Admissions Is Just Part of the Diversity Puzzle

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Illustration by Pui Yan Fong

I hope that as the courts continue to weigh the merits of affirmative-action cases, they consider the widely held importance of a diverse freshman class. But I hope, too, that judges and higher-education leaders alike recognize that a varied class is only one piece of the diversity puzzle.

It's strange that virtually all of the attention of the courts and college leaders is focused on the front end of the process—admissions—rather than the outcomes of these exercises in creating "critical masses" of diversity. As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote for the majority in 2003's *Grutter v. Bollinger*, campus diversity—"a compelling state interest"—is a means to an end, not an end unto itself. Unfortunately, that's not the way it's treated on most college campuses.

Admissions officers have the power to select the ingredients for a diverse campus. But then colleges drop the ball when it comes to achieving the end espoused by O'Connor in *Grutter*. "Diversity promotes learning outcomes and 'better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce,'" she wrote. "Major American businesses have made it clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints."

It is not sufficient to declare successive incoming classes of freshmen the most diverse yet. Too many administrators think that by populating their gated communities with evermore demographically mixed classes, "diversity" will result. I have taught during the last 25 years at a variety of campuses, including a large state university, large private universities, a small liberal-arts college, and now an Ivy League institution. I can attest to the fact that the benefits of diversity do not spontaneously arise merely from the presence of a varied student body. It is amazing to me the amount of effort undertaken to create diverse incoming classes while comparatively little is done to create a "choice architecture," to borrow a phrase from behavioral economics, that would "nudge" students into interactions outside of their comfort zones. Without such nudges, students will default to sameness or, in the words of the political scientist Robert Putnam, they will "hunker down" with students like themselves.

Sandwiched between the widely publicized research efforts that yielded *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000) and *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster 2010), written with David E. Campbell, Putnam undertook equally rigorous research that resulted in a journal article in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century"

(2007). There, drawing from a sample of 41 communities (roughly 30,000 respondents) across the United States collected as part of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey in 2000, Putnam wrestles with the impact of diversity on the building of social capital.

Like many academics (myself included), he supports diversity on college campuses. He filed an amicus brief in support of the University of Texas at Austin in the *Fisher v. Texas* case in response to a brief that used the findings in "E Pluribus Unum," in part, to back the plaintiff's argument against the use of race in admissions. Putnam's research, however, provides confounding as well as supporting evidence on the impact of diversity.

He makes three main points:

- "Increased immigration and diversity are not only inevitable, but over the long run they are also desirable. Ethnic diversity is, on balance, an important social asset."
- "In the short to medium run, ... immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital."
- "In the medium to long run, ... successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities. Thus, the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we.'"

College presidents across the nation would love to create such a broad and encompassing "we" on their campuses. But when it comes to social-capital building, most colleges fail at institutionalizing what Putnam and others call the "bridging" type of social capital, as opposed to the other basic kind, the "bonding" type. Bonding social capital is most prevalent on campuses because it involves deep trust and reciprocity with those whom you know well and care about—think fraternities, sororities, and affinity houses.

Recently, here at Dartmouth College, we announced the opening of our 14th affinity house. Bonding opportunities allow our student birds of a feather to flock together but do much less to bridge disparate groups into a campus community. At least 10 of Dartmouth's affinity houses explicitly promote bonding relationships among similarly situated students rather than bridging opportunities.

On a totally bridged campus, there would be far less need for the bonding type of affinity housing as the broader, diverse campus becomes a comfort zone. Bridging involves bringing together different races, ethnicities, and gender and sexual orientations in common cause. That's more difficult, but it is at the core of diversity as articulated by Justice O'Connor.

Left to their own devices in response to campus diversity, students will "hunker down" with a small group of similar associates. They hunker down when given the choice of where, and with whom, to live. They hunker down in dining halls. They hunker down even in classes.

A classic example was presented in a 2012 article in *The Chronicle.* The reporter, Libby Sander, described where students chose to sit in Leonard N. Moore's history course "The Rise of the Black Power Movement" at the University of Texas at Austin: "White sorority sisters, middle

right. Football and basketball players, back right. Second-generation African students, front right. Back left, conservative white students. Front left, religious black students." Moore says to the class, "Five hundred students, super-diverse—and look how you all sit. It is amazing how you all sit." He acknowledges, "We tend to sit with people we feel comfortable with."

For Putnam, the light at the end of the tunnel is found in "old" diversity. That is, social-capital benefits accrue when generations of diverse citizens live and work together for decades.

Unfortunately, on our college campuses, there will never be a medium term, let alone a long term, because entire campus populations turn over every four or five years. That makes the job of institutionalizing diversity in any meaningful way that much harder, particularly if we continue to support bonding but do little to encourage bridging.

When Putnam was interviewed by *The American Interest* (January/February 2008 issue), he offered the following synopsis: "Bonding and bridging aspects of social capital have different consequences. Bonding social capital links you to people just like you, same gender or age or race or what-have-you. Those sorts of links are good for some things and not for others. If you get sick, the people who bring you chicken soup probably represent your bonding social capital. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, represents your ties to people who are unlike you, who are of a different race or generation. For a modern and diverse democratic society, bridging social capital is important because, if you have a society that has tons of bonding but no bridging, you have a society that looks like Beirut or Baghdad."

As the courts craft their opinions, they would do well to remember the importance of diversity in the college-admissions process. College leaders, in addition to reaffirming this important role in admissions, must focus far more attention on creating truly bridged campuses, rather than wishing and hoping that diversity will flourish on its own.