The black faculty gap

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INCREASING Faculty Diversity: The Occupational Choices of High-Achieving Minority Students, by the sociologists Stephen Cole and Elinor Barber, has already aroused controversy. Recently the subject of a lengthy article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the book has made news because its findings bear directly on the important University of Michigan affirmative-action cases to be decided by the Supreme Court this June. The book’s research counters in one important respect the argument that racial preferences are good for blacks and for higher education more generally, and it therefore may play a role in the Court’s decision.

This will be the first time since the Bakke case a quarter-century ago that the Court will rule directly on the constitutionality and conformity to civil rights law of the preference for black students in admission to selective colleges, universities, and professional schools. The Bakke decision seemed to permit special attention to, and preference for, black and presumably other underrepresented minority students on grounds that diversity improved the educational environment for all students. Though only Justice Lewis Powell made this argument, he was part of the majority of those justices who (on other grounds) declared that the strict minority quota instituted by the University of California at Davis School of Medicine was unconstitutional. And thus college and university lawyers have taken his opinion as warrant for procedures that give preferences to black and Hispanic applicants. This is the thin legal reed on which preferences for black and other minority students (principally Hispanic) now rest. Opponents and proponents of the affirmative-action policies of the Uni-

† Harvard University Press. 368 pp. $45.00.
versity of Michigan agree that this diversity argument will play a key role in the Court’s decision.

COLE and Barber’s study argues that there are important negative consequences of the widespread effort by elite and selective institutions to admit black students whose academic achievements fall far below those of the majority of students admitted. These findings are especially newsworthy because the study was supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—the very same foundation that had supported the major study by William Bowen (its president, and the former president of Princeton) and Derek Bok (former president of Harvard) arguing just the opposite. Bowen and Bok’s 1998 book, The Shape of the River, had presented a good deal of evidence supporting the value of preferences for black students, and gave no evidence that such policies had negative consequences for white or minority students. (Stephen Cole indicated in the Chronicle story that he did not expect any further support for his research from the Mellon Foundation.)

Indeed, Cole and Barber’s study has been supported financially by that galaxy of institutions—Ivy League colleges and universities and major foundations—that are uniformly in support of affirmative action in college and university admissions. The idea for the study came out of discussions between Elinor Barber, then a research associate in the Provost’s Office at Columbia University, and Neil Rudenstine, then president of Harvard and a fervent supporter of affirmative action both in university admissions and in faculty recruitment. What, Rudenstine asked, could Ivy League institutions do to increase their numbers of minority faculty? This has been an important objective at all of the Ivies, as the number of black faculty in particular remained low despite efforts to increase their presence. Elinor Barber recruited Cole, who has done important work on the sociology of scientists, to join her in researching this question. The Council of Ivy League Presidents gave an initial grant, and the Mellon Foundation and Ford Foundation soon lent their support.

There are many ways of approaching the question of minority faculty shortage, but Cole and Barber decided to focus on the occupational choices of minority college stu-
udents of high achievement, and to examine the factors that determined those choices. The authors took the reasonable position that the chief source for college and university faculty, for Ivy League institutions certainly but in fact for almost all institutions of higher education, is the pool of better students at selective institutions and the large Ph.D.-producing universities. These are the institutions from which the authors drew their sample of students for their research. They limited the students in their sample to those who majored in the arts and sciences, the fields with the greatest number of students who go on to pursue advanced scholarly research.

The major data for the study was gathered by a lengthy questionnaire, distributed by mail with telephone follow-up, exploring occupational choice and its background. The recipients were all black and Latino students who had majored in the arts and sciences and expected to graduate in 1996. Students in three kinds of colleges were surveyed: Ivy League colleges (all were included); 13 elite liberal arts colleges including Amherst, Bowdoin, Carleton, Vassar, and Wesleyan; and four historically black colleges and universities ("HBCUs"—Florida A&M, Howard, North Carolina A&T, and Xavier University of Louisiana). Black and Latino graduates of nine large state universities (Ohio State, Rutgers, SUNY at Stony Brook, North Carolina, UCLA, University of Texas at Austin, University of Virginia, University of Washington at Seattle, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison), who had majored in the arts or sciences and had a grade point average of 2.8 or above (or at least a B-) also received the questionnaire. While all minority graduates in the Ivy League, liberal arts colleges, and historically black institutions were surveyed, the authors limited the sample of students at state universities to the higher achievers, on the ground that it was among these that one would be more likely to find students choosing academic careers.

For comparative purposes, the researchers added samples of white and Asian students from Ivy League schools, liberal arts colleges, and state universities. The questionnaire was supplemented by interviews with students that explored the reasons for their occupational choices. In all, 7,612 seniors at 34 colleges and universities responded to the questionnaire.
OLE and Barber define the problem as one primarily of occupational choice: If more black and Latino students chose the academic life, then there would be more potential minority faculty available for the institutions seeking them. There are other ways of explaining the shortage of minority faculty, such as discrimination. But Cole and Barber reject this explanation, and indeed one can find little evidence that discrimination is a factor.

If the problem is occupational choice, then admissions preferences for black and Latino students in elite institutions—where they are immersed in environments that encourage academic careers—might be thought to be a part of the solution. But Cole and Barber argue rather that preferences contribute to the problem. An academic career, they assert, is not likely to be chosen by students who do poorly in college. If minority students are regularly placed in institutions for which they are not prepared academically, they will get poorer grades, develop low self-esteem, and decide they had better go into intellectually less demanding fields. Racial preference policies, by regularly reaching below an institution's cut-off point for academic achievement in order to increase the number of minority students, ensure that these students will see themselves as inferior or less academically prepared. Had they been placed in institutions where they matched the average student, the authors argue, they might be more likely to choose academic careers.

Affirmative action is the source of this problem, Cole and Barber claim, because it requires that all institutions seeking minority students select students performing well below the average of the white students they accept. Very few minority students score high on standardized tests. The most selective institutions take the best of these minority students, while schools in the next level of selectivity also accept minority students well below their average student, and so on down the chain of selectivity. (While the term “minority” is used to encompass Asian as well as black and Hispanic students, it is well known that Asian students have no problem in gaining admission to highly selective institutions on the basis of academic qualifications, and that the problem of low academic qualifications is more severe among blacks than among Hispanics.)

This is the “fit” hypothesis, which has played a large role in the argument over racial preferences in admissions:
Black students would be better off at institutions in which they “fit,” rather than those in which they will feel out-classed. The thesis was first propounded many years ago by Thomas Sowell, and it stands to reason. Students discouraged by poor grades are more likely to drop out and choose less demanding occupations. But while this is plausible, Bowen and Bok, in their extensive study of minority students at selective institutions, in fact found the reverse to be true. Black students did get poorer grades than white and Asian students—that part of the argument held up—but the difference in dropout rates was minuscule. Bowen and Bok also found that black students selected the demanding occupations of medicine and law at roughly the same rates as whites, that they were accepted into elite professional schools at a higher rate than whites, and that in general they had very positive impressions of their college experience.

The differences in the findings of the two studies1 is striking enough to have demanded some close examination, but disappointingly we don’t get this in Cole and Barber’s book. They seem to be inhibited in taking Bowen and Bok on directly. “Bowen and Bok,” they write, “claim that their data, which use very different dependent variables from ours, do not support the fit hypothesis and that the benefits of racial preferences in admissions outweigh any harm they cause. The data presented in this chapter provide another test of the hypothesis.” That is a very mild formulation, and it is frustrating that Cole and Barber do not go into any further detail in comparing the two studies and arguments. The authors point to one difference

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1 Bowen and Bok dealt only with black students, while Cole and Barber also studied Hispanics (or Latinos) and Asians. Cole and Barber note the same shortage of Latino faculty as of blacks, but to my mind the two situations are quite different. The Latino population is primarily composed of immigrants and their children, and so one can expect more or less the same progress among them as among other immigrant groups. In any case, even today their academic achievement is higher than that of African Americans, as is documented in Cole and Barber’s book and in many other sources. Cole and Barber have a good deal of interesting information on the occupational choices of Asian Americans, and refer at various points to an “underrepresentation” of Asian faculty, but in what sense it is not clear. Asians are less than 5 percent of the population, and make up more than 5 percent of full-time instructional faculty. It is true that much higher percentages of students in elite institutions are Asian, but it is evident from this study that one reason the number of Asian faculty is not higher is that Asian students disproportionately choose to go into medicine.
in the studies which, however, they do not further dis-
cuss—namely, that their “dependent variable,” that is, the
thing they are trying to explain—is different from that of
Bowen and Bok. But in reality it is not very different.

Bowen and Bok examined whether black students who
have benefitted from affirmative action choose careers re-
quiring advanced study beyond college in the same pro-
portion as white students, and what those careers are; Cole
and Barber are interested in how many minority students
choose academic careers and why. But in order to explore
this, Cole and Barber have to examine the range of careers
minority and nonminority students choose—the same task
as undertaken by Bowen and Bok. A more substantial
difference between the two studies is the method used to
determine just what those occupational choices are. Cole
and Barber’s test—their “dependent variable”—is what ca-
reers the students plan to pursue, while Bowen and Bok’s
is what careers the students have actually chosen, as shown
by the higher degrees they have gained. For Cole and
Barber, the dependent variable is given by the answers to
the first questions in their questionnaire, “what career(s)
do you have in mind now, even if you have not com-
pletely made up your mind,” and “pick the one career you
are most likely to end up in.” Bowen and Bok, on the
other hand, examine the percentage of white and black
students who have indeed gone on to earn professional and
doctoral degrees.

It turns out that the proportion of white and black
students at the selective institutions studied by Bowen and
Bok who go on to pursue advanced degrees, professional
and academic, is the same. So the “fit” hypothesis has
nothing to explain here. In examining what kinds of degrees
blacks and whites get, Bowen and Bok find that more blacks
than whites get law degrees, fewer get medical degrees,
about the same get business degrees, and more whites than
blacks get doctoral degrees (7 percent to 4 percent). It is
presumably among the latter that we would find future
college and university teachers.

I WOULD think the difference between the careers stu-
dents expect to pursue (which is Cole and Barber’s
“dependent variable”) and the degree they actually have
received (Bowen and Bok’s variable) is sufficiently im-
portant to have called for some discussion. Very few of
the graduates of Bowen and Bok’s study go on to earn degrees that lead to college and university teaching. They are to be found in that 7 percent of white students and 4 percent of black students that get doctoral degrees. In contrast, much larger proportions of the graduates in Cole and Barber’s sample express interest in becoming college teachers. We have here the contrast between aspiration—and some of those aspirations are for careers that require very long-term and demanding commitments—and actual implementation.

But leaving aside this important question, does the “fit” hypothesis explain, or at least partly explain, the difference (7 percent versus 4 percent) in the proportion of white and black students going on to earn Ph.D.s, and the resulting paucity of black college and university teachers and researchers? Is it affirmative action, and the consequent misfit between many black students and the institutions they attend, that explains this difference in Bowen and Bok’s study? Cole and Barber’s evidence on this point comes in their breakdown of occupational choice by kind of institution and race. They find, surprisingly, that similar proportions of their white students in liberal arts, Ivy League, and state university colleges choose academic careers. Apparently, the college attended does not affect the proportion of white students who will opt for academic careers. But when we look at the African-American students, we find substantial differences by category of institution in the choice of academic career: While 12 percent of black students in state universities and the historically black colleges choose academic careers, only 8 percent in the Ivy League and liberal arts colleges do.

This suggests that the lower grades that black students receive at the more selective institutions may in fact discourage them from choosing academic careers. Similarly, Cole and Barber find a sharp contrast between the intended careers of freshmen and the intended careers of graduates, depending on what kind of institution the African-American students attended. The fall-off from freshman interest in academic careers in the years leading to graduation is much greater for African Americans who attend liberal arts colleges and Ivy League schools than for those who attend state universities and HBCUs. Thirty-one percent of African-American students at state university colleges and HBCUs who expressed interest in aca-
ademic careers as freshmen retain that interest as they approach graduation. Half that percentage in Ivy League and liberal arts colleges stick to this choice through their college years. Very likely poorer grades in the more selective institutions discourage them from pursuing an academic career.

But Cole and Barber's findings show a very different pattern for Latino students. For this group, the largest percentage choosing academic careers surprisingly is in the Ivy League colleges. Since they also benefit from affirmative action, though not to the same degree as blacks, one wonders why the "fit" hypothesis does not apply to them. In addition, their persistent interest in an academic career is greater than that of even the white students across the range of institutions. Clearly, affirmative action is affecting them very differently from the way it affects blacks.

But there is a larger problem with Cole and Barber's argument. While black students attending the HBCUs and state universities do get better grades and are less dissuaded from their original intentions of becoming college teachers and researchers, one wonders whether the better grades they are getting at these colleges are not giving them false encouragement. Recall, we are looking at hopes in Cole and Barber's study as against realization in Bowen and Bok's. And even if these students struggle through to a Ph.D., what kind of academic career can students with B-level grades in a state university, or higher grades in a low-ranking (in terms of SAT scores of students) historically black college, expect? Certainly, not the kind that will be of any help in solving the minority faculty shortage in the Ivy League, the original issue to which the research was addressed.

Cole and Barber try to estimate how many more minority students would choose academic careers if this discouraging effect of attending Ivy League and selective liberal arts colleges were eliminated, that is, if students attended institutions more in line with their academic abilities and were thus encouraged by the better grades they would receive. They attempt to calculate how many more African Americans and Latinos would choose academic careers if their grade distribution were the same as white students and if this were the only factor affecting their choice of career. In their sample of 1,974 blacks, 186 chose academic careers (69 of whom had grades of B or
lower). On the assumption of a grade distribution the same as whites, the number choosing academic careers would rise to 261, an addition of 75. The effect of this adjustment on the number of Latinos choosing academic careers is much smaller, since their grades tend to be higher than those of blacks to begin with.

This exercise demonstrates the wrong-headedness of this approach to the problem. The number of black students getting high scores on tests of academic ability, and high grades in selective institutions, is so small that we know in advance why there are so few black faculty. When we combine these low numbers of high-achieving black students with the attractions of alternative careers, whose educational requirements are fixed as against the open-ended number of years that must be devoted to gaining a Ph.D., and whose economic rewards are greater, it is perfectly clear why there is such a small number of black faculty. We have known for a long time the facts about the pipeline into academia, and how the number of blacks is rapidly reduced as one proceeds from high school graduation, to college graduation, to graduate school, and to the Ph.D. degree. These facts are reprised in a chapter of Cole and Barber’s book which specifies that in 1998, African Americans made up 14 percent of the population and about 4 percent of the Ph.D. degree recipients in arts and sciences. And more than 40 percent of those degrees were in education. Under the circumstances, the Ivy League schools and other institutions of higher education seeking black faculty do about as well as one can expect, or a little better.

The only way to increase substantially the number of black faculty is to increase the number of academically high-scoring black students. Many efforts in a wide variety of fields aim at this, but progress, while we can see some, has been extremely slow. Alternative routes to increasing the number of black faculty under present circumstances would only raid the much larger number of high-achieving black students who now choose law and medicine. And what would be gained for them, or for the black community, if we succeeded in adding a few more of them to the number who choose academic careers?