



Dr. William G. Bowen

Dr. William G. Bowen, an economist, is President of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and former President of Princeton University. With Dr. Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, Dr. Bowen is the author of *The Shape of the River, Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. At the invitation of ARCHE, Dr. Bowen visited Atlanta and presented the findings of the book during appearances at Morehouse College and Emory University on December 3, 1998.

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A Presentation by Dr. William G. Bowen on

The Shape of the River

Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions

at Morehouse College, December 3, 1998

Let me say first and most emphatically what a real pleasure it is for me to be back in Atlanta, a city I have visited many times with various hats on. It renews my appreciation for how a great city with a very diverse population can confront directly and openly the most sensitive issues and can work through them. It is always restoring.

This whole question of whether we can consider race in college and university admissions is an issue important, in my view not just in higher education, but for the society these institutions exist to serve. I'm not sure there are many more important topics for this country going forward than this one.

What did Derek Bok and I set out to do when we began the path that led to the publication of this book? What we set out to do primarily was present evidence—to look for facts—that would either sustain, or not, the assumptions so many of us have made over so many years in advocating efforts to include more fully the minority students who are in the educational programs of academically selective schools. We felt that there had been enough—maybe too much—high-pitched debate arguing from example and too little effort to see what the evidence really shows. To be sure, not everybody cares about evidence, but evidence does matter and it matters to lots of people.

The results we present are based largely on a huge database created by the Mellon Foundation called "COLLEGE AND BEYOND." It serves many purposes beyond these we are talking about today. In its entirety, the database contains records of students who entered 34 academically selective colleges and universities—including Morehouse, Spelman, and Emory—in either the fall of 1951, the fall of 1976, or the fall of 1989. For the purpose of this study, we were focused on a subset of just 28 of these institutions that had a large mix of white and black students.

Institutions, by Selectivity Categories, 1976 Entering Cohort

SEL 1 – Bryn Mawr College, Princeton University, Rice University, Stanford University, Swarthmore College, Wesleyan University, Williams College, Yale University

SEL 2 – Barnard College, Columbia University, Duke University, Hamilton College, Kenyon College, Northwestern University, Oberlin College, Smith College, Tufts University, University of Pennsylvania, Vanderbilt University, Washington University, Wellesley College

SEL 3 – Denison University, Emory University, Miami University (Ohio), Pennsylvania State University, Tulane University, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill)

Why do we focus on these academically selective schools? You will see that they include liberal arts colleges, women's colleges, universities, and four large public universities. The main reason is a very simple and practical one. This debate over whether you can take race into account in admissions has its strongest impact, its biggest bite, where people are forced to pick and choose. If a college or university is in a position—in many ways a favorable position—of having enough places for all the qualified students who apply, then you don't have to confront this issue, at least not in these terms. But if a school gets far more qualified applicants than it can accommodate, then it has to pick and choose. So it is in this territory that this debate is being fought out, as well as in the professional schools of law, medicine, and business. It is not an accident that most of the high profile law suits have focused on either these professional schools, medical schools and so forth, or on selective public universities, as the debate now in the state of Michigan focuses on the University of Michigan.

In no way is the study meant to suggest that other parts of the system of American higher education are not every bit as important as these schools. Of course they are. The glory of the system of higher education in this country is precisely its diversity. It serves many purposes in ways that are reinforcing and complementary. It's for that reason the Foundation sponsors so much work on sectors of higher education other than these schools at the same time that this project is focused here.

I should also explain that the focus of this study is on African-American students and on white students, which is not to begin to suggest that diversity in America is an all black-white issue. Of course it is not. There are large numbers of Hispanic students, as there are Asian-Americans, native Americans, and so on, but in the fall of 1976 there were far more African-American matriculants at these schools than there were Hispanics. In fact there were three times as many. We could do statistical analyses of the African-American population that we couldn't do with the Hispanics. That is why the focus is as it is. And we are funding other studies using other statistical methods to look at the Hispanic population.

The database, to which Morehouse, Emory, and Spelman contributed, is remarkable. It contains the full admission records of the students—of the almost 90,000 students—who entered in one of these three years. It contains their transcripts, how they did in school. Did they graduate? What did they major in? What kinds of grades did they get? Were they athletes? It tracks people relentlessly through what coaches call “the game of life.” What happened to them after they left college? Did they go on to graduate school? What graduate school? What about occupations, marriage, family, occupation, income, civic contribution? What do they think looking back? Do they regret that they ever went to wherever it is they went? And so it is the linking of all of these pieces of information—really tracking people through a lifetime—that gives the study its statistical power.

Objectives of Considering Race in Admissions

In order to evaluate these policies you have to begin with objectives. You can evaluate anything only against what it is supposed to be doing. When these academically selective colleges created these programs in the late '60s and early '70s, following the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many other people who really woke us up as a country, there were two objectives in mind. One was to improve education for everybody at these schools by creating a more diverse student body that would help people learn how to cope and function in an increasingly pluralistic world. The second objective was to prepare larger numbers of minority students to enter the professions, to assume positions of civic and community leadership, to do something about racial stratification in America.

So how did these schools do in achieving these objectives? I am going to first talk a little bit about what happened in college. We always begin, it seems, by talking about graduation rates, but before I do I need to remind everybody here of something you all know. People who do not graduate do not graduate for a host of reasons, most of which are not academic: there is not enough money, there are health problems, or who-knows-what went wrong in life. Graduation rates are not a measure of academic capacity, although people keep trying to interpret them that way, but still they do matter.

Graduation Rates

When we look at graduation rates we see that of the 28 schools in this study, 75 percent of the black matriculants who started out in the fall of 1976 graduated within six years from the first school they entered. Of course, others transferred and graduated from other places later on. You see in Figure 3.1 what the graduation rates are for Hispanic, Asian-American, and white students. Then you look at the national norms, and you see that the national norm for all black matriculants entering four-year schools was 40 percent; the norm for whites was 59 percent. So you see the theme of this research. The bump-up for African-American students from 40 to 75 percent is bigger than the bump-up for the white students of 59 to 86 percent. But the graduation rates at these schools

College & Beyond and National Graduation Rates, by Race, 1989 Entering Cohort

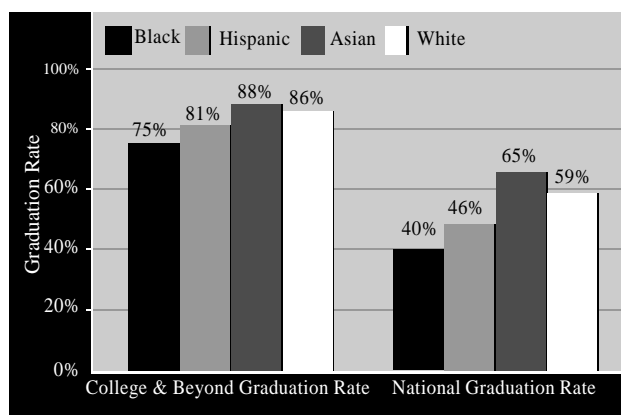


Figure 3.1 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

are very high for everybody. They should be. They have resources; they are very selective. It would be depressing in the extreme if this were not the case.

The Mellon Foundation is concerned about persistence, particularly among African-American matriculants nationally. Mike Nettles at the University of Michigan is conducting for the Foundation a major study intended to “unpack” the factors that cause that 40 percent figure nationally to be as low as it is. To what extent is it money, is it finances? To what extent is it poor programming, and so on? We’re on that case, but it is not my subject this morning.

Fields of Study

One of the myths, and I think one of the most pernicious myths to run through this debate, has been that African-American students admitted to these highly selective schools “dumb-down” the curriculum by majoring overwhelmingly in soft subjects, whatever one thinks those subjects are. Oddly, nobody ever knew what the distribution of majors looked like. We do know now, and what the graph in Figure 3.9 shows and the book discusses in more detail, is that overwhelmingly the patterns of majors are very similar. Black students are a little more likely to major in the social sciences; white students, a little more likely to major in the humanities. Where the sciences are shown—biology, chemistry—you couldn’t put a piece of paper between the white and the African-American matriculants. Very few white or black students are majoring in area and ethnic studies of any kind, roughly three percent. So, so much for the argument about differences in majors.

Percentage of Graduates Majoring in Selected Fields, by Race, 1989 Entering Cohort

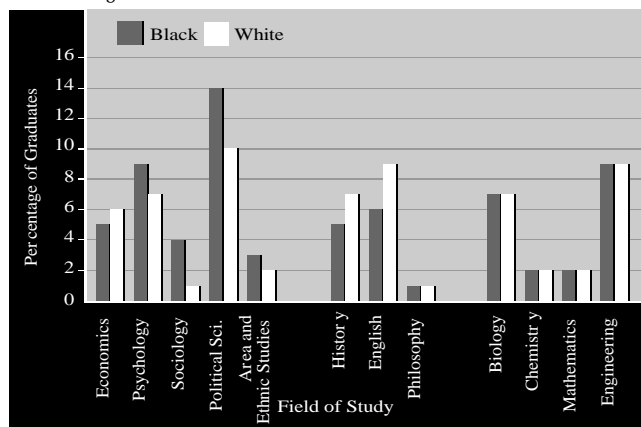


Figure 3.9 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

Grades

One of the most disturbing findings of this study is that African-American students enrolled in these predominantly white institutions do not always do as well academically as one would expect them to do on the basis of the credentials they bring with them. And it is not that they do badly, but that the student who gets an A-minus ought to get an A-plus. Why that is is a great mystery. There are many explanations and hypotheses that we can all think of right away, but it is not good. So again, the Foundation is investing heavily in efforts to understand better

the dynamics of all of this and what schools can do to improve academic performance which is good but which can be better.

I might just add parenthetically, and particularly for the admissions people, that the black students in this study report that they learn more than do their white classmates, particularly in critically important areas such as ability to communicate, to write, and so on. The kind of “value added” they gain from their education is very substantial.

Learning from Diversity

When Justice Powell wrote his critically important opinion in the Bakke case, he rested the legitimacy of race-sensitive admissions on this argument: that there was learning in diversity, and schools ought to be permitted to promote it if they want to. Until now that argument had rested almost exclusively on assertion and anecdote and not on any evidence.

In fact, the critics have charged that there wasn’t any real interaction: the black students go off and live by themselves, and the white students do this, that, and the other thing. So we measured interaction carefully, and what did we find? We found that 56 percent of all the white students in this study knew *well*—with the word well under-scored—two or more black classmates. And when you think that there are only seven percent black students in these schools, that is pretty remarkable. Among the black students, nearly 90 percent knew well two or more white classmates. Of course, there were more white classmates, so it was a much easier thing to do. But there was lots of interaction defined any way you look at it.

We then asked these students how much they thought they had learned from this aspect of college, and the answer is “a lot.” What we show is that among the 1976 matriculants, 57 percent of the black students thought that college made either a lot of difference or a great deal of difference—four or five on a scale of five—in terms of how much their college experience contributed to learning to get along and so forth. Forty-six percent of the white candidates gave the same response. By 1989, all the numbers move up and move up substantially. So by the testimony of the students who were there, a lot of learning of this kind went on.

Then we asked what I think is one of the most important questions in the book, although it hasn’t been picked up much by journalists. We asked the people who had been at these schools to reflect on their schools and tell us from their perspective after they graduated what they thought their schools ought to be doing in this and other areas: athletics, residential life, and so forth. What we found was that among the white matriculants, nearly 80 percent thought their school ought to sustain race-sensitive admission policies or increase them. Only 21.9 percent thought they ought to put less emphasis on these policies.

So we hear all this talk about white backlash and resentment and all that. Well, all I can tell you is that among white students at these schools, not so. There is overwhelming support for these policies among the white students who graduated, which is why I think when I was at Princeton administering these programs I had so little complaint about this aspect of what Princeton did. Sure, we should have won more

football games, and on and on and on, but there was very little complaint on these policies because students knew they made sense. It made sense for everybody, and I think that for the first time there are real data that make that point. I also think it needs a lot more emphasis in the national debate than it has gotten, because here we have testimony, not from people out there somewhere imagining what it's like, but from people who were actually there.

Advanced Degrees

We all know that graduate education increasingly is a pathway to opportunity in America, and one of the objectives of these programs, the second objective, was to aim toward getting talented minority students into the best graduate professional programs. That aim has been achieved without any question: 56 percent of the black graduates among those entering in 1976 earned advanced degrees of one kind or another. Fifty-six percent of their white classmates earned advanced degrees of one kind or another. Look at the white bars in Figure 4.2. Those are doctoral degrees—overwhelmingly Ph.D.s—or law degrees, medical degrees, and so forth. A higher fraction of the black graduates earned those degrees than did their white classmates. Look at the national reference points and you see the big jump up—from eight percent in professional or doctoral and 34 percent in total advanced degrees. So there is a huge accomplishment in that area.

Percentage of Graduates Attaining Advanced Degrees, by Type of Degree and Race, College & Beyond and National Graduates, 1976 Entering Cohort

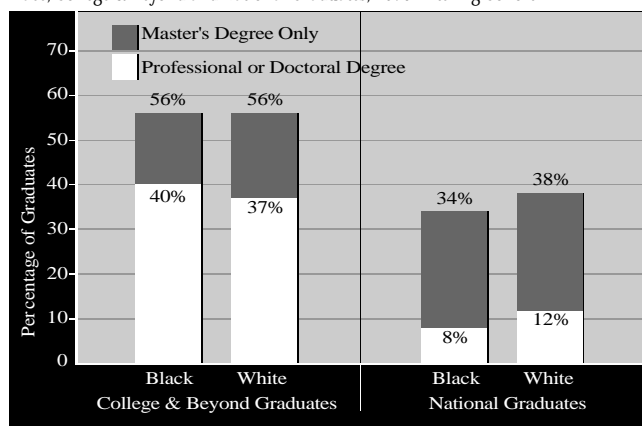


Figure 4.2 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

Earnings

I am an economist, and so I look at wages. I look at what the market place tells me people are willing to pay for the contributions these folks can make. What I find among men, shown in Figure 5.2, is that the average earnings of the black male graduates who entered in 1976 was \$85,000. These are people roughly 38 years old. The national reference point is \$46,000. The white men earned even more, and we can come back to that. It's an important distinction, but the bump-up for the white men from the national reference point is a little bit lower. Women earn less than the men. Now, spare the messenger! I know only that in the case of women the black-white gap does not exist for reasons we can talk about if you want to.

Mean Earned Income in 1995, by Race and Gender, College & Beyond Graduates and National Graduates, 1976 Entering Cohort

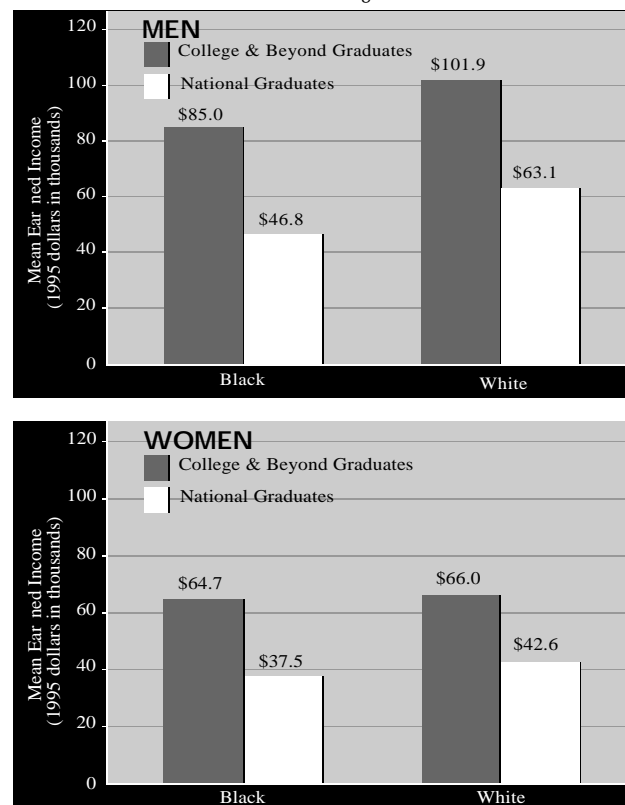


Figure 5.2 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

Civic Contributions

We were convinced when we started this study that it was very important to measure civic involvement, to see to what extent these people are giving something back. And this is one of the most important and impressive sets of results of the entire study. What we find is that however you classify the black and the white graduates, the black graduates are doing more in terms of civic and community contributions than are their white classmates. In Figure 6.6 [see page 5], I happen to have grouped them by advanced degree. Look at the doctors. Of all the white holders of M.D.s—these are people 38 years old—nine percent were leaders of community or social service activities. Now I think that's a pretty good percentage: these are very busy people, and they're at a time in their lives when there is a lot of pressure on them. Nearly one in ten of the white doctors is involved, leading something. Look at the black percentage: 18 percent; twice as high. Look at the lawyers. Look at the people with business degrees. Look at the people who had Master's degrees. I almost am embarrassed to look at the Ph.D.s. So did these students take away from college both the capacity to contribute to the community and a willingness to do so? Absolutely. They make huge contributions, which simply cannot be denied.

Percentage of Former Students Leading Community or Social Service Activities since College, by Type of Advanced Degree and Race, 1976 Entering Cohort

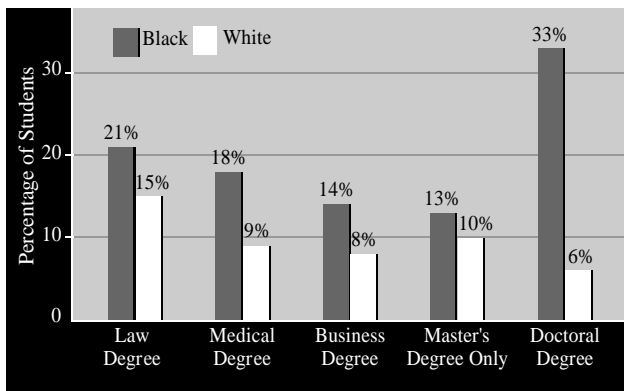


Figure 6.6 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

Academic Fit

One of the criticisms of these policies has been that the intended beneficiaries will be the victims; that the African-American and other minority students recruited with 1100 SAT scores will go to a place—choose your schools—where the average scores are higher. They will be demoralized, destroyed, defeated, bitter, hostile. They should have gone to a place where everybody had 1100 scores. They didn't fit in, won't fit in.

That is totally untrue. We have so much data, and I show in Figure 3.3 only groups of students within given SAT ranges. At the far left are all the African-American students within the 1000 to 1100 range, grouped by the school they attended. Compare the most competitive schools, where the average SAT may be 1300, with those that are less selective with lower averages. Do the students graduate at a higher rate from the schools with lower SAT averages, where, as the hypothesis says "they fit in best"? Absolutely not. The pattern is precisely the opposite. Repeat the experiment at the next interval. Substitute any outcome measure you want. Do anything you want to the data. Hold any constant you can think of holding constant. The pattern is relentless.

Black Graduation Rates, By Combined SAT Score and Institutional Selectivity, 1989 Entering Cohort

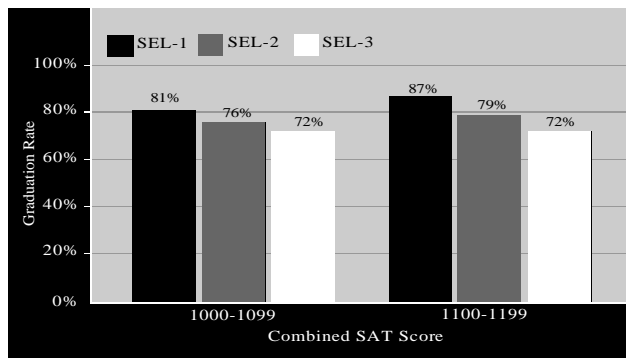


Figure 3.3 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

What this says to me, among other things, is that the admissions officers know what they're doing. They're not taking random sets of folks. They're taking the people within any given interval who they

think are going to do well in a particular educational environment.

Are the students succeeding? Sure they're succeeding. And of course the schools with the highest SAT scores are also privileged places. They've got money, they've got student aid, so of course they should get better results. If they didn't, we would be demoralized. So the "fit" hypothesis, that the beneficiaries are the victims, should be given a rest. There isn't a scrap of evidence to support it.

Admissions Probability

Now I say just a word about the impact of these policies and why they matter. And I need to take one minute to look at admissions probability.

What the bottom line in Figure 2.5 shows is how the probability of admission for a white applicant varied with SAT score. You see that, of course, the probability of admission rises as the SAT score rises. You also see that there are lots of people with lower scores being admitted, and there are lots of people with much higher SAT scores not being admitted. What this shows is that nobody is admitting students simply by the numbers, thank heavens.

For black applicants, you see a similar shape to the curve. I note two things. First, even for the black applicants having a high SAT score, a

Probability of Admission to Five Selective Institutions, by Combined SAT Score and Race, 1989

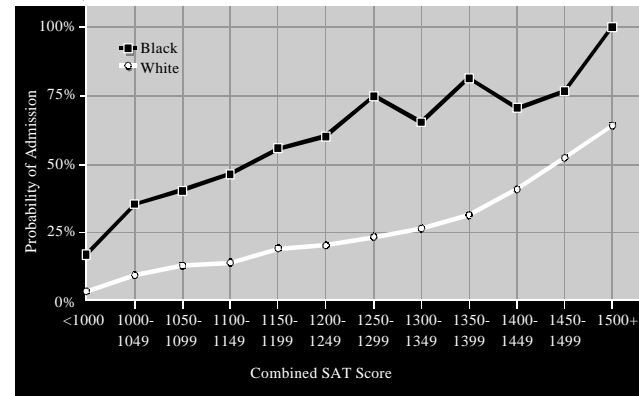


Figure 2.5 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

very high, astronomical SAT is no guarantee of admission. There are no guarantees for anybody, because there may be something else in an applicant's folder that the admissions person has doubts about. They may worry about whether it's the right school and so forth. Still, the fact that there is race-sensitive admissions is the reason the probability is higher for the black candidates than for the white candidates at any given SAT interval. So, the definition of race neutrality, the operational definition that we have used in this book, squashes the curves together.

Impact on Enrollment

Impose a regimen, a discipline, that says the odds of being admitted have got to be the same within any SAT interval if you're black or if you're white. If you do that, the impact on enrollment will be dramatic. This is why this debate is so important, why it has teeth, why it isn't just abstract. In Figure 2.11 [see page 6], we show estimates of impact if

there were no race-sensitivity in admissions, and we see that in the most selective schools African-American enrollment would fall from about eight percent to two percent and so forth. In law and professional schools, the impact would be even greater. So, this issue is real, and it is consequential. It is not about nothing.

Black Students as a Percentage of All College & Beyond Students, by Institutional Selectivity and Hypothetical Percentages, 1989

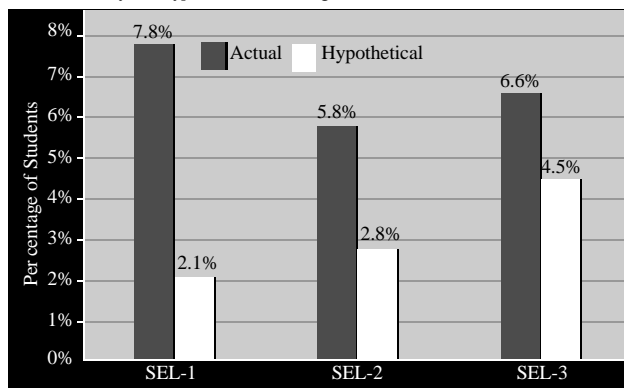


Figure 2.11 from *The Shape of the River*. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

Merit

As I talk about this issue all over the place, I keep coming back to the issue of merit. Now do I believe in admitting people on merits? Absolutely. But what does merit mean? Does it mean admitting just by test scores and grades? No, of course not. It never has. Who in their right mind ever believed that test scores and grades were the only factors that determined qualification? That makes no sense at all. The figures that I showed you before ought to destroy once and for all the notion that these are test score, grade-driven admissions policies for white or black students. Thank heavens they're not. Somebody is picking and choosing, which is what we're supposed to do.

I would submit that merit means admitting a group of people who individually—we are making individual decisions—and collectively, taken together, create a class that will advance best the societal purposes these institutions are charged with serving. And if you believe that one of these purposes is to create an educationally rich and diverse environment, does taking race into account make sense? Of course it makes sense. If you believe that one of the objectives is to contribute something to a society that we hope down the road will be less stratified than what we have today, do these policies make sense? Of course they make sense. These policies are designed to serve the missions of the institutions, and I would submit that that's how you need to think about merit. And if you thought about it in that way, the data in this study show overwhelmingly that these schools have been admitting relentlessly on merits.

If we tried to turn the clock back, which is what some people would like, we would not only fail to continue to make as much progress as we are making, but we would erode the hope that a lot of people have for themselves and for their children that this country is changing in a better way. I certainly would not want to align with that point of view.

Audience Participation

Nearly an hour of discussion followed Dr. Bowen's presentation at Morehouse College. The following questions and comments from participants, along with Dr. Bowen's responses, are taken from the transcript of the presentation.

Participant : I would like for you to say a few things about black under-performance, which I think is a tremendous problem, and the explanations you find most plausible.

Dr. Bowen : The grades and the class rankings of black matriculants at these highly selective schools are not as good as we would expect based on test scores and all the rest when they entered. The phenomenon sometimes called black under-performance has been studied by Claude Steele and a great many other people. And what accounts for it? I think there are three classes of explanations, and we are trying to parse these out and better understand them.

One is we don't measure very well what people bring with them when they come. High school grades and all that do not mean the same thing for the typical black matriculant as they do for the typical white matriculant. We should correct better for the advantages that the typical white matriculant carries along as that person enters college. So that's some part.

Second, there is what Steele has called stereotype-vulnerability. He is a Stanford psychologist who has written very intelligently on this subject. There is this notion that women can't do math, that African-Americans can't do this, that, and the other thing. It is destructive and harmful if students are put in situations where those stereotypes can be reinforced. Steele has shown in laboratory investigations that bad things follow. So on campuses you need to construct environments—which can be done—where you don't reinforce those kinds of stereotypes. That has implications for remedial programs and for all sorts of other things.

Third, and I think this is very important, the vignettes in the book, the really wonderful stories people in the database contributed, tell me that in so many instances under-performance results from lack of comfort, pressure, and distractions that get in the way. My colleague at the Foundation from Bryn Mawr says that in her experience it was the African-American students who were always asking, "Is this the right place for me? Do I belong?," who had a much harder time doing math than the ones who didn't feel that way. So I think a big challenge for these colleges is to help people feel comfortable, not distracted.

The good news is that there are a number of experimental programs around the country which demonstrate that this problem can be dealt with if people think about it and devise programs to do it. That's another objective of the Foundation right now.

Participant: We all know that Americans, whether they be judges, legislators, or editorial writers, think of merit as high school grades and SAT scores. How can we convince people of other important variables to include in the construction of merit?

