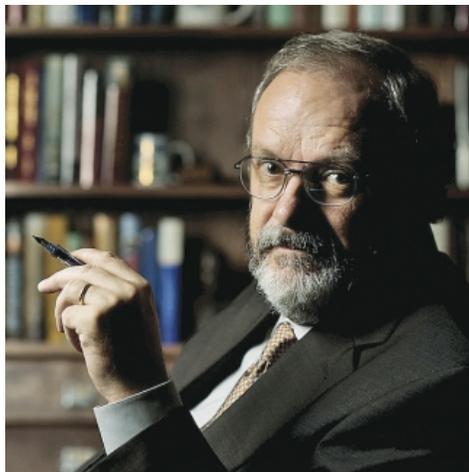


SPECIAL REPORTS

How Studying Classroom Diversity Helped the U. of Texas Win Its Case

By Eric Hoover | FEBRUARY 26, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM

Gary M. Lavergne compiled a mountain of data that loomed large in the Supreme Court case *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*. Perhaps no numbers were more crucial to the university's legal victory than his 2003 study on classroom diversity at Texas. At the time, the study revealed, 90 percent of the classes with fewer than 24 students had just one black student — or none at all. Recently, Mr. Lavergne, program manager in the office of enrollment analytics at Texas, shared some thoughts on the importance of statistics like that one and the use of enrollment data in general.



Matt Nager

Q: The *Fisher* case affirmed the necessity of having evidence in support of race-conscious policies. How would you describe its importance?

A: It comes down to the thoughtful use of numbers. People tend to be one-dimensional when they look at stats, thinking of them in terms of right or wrong. What few people do is really get into whether or not you can explain what you have done, and not just saying, "Ninety percent of our classes with an enrollment of five to 24 had none or only one African-American student." That's a statistic. OK, so, what does that mean? Why does that matter? You have to attach some meaning or importance to the numbers.

Q: So numbers have to tell a story.

A: Amassing data is pretty simple. I'm a whiz with Excel, but writing about the data is far more challenging. The challenge is integrating it into a common explanation of policy. A lot of people look at the production of numbers as an end. To me, it's a beginning.



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Q: How can different kinds of evidence, quantitative and qualitative, work together?

A: We had qualitative data on why some admitted students didn't end up here. When you look at classroom-level diversity data, and then you hear from minority students that they feel somewhat isolated and alone, those two kinds of data kind of explain each other.

Q: What inspired the study on classroom diversity?

A: After the *Grutter* opinion came out [the Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that colleges could consider race as one of several factors in admissions evaluations], I collected all the evidence Michigan produced and basically devoured it. I kept thinking about diversity. What does it mean? I started thinking about classroom discussions.

Q: Why was that so compelling?

A: Most universities talk about "structural diversity." How diverse is your whole incoming class? Very little had been done about diversity on the classroom level. When it came to producing educational benefits, you had to go beyond the global

stats of the entire campus and look at diversity at the classroom level. That's where you have the robust exchange of ideas. Who would've known back then that it was going to become one of the linchpins of the debate in the Supreme Court?

Q: What advice do you have for people who oversee admissions and enrollment data?

A: You begin with humility, the idea that you don't already know the answer. It takes time to know what's going on on your campus, the consequences of your policies. And never assume that what you're doing is routine when it comes to data. You never know when discovery or an open-records request is going to require you to hand it over.

Eric Hoover writes about admissions trends, enrollment-management challenges, and the meaning of Animal House, among other issues. He's on Twitter @erichoov, and his email address is eric.hoover@chronicle.com.

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