supreme Court, who has described herself as a "perfect affirmative action baby." Or former President Barack Obama, a graduate of Columbia and Harvard Law School, where in 1990 [he wrote](#) that he was "someone who has undoubtedly benefited from affirmative action programs during my academic career."

They are not the only beneficiaries to leave an imprint. By the early 1990s, affirmative action helped boost the percentage of Black Americans in medical school by a factor of four, according to a [2000 study](#) by economists at Georgetown University and Michigan State — producing doctors who chose more often than their white peers to serve communities with high concentrations of Black and Hispanic residents. Zachary Bleemer, a Yale economist, studied applicants to the University of California before and after the state banned race-conscious admissions in 1996. He found that before the ban, Black and Hispanic state residents were more likely to attend the system's most selective schools and, [in the decades after graduating, earn \\$100,000 or more](#) than those who applied after the ban. "If the institutions I graduated from did not have the freedom to say, 'I'm going to give him a shot,' there's no way I'm talking to you as a Harvard professor right now," said Anthony Jack, 38, an assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr. Jack graduated from Amherst College, where tuition cost one and a half times his mother's annual pay.

Carl Phillips entered Harvard in 1977 with what he called "respectable, but not the highest SAT scores," and the second-guessing of white students at his Cape Cod, Mass., public high school, who suggested that he was admitted because he was Black. At his work-study job cleaning dormitory bathrooms, the divisions of class and race were palpable. "You're marching across Harvard Yard with a bucket," he recalled, "and then there are people wearing tweed jackets and enjoying their leisure." "On one hand, I was grateful to have been accepted,"

he said. “On the other hand, I felt as if I had to prove that I was worthy of being let in.” But he took particular satisfaction in going on to teach high school Latin. “There are not many Black people who do that,” he noted. And then, when he taught at the university level, he saw that he could inspire confidence in Black and gay students, who often told him that “they had never had a professor who looked like me.” This year, he won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. “It’s hard to maybe measure the exact ways in which affirmative action helps,” said Mr. Phillips, now [a professor at Washington University in St. Louis](#). “But you can see this chain. One person is let in, that person then goes on to have a position where they can let other people in.”

Stigma and Self-Doubt

In 2012, when news got around Patsy Zeigler’s office that her younger daughter had been accepted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a white colleague asked her, “How did that happen?” There was a kid in her church, the colleague explained — a white kid, she meant — who did not get in. And that student, the colleague added, was “really smart.” Mrs. Zeigler felt her hackles rise. Should she mention that her daughter, Star Wingate-Bey, earned a near-perfect score on the verbal portion of her SAT? Should she cite Star’s leadership in the honors society? Her offers from other prestigious colleges? “Really smart?” she recalls thinking. “What is she saying about Star?”

This is not an uncommon experience for Black students and their families at elite schools. That collective stigma, affirmative action critics have said, undermines the accomplishments of Black people in America. “Do you know what reinforces the idea that they’re inferior?” Ward Connerly, a Black businessman in California and longtime opponent of affirmative action, [has said of Black students](#). “Being told they need a preference to succeed.”

But virtually no elite college makes admissions decisions entirely on test scores or grades. The list of students with preference is long: recruited athletes, children of alumni, donors and faculty and, at Harvard, a special “dean’s list” of prominent people. About 43 percent of white admitted students at the university fell into those categories, according to admissions data made public during the lawsuit. Dr. Richard V. Sims, 75, a graduate of Harvard Medical School, said some of his classmates were children of alumni and “were not outstanding students by any means.” He added, “They used that to get themselves into Harvard, so why should I feel ill at ease for having affirmative action contribute to my admission?” Jennifer J. Manly, [a neuropsychologist at Columbia](#) and a 1991 graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, said that she always felt confident that she was a qualified student, despite her belief that she had been given an advantage in admission. “I never felt guilty about that, because I was going to have to prove myself,” said Dr. Manly, who studies Alzheimer’s disease among Black and Hispanic Americans.

The affirmative action debate, though, can overshadow the debate over who is privileged — and why, according to Dr. Jack of Harvard. “People are quick to label any success of a Black person, a Latino person, a Native person, as a consequence of affirmative action while ignoring the plethora of policies that gave them a leg up,” he said.

A Glimpse of the Future

In the fall of 2018, a Berkeley student told Kyra Abrams that she must have been admitted because she was Black. Ms. Abrams thought it was a not-funny joke. After all, race-conscious admissions had been banned at California’s public universities for more than two decades. But Berkeley came with its own challenges. Black students, she said, referred to themselves as “the 1.9 percent,” their share of the student population, down from the low-double digits in the years before the ban. Their rarity, she figured, explained why students distributing fliers on the campus hub, Sproul Plaza, ignored her, assuming she was not an actual student, an experience known as “Sprouling while Black.” She also found herself left out of the competitive study clubs in her computer science class. “They don’t think Black students are smart enough to be in their clubs,” she said.



Kyra Abrams, of San Pablo, Calif., was the first in her family to graduate from college. Credit...Marlena Sloss for The New York Times

Ms. Abrams, of San Pablo, Calif., was the first in her family to graduate from college. She took the SAT three times, managing to eke out a decent combined score. In 2020, she campaigned for Proposition 16, [the failed state referendum](#) that would have reinstated race-conscious college admissions. After graduating last spring, Ms. Abrams enrolled in a [Ph.D. program in informatics](#) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She wondered if the Supreme Court's impending decision could mean that life for Black and Hispanic students at other elite schools might now resemble her Berkeley experience. If so, it will be hard, she wants to tell them. "You just feel isolated," she said. The Ph.D program is scary, too, but she is excited to work on bias in government data programs. "Nothing is linear," she said. "There are no lights to follow. You get to carve your own path."

[Amy Harmon](#) is a national correspondent, covering the intersection of science and society. She has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for her series "The DNA Age", and as part of a team for the series "How Race Is Lived in America." [More about Amy Harmon](#)