
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 2, 2000
TO: President Richard McCormick
FROM: Charles Hirschman
RE: I-200 and Minority Enrollments at the University of Washington

Some months ago, you asked me to convey any relevant results from my Mellon Foundation supported study on 'The Impact of Changes in Affirmative Action Policy on the Transition from High School to College in Washington State.' In this memo, I present an overview of some preliminary findings with particular relevance to the impact of I-200 on freshman enrollments at the University of Washington.

In addition to assessing the impact of I-200, the aim of the research project is to measure the opportunities for higher education of Washington State high school graduates, especially for race and ethnic minorities. During the first phase of the study, we are using enrollment data (from OSPI in Olympia, the U.S. Department of Education, and the University of Washington) to estimate the percentage of high school seniors who enroll in colleges and universities in the state of Washington. We have also conducted a survey of all high school seniors in the Tacoma Public Schools to measure their socioeconomic background and their plans for college. We will re-interview these students next year to find out how many are actually enrolled in college. The Tacoma data will be the baseline of a longitudinal study that (we hope) will continue for many years.

In this note, I report on only one slice of our data, namely the UW admissions database on freshman applications and admissions (obtained from Phil Hoffman in the Office of Institutional Studies) for the years of 1998, 1999, and 2000. This data series begins with the year before the implementation of I-200 and for the two years following. Table 1 shows the numbers of UW freshman applicants and the numbers of enrolled freshmen by race and ethnicity for Washington State and out-of-state in 1998, 1999, and 2000. Various summaries of these data are shown in different panels of the table, including absolute changes over time in the top right-hand panel, and percentage distributions by race and ethnicity in the lower panels. In the text, I highlight just the major patterns.

Overall, there are between 12,000 and 13,000 applicants for freshman slots at the University every year; about two-thirds are from in-state students. There was a small downturn in applications in 1999, but then a big jump in 2000 (largely driven by out-of-state applications). The number of enrolled freshman rose by almost 300 in 1999, and is projected to increase by another 400-500 students in 2000 (based on the number who have

paid deposits, the increase would be over 5,200 freshmen, but a more realistic estimate would be that the Fall freshman class will be between 4,900 and 5,000).

As the overall size of the UW freshmen class has increased by about 20 percent from 1998 to 2000, the relative numbers (and even the absolute numbers) of black, Hispanic, and American Indian students declined (though there was a modest recovery from 1999 to 2000). In 1998, 360 freshman (or 8.9 percent of the freshman class) were under-represented minorities (black, Hispanic, and American Indian); by 2000, the number was only 272 (or 5.2 percent of the freshman class). There was a modest recovery of minority enrollments in 2000, relative to 1999, but the absolute numbers are very small. For example, the numbers of black freshmen dropped from 121 in 1998 to 81 in 1999, and then rose to 105 in 2000.

Although the timing of these declines in minority enrollments suggest that I-200 is the culprit, the situation appears to be more complex than a simple tightening up of admission decision making. Table 1 shows that a decline in the number of applications from under-represented minorities, especially from in-state high school seniors, may be a critical element in the story. To understand what factors may have accounted for the decline in minority freshmen at the UW from 1998 to 2000, I examine three steps in the process: 1) the proportion of high school seniors who apply to the UW, 2) the proportion of UW applicants who are accepted, and 3), the proportion of accepted applicants who enroll as freshmen. These three “transitions” are presented across the columns in Table 2.

For the first transition (the application process), we can compute the relevant percentages only for Washington State high school seniors (see the middle panel under the first columns of Table 2). Overall, about 12 percent of Washington State high school seniors apply to the UW. The patterns by race and ethnicity are shown in Figure 1. The most remarkable statistic is that about 30 percent of Asian American high school seniors in Washington State apply the UW. Asian American high school seniors in Washington State are more likely to go to college than any other racial and ethnic group, and they are disproportionately drawn to the University of Washington.

High school seniors among the under-represented minority groups (blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians) are less likely to apply to the UW than are white high school seniors. These differences are fairly modest in absolute terms (2-3 percentage points), but significant (and consequential) in relative terms, as we shall see shortly. Most importantly, there was a drop-off in the percentages of black, Hispanic, and American Indian high school students who applied to the UW in 1999 relative to 1998 (there was a slight increase in the application rate for black students in 2000, but we are still behind the 1998 level). It seems that there was a significant “discouragement” effect on minority student applications to the UW following the passage of I-200. This effect may also be evident at Western Washington University (the other institution with competitive admission processes), which experienced a decline in minority enrollment. At other four-year colleges, private colleges, and community colleges, minority enrollment held fairly stable

from 1998 to 1999, and actually rose in a few cases (these data are not shown here, but are available if you would like to see them).

The middle columns in Table 2 show the acceptance rate of applicants to the UW. Most of the discussion of I-200 has focused on this process – indeed the intent of the referendum was to limit any direct consideration of race or ethnicity in admission decisions. In 1998, when race and ethnicity could be taken into account, there were only slight differences in the acceptance rate among Washington State applications—the rate hovered around 80 percent for all groups (see Figure 2). There was much wider variation among acceptance rates for out-of-state applicants (Note that over 90 percent of out-of-state applicants are whites or Asian Americans).

In 1999 (post I-200), there was decline of about 14 percentage points in the acceptance rates of Washington State black students (from 84 percent to 70 percent), and smaller declines for some of the other under-represented minorities (see Figure 2). In 2000, the acceptance rates for most Washington State minority groups are back up to where they were in 1998. The most important change in 1999 and 2000 was the increase in acceptance rates of out-of-state applicants from around 50 percent to over 70 percent.

The last step of the process—the “yield” or the percent of accepted applicants who actually enroll is shown in the last columns of Tables 6 and in Figure 3 (for in-state students). About one-half of all successful Washington State applicants enroll as freshmen compared to only about one-quarter of successful Out-of-State applicants. The yield of the under-represented groups in Washington State are fairly close those of whites, with the major exception of Asian American students who are disproportionately likely to matriculate. Overall, there appears to be a trend toward greater enrollment rates over the three-year period, especially in 2000 (this may be due, in part to the use of preliminary data on deposits paid, rather than actual enrollments).

How can we summarize the cumulative effect of these three “transitions” for each race and ethnic group over these three years? The bottom panel represents an exercise where we begin with a hypothetical pool of 1,000 Washington State high school seniors in each group for each year and subject them to cumulative winnowing of each transition (the real percentages from the top part of Table 6). The application process takes the heaviest “toll” for all groups. Only 9 to 10 percent (90/1000) of white high school seniors apply to the UW, but the attrition is even greater for the under-represented minority groups. Only 50 to 70 of the original 1000 high school seniors for blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians make it into the applicant pool. The decline in applications in 1999 (the “discouragement” effect) persists into 2000. Although there is some decrease in the Asian American application rate, their representation among high school seniors in the UW applicant pool is nothing short of incredible.

The admissions process is an important one, but much less consequential in explaining race and ethnic variations in enrollment than the application process. After 1999,

admissions decisions widened majority-minority gaps (especially for blacks).. The race and ethnic gaps in “representation” are reduced a bit in the final stage of matriculation, with some slight gains because of higher enrollment rates for under-represented minority groups. The net result from three steps is, however, smaller fractions of minority high school seniors are “translated” into UW freshmen than for the majority population. The exceptional group is Asian Americans—about 17-18 percent of Washington State high school seniors wind up as UW freshman, compared to less than 5 percent of all other groups.

Another perspective on the entire process is revealed in Table 3, which shows the consequences of three alternative strategies or scenarios that might be considered to increase the numbers of under-represented minority students. The first strategy is to increase the application rate of minority high school seniors to the UW to the average of all Washington State seniors—12.3 percent in 2000. The second strategy would be to admit 100 percent of all students who apply. The third strategy would be to persuade 100 percent of all accepted students to matriculate. None of these strategies is realistic, in the sense that they could be achieved, or even that they are desirable. The goal of this “what if” exercise is to discover the potential of these three “levers” to increase the numbers of under-represented students.

The first column in Table 3 represents the baseline for comparisons with the three scenarios—namely the “actual” numbers of the minorities (blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians) that are likely to be UW freshmen this fall (based on having paid their deposits indicating their plan to enroll). For purposes of this discussion, I focus on the middle panel of numbers, which are the in-state students from Washington State (and presented in Figure 4). There will be 100 black freshmen, 100 Hispanic freshmen, and 44 American Indian freshmen—altogether 244 minority freshman from Washington State of the expected entering class of 5,236 freshmen (the number is only 272 if both in-state and out-of-state students were included).

The first scenario in the second column raises the application rates for these groups to the simple average of all Washington State seniors—12.3 percent. In this scenario, the other two processes: the acceptance rates and the enrollment rates remained unchanged from their current levels. The change in application rate would have a very dramatic impact on the numbers of minority freshmen. The number of black freshmen would increase by two-thirds and the numbers of Hispanic and American Indian students would more than double.

The consequence of accepting 100 percent of all minority student applicants would be fairly modest—an overall gain of about 20 percent in the numbers of in-state minority freshmen. The limited effect that comes from changes in acceptance rate is because there are so few minority applicants, the majority of whom are already accepted.

The consequence of the third scenario—having all accepted students matriculate—would have more impact on minority student enrollments, increasing the number of minority students by more than 70 percent. This is because only about half of accepted applicants (minorities and the majority) currently enroll. Although this strategy would be efficacious in terms of increasing minority enrollments, it is also probably the most difficult to accomplish. Students who are accepted but decline usually have multiple offers of admission from other universities. It would be very difficult to entice more than a small number of minority students away from prestigious colleges and universities (e.g. Ivy League).

Overall, it seems that the most promising avenue of success is to increase the number of minority applications from high school seniors. Only 7.5 percent of black high school seniors and about 5 percent of Hispanic and American Indian high school seniors in Washington State applied for freshman admission in the year 2000. In spite of some progress, these fractions are below those of 1998 for all three under-represented minority groups. Bringing these numbers up state average of 12 percent, or even to 10 percent, would have a dramatic impact on minority student enrollments.