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Top Colleges Take More Blacks, but Which Ones?

By SARA RIMER and KAREN W. ARENSON

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — At the most recent reunion of Harvard University's black alumni, there was lots of pleased talk about the increase in the number of black students at Harvard.

But the celebratory mood was broken in one forum, when some speakers brought up the thorny issue of exactly who those black students were.

While about 8 percent, or about 530, of Harvard's undergraduates were black, Lani Guinier, a Harvard law professor, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., the chairman of Harvard's African and African-American studies department, pointed out that the majority of them — perhaps as many as two-thirds — were West Indian and African immigrants or their children, or to a lesser extent, children of biracial couples.

They said that only about a third of the students were from families in which all four grandparents were born in this country, descendants of slaves. Many argue that it was students like these, disadvantaged by the legacy of Jim Crow laws, segregation and decades of racism, poverty and inferior schools, who were intended as principal beneficiaries of affirmative action in university admissions.

What concerned the two professors, they said, was that in the high-stakes world of admissions to the most selective colleges — and with it, entry into the country's inner circles of power, wealth and influence — African-American students whose families have been in America for generations were being left behind.

"I just want people to be honest enough to talk about it," Professor Gates, the Yale-educated son of a West Virginia paper-mill worker, said recently, reiterating the questions he has been raising since the black alumni weekend last fall. "What are the implications of this?"

Both Professor Gates and Professor Guinier emphasize that this is not about excluding immigrants, whom sociologists describe as a highly motivated, self-selected group. Blacks, who make up 13 percent of the United States population, are still underrepresented at Harvard and other selective colleges, they said.

The conversation that bubbled up that weekend has continued across campus here and beyond as these professors and others publicly raise painful and complicated questions about race and class and how they play out in elite university admissions, issues that some educators and black admissions officers have privately talked about for some time.

There is no consensus on the answers, and since most institutions say they do not look into the origins of their black students, the absence of hard data makes the discussion even more difficult.

Some educators, including the president of Harvard, Lawrence H. Summers, declined to comment on the issue; others are divided.

The president of Amherst College, Anthony W. Marx, says that colleges should care about the ethnicity of black students because in overlooking those with predominantly American roots, colleges are missing an

"opportunity to correct a past injustice" and depriving their campuses "of voices that are particular to being African-American, with all the historical disadvantages that that entails."

But others say there is no reason to take the ancestry of black students into account.

"I don't think it should matter for purposes of admissions in higher education," said Lee C. Bollinger, the president of Columbia University, who as president of the University of Michigan fiercely defended its use of affirmative action. "The issue is not origin, but social practices. It matters in American society whether you grow up black or white. It's that differential effect that really is the basis for affirmative action."

Professors Gates and Guinier cite various sources for their figures about Harvard's black students, including conversations with administrators and students, a recent Harvard undergraduate honors thesis based on extensive student interviews, and the "Black Guide to Life at Harvard," which surveyed 70 percent of the black undergraduates and was published last year by the Harvard Black Students Association.

Researchers at Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania who have been studying the achievement of minority students at 28 selective colleges and universities (including theirs, as well as Yale, Columbia, Duke and the University of California at Berkeley), found that 41 percent of the black students identified themselves as immigrants, as children of immigrants or as mixed race.

Douglas S. Massey, a Princeton sociology professor who was one of the researchers, said the black students from immigrant families and the mixed-race students represented a larger proportion of the black students than that in the black population in the United States generally. Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociologist at Queens College, says that among 18- to 25-year-old blacks nationwide, about 9 percent describe themselves as of African or West Indian ancestry. Like the Gates and Guinier numbers, these tallies do not include foreign students.

In the 40 or so years since affirmative action began in higher education, the focus has been on increasing the numbers of black students at selective colleges, not on their family background. Professor Massey said that the admissions officials he talked to at these colleges seemed surprised by the findings about the black students. "They really didn't have a good idea of what they're getting," he said.

But few black students are surprised. Sheila Adams, a Harvard senior, was born in the South Bronx to a school security officer and a subway token seller, and her family has been in this country for generations. Ms. Adams said there were so few black students like her at Harvard that they had taken to referring to themselves as "the descendants."

The subject, however, remains taboo among some college administrators. Anthony Carnevale, a former vice president at the Educational Testing Service, which develops SAT tests, said colleges were happy to take high-performing black students from immigrant families.

"They've found an easy way out," Mr. Carnevale said. "The truth is, the higher-education community is no longer connected to the civil rights movement. These immigrants represent Horatio Alger, not Brown v. Board of Education and America's race history."

Almost from its inception, following the civil rights struggles of the 1960's, affirmative action has been attacked and redefined. In its 1978 Bakke decision, the Supreme Court shifted the rationale away from issues of social justice to the educational value of diversity.

One black admissions official at a highly selective college said the reluctance of college officials to discuss these issues has helped obscure the scarcity of black students whose families have been in this country for generations.

"If somebody does not start paying attention to those who are not able to make it in, they're going to start drifting farther and farther behind," said the official, who declined to be identified because the subject is so charged. "You've got to say that the long-term blacks were either dealt a crooked hand, or something is innately wrong with them. And I simply won't accept that there is something wrong with them."

Mary C. Waters, the chairman of the sociology department at Harvard, who has studied West Indian immigrants, says they are initially more successful than many African-Americans for a number of reasons. Since they come from majority-black countries, they are less psychologically handicapped by the stigma of race. In addition, many arrive with higher levels of education and professional experience. And at first, they encounter less discrimination.

"You need a philosophical discussion about what are the aims of affirmative action," Professor Waters said. "If it's about getting black faces at Harvard, then you're doing fine. If it's about making up for 200 to 500 years of slavery in this country and its aftermath, then you're not doing well. And if it's about having diversity that includes African-Americans from the South or from inner-city high schools, then you're not doing well, either."

Even among black scholars there is disagreement on whether a discussion about the origins of black students is helpful. Orlando Patterson, a Harvard sociologist and West Indian native, said he wished others would "let sleeping dogs lie."

"The doors are wide open - as wide open as they ever will be - for native-born black middle-class kids to enter elite colleges," he wrote in an e-mail message.

There is also wide disagreement about what, if anything, should be done about the underrepresentation of African-American students whose families have been here for generations. Even Professor Gates, who can trace his ancestry back to slaves, and Professor Guinier, whose mother is white and whose father immigrated from Jamaica, emphasize different ideas.

"This is about the kids of recent arrivals beating out the black indigenous middle-class kids," said Professor Gates, who plans to assemble a study group on the subject. "We need to learn what the immigrants' kids have so we can bottle it and sell it, because many members of the African-American community, particularly among the chronically poor, have lost that sense of purpose and values which produced our generation."

In Professor Guinier's view, there are plenty of other blacks who could also succeed at elite colleges, but the institutions are not doing enough to find them. She said they were overly reliant on measures like SAT scores, which correlate strongly with family wealth and parental education.

"Colleges and universities are defaulting on their obligation to train and educate a representative group of future leaders," said Professor Guinier, a Harvard graduate herself who has been studying college admissions practices for more than a decade. "And they are excluding poor and working-class whites, not just descendants of slaves."

Harvard admissions officials say that they, too, are concerned about attracting more lower-income students of all races. They plan to spend an additional \$300,000 to \$375,000 a year to recruit more low-income students and provide more financial aid to these students.

"This increases the chances that we will be able to reach into the communities that have not been reached," said William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid.

While Harvard officials ignore the ethnic distinctions among their black students, Harvard's black undergraduates are developing a body of literature in the form of student research papers.

Aisha Haynie, the undergraduate whose senior thesis Professor Guinier cited, said her research was prompted by the reaction from her black classmates when she told them that she was not from the West Indies or Africa, but from the Carolinas. "They would say, 'No, where are you really from?' " said Ms. Haynie, 26, who earned a master's degree in public policy at Princeton and is now in medical school.

Marques J. Redd, a 20-year-old from Macon, Ga., who graduated in June and was one of the editors of Harvard's black student guide, said that Harvard officials had discouraged them from collecting the data on who the black students were.

"But we thought it was one aspect of the black experience at Harvard that should be documented," he said. "The knowledge had power. It was something that needed to be out in the open instead of something that people whispered about."

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