

Affirmative Actions and College Students' Academic Engagement and Performance in China

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Abstract
(150 words)

Preferential admissions to Chinese colleges are substantial as the data on 5000 college students in Beijing from China Education Panel Studies (CEPS:College 2009-2012) show a 20% rate of preferential admissions. While descriptions of affirmative action programs are found in the education literature, little research is done about the consequences of affirmative action programs of different natures for college students' academic engagement and performance. Using the theory of stereotype threat and the theory of skills mismatch, this paper will (1) classify and test contemporary China's affirmative actions into three types – ethnic minorities, athletes (artists), and the advantaged, and (2) model the potentially differential effects of these three types of affirmative actions on college students' academic engagement and performance. The research design focuses on forming proper counterparts of students admitted under each type of affirmative actions using propensity score matching of background characteristics (excluding admission scores) and multivariate modeling of matched individuals.

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Extended Abstract

Preferential admissions to China's colleges and universities have caused increasing attention of scholars and the public during the rapid higher education expansion since 1999. While preferential admission for ethnic minorities is an ancient form of affirmative action policy from the emperor exam system, affirmative actions for athletes or persons with artistic talents and children of higher class and higher power background are two modern forms of affirmative actions. To increase the complexity of the matter, the national policy differs from provincial policies, which have wide attitudes in designing and implementing specific affirmative actions programs. The characteristics of applicants, the amount of bonus scores, and the implementation methods of these programs, just to mention a few dimensions, can complicate the preferential admission system geometrically.

The wide coverage and the extreme complicated rules and implementations may be a reason why research on preferential admissions to colleges and universities remain in the descriptive stage. The challenge thus is two-fold. First, we need to develop a classification scheme to organize the preferential admissions. We propose a typology based on (1) ascriptive characteristics by ethnic minorities (vs. Han, the majority), (2) non-academic talents (athletes and artists), and (3) the advantaged by parental class and powers. Second, we need to conceptualize the potential impact of preferential admissions. We will utilize theories from social psychology and sociology, particularly the theory of stereotype threat from the institutional, external pressure for ethnic minorities because of their visible ascriptive characteristics, and the theory of skills mismatching, particularly the lower academic preparation resulting from all preferential admission. Based on applying these theories to the China case, we hypothesize that ethnic minorities admitted under affirmative actions will suffer from both stereotype threat at the institutional level and skills mismatch at the individual level. Thus we expect to see a high academic engagement and low academic performance for those ethnic minorities under affirmative action than that for those who were not under affirmative action. In contrast, we expect that athletes, artists, and the advantaged under affirmative action will exhibit both lower academic engagement and performance than their counterparts under no affirmative action.

Data are drawn from the 4 waves of China Education Panel Studies (CEPS:College 2009-2010) of about 5000 college students, representing the freshmen and junior population in all higher education institutes in Beijing in 2009. This dataset is the only longitudinal data using the probability sampling method in China. Detailed questions collect information on affirmative actions covering almost the entire complicated system of affirmative actions. Based on this information, we will be able to do a good job in building and testing our proposed classification scheme using latent class analysis. The CEPS:College also contains valuable information on academic engagement in terms of both behavior and attitudes/efficacy in multiple time points. Academic performance is

measured at semesters including number of courses with excellency vs. failure, relative ranking in class, standardized English test at the national level, admissions to graduate programs domestic and abroad, job offers from national or provincial offices as a result of high pass of standardized civil exams. These academic performance measures are appropriate for the Chinese society context and thus appropriate for testing the theory of stereotype threat and the theory of skills mismatch in the China context.

Findings from this study, the first of its kind, will advance our understanding of affirmative actions and their consequences for college education in China. They will also enhance our theoretical understanding of the two theories from China's experience. Based on these theory-guided, context-sensitive findings, evidence-based policy implications and recommendations can be made to contribute to a more equal and fair higher education system in China.

Preliminary Results

The follow table is based on partial affirmative action variables (bonus scores). The table shows a general pattern of lower academic engagement and lower academic performance of students who received bonus scores as compared with all other students.

Table 1. General Patterns of Academic Engagement and Performance between Students with and without Bonus Scores under Affirmative Actions

Student Outcome	Students w/o Bonus Score	Students w/ Bonus Score
Academic Engagement		
Skipping general courses	2.09	2.21
Skipping major courses	1.79	1.88
Academic Performance		
STEM major	54.5	41.6
# excellent courses	15.5	14.3
# failing courses	1.88	1.79