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When Claims Collide: Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and the Meaning of Discrimination

Cara McClellan*

This term, the Supreme Court will decide Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (SFFA v. Harvard), a challenge to Harvard College’s race-conscious admissions program. While litigation challenging the use of race in higher education admissions spans over five decades,1 previous attacks on race-conscious admissions systems were brought by white plaintiffs alleging “reverse discrimination”2 based on the theory that a university discriminated against them by assigning a plus factor to underrepresented minority applicants. SFFA v. Harvard3 is distinct from these cases because the plaintiff organization, SFFA, brought a claim alleging that Harvard engages in intentional discrimination by penalizing Asian American applicants despite their status as people of color.4 SFFA alleges

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1. See Regents of the Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265, 269–70 (1978) (holding that a medical school admissions plan with a quota for students admitted from minority groups violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment); Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 306, 311 (2003) (holding that the use of race as a factor in law school admissions did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment or Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964); Fisher v. Univ. of Tex. at Austin (Fisher I), 570 U.S. 297, 301–03 (2013) (finding that use of race in the admissions process must be evaluated under strict scrutiny); Fisher v. Univ. of Tex. at Austin (Fisher II), 579 U.S. 365, 369 (2016) (finding that use of race as a factor in holistic review of undergraduate applications survived strict scrutiny review as it was narrowly tailored to serve a compelling state interest).

2. Reverse Discrimination, BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY (6th ed. 1990) (“A type of discrimination in which majority groups are purportedly discriminated against in favor of minority groups . . . .”)


that Asian American applicants are discriminated against in the college admissions process because Harvard undervalues standardized test scores and other "objective" factors on which Asian American students in the aggregate outperform other applicants. Yet, at the same time that a Massachusetts district court considered SFFA's claims, on the other side of the country, a coalition of students of color, including Asian American students, brought Smith v. Regents of University of California, a lawsuit arguing that standardized test scores were racially biased against them and that reliance on standardized test scores was itself discriminatory. The claims in these cases provide an entry point for considering what I call "mirror" claims of discrimination, in which allegations of discrimination are brought challenging both sides of an issue or policy decision, in this case the use of standardized test scores in the college admissions process. This Article argues that without a contextual analysis that is grounded in white supremacy, 5 discrimination claims lose their meaning and could be actionable on competing sides of many issues and policy decisions. Instead, courts have a duty to provide guidance about when liability exists by considering how racial disparities in power and resources operate in the context of a particular claim. First, I argue that one way of distinguishing between what appear to be mirror discrimination claims is to ask whether there is a strong basis in evidence to believe that a policy or decision would entail liability for disparate impact discrimination. If so, avoiding disparate impact liability provides a defense against a claim of intentional discrimination and a basis for distinguishing the reverse action. Next, I consider how to analyze mirror claims that involve intragroup variation within a protected group, such as in the Smith and SFFA cases where there are contested arguments about how different

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1. See S. Ct. 895 (2022). Subsequent to the appointment of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, who was recused from hearing the Harvard lawsuit, the Court ordered that the cases no longer be consolidated. See Amy Howe, Court Will Hear Affirmative-Action Challenges Separately, Allowing Jackson to Participate in UNC Case, SCOTUSBLOG (Jul. 22, 2022, 6:43 PM), https://www.scotusblog.com/2022/07/court-will-hear-affirmative-action-challenges-separately-allowing-jackson-to-participate-in-unc-case [https://perma.cc/4C4Y-L78H] (noting that Justice Jackson recently completed a term on Harvard’s board of overseers as the basis for her recusal). This Article focuses primarily on the litigation against Harvard because it includes a claim of discrimination against Asian American applicants, while the Supreme Court’s review of UNC’s policy considers only whether race-conscious admissions is constitutional and whether UNC properly rejected a race-neutral alternative. But see Complaint at 2–4, 17, SFFA v. Univ. of N.C., 319 F.R.D. 490 (M.D.N.C. 2017) (No. 1:14-cv-00954) (alleging discrimination against Asian American and white applicants).

2. I am drawing on the definition of “white supremacy” developed by Frances L. Ansley, and adopted by critical race theorists, such as Professor Cheryl Harris. See Frances L. Ansley, Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship, 74 CORNELL L. REV. 993, 1024 n.129 (1989) (defining white supremacy as “[a] political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources . . . and [in which] white dominance and non-white subordination [exist] across a broad array of institutions and social settings”); Cheryl I. Harris, Whiteness as Property, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1707, 1714 n.10 (1993) (adopting Ansley’s aforementioned definition of white supremacy).
subgroups of Asian American applicants are impacted. I argue that for an intentional discrimination claim to succeed, it should address, rather than ignore, how intragroup differences contribute to experiences of subordination. Finally, I argue that, as Harvard students testified, diversity within diversity can challenge stereotyping and essentialism and provide a pathway to combat subordination.

INTRODUCTION

On October 31, 2022, the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard,* a challenge to Harvard College’s race-conscious admissions program. With a new conservative majority of the Supreme Court that has already demonstrated a willingness to overturn precedent in other contexts, many commentators have speculated that the Court is poised to overturn over forty years of case law upholding a university’s ability to consider race as one of many factors in admissions in order to serve a compelling interest in the educational benefits of diversity. Indeed, in their opinions in the *Fisher v. Texas Case Ruling,*

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9. See cases cited supra note 1.
decisions, Justice Thomas and Justice Alito previewed that they would rule that race-conscious admissions is unconstitutional and that they believe race-conscious admissions discriminates against Asian American applicants, even though that issue was not a question before the Court or part of the record presented in the Fisher case.10

After her unsuccessful challenge to affirmative action in Fisher, the named plaintiff, Abigail Fisher, took up the concerns that Justices Alito and Thomas highlighted in Fisher I and Fisher II, and collaborated with Edward Blum, the architect behind multiple challenges to race-conscious policies in different areas of the law,11 to found Students for Fair Admissions.12 SFFA created websites entitled Harvardnotfair.org and UNCnotfair.org to recruit Asian American applicants to join SFFA and challenge race-conscious admissions through litigation.13 Ultimately, SFFA filed lawsuits challenging race-conscious admissions at the University of

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10. Fisher I, 570 U.S. 297, 331 (2013) (Thomas, J., concurring) (“There can be no doubt that the University’s discrimination injures white and Asian applicants who are denied admission because of their race.”); Fisher II, 579 U.S. 365, 410 (2016) (Alito, J., dissenting) (“[T]he UT plan discriminates against Asian-American students.”). During oral argument in Fisher I, Justice Alito questioned the attorney for the University of Texas as to whether Asian Americans were treated fairly in the admission process, and in particular whether subgroups of Asian American applicants were considered. Transcript of Oral Argument at 52:07–20, Fisher I, 570 U.S. 297 (2013) (No. 11-345). Justice Alito wrote even more forcefully in his opinion dissenting from the Court’s decision to reaffirm race-conscious admissions in Fisher II that the University of Texas could not establish a compelling interest in diversity because it discriminated against Asian Americans. Fisher II, 579 U.S. at 410 n.4 (internal citations omitted) (“Given a ‘limited number of spaces,’ providing a boost to African-Americans and Hispanics inevitably harms students who do not receive the same boost by decreasing their odds of admission.”). Stephanie Mencimer, Affirmative Action Won, but Now It Faces a Far Bigger Threat, MOTHER JONES (June 24, 2016), https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/samuel-alito-fisher-v-texas-affirmative-action/ [https://perma.cc/4TRD-72LQ].


12. SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d 157, 164 (1st Cir. 2020) (“SFFA was incorporated on July 30, 2014. Its original board of directors had three self-appointed members: Edward Blum, President, Abigail Fisher, Secretary, and Richard Fisher, Treasurer.”).

Texas, Harvard University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Yale University. In doing so, Abigail Fisher and Edward Blum reframed the legal challenge to affirmative action policies in which plaintiffs since Bakke had alleged reverse discrimination as a claim of discrimination against Asian American applicants.

This Article begins by examining the allegations of intentional discrimination in the SFFA v. Harvard lawsuit, which rely primarily on racial disparities in the standardized test scores of applicants to Harvard. I then contrast SFFA’s allegations of discrimination with those presented in Smith v. Regents of the University of California, a case in which a coalition of students, including Asian American students, flipped the claims in SFFA on their head by arguing that the use of the SAT and ACT constitutes discrimination because of barriers that underprivileged students face that disadvantage them on standardized tests.

I then argue that one way of distinguishing between what appear to be mirror discrimination claims is to ask whether there is a strong basis in evidence to believe that a policy or decision would entail liability for disparate impact discrimination. If so, avoiding disparate impact liability provides a defense that should shield the actor against a mirror claim of intentional discrimination by establishing that there is not a substantial

14. See Complaint at 1–2, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Univ. of Tex. at Austin (SFFA v. Univ. of Tex. at Austin), No. 1:20-cv-763 (W.D. Tex. July 20, 2020) (arguing the race-based admissions program at the University of Texas at Austin violates the Equal Protection Clause); Complaint at 1, SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (D. Mass. 2019) (No. 14-cv-14176) (arguing the undergraduate admissions program at Harvard College is racially and ethnically discriminatory and violates Title VI); Complaint at 2, SFFA v. Univ. of N.C., 319 F.R.D. 490 (M.D.N.C. 2017) (1:14-cv-00954) (arguing the undergraduate admission policies at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill are racially and ethnically discriminatory); Complaint at 1, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Yale Univ., No. 3:21-cv-00241, 2021 WL 736917 (D. Conn. 2021) (alleging racial discrimination in administration of Yale’s undergraduate admissions).
16. Anemona Hartocollis & Stephanie Saul, Asians Become Focus of Battle on Admissions, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 3, 2017, at A1. For a discussion of other cases in which Justice Alito has provided a blueprint for the future challenges to existing precedent based on a theory not currently before the Court, see Michael Gentithes, Janus-Faced Judging: How the Supreme Court is Radically Weakening Stare Decisis, 62 WM. & MARY L. REV. 83, 102 (2020).
17. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) are standardized exams that seek to measure a high school student’s college readiness. The SAT is administered by the College Board. The ACT is administered by ACT, Inc. However, these test scores are only weak indicators of performance in institutions with selective admissions and are highly correlated with race. See, e.g., Saul Geiser, The Growing Correlation Between Race and SAT Scores: New Findings from California, UC BERKELEY: CTR. FOR STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC., Oct. 2015, at 1 (“The UC data show that socioeconomic background factors—family income, parental education, and race/ethnicity—account for a large and growing share of the variance in students’ SAT scores over the past twenty years. . . . Of those factors, moreover, race has become the strongest predictor.”); Maria Veronica Santelices & Mark Wilson, Unfair Treatment? The Case of Freedle, the SAT, and the Standardization Approach to Differential Item Functioning, 80 HARV. EDUC. REV. 106, 126, 128 (2010) (questioning the validity of SAT verbal scores due to cultural bias built into questions).
legitimate justification for the reverse action in the face of the disproportionate adverse effect on members of a protected group.

Drawing on critical race theory scholarship, I next discuss how an intersectional frame informed by disaggregated data can help to analyze racial power and understand mirror discrimination claims contextually. I argue that for an intentional discrimination claim to succeed it should address, rather than ignore, intragroup variation in impact that contribute to subordination.

In the final section, I draw on the testimony that Harvard students and alumni presented during the SFFA v. Harvard trial. Asian American students and alumni at Harvard who testified at trial described how race-conscious admissions did not constitute intentional discrimination, but instead fostered diversity along multiple dimensions within the Asian American community, combatting tokenism and essentialist ideas about Asian American identity on campus.18 Ironically, while SFFA argues that Asian Americans are discriminated against because they are labeled model minorities,19 the framing of SFFA’s claims reinforces stereotypical notions.

1. CLAIMS OF DISCRIMINATION IN STUDENTS FOR FAIR ADMISSIONS V. HARVARD

At the outset, it is important to distinguish between the different claims that were brought by SFFA20 before focusing on SFFA’s intentional discrimination claim, which is the primary subject of this Article.21 As others have argued, SFFA’s claim that the consideration of race leads to discrimination against Asian Americans conflates affirmative action with negative action. Scholars have used the term “causation fallacy,” coined by now California Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu, to explain why

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20. After the Supreme Court issued its ruling in Fisher II, on June 23, 2016, the district court dismissed two of SFFA’s original claims on the pleadings: (1) its claim that Harvard uses race to fill more than just the last few places in its class; and (2) its claim that Harvard considers race in its admissions process generally. SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126, 132 (D. Mass. 2019).
21. See also Jeena Shah, Affirming Affirmative Action by Affirming White Privilege: SFFA v. Harvard, 108 GEO. L.J. ONLINE 134, 135 (2020) (explaining that because SFFA’s claims challenging race-conscious admissions are legally distinct from the intentional discrimination claim, the correct legal analysis would separate the race-neutral components of Harvard’s admissions program that produced “disparate outcomes as between whites and Asian Americans” from the race-based affirmative action component of the program, which are irrelevant to the inquiry).
race-conscious admissions do not lead to a disfavoring of Asian American applicants, and thus the two issues should not be equated.22

In its claims challenging affirmative action, SFFA alleges that Harvard’s race-conscious admissions violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.23 Under controlling Supreme Court precedent, a university may consider race as part of its admissions process so long as it can survive strict scrutiny (i.e., is narrowly tailored to serve a compelling interest).24 In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Supreme Court explained that narrow tailoring requires a “highly individualized, holistic review of each applicant’s file” such that “all factors that may contribute to student body diversity are meaningfully considered alongside race in admissions decisions.”25 A narrowly tailored, race-conscious admissions program must

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24. Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 315, 335–36, 343 (2003) (holding that the narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body is not prohibited by the Equal Protection Clause).

25. Id. at 337–38. See also Regents of the Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265, 307, 311–12,
use race “in a flexible, nonmechanical way” and “only as a plus [fac-
tor].”

SFFA argues that Harvard’s program is not narrowly tailored because: (1) Harvard engages in racial balancing; (2) Harvard uses race as more than a plus factor; and (3) Harvard fails to consider and use race-
neutral alternatives. In addition to challenging Harvard’s race-con-
scious admissions system based on the facts, SFFA brought a claim arguing that the Supreme Court should overturn existing precedent and hold that race-conscious admissions in higher education is not permissible as a matter of law.

Distinct from the first category of claims SFFA brought, SFFA also alleges that Harvard discriminates against Asian American applicants by disfavoring Asian American applicants. SFFA’s main argument is that Harvard’s admissions data reveals different treatment among similarly qualified applicants of different racial backgrounds. In support of this

26. Grutter, 539 U.S. at 334, 339. In Fisher I, the Court further clarified that while universities receive judicial deference in defining the pursuit of diversity as part of their educational missions, they receive no deference when courts review narrow tailoring. Fisher I, 570 U.S. 297, 311 (2013). Narrow tailoring requires a university to give good faith consideration to race-neutral alternatives and determine that there is no workable race-neutral alternative that would achieve the educational benefits of diversity. Fisher II, 579 U.S. 365, 377 (2016).


29. Plaintiffs’ discrimination claim is brought under Title VI because Harvard is a private university. Title VI bars federally funded entities from discriminating based on race or ethnicity. The legal standard for establishing a violation under Title VI generally mirrors the equal protection standard. See Guardians Ass’n v. Civ. Serv. Comm’n, 463 U.S. 582, 584 (1983); Gratz v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 244, 305 n.23 (2003) (quoting Alexander v. Sandoval, 532 U.S. 275, 281 (2001)) (“[D]iscrimination that violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment committed by an institution that accepts federal funds also constitutes a violation of Title VI.”). But for an argument that the ability for actors to adopt amelioratory policies is broader under Title VI, see Olatunde C. Johnson, Lawyering That Has No Name: Title VI and the Meaning of Private Enforcement, 66 STAN. L. REV. 1293, 1304–1306 (2014). But “[n]arrow tailoring does not require exhaustion of every conceivable race-neutral alternative,” “nor does it require a university to choose between maintaining a reputation for excellence or fulfilling a commitment to provide educational opportu-
nities to members of all racial groups.” Grutter, 539 U.S. at 339.

30. See SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d 157, 202 (1st Cir. 2020) (“On average, an Asian American student has a .34% lower chance of admission to Harvard than a similarly situated white student . . . .”). In addition, SFFA points to circumstantial evidence, including the history of Harvard’s ad-
missions system discriminating against Jewish applicants by establishing quotas that limit the amount of admitted Jewish students. Complaint ¶¶ 162–77, SFFA, 397 F. Supp. (No. 14-14176), and a prior investigation by the Office of Civil Rights in the 1980s. Id. ¶¶ 164–67. That investiga-
tion ultimately concluded there was no discrimination against Asian Americans in admissions. Id. ¶ 166. SFFA also notes that admissions officers left in the margins of six Asian American students’ applications describing them as “quiet/shy . . . [and] extraordinarily gifted in math . . . .”
allegation, SFFA’s expert, Dr. Peter Arcidiacono, divided applicants to Harvard into ten deciles based on standardized test scores and high school GPAs.\textsuperscript{31} Arcidiacono then ran a regression analysis showing that students of different racial backgrounds in the same deciles had different admission rates.\textsuperscript{32} According to SFFA, this analysis shows that some Asian American applicants in the highest deciles were not admitted while students of other racial backgrounds in the same deciles were.\textsuperscript{33}

Importantly, this regression analysis is based only on standardized tests and grades and omits any other factors that Harvard considers in the admissions process.\textsuperscript{34} As part of its admissions process, Harvard assigns applicants four ratings. First, the academic rating, which includes, among other factors, grades and standardized test scores, the applicant’s high school’s characteristics and curriculum, academic prizes, letters of recommendation, and Harvard faculty members’ appraisals of the student’s work.\textsuperscript{35} Next, applicants are assigned an extracurricular rating based on activities outside of classes, and the likelihood of contributing to Harvard’s extracurriculars.\textsuperscript{36} Third, applicants receive an athletic rating, based on involvement in sports and recruitment to join a team once at Harvard.\textsuperscript{37} Fourth, admissions officers assign a personal rating, which considers the strength of each teacher and guidance counselor recommendation submitted on behalf of an applicant, other recommendation letters, alumni interviews, and the student’s personal statement.\textsuperscript{38}

In addition to its analysis of admissions rates based on the grades and standardized test scores of applicants, SFFA asserts that Asian American applicants are assigned lower average personal ratings\textsuperscript{39} when compared to other applicants with similar standardized tests scores and grades.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Id. ¶¶ 246–48.} However, evidence presented at trial demonstrated that applicants of other backgrounds received similar comments. \textit{See SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 157 (“The docket binder that contains notes to the effect that several Asian American applicants were ‘quiet’ or ‘flat’ also includes notes for white, African American, and Hispanic applicants who were also described as ‘quiet,’ ‘shy,’ or ‘understated.’”). Finally, SFFA cites to subsequent changes Harvard made to provide more explicit guidance to admissions officers to not consider race with respect to the personal rating. \textit{Id. at 141.}

\textsuperscript{31} Expert Report of Peter S. Arcidiacono at 40, \textit{SFFA, 397 F. Supp.}

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 162–63.}

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Id. at 163 (“Asian Americans in the top academic deciles are receiving strong personal and overall ratings at lower rates than applicants from other racial groups with similar academic qualifications.””).}

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Id. at 165.}

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Id. at 140.}

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 140–41.}

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Id. at 141.}


\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Id. at 26.}
As will be discussed later, SFFA does not provide a basis for its assumption that students’ scores in the personal category should be correlated with their standardized test scores and grades. SFFA argues that Asian American applicants’ personal ratings are lower because “many admissions officers believe in stereotypes that work against Asian-American[s],” including that Asian Americans are “model minorities,” but does not provide evidence to support this allegation.

On October 1, 2019, District Judge Allison Burroughs issued a decision in SFFA v. Harvard holding that Harvard’s race-conscious admissions program satisfied strict scrutiny because it was narrowly tailored to serve a compelling interest in diversity, and rejecting SFFA’s claim of intentional discrimination. At the outset of her analysis, Judge Burroughs recognized that “given SFFA’s heavy reliance on the data to make out its claims . . . statistical evidence is perhaps the most important evidence in reaching a resolution of this case.” The court noted that because the parties’ experts reached different conclusions as to whether Asian Americans are discriminated against in the Harvard admissions process due to their inclusion of different applicants and use of different control variables, “decisions by the Court as to which applicants and control variables belong in the admission outcome model are pivotal.”

Although both experts had access to the same admissions data for more than 150,000 domestic applicants to Harvard, the analyses of Harvard’s expert, Dr. David Card, and SFFA’s expert, Dr. Arcidiacono, are based on regression models that differ in important ways. SFFA’s expert, Dr. Arcidiacono, removed the personal rating from the model entirely, despite the fact that this does not accurately reflect Harvard’s admissions

41. See infra notes 124–127.
43. Id. (alteration in original).
44. Id. at 63.
45. SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 126, 195. In resolving SFFA’s claims that Harvard’s use of race-conscious admissions is not narrowly tailored, the court found that Harvard does not use quotas or try to assemble a class with any particular racial composition as is shown by how much the racial composition of each class has varied year to year. Id. at 196. The court also found that Harvard does not use race as more than a plus factor and credited testimony that race is only a factor. Id. at 199. Finally, the court concluded that none of the race-neutral alternatives that the plaintiffs presented would be able to similarly foster the benefits of diversity. Id. at 200.
46. Id. at 158.
47. Id. at 159.
48. Id.
49. Id. at 173.
According to SFFA’s expert, this factor was removed because Asian American applicants had lower personal ratings overall and therefore he claimed the personal rating must be racially biased. In addition, Arcidiacono’s model excludes applicants who were recruited athletes, children of Harvard College or Radcliffe alumni, children of Harvard faculty or staff members, and individuals on the dean’s or director’s interest lists (ALDCs), a category of applicants that collectively make up approximately 30 percent of Harvard’s admitted class. Dr. Arcidiacono states that he excluded these applicants from his analysis because they receive a “tip” based on their ALDC status and therefore are treated differently than other applicants.

The court found Dr. Card’s analysis to be the more reliable model because of its inclusion of variables that reflect actual process, including the consideration of ALDC applicants and the personal rating. In contrast with Dr. Arcidiacono, who found a slight negative correlation between Asian American identity and likelihood of admission, Dr. Card concluded that there was no statistically significant difference in the probability of admissions of Asian American applicants. To the contrary, he found that “certain statistics can be interpreted to suggest that Harvard’s admissions process unintentionally favored some subsets of Asian Americans . . . .”

The district court concluded that Harvard’s admissions process appropriately considered race in a manner that was narrowly tailored to serve a compelling government interest. The court also concluded there was no evidence of intentional discrimination. The court was persuaded that SFFA did not identify a particular admissions file that evinced discrimination and no individual Asian American testified throughout the litigation that they were discriminated against by Harvard. The court also found “no evidence of discrimination in the personal ratings save for the slight numerical disparity itself” which could be “at least partially explained by a variety of factors including race-correlated inputs to the rating,” in which case the actors engaged in biased decision-making were not actually affiliated with Harvard. In reaching this conclusion, Judge

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50. SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d at 157, 165 (1st Cir. 2020).
51. SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 166, 173.
52. Id. at 138.
53. Id. at 159.
54. Id. at 159–60.
55. Id. at 160.
56. SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 175.
57. Id. at 194.
58. Id. at 195.
59. Id. at 198.
60. Id. at 194.
Burroughs relied on Dr. Card’s report, suggesting that Asian Americans had lower personal rating scores because of the external factors, such as teacher and guidance counselor recommendations. As Judge Burroughs put it: “[T]o the extent that disparities in the personal ratings are explained by teacher and guidance counselor recommendation letters, Harvard’s admissions officers are not responsible for any race-related or race-correlated impact that those letters may have.”

The First Circuit affirmed the district court’s decision on appeal. The First Circuit held that under governing Supreme Court precedent, Harvard’s race-conscious admissions program does not violate Title VI. With regard to the discrimination claim, the First Circuit also agreed with the district court that the appropriate statistical model for evaluating SFFA’s intentional discrimination claim must include the personal rating and that the model conclusively showed no discrimination against Asian Americans. Instead, it showed that Asian American identity has a statistically insignificant effect on an applicant’s chance of admissions.

SFFA then sought certiorari to the Supreme Court. On January 24, 2022, the Supreme Court granted the case, and arguments were heard on October 31, 2022.

II. CLAIMS OF DISCRIMINATION IN SMITH V. REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY

62. SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 170.
63. See SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d 157, 188–94 (1st Cir. 2020) (holding that the district court did not err in any of its findings).
64. Id. at 195–96.
65. Id. at 183. See also id. at 195 n.34 (declining to determine the appropriate standard of review and concluding that Harvard prevails irrespective of the burden of proof).
66. SFFA argues . . . that, under strict scrutiny, Harvard bears the burden of disproving SFFA’s intentional discrimination claim. Harvard argues that SFFA’s intentional discrimination claim does not get the benefit of strict scrutiny until SFFA has established that Harvard has discriminated against Asian Americans and acted with racial animus against them.

Id. The Department of Justice under President Trump filed a brief arguing that in order for an affirmative action program to satisfy strict scrutiny, it cannot penalize any group and that the racial disparity in personal scores demonstrated a penalty. Brief for the United States as Amicus Curiae Supporting Appellant and Urging Reversal at 23–34, SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d 157 (No. 19-2005). But see Equal Protection—Affirmative Action—First Circuit Holds That Harvard’s Admissions Program Does Not Violate the Civil Rights Act—Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College, 980 F.3d 157 (1st Cir. 2020), 134 HARV. L. REV. 2630, 2634 (“Such a shift is explained neither by the doctrine nor the purpose of strict scrutiny.”).
At the same time that the district court in Massachusetts considered SFFA’s claims, on the other side of the country, a coalition of students of color—including Asian American students—brought Smith v. Regents of the University of California.68 In Smith, plaintiffs argued that standardized test scores were racially biased against them and that reliance on standardized test scores was itself discriminatory.69 Thus, in contrast to SFFA’s argument, the Smith plaintiffs asserted that some Asian American applicants were harmed by the emphasis on standardized test scores in the college admissions process.70

The Smith plaintiffs filed a lawsuit against the University of California in the Superior Court of the State of California on December 10, 2019, alleging that the university’s use of standardized tests discriminated against students of color (including Asian American students), English language learners, and students with disabilities.71 According to the complaint, the University of California’s reliance on standardized test scores in the admissions process discriminated against the plaintiffs because SAT and ACT scores strongly correlated with the income and education of the applicant’s parents or guardians72 and the applicant’s race.73 According to the plaintiffs, “[t]he use of these exams is an unlawful practice in violation of the California Constitution’s equal protection clause and numerous State anti-discrimination statutes, and it is barring our clients

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70. Id. at 40.
72. See Jay Rosner, Disparate Outcomes by Design: University Admissions Tests, 12 BERKELEY LA RAZA L.J. 377, 383–84 (2001) (noting a factor contributing to the gap in test scores is high-quality preparation courses that affect low-income students by the high cost of the course); Sigal Alon & Marta Tienda, Diversity, Opportunity, and the Shifting Meritocracy in Higher Education, 72 AM. SOC. REV. 487, 490–91 (2007) (internal citations omitted) (“Simply put, poor students, among who black and Hispanics are overrepresented, average lower test scores than their wealthy and nonminority counterparts because they are significantly more likely to attend underperforming, resource-poor schools.”).
73. Even after controlling for parents’ education and family income, “race has a large, independent, and growing statistical effect on applicants’ SAT and ACT scores.” Amended Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief at 53, Smith, No. RG19046222, 2020 WL 6481672 (quoting Saul Geiser, Norm-Referenced Tests and Race-Blind Admissions: The Case for Eliminating the SAT and ACT at the University of California, UC BERKELEY: CTR. FOR STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC., Dec. 2017, at 3.
from equal access to higher education."  

To support these allegations, the plaintiffs cited research—including research conducted by faculty within the University of California (UC) system—showing that test questions are biased against underrepresented minority students. The Smith plaintiffs also relied on research showing that the SAT is unreliable due to racial bias that undervalues the performance of students of color, in part due to test makers validating test questions by using white test takers as the norm.

To further support their discrimination claim, the plaintiffs relied on an expert analysis that divides students into different deciles based upon high school GPA. According to the plaintiffs, the analysis illustrates how consideration of SAT and ACT scores “displaces high-performing underrepresented minority applicants from the top [deciles].” In other words, for these students, having high grades is not as closely correlated with having a high SAT or ACT score as it is for students of other racial backgrounds. Plaintiffs allege that:

[w]hen ranked by high school grades, underrepresented minority students comprised 12 percent of applicants in the top decile [, but] [w]hen ranked by SAT and ACT scores, however, the representation of underrepresented minority students fell to only 5 percent. Conversely, ranking applicants by SAT and ACT scores resulted in underrepresented minority students comprising 60 percent of the bottom decile, as opposed to only 39 percent when ranked by high school grades.

The complaint concludes that because “[u]nderrepresented minority applicants are less than half as likely to rise to the top of the pool” when ranked by SAT and ACT scores, rather than by high school GPA, standardized tests are a barrier to their admission.

In contrast with SFFA, the Smith plaintiffs argue that there are disparities in acceptance rates for some Asian American populations. Grouping

74. Demand Letter to the Regents of Univ. of Calif., supra note 71.
75. See, e.g., CLAUDE S. FISCHER ET AL., INEQUALITY BY DESIGN: CRACKING THE BELL CURVE MYTH 46 (1996) (“Therefore, we cannot read a gap in test scores as if it reflected an edge that the admission process gives to some students at the expense of others. In part, it reflects the disadvantages that suppress the measured achievement of some groups, especially blacks and Latinos.”); WILLIAM G. BOWEN & DEREK BOK, THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER: LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF CONSIDERING RACE IN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS 16 (2d ed. 2000) (“The most obvious approach, comparing average SAT scores of black and white students, is seriously flawed and should not be used for this purpose.”).
77. Amended Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief at 115, 125, Smith, No. RG19046222, 2020 WL 6481672.
78. Id. at 115.
79. Id.
80. Id.
81. Id. at 116 (alteration in original) (citing GEISER, supra note 73).
Asian American applicants together masks the reality that many Southeast Asian students face educational disparities comparable to Black, Latinx, and Native American students.\textsuperscript{82} For example, while the acceptance rate was 15.06 percent for Asian American applicants, disaggregating data on Asian applicants reveals disparities between different subgroups.\textsuperscript{83} Korean and Taiwanese applicants had acceptance rates of 19.18 percent and 18.40 percent, respectively, but Filipinx and Hmong applicants had acceptance rates of 12.35 percent and 9.55 percent, respectively.\textsuperscript{84}

One organizational plaintiff in the lawsuit, Chinese for Affirmative Action, further describes how the SAT and ACT unfairly prevent Chinese American students who are English language learners and who lack the resources for expensive test prep tutoring from being admitted to the UC programs.\textsuperscript{85} The group alleges that standardized tests underestimate the ability of English language learners to succeed in college by failing to provide for accommodations or to contextualize scores.\textsuperscript{86} Another organizational plaintiff, Little Manila After School Program, alleges that the SAT and ACT unfairly disadvantage Filipinx students in the admissions process due to racial bias and the inaccessibility of expensive test preparation tutoring.\textsuperscript{87} The complaint explains how test scores are largely impacted by whether students can access test preparation materials and whether families can purchase coaches or counselors for several thousand more dollars to work with students on tailor-made preparation to game the test.\textsuperscript{88}

Plaintiffs next argue that standardized test scores are not reliable indicators of a student’s potential to succeed in college, and that high school GPA is a more accurate predictor of college outcomes than SAT scores.\textsuperscript{89} Indeed, in May 2019, the College Board admitted that the SAT was not entirely reliable without additional contextual information about a test taker’s background.\textsuperscript{90} It introduced what it termed an “adversity score”
to aid college admissions officers in interpreting results. According to the College Board’s CEO, without such information on socioeconomic background characteristics, SAT scores might not be properly interpreted.

Finally, the Smith suit alleges that the University of California has long been aware of the consistent and longstanding racial and socioeconomic bias baked into the exams, but continued to rely on both exams, despite knowing that the SAT and ACT are biased and not reliable indicators of students’ ability to succeed. In fact, in 1962, UC decided not to use the SAT because the “scores add little or nothing to the precision with which existing admissions requirements are predictive of success in the University,” but later reinstated its use. More recently, UC convened a Standardized Testing Task Force which recognized that exam results were biased by the reality that students from more affluent backgrounds have access to additional resources, including private test preparation courses and coaches.

Plaintiffs argue that the prior knowledge the UC system possessed about the racially disparate impact and unreliability of the tests is relevant to their discrimination claim under the state constitution’s equal protection clause. Their analysis parallels the federal Arlington Heights test...
for establishing intentional discrimination.99 Under this test, when a decision-making body persists in employing a criterion that it knows to have a disparate impact without a legitimate justification, this can constitute evidence of discrimination.100 Plaintiffs also argue that the historical background of decision-making is relevant because the Regents have understood for decades that the SAT and ACT have only minimal predictive validity and operate to disproportionately exclude low-income and underrepresented minority students from the University—yet they have repeatedly chosen to continue requiring the tests.101 By ignoring studies showing that the exams are not reliable, plaintiffs allege that the UC Regents have departed from their own policies on testing principles.102 Moreover, contemporaneous statements by President Janet Napolitano acknowledging the bias associated with the tests provide evidence that the University’s leaders recognized that the SAT and ACT unfairly disadvantage students based upon race, socioeconomic, and disability status.103

On September 1, 2020, the state court issued a preliminary injunction requiring the UC system to cease the use of the test scores during the litigation.104 The court focused its legal analysis on the plaintiffs’ disability claims under California law as well as the current pandemic conditions, and considered whether a person’s inability to exercise the test option due to a disability is a denial of meaningful access to an opportunity or benefit.105 Although the court’s decision did not reach the plaintiffs’ equal protection claim under the California Constitution,106 central to its analysis was the question of whether standardized tests are “a valid method of measuring academic achievement . . . .”107 Regarding the college entrance exams, the court wrote that “the evidence shows that the

99. See Vill. of Arlington Heights v. Metro. Hous. Dev. Corp., 429 U.S. 252, 266–68 (1977) (outlining factors for determining whether discriminatory purpose motivated an actor, such as: statistics demonstrating a “clear pattern, unexplainable on grounds other than” discrimination; “the historical background of the decision”; “[t]he specific sequence of events leading up to the challenged decision”; the defendant’s departures from its normal procedures or substantive conclusions; and the relevant “legislative or administrative history”).
100. Id.
101. Amended Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief at 120, Smith, No. RG19046222, 2020 WL 6481672.
102. Id. at 119–20.
104. Id. at 8–11.
105. The court recognized that the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) provides a broader basis for liability than California’s equal protection clause, and “eschews reliance solely on traditional or adverse impact labels.” Id. at 9. Instead, the ADA “extends to . . . a range of conduct, including conduct that creates an adverse impact . . . .” Id.
106. Id. at 11–12.
efficacy of the tests is at best minimal.”108 It then concluded that the plaintiffs had made a substantial case and were likely to succeed on the merits.109 Subsequently, the parties reached a settlement, under which the UC system would remain test-free through fall 2025.110 The settlement agreement also provides that “if the [University] chooses a new exam for use in undergraduate admissions in the future, it will consider access for students with disabilities in the design and implementation of any such exam.”111

III. THE NEED FOR A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF DISCRIMINATION CLAIMS

In this Part, I consider a framework for analyzing claims of discrimination brought on both sides of an issue, such as in these cases challenging universities’ use of standardized tests. I refer to such cases as “mirror” discrimination claims. I argue that without a contextual analysis of intentional discrimination claims, universities and other actors could be subject to conflicting liability, such as in the Smith and SFFA litigation, where claims of intentional discrimination could simultaneously be brought challenging admissions practices that rely too much on standardized test scores and those that do not rely enough. Indeed, one could imagine applicants bringing a claim of intentional discrimination against Harvard College that replicates the claims brought by the Smith plaintiffs against UC. One could even imagine a group of plaintiffs intervening in the SFFA v. Harvard litigation to bring a crossclaim of discrimination by asserting that Harvard’s reliance on standardized tests discriminates against them. Such a counterclaim was not explicitly brought in the SFFA v. Harvard litigation, but students and alumni in support of race-conscious admissions did present evidence that reliance on standardized test scores had a discriminatory effect on students of color who apply to Harvard, including some Asian American applicants.112

108. Id. at 11.
109. Id.
111. Id. at 3.
In the Sections that follow, I consider whether disparate impact liability can help us distinguish between what appear to be mirror intentional discrimination claims by scrutinizing the justification for the policy given its disproportionate adverse impact. I then consider how to interpret variation in the impact of a policy on a protected group when faced with mirror claims of intentional discrimination.

A. The Compelling Interest in Avoiding Disparate Impact Liability in Mirror Discrimination Claims

Both the SFFA and the Smith plaintiffs allege discrimination based on the over or under reliance on standardized test scores in college admissions. The plaintiff groups rely on data showing racial disparities in standardized tests scores, but they reach two different conclusions about the significance of this data. One way of distinguishing between their claims is to consider whether a college’s decision not to rely on standardized test scores could be defended based on a compelling interest in avoiding disparate impact liability.113

As Kimberly West-Faulcon has argued, universities that rely on admissions criteria like the SAT in a manner that unjustifiably decreases the admissions chances of minority applicants could be in violation of Title VI disparate impact regulations.114 Although the Supreme Court has determined there is no private right of action for disparate impact
discrimination under Title VI, 115 disparate impact discrimination is still recognized and proscribed by agencies implementing Title VI. 116 A prima facie case of disparate impact liability can be established when a policy or practice has an adverse effect that disproportionately impacts members of a protected group. 117 The burden then shifts to the defendant to demonstrate the existence of a substantial legitimate justification for the policy or practice. 118 This explanation may be rebutted by demonstrating that an alternative would achieve the same legitimate objective but with less of a discriminatory effect. 119

In its brief, Harvard admits that because standardized test scores undervalue the potential of students of color, consideration of race is necessary for it to contextually evaluate applicants. 120 In other words, Harvard admits the first element for establishing a prima facie case of disparate impact discrimination: that its use of standardized test scores has a disproportionate adverse effect on students of color. 121 While Harvard could try to defend its policy as serving a substantial justification (selecting qualified applicants), the research challenging the validity of standardized tests that was used in the UC case could rebut this explanation. Finally, Harvard’s policy of flexibly considering other admissions factors

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117. CIVIL RIGHTS DIV., supra note 116, at 6.

118. Id.


120. See Harvard’s Response to SFFA’s Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law at 19, SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (D. Mass. 2019) (No. 14-cv-14176) (citation omitted) (“There is wide variation by race in the number and proportion of applicants who fall within a given decile, reflecting (for example) the fact that African-American and Hispanic applicants disproportionately face challenges of educational opportunity that may limit the degree to which grades and test scores reflect their true academic potential.”). Moreover, Harvard has suspended the consideration of standardized tests in admissions cycles impacted by the pandemic and for at least another four years. See Vivi E. Lu, Harvard College Suspends Standardized Testing Requirement for Next Four Years, HARV. CRIMSON (Dec. 17, 2021) (discussing Harvard College’s decision to suspend its standardized testing requirement).

121. See, e.g., Griggs v. Duke Power Co., 401 U.S. 424, 431 (1971) (holding that requiring job applicants to have a high-school diploma and score satisfactorily on an aptitude constituted discrimination where the requirements have a racially disparate impact and are related to job performance or business necessity); see also Albemarle Paper Co. v. Moody, 422 U.S. 405, 425 (1975) citing McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green, 411 U.S. 792, 801 (1973) (holding that the burden shifts to the defendant to establish a legitimate purpose once a prima facie case of disparate impact discrimination is established).
demonstrates that there are other admissions criteria that Harvard officials believe serve the objective of selectively admitting qualified students while producing a less discriminatory effect. In short, one could establish the basic elements for disparate impact liability: that Harvard’s use of standardized test scores has an avoidable racially disparate impact.

To be clear, avoiding disparate impact discrimination was not raised as an affirmative defense in the Harvard litigation and thus is not at issue in that case. My point is simply that disparate impact discrimination can help us distinguish between competing claims of discrimination. Strong evidence that greater emphasis on standardized tests would give rise to disparate impact liability provides a defense that distinguishes SFFA’s claims of intentional discrimination from the Smith plaintiffs’ claims. There is no substantial legitimate justification for relying more heavily on standardized tests in the face of their racially disparate impact given their unreliability. In contrast, there is a justification for a policy of relying less on standardized testing. The claims aren’t mirror images after all.

More fundamentally, the evidence of racial bias in standardized testing undermines SFFA’s argument that standardized test scores are a reliable baseline for assessing discrimination. SFFA claims that standardized test scores are objective indicators of being qualified for admission to Harvard, but as discussed in the prior section, social research on the SAT and ACT shows that racial bias is embedded throughout the test and test scores have limited predictive value for determining which students are likely to succeed in college. SFFA ignores that these tests have been shown to be biased against Black, Latinx, Native American, and Southeast Asian students and privilege white and wealthy students, undermining the legitimacy of the test and the justification of colleges relying on test scores at all.

In addition, SFFA provides no explanation for arguing that a student’s test score should be correlated with a student’s personal rating. SFFA’s central argument is that the disparity in personal ratings between Asian American and other people of color is so much larger than the disparity between Asian American and white applicants that it demonstrates that Harvard is providing undeserved tips in the personal rating to Black and Latinx applicants as part of its race-conscious admissions process.

122. See generally Santelices & Wilson, supra note 17; Roy O. Freedle, Correcting the SAT’s Ethnic and Social-Class Bias: A Method for Reestimating SAT Scores, 73 HARV. EDUC. REV. 1, 28–29 (2003) (explaining that Black and Latinx examinees outperformed white examinees on questions which use vocabulary taught at school, white examinees outperformed Black and Latinx examinees on questions with varying colloquial meanings). For a deeper discussion of why so-called objective indicators of merit are in fact racially biased, and the overreliance on standardized tests, see generally LANI GUINIER, THE TYRANNY OF THE MERITOCRACY (2015).

123. Brief for Petitioner, supra note 39, at 31.
the contrary, as Professor West-Faulcon explains, it is unsurprising that the admitted students from the groups that have lower average test scores must score higher when it comes to other admission criteria in order to gain admission. SFFA relies on “the average-test-score-of-admitted-students fallacy,” which points to a difference in the numerical average of the SAT test scores of all Black and Asian American (or white) students admitted as proof that a university is racially discriminatory in applying its SAT test score standard. But the difference in average test scores does not amount to proof that a university has a policy of applying a lower standard to the individual applicants belonging to the racial group with the lower group test score average. Harvard’s admissions policy is not the cause of the numerical difference in the group average of the test scores; a similar numerical difference exists throughout the country, including within UC’s admission system, despite the fact that UC is prohibited from considering race as the result of Proposition 209. From this standpoint, SFFA’s expert’s decision to exclude the personal rating as a factor in modeling the impact of race on an applicant’s likelihood of admission is important because it removes some of the other key considerations on which applicants with lower test scores may distinguish themselves.

Perhaps most telling, SFFA’s argument presumes that racial disparities in test scores are legitimate and should not be questioned, but that racial disparities in the personal rating are not legitimate and should be questioned. SFFA does not provide a reason for treating these factors differently. Instead, SFFA assumes that when Asian American and white students receive the highest scores on tests, the testing system must be objective and fair, but when Black and Latinx students receive higher personal scores, the system of rating applicants must be biased or illegitimate. This reveals a disturbing underlying assumption about the inherent abilities and performance of students of different racial groups that reinforces unfounded beliefs about race-based differences in intellect and academic superiority.

124. West-Faulcon, supra note 22, at 595 n.16.
125. Id. at 594.
126. CAL. CONST. art. I, § 31(a).
127. See SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 173–74 (D. Mass. 2019) (expressing approval of Dr. Card’s methodology which recognized that the personal rating captures relevant characteristics that are considered by Harvard’s admissions officers and therefore should be included in a regression analysis evaluating the impact of race).
128. See Memorandum in Support of Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment on All Remaining Counts at 43–44, SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (No. 1:14-cv-14176) (“According to Dr. Arcidiacono, then, statistical variances that favor Asian Americans should be dismissed as the result of ‘unobservable characteristics,’ but statistical variances that disfavor Asian Americans are attributed to alleged bias.”).
Although SFFA’s original complaint outlines a claim of discrimination based on different treatment of Asian American applicants vis-à-vis white applicants, SFFA repeatedly relies on data comparing Asian American applicants’ likelihood of admission to other students of color. A closer consideration reveals some of the practical reasons why other students of color are not an appropriate comparator for determining whether Asian Americans experience negative action in Harvard’s admissions process. SFFA argues that Asian Americans experience implicit bias due to how they are assessed by their high schools, but extensive research demonstrates that Black, Latinx, and Native American students experience pervasive implicit bias, too. Studies have found that the (sometimes unconscious) racial bias of educators fundamentally shapes the educational opportunities of students of color, as exhibited in expectations of students, assignment to advanced coursework, student evaluations, student discipline, and college counseling.

129. See Brief for Petitioner at 30, SFFA v. Harvard, 142 S. Ct. 895 (2022) (Nos. 20-1199 & 21-707) (“Harvard admits Asian Americans at similar or lower rates than whites, even though Asian Americans receive higher academic scores, higher extracurricular scores, and higher alumni-interview views.”); Plaintiff’s Memorandum in Support of Its Motion for Summary Judgment at 10, SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (No. 14-cv-14176) (“Looking at the number of Asian Americans denied admission because of the bias against them underscores the magnitude of the penalty. If they had been treated like white applicants, an average of approximately 44 more Asian Americans per year would have been admitted to Harvard over the six-year period the experts analyzed.”).

130. See SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d 157, 185 n.23 (1st Cir. 2020) (“It is not entirely clear how SFFA’s arguments about Harvard’s use of race to benefit African American and Hispanic applicants relate to SFFA’s central allegation that Harvard discriminates against Asian American applicants in favor of white applicants. We understand SFFA’s arguments as attacking the use of race to admit African American and Hispanic candidates, to the detriment of Asian American and white applicants.”).


established research is especially important in light of the district court’s conclusion that racial disparities in the personal rating are most likely caused by factors outside of Harvard’s admissions process that almost certainly disadvantage other applicants of color as well.134

B. The Importance of an Intersectional Frame in Analyzing Mirror Discrimination Claims

The previous section considered how disparate impact liability can help us distinguish between mirror discrimination claims. This section will consider how to analyze mirror claims that involve intragroup variation, such as in Smith and SFFA, where there are contested arguments about how different subgroups of Asian American applicants are treated.

As previously discussed, SFFA brought a series of cases challenging college admissions programs as discriminatory against Asian American applicants. The case against Yale University is particularly notable because it takes the remarkable step of redefining who qualifies as Asian American for the purpose of the lawsuit.135 The complaint declares that “references to Asian applicants exclude . . . Asian applicants who identify, at least in part, as from a favored Asian-American subgroup, such as

253, 271 (2007) (finding that educators were less likely to offer encouragement and pose questions to Black and Latinx students than white students); RUSSELL J. SKIBA & NATASHA T. WILLIAMS, THE EQUITY PROJECT AT IND. UNIV., ARE BLACK KIDS WORSE? MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN BEHAVIOR: A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE 4 (2014), https://indrc.indiana.edu/tools-resources/pdf-disciplineseries/african_american_differential_behavior_031214.pdf [https://perma.cc/NY7M-QV9S] (“The fact that race remains a significant predictor of discipline after controlling for a range of disciplinary infractions strongly suggest that factors related to student behavior are not sufficient to account for racial/ethnic disparities in discipline.”); DANIEL SOLORZANO & ARMIDA ORNELAS, A CRITICAL RACE ANALYSIS OF LATINO/A AND AFRICAN AMERICAN ADVANCED PLACEMENT ENROLLMENT IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS 15 (2004) (analyzing the availability of Advanced Placement courses for Latinx and Black students and how these courses impact education); JORDAN G. STARCK ET AL., TEACHERS ARE PEOPLE TOO: EXAMINING THE RACIAL BIAS OF TEACHERS COMPARED TO OTHER AMERICAN ADULTS 273 (2020) (reviewing data regarding teachers’ explicit and implicit racial biases relative to other adults).

134. SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 170 n.48; see also id. at 162. The court recognized that “[a]t least a partial cause of the disparity in the personal ratings between Asian American and white applicants appears to be teacher and guidance counselor recommendations, with white applicants tending to score slightly stronger than Asian Americans on the school support ratings.” Id.

135. The Department of Justice (DOJ) under President Trump originally brought the case alleging that Yale University discriminated against white and Asian American applicants in its admissions process by not relying more heavily on standardized test scores. Amelia Davidson, Students for Fair Admissions Sues Yale, Petitions to Escalate Harvard Case to Supreme Court, YALE DAILY NEWS (Feb. 25, 2021, 11:58 PM), https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2021/02/25/students-for-fair-admissions-sues-yale-petitions-to-escalate-harvard-case-to-supreme-court/ [https://perma.cc/KYZ2-9MPQ]. After the DOJ under President Biden withdrew the lawsuit against Yale, SFFA refiled this same lawsuit. Id. SFFA also filed a challenge against Yale University after the Biden administration’s Justice Department dropped its investigation of Yale and SFFA’s motion to intervene was denied. Id.; see United States v. Yale Univ., 337 F.R.D. 35, 41 (D. Conn. 2021) (denying motion to intervene after finding United States capable of adequately representing SFFA’s interest in case).
applicants who identify as Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, or Vietnamese.”

Why does SFFA exclude these subgroups from its definition of Asian American? A closer examination of the data reveals that because these subgroups of Asian American students have lower average SAT scores and grades than other groups of Asian American students, they did not fit SFFA’s claim of intentional discrimination.

Although the group of Asian Americans who apply to elite universities tend to have higher average standardized test scores and grades than other racial groups, the high academic performance of this group of students does not reflect all Asian American ethnic groups, in particular Southeast Asian Americans. While it is true that Asian ethnic groups, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans, in the aggregate, have achieved higher education levels and incomes, relying on educational and economic data in the aggregate conceals the gaps between different Asian

American subgroups. This reality has led many scholars and advocates to call for more disaggregated data to understand the educational experiences of Asian American students and to expose the fallacy of the “model minority” myth, which serves to hide the discrimination and bias that some Asian Americans face.

Because the data associated with Southeast Asian applicants cannot support SFFA’s theory of discrimination, the Complaint defines this subgroup of Asian American students as “favored” and not discriminated against. In other words, faced with the gap in performance on standardized tests between different subgroups of Asian American students, SFFA determined that rather than address these differences within its theory, it would just redefine Asian American for the purposes of this case. Ironically, in doing so, SFFA removes the subgroups that are most likely to have their educational opportunity disadvantaged within the protected class of Asian Americans.

*SFFA v. Yale* raises a concern that comes up more generally in the context of discrimination cases where there is variation in how a protected class is impacted by a particular policy, which is how courts should determine which subgroups to recognize. For example, in a disparate


143. Id. ¶ 1.

When Claims Collide

impact case brought under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), the Eighth Circuit expressed concern that if there were no limit to how disparate-impact subgroups could be defined,\footnote{EEOC v. McDonnell Douglas Corp., 191 F.3d 948, 950–51 (8th Cir. 1999).} there would be a risk of plaintiffs “gerrymander[ing] evidence” by manipulating statistical evidence to show a disparate impact on that particular subgroup.\footnote{For further discussion, see Marc Chase McAllister, \textit{Subgroup Analysis in Disparate Impact Age Discrimination Cases: Striking the Appropriate Balance through Age Cutoffs}, 70 ALA. L. REV. 1073, 1082–83 (2019) (observing that courts are split regarding how to interpret which subgroups may claim disparate impact discrimination under the ADEA).} SFFA’s strategic erasure of data showing educational disadvantage within the Asian American community is a highly concerning form of gerrymandering evidence because it ignores marginalized members of a protected group.

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that all members of a protected class must be similarly impacted by the challenged policy in order for there to be a cognizable claim of discrimination. To the contrary, systems of bias often impact members of a protected group differently. Race is, after all, just one dimension of group identity. As Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw famously theorized when she coined the term \textit{intersectionality}, multiple identities can overlap to create a distinct status for people who share some aspects of their identities.\footnote{Kimberlé Crenshaw, \textit{Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine}, 1989 U. CHI. L. FORUM 139, 140 (1989), http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8 [https://perma.cc/EA69-B5XQ].} Collectively, separate categories of identity can intersect to cause a particular experience of subordination. Thus, intragroup differences can contribute to overall patterns of subordination between groups. Indeed, an intersectional frame helps to ensure that generalizations about groups in the aggregate do not overshadow the more specific experiences of subgroups, including experiences of discrimination that might otherwise be overlooked.\footnote{TED, \textit{The Urgency of Intersectionality: Kimberlé Crenshaw}, YOUTUBE (Dec. 7, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o&ab_channel=TED [https://perma.cc/4BMJ-355A].}

Although not as explicit as in the Yale litigation, SFFA’s approach to the Harvard litigation lacks an intersectional frame for considering how an Asian American applicant’s identity may interact with their status with regard to other group identities. SFFA does not acknowledge differences between subgroups at all, including those who are disadvantaged by increased reliance on standardized testing. The lack of an intersectional frame for considering the status of Asian Americans who identify as Hmong or Filipinx or Cambodian results in overlooking the bias these groups face. In contrast, the Smith plaintiffs’ use of disaggregated data reveals that Asian American students at the intersections of different
identities experience educational barriers that impact their scores on standardized tests.\textsuperscript{149} By failing to apply an intersectional frame, SFFA ignores that there are people with intersecting identities within the Asian American community and masks the challenges some Asian American subgroups face.

Because SFFA brought an intentional discrimination claim against Harvard, the variation in how Harvard’s admission policy impacted Asian American subgroups was an issue the district court struggled with in reviewing SFFA’s discrimination claim. SFFA admitted that Harvard’s admissions policy does not negatively impact some groups of Asian American applicants, and the district court found it improbable that Harvard would discriminate against some groups, but not other groups of Asian American applicants.\textsuperscript{150} For example, Harvard’s expert, Dr. Card, modeled admissions outcomes for two subgroups of Asian American applicants: females and applicants from California.\textsuperscript{151} He found that Asian American identity within these subgroups returned positive coefficients.\textsuperscript{152} Based on these models, the court reasoned that to the extent biases influenced the admissions process, those biases were not uniform across the Asian American applicant population.\textsuperscript{153} The court also did not find it credible that Harvard only discriminated against non-ALDC Asian Americans,\textsuperscript{154} reasoning that “it does not seem likely that Harvard would discriminate against non-ALDC Asian Americans, but not discriminate against ALDC Asian American applicants or that there would be a race-related explanation for treating the two groups differently.”\textsuperscript{155} In other words, the district court was not willing to accept SFFA’s claims that discrimination would only affect certain groups of Asian American applicants.

The more narrow the impacted group, the more suspicious courts may be that the impact is the result of a discriminatory purpose\textsuperscript{156} because

\textsuperscript{149} For further discussion, see Brief of Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Defendant-Appellee at 11, SFFA v. Harvard, 980 F.3d 157 (1st Cir. 2020) (No. 19-2005).

\textsuperscript{150} SFFA, 397 F. Supp. at 174 (No. 14-cv-14176).


\textsuperscript{152} Id. ¶ 14.

\textsuperscript{153} SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 173 (No. 14-cv-14176).

\textsuperscript{154} See id. at 138 (defining “ALDCs” as Athletes, Legacy Applicants, Dean’s Interest List Applicants, and Children of Faculty or Staff).

\textsuperscript{155} Id. at 174.

\textsuperscript{156} The legal standard for proving a violation of the Equal Protection Clause requires that plaintiffs prove both racially discriminatory effect and purpose. See Pers. Adm’r of Mass. v. Feeney, 442 U.S. 256, 272 (1979) (“[E]ven if a neutral law has a disproportionately adverse effect upon a racial minority, it is unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause only if that impact can be traced to a discriminatory purpose.”); see also Washington v. Davis, 426 U.S. 229, 240–41 (1976)
they may question why the defendant targeted some members of the group, but not the group more generally. But a claim of discrimination against a subgroup that shares protected status should succeed when plaintiffs are able to establish that the subgroup is subject to different treatment based at least in part on their protected group status. Courts have recognized that intentional discrimination can be directed toward a subgroup of a protected class, for example, where the subgroup is subject to different treatment based in part of their protected group status, even when the overall protected group is not disproportionately disadvantaged in the aggregate. This is true even when protected status is not the sole cause of discrimination, or where the decisionmaker was not aware of their bias, so long as protected status was a factor that led to different treatment. But plaintiffs bringing an intentional discrimination claim on behalf of a subgroup must offer a theory that they experienced intentional discrimination based on their protected status, in ways that are different from members of the protected group who were impacted differently.

SFFA failed to provide a meaningful theory for how intentional discrimination operated in the context of its claims, and ignored the ways that the complex and intersecting identities of Asian American college applicants impact lived experiences. Ironically, although SFFA argues that Asian Americans are discriminated against because they are

(impacting the burden of proving prima facie elements of discriminatory purpose and effect on equal protection plaintiffs, then shifting the burden to the state to rebut these presumptions).

157. See Serena Mayeri, Intersectionality and Title VII: A Brief (Pre-)History, 95 B.U. L. REV. 713, 727 (2015) (“[C]ourt opinions that acknowledged, much less discussed, intersectionality were few and far between.”).


161. See Amici Curiae Students Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law at 49, SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (D. Mass. 2019) (No. 14-cv-14176) (“SFFA’s primary argument . . . appears to be that Harvard is acting with an unconscious bias against Asian American students,” but SFFA “did not bring forth any witness to explain what an unconscious bias is, how it operates, or how the evidence here demonstrates that Harvard is acting with an unconscious bias that favors white applicants to the detriment of Asian American applicants.”).
stereotyped as model minorities, by failing to disaggregate data and acknowledge intragroup differences, the framing of SFFA’s theory of discrimination reinforces stereotypical notions that misunderstand the diversity within Asian American identity.162

C. Recognition of Diversity Along Multiple Axes Can Challenge Subordination & Essentialism

While no individual injured plaintiffs appeared during the SFFA v. Harvard trial, eight current Harvard students and alumni testified as amici in support of race-conscious admissions, including three Asian American Harvard students.163 In their testimony, these three students discussed how they believed they benefited from having their ethno-racial identities recognized rather than being harmed by Harvard’s holistic admissions policy.164

First, students testified that some Asian American students would be excluded if Harvard’s admissions process inflexibly relied on standardized test scores. For example, Thang Diep, a Vietnamese American who immigrated to the United States at age eight, explained how he believed his personal statement describing his experiences as an immigrant and English learner helped contextualize his SAT score when Harvard admissions officers reviewed his application.165 He explained that he “believe[s] that [he] benefited from affirmative action . . . [because] it allows [his] immigration history to be taken into account.”166 Indeed, although a Harvard admissions officer noted on his application that his SAT score was on the lower end of the Harvard average, the admissions committee considered his other academic achievements in light of the discrimination and challenges he faced as a Vietnamese immigrant.167

163. The Lawyers Committee for Civil Right and Asian Americans Advancing Justice represented four current Harvard students and alumni; The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund represented twenty-six Harvard student and alumni organizations as amici plus. See Memorandum and Order on Proposed Defendant-Intervenors’ Motion to Intervene, SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (D. Mass. 2019) (No. 1:14-cv-14176) (granting amicus status); Memorandum and Order Regarding Motions to Participate in Trial Proceedings Filed by Amici Curiae, SFFA v. Harvard, 397 F. Supp. 3d 126 (No. 1:14-cv-14176) (granting permission to participate in trial); see also Ruben J. Garcia, A Democratic Theory of Amicus Advocacy, 35 FLA. ST. U. L. REV. 315, 342 (2008) (“Often, the court will allow a party who is unable to intervene to participate in a case as an ‘amicus plus,’ with a greater role than simply filing a single brief.”). In addition to filing briefs, eight amici students and organizations testified during trial. SFFA, 397 F. Supp. 3d at 6.
165. Id. at 157–58.
166. Id. at 158.
167. Id. at 146–48.
Another student testified as to how she would personally be penalized if she could not discuss her ethnic and racial background in her application. Sally Chen, a Chinese American student, testified that without race-conscious admissions, she doesn’t think she would have been admitted to Harvard. In her essay, she “wrote very directly about how being the daughter of Chinese immigrants and being a kind of translator and advocate for them across barriers of cultural and linguistic difference . . . shaped [her] views on social responsibility . . .” In her application file, the admissions officer noted her description of “the significance of growing up in a culturally Chinese home . . .” Sally testified that Harvard’s holistic admissions program considered her ethno-racial background, which was essential to describing who she is.

Students also testified that without a holistic admissions process that considers race, as well as diversity along other axes, there would be less diversity within the Asian American community at Harvard. As explained in the Asian American Legal Defense and Educational Fund brief: “Individualized admissions policies are best equipped to recognize the vast diversity within the Asian community, including the stark differences in socioeconomic and education attainment among different ethnic subgroups.” Student Catherine Ho observed that as a Southeast Asian American, diversity within diversity or diverse representation of Asian American identity on campus truly mattered. It was important to her that there was diverse representation of Asian Americans within organizations on campus so that students “realize how diverse the Asian-American experience is.”

The students who testified also described how, contrary to SFFA’s argument, race-conscious admissions is not discriminatory, but instead fosters the kind of diversity that challenges stereotypes about Asian

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170. Id. at 200.

171. Id. at 202.

172. Id.

173. See also Brief for Lawyers’ Comm. for C.R. and Asian Am. Advancing Justice as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondent at 9, SFFA v. Harvard, 142 S. Ct. 895 (2022) (No. 20-1199) (“Indeed, Harvard’s race-conscious policy not only cultivates diversity across racial groups, but also within racial groups (‘intra-racial’ diversity), including among Asian American students who vary widely in their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, political, and religious backgrounds.”).


Americans by exposing students on campus to a diversity of Asian American experiences instead of narrowly focusing on admitting students with the highest test scores. Sally Chen testified that she felt it was important to “have an Asian American population that is also racially and ethnically diverse as well as socioeconomically diverse to really dispel these kinds of overarching myths about what it means to be Asian American.” Sally emphasized that to “meet [other] Asian Americans who are different” pushed her to reflect on her own identity and challenged assumptions she had about others.

Diversity within diversity requires both a critical mass of students from different racial backgrounds and attention to how multiple identities overlap and intersect. By allowing the flexibility to consider many factors, including race, but also socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and religion, amongst other kinds of group status, holistic admissions offers the potential to foster diversity within the group of admitted students who share a common racial background. There are of course, distinctions between different subgroups within the Black, Latinx and Native American communities, just as there are within the Asian American community, and there is a real need for disaggregated data within all of these groups to recognize and understand intragroup differences. College admissions committees should consider identity among multiple matrices to pursue a compelling interest in diversity and to protect against tokenism, and the wrong (but common) assumption that an individual student can represent the experience of an entire racial group. The importance of diversity within diversity, and the need for an intersectional frame to consider intersecting identities, exists for students of all racial backgrounds, during the application process and beyond.

In sum, the students who testified in *SFFA v. Harvard* described how, as the Supreme Court recognized in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, race-conscious admissions does not lead to discrimination, but fosters a critical mass of minority students and combats racial stereotypes as students experience diversity at the intersection of different overlapping identities on campus. At the same time, Sally Chen shared a story that especially

176. Id. at 204, 210–11.
177. Id.
178. Id.
underscores the urgent need to further combat stereotyping of Asian American students on campus, which is worth recounting in full and in her own words:

I was studying in a student space called Ticknor Lounge when a staff person approached me and said, “Tourists aren’t allowed here. This is a space for students only.” And she essentially told me to leave, which in that moment I don’t think I even processed what was happening. I pulled out my ID and I said, “I go here.” She was unfazed. . . . [I]t made me feel like I didn’t belong there. It made me feel foreign. And it really, I think, triggered a kind of internal critique of myself.181

As Sally’s story illustrates, there remains a deep-seated assumption by many in American society that elite universities are spaces exclusively for white students. Although Sally describes a process of self-critique, it is evident from the circumstances of the story that the guard’s assumption that she did not belong was rooted in stereotypes about Asian Americans as foreign tourists and not based on anything she had personally done to suggest she was not actually a Harvard student.

Despite the fact that Asian Americans are stereotyped as model minorities, the assumption that they do not belong in elite settings remains prevalent in American society, just as a presumption of not belonging persists for other students of color for whom assumptions and stereotypes cut in other (sometimes opposite) ways.182 Indeed, similar stories of being stopped by guards and asked for identification on campus, ejected, or otherwise experiencing hostility and exclusion are prevalent among Black, Latinx, and Native American students at Harvard and elsewhere.183 These stories emphasize that despite the unique ways that discrimination manifests for students of color from different backgrounds, racial bias remains a common feature of their experiences in elite white schools that undermines their sense of belonging, regardless of the assumptions others make about their test scores and qualifications. While race-conscious admissions policies can help to challenge race-based stereotypes and essentialism by increasing diversity on campus, they will not on their own end deeply entrenched white supremacy. The roots of racial bias and subordination go far deeper than that.

181. Id. at 204–05.
182. See, e.g., Fisher I, 570 U.S. 297, 333 (2013) (Thomas, J., concurring) (alterations in original) (arguing that affirmative action “stamp[s] [blacks and Hispanics] with a badge of inferiority”). As Sally’s story makes clear, the badge of inferiority that non-white students wear is persistent irrespective of whether they are assumed to have lower test scores.
CONCLUSION

Without an analysis of racial disparities in access to power and resources, discrimination allegations lose meaning, and mirror claims could give rise to liability on both sides of an issue. The question of how to resolve mirror discrimination claims is not merely hypothetical, as a series of cases have recently alleged that universities and school districts are intentionally discriminating against some students, including students of color, where they take action to address racially disparate admissions practices. I have argued that one way of distinguishing between what appear to be mirror discrimination claims is to ask whether there is a strong basis in evidence to believe that a policy or decision would entail liability for disparate impact discrimination. If so, avoiding disparate impact liability provides a defense and establishes that there is not a substantial legitimate justification for the reverse action in the face of the disproportionate adverse effect on members of a protected group. In addition, I have argued that an intentional discrimination claim should not ignore intragroup variation that leads to different experiences of marginalization within a protected class.

If the Supreme Court rules that race-conscious admissions is unconstitutional, it will likely reject an anti-subordination approach to understanding intentional discrimination. This would lead to deep retrenchment of existing racial disparities and barriers college access. The reality is that many admissions policies that may appear to be “race-neutral” on their face, in fact unfairly advantage white students. As discussed, colleges and universities have a duty to address the ways that admissions policies may unjustifiably, disproportionately exclude students of color—a duty that exists regardless of whether race-conscious admissions is deemed constitutional. Indeed, if the Supreme Court holds that race-conscious admission is unconstitutional, addressing racially disparate impacts perpetuated through other college admissions policies will become even more critical to ensuring that pathways to college remain open to students of all racial backgrounds. Universities should consider whether reliance

184. See Vinay Harpalani, Testing the Limits: Asian Americans and the Debate over Standardized Entrance Exams, 73 S.C. L. REV. 759, 761 (2022) (discussing legal challenges to higher admission policies and challenges to admissions at New York City’s Specialized High School Admissions Test and Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (Fairfax, Virginia)’s admissions policies).
185. Ruth Colker, Anti-Subordination Above All: Sex, Race, and Equal Protection, 61 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1003, 1009, n. 17 (1986) (“Anti-subordination advocates argue that legal rules can be used affirmatively as a means of ending historical patterns of patriarchy and white supremacy.”).
187. 28 C.F.R. § 42.104(b)(2).
on the SAT or ACT unjustifiably decreases the admissions chances of minority applicants in violation of Title VI, in light of the well-established research showing that the SAT and ACT are not reliable indicators of a student’s potential to succeed in college.188 Universities should also carefully review legacy admissions policies that have the effect of disadvantaging students whose families lacked access to institutions of higher education in previous generations, and thus disproportionately favor white and wealthy applicants who were not historically excluded.189 Finally, the need for colleges and universities to ensure a safe and inclusive climate will be even more urgent if the Supreme Court’s pending decision results in a significant drop in the number of underrepresented minority students in higher education, limiting diversity within diversity, and increasing racial isolation and tokenism on campuses.

188. See infra Part III.A.
189. See Kathryn Ladewski, Preserving a Racial Hierarchy: A Legal Analysis of the Disparate Racial Impact of Legacy Preferences in University Admissions, 108 Mich. L. Rev. 577 (2010) (arguing that legacy preferences are prohibited by Title VI because they have a discriminatory effect on minority college applicants and have not been shown to promote a legitimate university purpose).