The New York Times April 1, 2012 By TAMAR LEWIN

At the University of Texas, Admissions as a Mystery

AUSTIN, Tex. — Even after 20 years of legal wrangling, admission to the University of Texas — and what role race plays — still has its mysteries. Part of the process is clear. Under the state's Top 10 Percent program, Texas students at the top of their high school class are guaranteed admission, filling three-quarters of the slots for in-state students. The process for admitting the other quarter — the part that the United States Supreme Court will consider next fall, in a lawsuit filed by Abigail Fisher, a white applicant denied admission in 2008 who said she was discriminated against because of her race — is not so clear cut. For those spots, applicants are rated on factors including test scores, essays, activities, socioeconomic status, cultural background — and race and ethnicity.

The process, known as holistic review, allows the university to shape a diverse class with the interests and talents to make good use of university resources, said William Powers Jr., the president of the University of Texas' flagship campus in Austin.

"If a company had 100 applications for five positions and just took the five with the highest grade point average without looking at anything else, I think people would be stunned," he said. "Grades are important, but there are other important indicia, like leadership and diligence. Grades don't tell us who is going to have a proclivity, or aptitude, for geosciences, fine arts or teaching."

But whom does holistic admissions help more — minority students, or affluent white applicants from private and suburban schools? "It is not the case that the 25 percent is designed or motivated by adding to ethnic diversity or adding to the numbers of students from private or suburban schools," he said.

With the case in litigation, Mr. Powers declined to discuss the numbers. But university records show that about two-thirds of the white freshmen were admitted automatically, compared with 80 percent of the black students and 85 percent of the Hispanic students. Because students are admitted to specific colleges, like the College of Education or the business school, it is impossible to determine which group benefits most from holistic review without knowing how many students of which race applied to, and were admitted to, each school — numbers the university does not release.

College counselors say that holistic admissions decisions are hard to predict. "We try to teach all our parents and students that U.T. uses holistic review to fill specific programs, but it's sometimes hard to accept that someone with lower grades and scores might get in if they're an all-state cheerleader," said Jeff Pilchiek, director of guidance at the highly regarded Westlake High School. "The buzz a few years ago was, 'Apply to education, and then you can transfer to business.' Then it was natural science, but that got very competitive."

In interviews on the stately campus overlooking the State Capitol, students' views on holistic admission seemed to depend on their own race and ethnicity.

This year's freshman class of 7,000 students is 46 percent white, 23 percent Hispanic, 20 percent Asian and 6 percent black — and, as on most campuses, many students socialize mostly with others like themselves. "I imagined, coming to college, that it would be unified, but when I got here, I fell back into my comfort zone," said Aimee Vasquez, a Hispanic freshman. The university's motto is "What Starts Here Changes the World," she added, but "it's comfortable to be with your own kind, so we're not changing the world."

Like other black and Hispanic students interviewed, Ms. Vasquez said she believed that holistic admissions mostly helped affluent white students from top schools. “I think the holistic approach, where they look at everything, does more for kids who went to the most awesome schools, mostly the white kids,” she said. “A lot of them have great test scores, great grades and lots of activities.”

Catherine Rodarte, a Hispanic junior, agreed. Only one friend was not admitted under the state’s top students program, she said, “and when I asked how she got in, she said she was really involved in a lot of activities in high school.” She added: “In my anthro class, we were discussing it, and some people said they thought Latino students got in easier, and get more aid. I didn’t say anything, because sometimes it’s still hard for me to speak up in class when it’s almost all white students around me.”

Black students experience that isolation, too. “I’m pretty outgoing, but I’m the only black person in my Spanish class, and when it’s time to choose a partner, there’s that moment of, ‘Who’s going to want to be my partner?’ ” said Charley Collins, a senior. Ms. Collins and Nicole Akpunku, a sophomore friend, said the black students they knew had been admitted automatically. “All of my friends who got in were in the Top 10,” Ms. Akpunku said. But, Ms. Collins said, “a lot of white students didn’t come through Top 10.”However, many white and Asian students think that holistic admissions bring in more black and Hispanic students.

“If I had to guess, I think the 25 percent helps minorities more,” said Christina Jackson, a white senior from Oklahoma. “There’s been a shift. I think they’re thinking more about minorities now.”

Few students spoke with much passion on the issue. “I haven’t heard big debates or anything, maybe because the current students were already admitted,” said Natalie Butler, the student body president. Some faculty members did not seem to be getting worked up either. “There’s a little bit of fatigue,” said Arthur Markman, a psychology professor.