DIVERSITY INITIATIVES AND THE LAW (STUDENT PROGRAMS)

Winter 2009

Jonathan R. Alger
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

The following summary provides a brief overview of practical principles and lessons learned from the U.S. Supreme Court’s decisions in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003) (upholding the University of Michigan’s use of race in law school admissions) and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003) (invalidating the University of Michigan’s use of race in undergraduate admissions) with regard to race-conscious programs at colleges and universities, along with some practical considerations and guidance based on these cases and other related sources of legal authority. Although *Grutter* and *Gratz* involved admissions rather than financial assistance or outreach, and the Court has emphasized that context matters in Equal Protection analysis, the principles announced in *Grutter* and *Gratz* generally would appear to be applicable to financial assistance and outreach as well. Quotations are from these Supreme Court decisions except as otherwise noted.

I. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE LAW (STUDENT BODY DIVERSITY)

A. Some Basic Rules

1. Public Institutions and Private Institutions are Treated the Same

Public institutions are subject to the restrictions of the Constitution, while private institutions are not. Both public and private institutions that receive federal funds are subject to Title VI, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d, however, which prohibits racial discrimination in educational programs and activities. The Supreme Court explicitly held that “that discrimination that violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment committed by [a private] institution that accepts federal funds also constitutes a violation of Title VI.” In other words, all public and private institutions that receive any federal funds are held to the same standards with regard to race-conscious programs.

2. All Consideration of Race Is Subject to Strict Scrutiny

If race, ethnicity or national origin is considered as a factor in a decision-making process (e.g., in awarding scholarships), strict scrutiny will be applied under the Constitution (for public institutions) or Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (for public and private institutions that receive federal financial assistance). Under strict scrutiny, an institution must demonstrate that it has a compelling interest, and that its consideration of race is narrowly tailored to meet that interest.
3. Non-Racial Considerations Receive Only Rational Basis Scrutiny

The consideration of other criteria that do not constitute suspect classifications (e.g., socioeconomic status, geography, special skills and talents) may be subject to rational basis review only (i.e., they merely need a rational basis to be upheld). These criteria are likely to be upheld as legitimate if they bear some relationship to the institution’s goals and mission—even if they disproportionately favor certain racial groups. See, e.g., 59 Fed. Reg. 8756, 8757 (Feb. 23, 1994) (Principle 1 on “Financial Aid for Disadvantaged Students” in federal guidance on race-targeted financial aid).

4. Administrative Considerations Are Critical

Even if a race-conscious program is privately funded (e.g., a race-conscious scholarship program), an institution must comply with strict scrutiny if it administers the program or provides significant assistance to the outside party operating the program. See, e.g., id. at 8757-58 (Principle 5 on “Private Gifts Restricted by Race or National Origin”).

Administrative inconvenience should not be used as a justification for taking shortcuts when it comes to the consideration of race.

B. Compelling Interests

1. Remediying the Present Day Effects of Past Discrimination by the Institution

Institutions can consider race as a factor to remedy present effects of past discrimination at that institution—but not societal discrimination. See, e.g., id. at 8757, 8759-60 (Principle 3 on “Financial Aid to Remedy Past Discrimination”).

There must be a clear, traceable nexus between past discriminatory practices or policies and present-day effects stemming from those practices or policies.

Institutions do not have to be under a court order in order to assert that they are remediying discrimination, but they do need a strong basis in evidence. See, e.g., id. at 8757.

This justification must be used with regard to a particular group or groups for which this history and nexus can be clearly demonstrated.

In reality, this justification is difficult to rely upon outside the context of a court order (the nexus is difficult to prove; it may require disproving many other possible causes of present-day disparities among racial groups).

States cannot remove this justification from institutions through the political process (e.g., ballot initiatives).
2. The Educational Benefits of a Diverse Student Body

Institutions can voluntarily consider race as one among many factors in order to achieve the educational benefits of a diverse student body—unless they are prohibited from doing so by state laws that go beyond federal constitutional and statutory requirements.

An institution/school/program’s mission statement or other, similar foundational policy documents should state the educational rationale for diversity in that particular student body.

Such policy statements should be backed up with well-considered and articulated educational judgments—preferably with significant faculty input and involvement. (Courts will give some deference to educational judgments, but only if they appear to be sincere and carefully considered academic judgments rather than post-hoc rationales to justify particular outcomes.)

If possible, it is helpful to have studies that demonstrate the educational benefits of diversity in a particular program or school.

C. Narrow Tailoring

1. Individualized Consideration

Most importantly, if an institution wishes to utilize race in admissions to foster diversity, it must provide for “truly individualized consideration.” Essentially, the factor of individualized consideration involves two elements—no applicant is isolated from competition, and the applicant’s race is not the “defining feature” of the application.

a. No Applicant Is Isolated From Competition

If a race-conscious program is to pass the narrow tailoring test, the institution may not “insulate applicants who belong to certain racial or ethnic groups from the competition for admission.” Thus, “universities cannot establish quotas for members of certain racial groups,” and may not reserve “a certain fixed number or proportion of the available opportunities . . . exclusively for certain minority groups.” Similarly, institutions may not have separate admissions tracks for different races.

The Supreme Court recognized a legally significant difference between the use of a quota and the “goal of attaining a critical mass of underrepresented students,” however. While the former is prohibited, the latter is allowed. On the one hand, “quotas impose a fixed number or percentage which must be attained . . . and insulate the individual from comparison with all other candidates for the available seats.” On the other hand, “a permissible goal . . . requires only a good faith effort . . . to come within a range demarcated by the goal itself, and permits consideration of race as a ‘plus’ factor in any
given case while still ensuring that each candidate competes with all other qualified applicants.”

i. Weighting of Race and Other Factors

You do not have to weight all diversity-related factors the same. The relative weights of such factors should reflect the extent to which you need to give them special consideration in order to attain your diversity-related educational goals.

Calibrate your use of race so that it is substantial enough to make a real and effective difference in program outcomes, but not so much that it becomes the predominant or overwhelming criterion for participation in a program. See Parents Involved for Community Schools v. Seattle School District, 127 S. Ct. 2738 (2007).

ii. Critical Mass

You can pay some attention to the numbers of students from various racial and ethnic groups, but be able to demonstrate that other institutional goals and interests are also being weighed and balanced.

The concept of seeking a critical mass of students from particular backgrounds should be context-specific and should be aimed at achieving the educational benefits of a diverse student body—i.e., to avoid tokenism so that students can see differences within racial groups and similarities across racial lines.

Have clearly articulated reasons for why certain groups are included or excluded when using race as a factor in decision-making in light of institutional needs, demographics, etc.

Do not premise numerical goals merely on racial balancing (i.e., matching participation in a particular program to the demographics of the population at large). Always have an educational justification for your goals.

b. Race Is Not Decisive or the “Defining Feature” of the Application

“That a race-conscious admissions program does not operate as a quota does not, by itself, satisfy the requirement of individualized consideration.” Rather, the institution must also demonstrate that race is not decisive or the “defining feature” of the application. ‘When using race as a ‘plus’ factor in university admissions, a university’s admissions program must remain flexible enough to ensure that each applicant is evaluated as an individual and not in a way that makes an applicant’s race or ethnicity the defining feature of his or her application.” This inquiry into race is as demonstrated by three component parts: (1) no assumption of a contribution to diversity; (2) an opportunity for each individual to highlight his or her contribution to diversity; and (3) a requirement that each application be read individually.
i. No Assumption of a Contribution to Diversity

In evaluating the contributions that an individual makes to diversity, the institution must treat “each particular applicant as an individual, assessing all of the qualities that individual possesses, and in turn, evaluating that individual’s ability to contribute to the unique setting of higher education.”

Do not use quotas or set-asides based on race.

Do not divide candidates into separate pools for review based on race. Every candidate should compete against the entire pool.

Do not use race mechanistically—e.g., by automatically assigning points to people based on race. It helps to be able to demonstrate that your institution can take account of mixed race in a nuanced fashion, for example—rather than always resorting to a simple all-or-nothing consideration of race (e.g., a policy may recognize differences between students of African v. African-American descent in light of domestic and international diversity considerations).

Whenever possible, do not automatically include or exclude individuals from participating in particular programs merely because of their race—especially if the program is not otherwise available to such students.

- Race-exclusive programs (where being a member of one or more particular racial groups is an absolute prerequisite for participation) are the most difficult to justify, and may not be permissible in many circumstances.

Be careful in using absolute cut-off scores for participation in various programs—this approach may be hard to justify on educational grounds and could undercut the notion of holistic, individualized review.

Do not use different cut-off scores or academic criteria based on race.

ii. All Applicants Must Have an Opportunity to Highlight Their Own Potential Diversity Contributions.

If an institution is considering race in order to obtain the educational benefits of a diverse student body, it should give “substantial weight to diversity factors besides race.” If an institution is serious about diversity as a compelling interest, it should be able to demonstrate that it is seeking diversity across a broad array of factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, geography, special skills and talents, overcoming educational obstacles or other disadvantages, family circumstances, etc.) – not just race.

iii. Each Application Must Be Read Individually.
When considering race in the admissions context, the Supreme Court held that review of applicants should be holistic and individualized. It is helpful to keep these concepts in mind to the extent possible in other contexts such as outreach or financial aid.

Whenever possible, consider ways to provide opportunities for candidates to bring out a variety of attributes that will contribute to the overall diversity of the student body.

### 2. Consideration of Race-Neutral Alternatives

In order to show that its use of race is narrowly tailored, a university must be able to demonstrate “serious, good faith consideration of workable race-neutral alternatives that will achieve the diversity the university seeks.” Consider race-neutral alternatives that would accomplish your educational objectives.

- You do not have to try and fail at all such alternatives, but you must show that you have seriously considered them.

- If such alternatives could provide at least some partial progress with regard to racial diversity, then consider using them to minimize the needed consideration of race.

- Demonstrate (and preferably document) that you have studied these alternatives and determined why they would or would not work to meet your institution’s needs.

You do not have to forego academic excellence or other educational goals to achieve race neutrality.

### 3. Burden on Individuals Who Are Not Members of Favored Racial Group

In order to satisfy narrow tailoring, “a race-conscious admissions program must not unduly burden individuals who are not members of the favored racial and ethnic groups.” The Court concluded that the University of Michigan Law School’s admissions policy met this standard because “it can (and does) select nonminority applicants who have greater potential to enhance student body diversity over underrepresented minority applicants.” “[I]n the context of its individualized inquiry into the possible diversity contributions of all applicants, the Law School’s race-conscious admissions program does not unduly harm nonminority applicants” (emphasis added).

When considering race as a factor, do everything possible to minimize the burden on other groups of students who do not receive this extra consideration because of their race. Be sure that all students have an opportunity to participate in the same sorts of financial aid, recruitment and outreach programs.
4. Duration

Compare the amount of race-conscious financial aid to the total pool of financial aid available, and minimize that percentage.

Race-conscious programs should be flexible to the extent possible to allow special circumstances to be taken into account and to minimize burdens on individual students based on race.

Set explicit time limits or sunset provisions for race-conscious programs, and/or ensure that they are subject to periodic review. Their effectiveness and results should be analyzed over time in light of changing circumstances and demographics.

Race-conscious programs (including scholarships) should not be set in stone or presumed to exist in perpetuity.

Look systematically at how all of your programs operate together and complement each other (admissions, financial aid, outreach, recruitment, retention). Beware of inconsistencies in focus and approach that seem to be at odds with each other from a practical or theoretical perspective in terms of your overall educational goals.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS


In Parents Involved for Community Schools v. Seattle School District, 127 S. Ct. 2738 (2007), the Supreme Court struck down the voluntary integration plans of school districts in Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky. The school districts were not under court orders to desegregate, but instead had voluntarily adopted student assignment plans that relied on race to determine which schools certain children may attend. Chief Justice Roberts wrote an opinion that was the Opinion of the Court in part and a Plurality Opinion in part. Those portions of the Roberts opinion that were joined by Justice Kennedy are the Opinion of the Court and those portions that were not joined by Justice Kennedy are merely a plurality. As a practical matter, this decision will make racial integration in many K-12 school districts very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve at any point in the near future. Although he concurred in the result, in his concurring opinion, Justice Kennedy stated that “[t]o the extent the plurality opinion suggests the Constitution mandates that state and local school authorities must accept the status quo of racial isolation in schools, it is, in my view, profoundly mistaken.” Id. at 2791.

Although the case involved only K-12 education, several aspects of the decision have implications for higher education.

First, the Court declared that correcting a “racial imbalance” in the K-12 schools was not a compelling governmental interest. Thus, a desire merely to have a particular minority
representation is not compelling. This aspect of the case is particularly significant for institutions that do not have a well-developed definition of diversity or that have not tied this definition and interest closely to their educational mission.

Second, the Court distinguished the K-12 context from higher education and refused to apply the Grutter rationale (based on the educational benefits of diversity) in the K-12 context. This decision casts doubt, therefore, on whether diversity would be found by the present Supreme Court to be a compelling governmental interest outside of contexts directly related to university admissions (possibly including the faculty hiring context, for example).

Third, the Court reemphasized that if racial classifications are going to survive strict scrutiny, the racial classification must be effective in achieving the compelling governmental interest. Thus, a racial classification that does little or nothing to achieve diversity would not survive. This holding could be particularly significant in the scholarship and outreach contexts.

Fourth, the Court strengthened the requirement that the government consider race-neutral alternatives before utilizing racial classifications. In Grutter, the Court had deferred to the University of Michigan’s assertions that race-neutral alternatives would be ineffective. In the Seattle School District case, however, the Court seemed to abandon that sort of deference and instead declared that the districts “failed to show that they considered methods other than explicit racial classifications to achieve their stated goals.” This portion of the decision could create a greater hurdle for institutions trying to justify the use of race in the scholarship and outreach contexts.

For example, a federal lawsuit was filed in April 2008 (Fisher v. State of Texas et al.) against the University of Texas at Austin, accusing that institution of improperly considering an applicant’s race when more effective, race-neutral ways of achieving diversity were allegedly available. See Katherine Mangan, “Lawsuit Accuses U. of Texas of Illegally Reintroducing Race-Based Admissions,” The Chronicle of Higher Education (Apr. 8, 2008). Prior to the Grutter decision, Texas law had guaranteed in-state applicants who are in the top 10% of their high school’s graduating class admission to any public university in the state. The new lawsuit alleges that this so-called “percentage plan” was sufficient to achieve racial diversity without resort to the additional consideration of race (which the University had reintroduced after the Grutter decision). This case should be closely watched as a test of the nature and amount of evidence that must be garnered to show that race-neutral alternatives would not be successful in meeting an institution’s diversity goals.

Fifth, a four-Justice plurality (Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Scalia, Thomas, and Alito) effectively adopts the first Justice Harlan’s view that the Constitution is colorblind. “Accepting racial balancing as a compelling state interest would justify the imposition of racial proportionality throughout American society.” “Allowing racial balancing as a compelling end in itself” would ensure “that race will always be relevant in American life” and “would support indefinite use of racial classifications, employed first to obtain
the appropriate mixture of racial views and then to ensure that the [program] continues to reflect that mixture.” “Racial balancing is not transformed from ‘patently unconstitutional’ to a compelling state interest simply by relabeling it ‘racial diversity’ [or avoidance racial isolation or promotion of racial integration].” In short, the view of these four justices seems intolerant of any voluntary use of race.

Sixth, although Justice Kennedy did not embrace the idea of a colorblind Constitution, he also rejected what he called the dissent’s “misuse and mistaken interpretation of our precedents. This leads it to advance propositions that, in my view, are both erroneous and in fundamental conflict with basic equal protection principles.” He emphasized that school districts must not “treat each student in different fashion solely on the basis of a systematic, individual typing by race.” Justice Kennedy’s comments are consistent with his view in *Grutter* that diversity is a compelling interest in higher education, but that the University of Michigan Law School failed to achieve narrow tailoring. In sum, he seems to be skeptical of any voluntary use of race, but he has not shut the door on all tightly defined programs in which the use of race is carefully justified in light of all the facts and circumstances.

**B. State Constitutional Initiatives**

Although *Grutter* and *Gratz* permit universities to consider race in the admissions process and, presumably, in financial assistance and outreach programs as well (which are closely linked with admissions), there has been a movement to amend state constitutions to prohibit any voluntary consideration of race (as well as national origin and gender) at public institutions—including public colleges and universities. Most notably, the American Civil Rights Institute (led by Ward Connerly) has organized successful voter referenda efforts in California (Proposition 209), Washington, Michigan (Proposal 2), and Nebraska (I-424). Although federal constitutional challenges were brought to both the California and Michigan amendments, those challenges were unsuccessful.

The initiatives include the following language:

> The state shall not discriminate against or grant preferential treatment to any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education or public contracting.

These initiatives prohibit public colleges and universities from considering race, national origin or gender voluntarily as a factor in admissions, financial aid, outreach, etc. The initiatives do not affect private institutions. It is likely that the American Civil Rights Institute will continue to target other states whose rules also permit such ballot initiatives. Many states, however—particularly those in the East—do not allow the citizens to initiate referenda to amend their state constitutions.
C. Guidance and Enforcement from U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights

Five years after the Michigan cases were decided by the Supreme Court, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued “Dear Colleague” letters to colleges and universities (as well as a separate letter to K-12 schools) outlining its interpretation of the Michigan cases. Although the OCR letters break no new legal ground and do not overturn previous OCR policies (such as its guidance on race-targeted financial aid, cited in the Appendix below), it nevertheless appears to be an attempt to portray the impact of the Michigan cases in a limited light insofar as those decisions recognized the ability of institutions to consider race as one of many factors in the admissions process—by emphasizing the barriers institutions faced in making the argument for the necessity of race-conscious programs. See “Guidance or Spin on Affirmative Action Rulings?”, http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/09/19/ocr (Sep. 19, 2008). The NAACP Legal Defense Fund took issue with OCR’s interpretation and argued that OCR had taken an unduly narrow view of the latitude schools have under the Supreme Court’s decisions.

At the same time, OCR continues to investigate allegations of race discrimination with regard to admissions and other policies at colleges around the country. For example, OCR is pursuing a compliance review at Princeton University in which an Asian-American applicant alleges that he was discriminated against because of his race. See “Department of Education Expands Inquiry into Jian Li Bias Case,” The Daily Princetonian (Sep. 8, 2008), http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2008/09/08/21307/.

III. OTHER CURRENT ISSUES AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

A. Research Challenges Regarding Use of Race and “Race-Neutral” Alternatives

Opponents of race-conscious policies have continued to challenge the results of “race-neutral” approaches at institutions that are required to use them, arguing that in some instances the schools are finding back-door ways to consider race. For example, a professor at UCLA (Tim Groseclose) has publicly accused his institution of improperly using information regarding race from student essays. Professor Groseclose asserts that many students reveal their race in essays (since it is not an overt factor in admissions), and that the school in turn has used this information to favor black applicants in particular (at the expense of other students of color). See “Is ‘Holistic’ Admissions a Cover for Helping Black Applicants?”, http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/09/02/ucla (Sep. 2, 2008).

The Center for Equal Opportunity (CEO) recently accused the law schools of Arizona State University and the University of Arizona of favoring black applicants with substantially lower grades and test scores than students of other racial groups. See “Report Accuses Arizona Public Law Schools of Bias Against White Applicants,” The Chronicle of Higher Education: Academe Today (Oct. 1, 2008). CEO has made similar
accusations in the past against a variety of other institutions by focusing on comparisons of applicant grades and test scores that do not take into account other variables in the admissions process.

Other researchers have suggested that colleges are not employing broad definitions of diversity in graduate school admissions in particular, focusing less on socioeconomic status than on factors such as race and ethnicity. According to a recent study in *PS: Political Science and Politics* by Professor Kenneth Oldfield of the University of Illinois at Springfield, political science graduate departments are doing virtually nothing to consider class issues in admissions. See “In Grad Admissions, Where is Class?”, [http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/09/class](http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/09/class) (July 9, 2008).

**B. Privately Led Diversification Efforts**

In order to find creative ways to overcome bans on race-conscious programs that apply to public institutions of higher education affected by ballot initiatives or other similar restrictions, private entities (such as alumni associations or subcomponents thereof) have begun to take the initiative to develop outreach and scholarship programs for students from underrepresented groups.

**IV. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The inclusion of particular organizations or publications on this list is for informational purposes only, and does not constitute an endorsement by the author of the viewpoints or contents represented.

**A. Federal Government**

**U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (“OCR”)** ([www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr)): Federal agency that enforces Title VI of the Civil Rights of 1964 as well as other federal discrimination statutes in higher education. OCR investigates complaints, conducts compliance reviews, and issues guidance on issues such as race-conscious financial aid.

*Policy guidance on race-targeted financial aid*, 59 Fed. Reg. 8756 (Feb. 23, 1994) (sets forth the circumstances under which race can be a factor in financial aid programs under Title VI as interpreted by the federal government)

*Achieving Diversity: Race-Neutral Alternatives in American Education* (2004) (list of race-neutral model programs and approaches in areas such as financial aid from institutions around the country that OCR suggests colleges and universities consider before adopting race-conscious approaches)

**B. Analyses from National Education Organizations**
1. **National Association of College and University Attorneys**


2. **College Board**


3. **Non-NACUA Publications Authored by NACUA Members**


**C. Advocacy Groups**

1. ** Advocacy Groups Supporting the Use of Race**

**NAACP Legal Defense Fund** ([www.naacpldf.org](http://www.naacpldf.org)) (“LDF”): An organization that provides advocacy and litigation on issues of racial justice in education and other realms. LDF has assisted some schools and colleges with analyzing race-conscious programs.

2. ** Advocacy Groups Opposing the Use of Race**

**American Civil Rights Institute** ([www.acri.org](http://www.acri.org)) (“ACRI”): An organization created by Ward Connerly to “educate the public about racial and gender preferences;” it has led ballot initiatives in California, Michigan and elsewhere to ban race and gender-conscious programs at public institutions.

**Center for Equal Opportunity** ([www.ceousa.org](http://www.ceousa.org)) (“CEO”): This organization is a think tank devoted to “the promotion of colorblind equal opportunity and racial harmony.”
Center for Individual Rights (www.ceousa.org) (“CIR”): The Center for Individual Rights opposes “preferences” based on race and has assisted in litigation and other challenges to race-conscious programs.


For an interesting discussion of how these organizations are funded and coordinated, see Lee Cokorinos, _The Assault on Diversity: An Organized Challenge to Racial and Gender Justice_ (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

**D. Materials Related to the University of Michigan Cases**

University of Michigan Cases and Related Resources (www.vpcomm.umich.edu/admissions): This website provides a comprehensive chronology of the University of Michigan admissions lawsuits along with related research, amicus briefs, news and scholarly analysis, etc.

**E. Diversity Practices and Resources**

DiversityWeb (www.diversityweb.org): A comprehensive compendium of campus practices and resources about diversity in higher education.