Who Will Advocate for Educational Equity? Understanding Law School Admissions and Diversity in the Legal Profession

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Brief History of Law School Admissions


Limitations of Prior Research

Current research tends to focus on the relationship between Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) scores and admission for different ethnic or racial groups to selective law schools. Session attendees will learn about how even after controlling for LSAT scores and GPA, Black and Hispanic women are less likely to be admitted to public law schools. We will discuss implications for diversity in the classroom and classroom discussions, as well as for preparing diverse lawyers and legal scholars who may address educational inequities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the underrepresentation of women of color in law schools and to take a more nuanced approach to diversity challenges in the pipeline to the legal profession through the lens of intersectionality. Diversity in admissions is not just about access to legal education and the legal profession, it is also important to recognize the educational benefits of diversity and the relationship between diversity and the quality or value of a law school education (e.g., Nance & Madsen, 2014; Reynoso & Amron, 2002). Conceptually, we draw upon Crenshaw’s (1989) work to examine the intersection of race and sex in law school admissions and enrollment decisions. Without intersectionality as a conceptual lens, women of color tend to be aggregated with men of color or white women (Crenshaw, 1989). The study is guided by the following research question: Were women of color (i.e., Black women, Latina women, Asian women) statistically less likely to be admitted to law schools after controlling for Law School Admission Test (LSAT) scores, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), and state residency?
Timeliness

U.S. law schools and the American legal profession are hampered by a lack of diversity (American Bar Association, 2008). After much progress around the turn of the century, women are again underrepresented, compared to men, in the ranks of early-career lawyers (Nance & Madsen, 2014). In fact, the underrepresentation of women in the pipeline for the legal profession stands in stark contrast to other professions, such as medicine (Nance & Madsen, 2014). Additionally, estimates suggest that by 2030, approximately “100,000 additional black attorneys and more than 230,000 additional Hispanic attorneys would need to join the ranks of the profession to approach parity with the general population” (Redfield, 2009, p. 10). Although scholars tend to address the underrepresentation of women or racial minorities in law schools and professions, they tend to approach sex and race separately (e.g., Johnson, 2013; Olivas, 2005; Nussbaumer, 2006; Randall, 2006; Strickland, 2001). Crenshaw (1989) introduced the idea of intersectionality between race and sex to argue that it is important to have women of color (and their unique perspectives) represented in legal discussions. As Crenshaw (1989) argued, we need an intersectional approach that acknowledges that women of color may face additional challenges in law school admissions (or enrollment) than white women or men of color.

Findings

We will present findings from multi-level statistical analysis of publicly available data from 25 law schools. Preliminary analyses show that Black women and Hispanic women were less likely to be admitted to public law schools. These preliminary findings hold interesting implications for law school admissions practices and affirmative action policy. Most reports and research studies discuss race and sex as separate categories, but we show that it is important to consider the two together. Our preliminary findings suggest that we should be intentional about ensuring that women of color are included in efforts to recruit diverse students who may join the legal profession and address issues related to educational equity.
References


