

## What Color Is an A?

### Colleges take on a persistent but rarely discussed issue: the poor grades earned by many minority students

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Chantrice Ollie is an all-too-rare find at most predominantly white, selective colleges: a black student with a high grade-point average.

She applied to Skidmore College with weaker academic credentials than most of the students it admits. Her public high school, in Cleveland, offered few advanced courses. She had earned mostly A's, but her SAT scores were well below Skidmore's usual standards.

Had Ms. Ollie enrolled at a different elite college, there is a good chance her grade-point average would be well below the 3.6 she has earned at Skidmore in her freshman year. But Skidmore — a small, private, liberal-arts college in a town known for its horse tracks — has committed itself to taking in academic long shots and turning them into winners. On the whole, the black students admitted through Skidmore's special programs for subpar applicants from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds earn higher grades than those who enroll through the regular admissions process. The same holds true for other racial and ethnic groups.

Ms. Ollie attributes much of her academic success so far to the emotional support she receives from the programs' staff and her fellow participants. "It's a family," she says.

In finding ways to increase the share of its minority students who perform at high levels, Skidmore is itself exceptional. After more than five decades of racial integration and four decades of affirmative action, most of the nation's colleges and universities have not come close to eliminating the performance gap that separates many black, Hispanic, and Native American students from their white and Asian-American counterparts.

Although some colleges say they are working on the problem, few have any proof that their strategies are effective. The paucity of minority undergraduates earning high grade-point averages remains one of the chief obstacles to diversifying the enrollments of advanced-degree programs.

The crisis could grow more dire. As legal and legislative assaults on affirmative action continue, more graduate and professional schools may have to stop considering applicants' race and ethnicity. Unless colleges can find ways to improve minority undergraduates' academic performance, there is likely to be a drop in the percentage of black, Hispanic, and Native American students becoming doctors, lawyers, professors, and engineers.

Susan B. Layden, who oversees Skidmore's efforts to promote minority achievement as associate dean of student affairs, is among a growing group of educators and researchers who believe that colleges must do far more to help minority students earn high grades.

"This is not rocket science," she says. "We can do this across higher education, especially at the elites."

### **Worse Than Expected**

In seeking to increase their numbers of high-achieving black, Hispanic, and Native American students, colleges face two formidable problems: Such students are substantially underrepresented among applicants with high grades and SAT scores. And even those who perform well in high school tend to do worse in college than white and Asian-American students with comparable SAT scores and grades — a problem known as "the overprediction phenomenon."

The underrepresentation of black, Hispanic, and Native American students among highly qualified college applicants is often blamed on disparities in family education and income, as well as on inequities in elementary and secondary education. But the children of many affluent professionals in those same groups are struggling, too — tending, on average, to score lower on the SAT and academic-achievement tests than white and Asian-American students who attend inferior schools and have parents with less education and money.

Education researchers and other social scientists have offered a host of explanations for such performance gaps, including the residual effects of slavery and segregation, the stigmatization of high academic achievers by their minority peers, and the lack of minority role models among college administrators and professors. All those theories are the subject of vigorous debate. (See article on Page A26.)

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that white and Asian-American students continue to outperform black, Hispanic, and Native American students by a significant degree. According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the percentage of the nation's white undergraduates earning mostly A's is about twice the proportion of black undergraduates doing so.

Researchers with access to the transcripts of students at selective colleges say the performance gaps are even more pronounced there, especially at the highest achievement levels and among students majoring in mathematics, engineering, the sciences, and technology-related fields.

Such gaps exist in advanced-degree programs as well. Studies of law schools conducted since the early 1990s have found that about half of black students rank in the bottom fourth, or even the bottom tenth, of their classes (the variation mainly reflects differences in the law schools and student populations being studied). One of the chief goals of programs such as Skidmore's is to ensure that minority students are better represented among students ranked in the middle and near the top.

### **Academic Boot Camp**

In an attempt to compensate for the short supply of black, Hispanic, and Native American students who meet its regular admissions standards, Skidmore, with a total enrollment of about 2,400, annually admits about 40 freshmen whose failure to make the cut seems related to their

disadvantaged backgrounds. Once they matriculate, the college provides them with support services intended to help them succeed academically.

Skidmore has two intertwined efforts under way: the Higher Education Opportunity Program, which receives state support and serves only New Yorkers, and the Academic Opportunity Program, for students from other states.

The programs assist students who have high high-school grades and other traits signaling strong long-term academic potential, but who have low SAT scores or come from schools that offered few advanced courses.

One of those students is Uriel Salcedo, a sophomore whose parents are working-class Mexican immigrants. The teachers at his Denver public high school lavished high grades on him and praised his writing ability. But when he arrived at Skidmore, he says, he got C's and D's on his papers: "It was like I had been living a lie most of my life."

The Skidmore programs are designed to ease that transition, starting before the freshman year even begins. Each incoming student must attend a four-and-a-half-week academic boot camp. Students spend their days taking an intensive writing course, an intensive math course, and a course in which they must digest — and write analytically about — the ideas of figures like Plato and Darwin. They are required to study for three hours a night, with the help of professional tutors.

Bobby Langford, a black freshman from Worcester, Mass., says the summer program pushed him "to the limit," but that his writing skills improved substantially. Moreover, the philosophers he studied are so firmly implanted in his head that often, he jokes, "I think I am thinking too much."

Vaughn Greene, a black junior who enrolled through the Higher Education Opportunity Program and has served as a head resident in the dormitories during the past two summer institutes, says many students at first fail to take the summer program seriously. After getting slammed with D's and F's on their first papers, however, "they realize it is time to switch gears and actually do something because these people aren't playing."

The lesson appears to sink in. As of last fall, 78, or nearly 60 percent, of the 133 students involved in the two Skidmore programs had grade-point averages of at least 3.0, and more than a fourth had at least 3.5.

In trying to close the academic performance gap between the races, Skidmore is taking on one of academe's touchiest subjects. Officials of colleges and universities generally refuse to disclose the median grade-point averages of their minority students. Many are hesitant to even discuss the performance gap, for fear that doing so would stigmatize minority students or provide ammunition to those seeking an end to race-conscious admissions.

Critics of affirmative action say the academic performance gap is simply a result of colleges' willingness to lower their standards for the sake of diversity. "If you systematically admit

students with lower academic qualifications, then those students are going perform below the level" of regularly admitted students, says Roger B. Clegg, president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, an advocacy group. The center has produced several reports citing the lower achievement of minority students as evidence that admissions offices give substantial preferences to certain minority candidates.

### **'An Ignored Issue'**

Some college leaders argue that the performance gap merits discussion regardless of the political ramifications. "There are people who are just waiting to pounce" on any bad news about minority achievement to make a point, says Joseph A. Tolliver, St. Lawrence University's vice president for student life. But "if you don't talk about it, how are you going to solve it?"

Freeman A. Hrabowski III is president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, which has attracted national attention by successfully fighting the overprediction phenomenon and getting black and Hispanic students with high SAT scores to perform at least as well as those scores would predict. He calls the performance gap "an ignored issue." College leaders, he says, "should be more concerned about seeking the truth and less concerned about what sounds popular or even politically correct."

Discussions of the possible causes of the performance gap can easily veer toward subjects that are controversial, even taboo. Glenn C. Loury, a professor of social sciences and economics at Brown University who previously directed Boston University's Institute on Race and Social Division, observes that some academics fault the cultures associated with certain minority groups or even suggest that genetics may be at work. He can feel uncomfortable even entertaining the idea that cultural forces play a role because, in doing so, he says, "you are presuming there is something wrong with African-American kids, and now you are undertaking to fix them."

The discussion is further complicated by the effectiveness of many historically black and predominantly Hispanic colleges. Many of them produce large numbers of minority graduates with academic records strong enough to easily gain admission to most graduate programs and law and medical schools. Their relative success suggests that predominantly white colleges may place a distinct set of obstacles in the paths of minority students, an idea that can put campus administrators on the defensive.

### **Talks Under Way**

Many college officials who are working to close the performance gap say the initial impetus for their efforts was the 1998 publication of William G. Bowen and Derek Bok's *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton University Press). Based on their analyses of data from 28 selective colleges, Mr. Bowen, a former president of Princeton University, and Mr. Bok, a former president of Harvard University, extensively documented race- and ethnicity-linked differences in achievement, including those attributable to the overprediction phenomenon. They also found a strong correlation between undergraduate grades and future earnings, with black students who earn low

grades suffering more, in terms of their future earnings, than white students with comparable academic records.

Since then dozens of colleges have joined efforts to study and discuss the academic performance gap, although most have yet to bear fruit.

Among the efforts under way is the Consortium on High Achievement and Success, comprising more than 30 private liberal-arts colleges and small universities, including Amherst, Brandeis, Oberlin, Pomona, St. Lawrence, and Swarthmore. Established in 2001 and based at Trinity College, in Hartford, Conn., the group has adopted a statement of principles declaring that "all students who matriculate to our campuses are capable of succeeding," and that member institutions intend to focus on "promoting high educational achievement, not remediation."

So far the consortium has collected data from member colleges to determine what approaches are working, encouraged its members to replicate any programs shown to remedy the especially severe education problems of black and Hispanic men or to academically challenge highly talented minority students, and worked to design academic support programs aimed at helping students perform well in difficult entry-level courses. It plans to hold meetings in the coming months on effective approaches to educating freshmen, teaching writing, and advising students who wish to enter the health professions.

"We are trying all sorts of things. Some things are succeeding, some are not," says Mr. Tolliver, of St. Lawrence, who is a member of the consortium's Steering Board.

As part of a separate effort, scientists from 18 higher-education institutions, including Bowdoin College, Harvard University, the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, and the University of Washington, have been meeting since late 2005 in symposia on improving diversity in the sciences. Member institutions have agreed to submit data on grade-point averages, retention rates, and other measures of success, to establish a basis for long-term studies seeking to identify effective strategies for improving minority achievement.

Wendy E. Raymond, an associate professor of biology at Williams College who helps to lead the effort, says the federal government has spent millions of dollars on programs that "have had very little statistical success" in getting more minority students to become scientists. "Let's encourage funding for programs that actually work," she says.

Elsewhere on the research front, Mr. Bowen is gathering data on the performance gap as part of a study of 21 major public universities. The Council on Aid to Education's Collegiate Learning Assessment is seeking to measure how much undergraduates at various colleges are learning. And the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering is gauging member colleges' progress in getting minority students to earn high grades.

### **Few Proven Strategies**

From 2002 to 2005, L. Scott Miller, then executive director of the Consortium for High Academic Performance, at the University of California at Berkeley, led a three-member team in

evaluating more than 100 efforts to improve the educational achievement of minority or disadvantaged undergraduates. The researchers found many programs and strategies that focused on increasing graduation rates, but very few that explicitly sought to help more minority students earn high grades.

Moreover, the team found, few of the programs examined had undergone any sort of rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness. As a result, its report concluded, selective colleges "have few programs and strategies with strong empirical evidence showing that they help increase the number of high-achieving undergraduates from underrepresented groups."

Among the few exceptions cited were Skidmore's two programs and the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

Established by Mr. Hrabowski in 1988, the Meyerhoff program recruits high-achieving, well-prepared students interested in science, engineering, and mathematics and takes steps to ensure that they perform academically every bit as well as might be predicted based on their high-school grades and SAT scores. Among its key components, the program urges faculty members to act as mentors, monitors students' progress, and encourages students in the program to help each other in study groups.

The university has compiled data showing that participants have much higher grade-point averages, and are much more likely to get admitted to graduate programs in science, engineering, and math than are students of the same minority groups who emerged from high school with similar academic profiles.

Unfortunately for other colleges, the Meyerhoff program's success depends largely on its ability to bring high-achieving minority students together. Because the nation's high schools annually produce only a few thousand black and Hispanic graduates with Meyerhoff-caliber academic profiles, there is a limit on the number of colleges that can duplicate the approach.

### **Expensive Proposition**

Mr. Miller and his fellow researchers concluded that the Skidmore programs would be easier for colleges to copy. Both the Skidmore and Meyerhoff programs are costly, however. The Skidmore programs had a total budget of \$4-million in the 2006-7 academic year.

Much of the money that is not used for financial aid pays the salaries of the educators who advise and provide the intensive tutoring to the students involved.

The office that houses the Skidmore programs has a welcoming feel. Students are free to drop in to seek academic help or simply banter and chat with staff members. On a recent Friday morning, Monica D. Minor, director of the Higher Education Opportunity Program, helped Eilin Nunez, a sophomore from the Dominican Republic, plan a term paper about politics in the Middle East. In another room, Lewis Rosengarten, the associate director, worked with Linda Leandre, a black freshman, to revise a paper that she had written for an English-composition class.

It is not as if Skidmore's minority students are completely happy with the college. The freshman class is just 3 percent black and 3.7 percent Hispanic. In April students here staged a protest demanding that the college do more to promote diversity and fight racial bias.

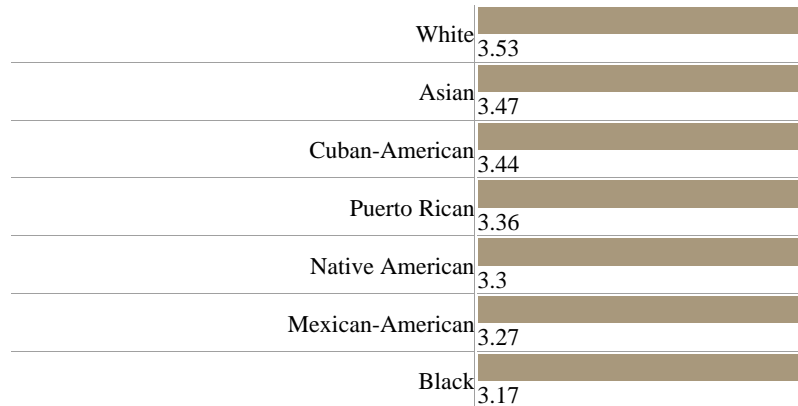
"There are a lot of people here who have no idea where we come from, the struggles we have had to get to college," says Ms. Ollie, the freshman from Cleveland.

The program's advisers make a point of urging students not let their studies suffer by getting overinvolved in minority-student organizations or efforts to transform the college. Ms. Layden, the associate dean of student affairs, says she occasionally intervenes with administrators when she determines that they are distracting minority students from their studies by asking them to help with minority recruitment or public-liaison efforts.

The conventional wisdom in academe is that students will perform better academically if they feel good about themselves socially and personally. The Skidmore programs operate on the assumption that doing well academically helps students feel good about themselves, says Ms. Layden. To help minority students feel they can achieve at higher levels regardless of what is going on around them, she says, "we create a smaller environment within this place where students feel safe."

**FITNESS FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL**

Mean grade-point averages of applicants to U.S. medical schools in 2004, by race and ethnicity:



**SOURCE:** Association of American Medical Colleges, "Facts and Figures," 2005

**RACE, ETHNICITY, AND UNDERGRADUATE GRADES**

Proportion of each racial and ethnic group earning high or low grades as undergraduates, based on 2003-4 data for all U.S. colleges:

	Percentage earning ...	
	mostly A's	mostly C's or lower
Black	9.6%	40.7%
Hispanic	12.7%	34.6%
American Indian	13.2%	32.5%
Pacific Islander	14.4%	32%
Asian	16.9%	25.6%
White	19.3%	24%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions, 2003-4