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From Housing to Admissions Redlining: Race, Wealth and Selective Access at Public Flagships, Post-World War II to Present

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Abstract

This paper interrogates two important but obscured admission policy developments at leading American universities in the post-World War II era. First, we critically examine the University of California's "special admissions," later formalized as the "Admission by Exception" policy adopted at two flagship campuses (Berkeley and UCLA) to open opportunities for veterans returning from the War under the GI Bill. The scale of this Admission by Exception policy was orders of magnitude larger than any comparable admissions policy in recent decades, including both the eras with and without legally permissible affirmative action. Second, we excavate archival evidence from the immediate aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, where leaders at the flagship University of Texas at Austin campus hastily adopted a new standardized exam requirement because their enrollment modeling indicated this was the most efficient way to not face further losses in federal court while excluding the largest number of African Americans (and thereby resisting *Brown*) and maintaining the same overall size of the freshmen class. These two post-war admission policy changes, one arising in de facto segregated California and the other in de jure segregated Texas, operated as racialized institutional mechanisms analogous to "redlining" racially restrictive housing policies that are a more familiar feature of the post-War era. We draw on historical data about earnings and wealth accumulation of the overwhelmingly white graduates of UC and UT in the 1950s–70s and connect these findings to the theoretical frameworks of Cheryl Harris's "whiteness as property" and George Lipsitz's racialized state investment. We show how these admission policies contributed to the intergenerational transfer of advantage. We then turn to the contemporary admissions landscape at highly selective American universities after the Supreme Court's *SFFA v. Harvard* ruling. We link current trends at some elite institutions toward a return to standardized testing requirements, maintaining considerations of athletic ability mostly in "country club" sports as manifestations of bias in university admissions, which tend to favor white applicants. The paper connects historical racialization of admissions to ongoing inequities in access and outcomes, showing how both historical and contemporary admissions policies reward inherited forms of cultural capital aligned with whiteness.

Keywords: admissions bias; standardized testing bias; Admission by Exception; affirmative action bans; race-neutral policies; whiteness as property; whiteness and higher education; public flagship universities; highly selective; wealth



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1. Introduction: Historical and Theoretical Framing

“Given the lengthy history of state-sponsored race-based preferences in America, to say that anyone is now victimized if a college considers whether that legacy of discrimination has unequally advantaged its applicants fails to acknowledge the well-documented ‘intergenerational transmission of inequality’ that still plagues our citizenry.”

—Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, dissenting in *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, 600 U.S. 181, p. 385 ([Students for Fair Admissions 2023](#))¹

Placed at the close of a Supreme Court opinion dismantling race-conscious admissions, Justice Jackson’s words invite us to see the *SFFA* decision as part of a long legal tradition of upholding white advantage under the cover of race neutrality. The dissent, grounded in historical fact and current data, cautions against a race-neutral fantasy that erases the very state actions that created entrenched racial inequities. This warning resonates far beyond college admissions, echoing debates over voting rights, housing policy, and other arenas where facially neutral rules preserve and protect racial hierarchies ([Jayakumar 2024](#); [Lipsitz 2006](#)). It is this continuity—between past and present, between the rhetoric of equality and the reality of racialized state investment—that drives the inquiry of this paper.

This paper, therefore, asks: How have flagship public universities historically encoded racial advantage through ostensibly neutral admissions criteria, and how do those logics persist in contemporary policy? We conduct a comparative historical analysis of two case studies—the University of California and the University of Texas at Austin—selected for their contrasting legal regimes (de facto versus de jure segregation) and national influence. Using archival correspondence, university senate reports, legal records, and secondary analyses, we trace how each institution operationalized race-neutral frameworks to preserve white access and convert public resources into private, inheritable advantage.

The mid-20th-century history of housing policy offers perhaps the clearest template for understanding how racially exclusionary systems are constructed and defended through seemingly rational, bureaucratic, and “neutral” policy tools. In the 1930s, the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) created color-coded maps to guide federal mortgage refinancing efforts during the Great Depression. Neighborhoods were graded from “A” (green) to “D” (red) based on perceived lending risk; regardless of income or individual creditworthiness, any neighborhood with Black residents was automatically coded “red,” signaling that it was unworthy of investment ([Rothstein 2017](#)). This system was justified in the technocratic language of “risk assessment,” yet its criteria were racially predetermined. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established in 1934, extended this logic. FHA underwriting manuals instructed lenders to avoid “inharmonious racial groups,” refusing mortgage insurance in integrated areas and Black buyers in white neighborhoods ([Rothstein 2017](#)). From 1934 to 1968, 98 percent of FHA loans were given to white borrowers ([Baradaran 2017](#)).

The GI Bill, which between 1944 and 1971 delivered \$95 billion in benefits to veterans and their families, further amplified this pattern. While formally available to all veterans, its administration was delegated to local entities steeped in Jim Crow segregation, ensuring that Black veterans were systematically excluded from the low-interest home loans, educational subsidies, and business capital that fueled white upward mobility ([Katznelson 2005](#); [Rothstein 2017](#)). The long-run results of this possessive investment in whiteness ([Lipsitz 2006](#)) remain stark: as of 2019, Black families’ median wealth was approximately \$24,000—about one-eighth of the \$188,000 median of white families ([Dickerson 2022](#), p. 1086). Moreover, at the vast majority of state flagship universities (45 of 50), the share of Black undergraduates still lags behind the share of Black high school graduates in those states, respectively ([Bollinger and Stone 2023](#), pp. 99–100; [Huelsman 2018](#), p.6 Table 1). These long-term effects are particularly frustrating given

that highly selective public flagships that could consider race as a modest plus factor in admissions prior to the *SFFA v. Harvard and UNC-Chapel Hill* Supreme Court rulings tended to have higher Black and Latinx graduation rates (and smaller equity gaps) compared to leading public flagships that were already under state-wide affirmative action bans (Jayakumar et al. 2023a, pp. 72–73; Bowman and Denson 2022).

As Lipsitz (2006) details in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, these policies did more than reflect existing racial disparities—they actively mobilized state resources to secure and enlarge white advantage, translating public investment into private, inheritable wealth for white families. Critically, this investment was cloaked in the neutral idioms of actuarial prudence, veteran support, and urban renewal. Such framing not only made racially targeted benefits politically palatable, it also fostered what Lipsitz identifies as white racial resentment—a politics of grievance in which any attempt to extend comparable benefits to Black Americans is framed as unfair “special treatment.” Harris’s (1993) groundbreaking articulation of “whiteness as property” explains how law and policy confer upon whiteness the attributes of property—rights to use, enjoy, and exclude; the ability to transfer benefits intergenerationally; and protection against infringement. This property interest is not merely symbolic. In housing, education, and employment, whiteness has functioned as an asset with market value, defended by legal regimes that treat challenges to white exclusivity as violations of legitimate expectations. Harris traces how even landmark decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*, while ending de jure segregation, left untouched the settled expectations of whites that their relative racial advantage would remain undisturbed. Lipsitz (2006) adds that the possessive investment in whiteness is sustained not only by material transfers but also by emotional and cognitive structures: denial of the structural origins of inequality, the cultivation of resentment toward remedial policies, and the recasting of historical advantage as individual merit.

This paper applies these frameworks to higher education, focusing on two historical case studies in flagship public universities: the University of California’s post-World War II Admission by Exception policy, which massively expanded access for white veterans excluded from traditional eligibility criteria, and UT Austin’s adoption of a standardized test requirement in the aftermath of *Brown*, explicitly designed (but not publicly acknowledged by UT) to curtail Black undergraduate enrollment while preserving white access (Russell 2010). Both cases reveal how admissions criteria—like mortgage insurance guidelines—can be engineered to appear neutral while functioning as tools of racial sorting and state-backed investment in whiteness (Jayakumar et al. 2023b).

We term these practices “admissions redlining”: the creation and deployment of selection mechanisms that, under the guise of objective standards or special opportunities, channel the benefits of public higher education to white populations and limit access for Black and other communities of color. By examining UC and UT side by side, we illuminate both expansive and restrictive strategies of protecting whiteness as property within higher education, and draw direct parallels to housing redlining’s logic, structure, and effects.

Even in states like California, operating under Proposition 209’s ban on affirmative action since the late-1990s, and Texas, constrained by the Top Ten Percent Plan since 1997², the *SFFA* decision has emboldened a conservative mobilization that targets these contexts with punitive measures. Recent federal actions have included an executive order requiring universities to disclose applicants’ race, SAT scores, and GPAs—creating new pressures to weigh standardized tests more heavily, despite decades of evidence of their racial and socioeconomic bias—and high-profile legal threats alleging anti-white discrimination in admissions. These measures work to reinforce structurally produced racial disparities and white advantage (Harris 1993; Jayakumar 2024; Jayakumar and Kendi 2023). They also mobilize white racial resentment toward perceived civil rights gains and legitimating

conservative efforts to fortify white racial standing (Lipsitz 2006) by framing corrective equity policies as discriminatory toward white students.

In the wake of the Court's *SFFA* decision, these historical patterns have not merely persisted; they have intensified. A coordinated conservative movement is advancing legislative bans on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, targeting scholars, and reframing racial justice work as ideological extremism (Harper 2025; Gretzinger et al. 2025; Kim 2025). The *SFFA* ruling has provided legal cover for these strategies (Jayakumar 2024; Jayakumar and Kendi 2023), emboldening state and federal actors to dismantle race-conscious infrastructure in higher education. In 2024, for example, the University of North Carolina system became the first statewide university system to proactively repeal its DEI policy, replacing it with a race-neutral "Equality" policy that prohibited most race-conscious practices and closed campus DEI offices (Spitalniak 2024). At the federal level, new 2025 directives forcing applicant-level disclosures of race, SAT scores, and GPAs threaten to reinforce a race-neutral cover-up, recasting longstanding racial and economic disenfranchisement reflected in test performance as objective measures of merit (Reardon 2025; Kim 2025; Harper 2025; Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Memorandum 2025). Among 2024 high school graduates who took the SAT, only 1% of Black students and 2% of Hispanic students scored between 1400 and 1600, compared with 7% of white students and 27% of Asian students (College Board data, cited in Saul et al. 2025). Given that affluent students are seven times more likely than low-income students to score at least 1300, the greater weight given to standardized tests risks resegregating elite higher education—an echo of the mid-century UT-Austin policy shift examined in this paper.

This paper examines two case studies—post-World War II Admission by Exception at the University of California and post-*Brown* standardized testing adoption at the University of Texas at Austin—as distinct but related examples of admissions redlining that parallel racially restrictive housing finance. We situate each within the racial state's broader investment in whiteness and connect these historical policies to contemporary forms of exclusion in elite public higher education.

2. The UC Story

At the time of this writing in 2025, leading American universities are at a crossroads in their overall relationship with the federal government, with unprecedented intrusions into admissions and colossal threats to their current and future research funding (e.g., Harvard, Columbia, UCLA). If this represents a possible denouement in the long-term stability of the Cold War to the present compact between public and private universities and the federal government as a source of research funding for the betterment of society, we wanted to excavate insights related to elite university admissions from the early origination point of this modern era.

Our analysis draws on historical archives, UC Academic Senate records, federal and university reports, and prior quantitative studies to reconstruct admissions policies and demographic patterns at Berkeley and UCLA from the 1930s through the 1950s. The end of World War II marked an inflection point corresponding with the rise in premiere U.S. research universities as reflected in federal planning reports such as *Science: The Endless Frontier* (Bush 1945) that presaged the development of the National Science Foundation and investment in American research universities during the Cold War and beyond (Geiger 2017; Miri 2021; Douglass 2021). At the University of California (UC) for example, federal funding accounted for only three to six percent of the University's overall budget expenditures between 1910 and 1942, but by 1945 federal funds had skyrocketed to 46% of UC expenditures (Douglass and Bleemer 2018, p. 10 Figure 4) even without counting the large amount of "contract tuition fees" federal government paid under the

GI Bill (Stadtman 1967, p. 295 n.2). Stated differently, the millions in federal funds that UC received via the GI Bill in 1946–47 was so large that it “exceeded the combined instructional budgets of the two main UC campuses, Berkeley and UCLA. . .” (King 2018, p. 591)

In fact, immediately after WWII, California had the highest number and percentage of veterans returning to higher education subsidized by the GI Bill of any state in the nation (King 2018, p. 591), making California and UC a uniquely robust “natural experiment” opportunity for scholars interested in assessing long-term wealth accumulation impacts of admissions policy choices (see Kurlaender and Grodsky (2013) for a different kind of admissions-related natural experiment in California). Paramount to UC’s and higher education’s social mission after World War II was the obligation to support a record number of returning veterans (with tuition and room and board provided under the GI Bill) and make the transition from the ravages of war to civilian and college life.

Recent advances in data integration of older archival sources and U.S. Census microdata have led to a renewed interest in studying the social policy effects of the GI Bill. Abramitzky et al. find that at elite U.S. public colleges right after WWII, as far as lower- and middle-income students were concerned “the representation of such students appears lower among likely veterans in elite public colleges” and a “decline in the proportion of Black men in public colleges” (Abramitzky et al. 2024, p. 4).

College enrollment statistics by race/ethnicity, unlike gender, were not directly collected in the years before and after WWII (Turner and Bound 2003, p. 153) Likewise, official UC Berkeley and UCLA records immediately after WWII (UC 1946a, 1946b) do not contain information on race, but we can triangulate information with other methods to confirm the absence of meaningful student of color enrollments during this era. In the UC Cliometric History database (Bleemer 2018), 1946 is the last year that individual student enrollment records with names are publicly available. Out of over 7900 undergraduate records in this dataset for UC Berkeley in 1946, the top five U.S. Hispanic (Latinx) surnames—Garcia, Rodriguez, Martinez, Hernandez, and Lopez—appear only six times (four women, two men)³. The same analysis of surnames is not a successful strategy for identifying African American students due to high overlap in common Black and White surnames (Smith, Brown, Williams, etc). However, one of the best direct measures available is the U.S. Survey of Veterans from the 1970s that showed within the WWII generation 11% of White male veterans but only 3% of Black male veterans used GI Bill benefits to obtain a B.A./B.S. degree (recalculating data from Turner and Bound 2003, p. 150 Table 2)⁴.

Admissions policy is an underappreciated aspect of the GI Bill and higher education. Olson found that “almost all colleges and universities modified their admission policies” (Olson 1974, p. 35) to admit veterans immediately after WWII, some of whom had not completed high school and/or had various shortcomings in their level of academic preparation. At UC in the 1930s–1950s the University had a set of faculty-approved courses (English, algebra, geometry, laboratory science, foreign language, etc.) that a student would need to have at least a “B” grade-point average to gain regular admission to a UC campus, which was the forerunner of the modern “A–G” course requirements that are part of UC’s admissions policy today (Douglass 2007; UC Academic Senate 2020; UC Academic Senate 2019).

During and immediately after World War II, UC’s faculty and regents created a provisional category of “special admissions,” later formalized as “Admission by Exception.” This policy authorized campuses to admit applicants who did not meet the prescribed entrance curriculum or grade-point thresholds but were deemed capable of university work (UC Academic Senate 1960; Douglass 2007). At its postwar peak, approximately 40% of freshmen entering Berkeley and UCLA were admitted under this category (Douglass 2007, Figure 2.2). Although the policy was framed as a civic obligation to accommodate returning veterans, in practice, the overwhelming majority of beneficiaries

were white men whose secondary-school preparation reflected segregated opportunity structures (Turner and Bound 2003; Katznelson 2005). In effect, the state's flagship system translated GI Bill subsidies into institutional mechanisms that expanded access for white veterans while leaving Black and Latinx Californians almost entirely outside the postwar surge in college attainment.

Figures 1 and 2 below, derived from senate archives (UC Academic Senate 1960), show the magnitude of the Admission by Exception policy at UC Berkeley and UCLA in the 1930s through the 1950s. The data show a large spike in Admission by Exception in 1945–46 and 1946–47 as the University accommodated an unprecedented number of veterans under the GI Bill. At this peak, approximately 40% of freshmen enrollments at UC Berkeley and UCLA were Admission by Exception veterans (Douglass 2007, p. 42 Figure 2.2), representing the single largest social experiment in UC admissions at least until the elimination of the standardized test requirement in 2020 amidst the COVID lockdown.

By contrast, the historical data in Figures 1 and 2 show that there were over 5917 admission-by-exception cases at UC Berkeley and UCLA during the two peak years at the close of World War II, when universities recognized a compelling obligation to assist veterans returning under the GI Bill. These historical beneficiaries of relaxed admission criteria at UC Berkeley and UCLA were nearly all white males⁵. These patterns of exception for some and restriction for others define a through-line in postwar admissions governance.

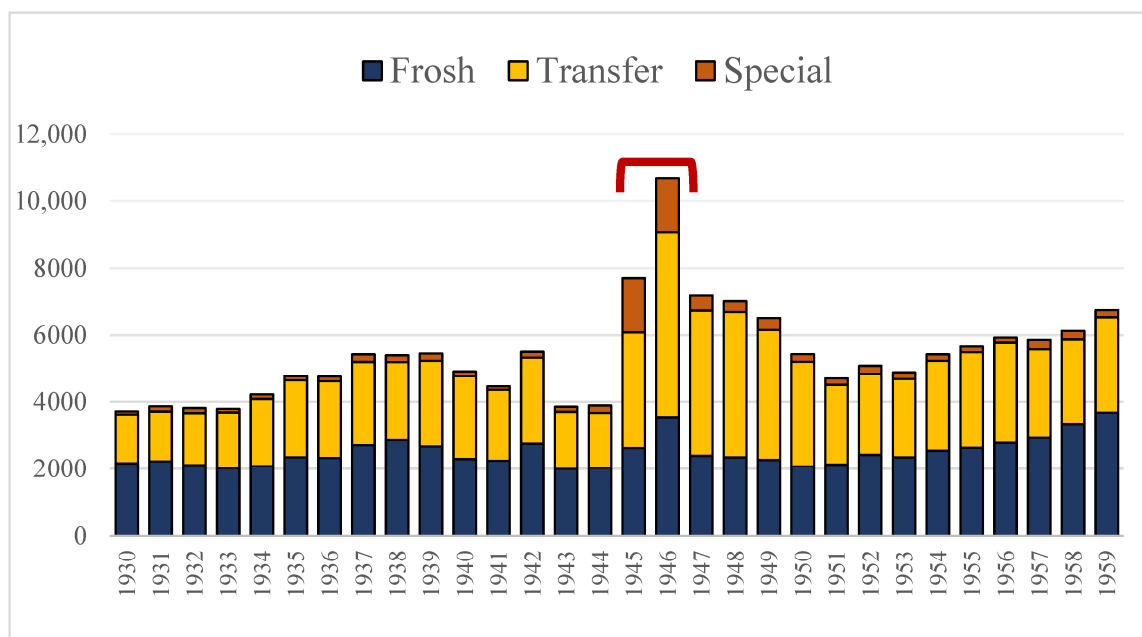


Figure 1. UC Berkeley Admission Offers, 1930–59.

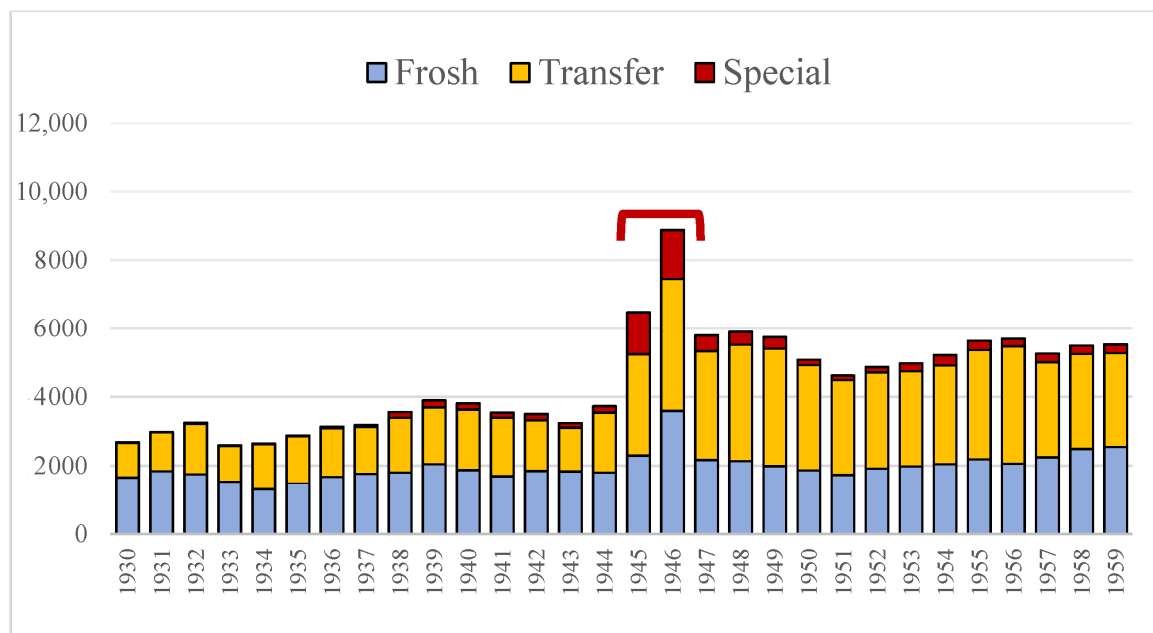


Figure 2. UCLA Admission Offers, 1930–59.

3. The UT Story

If California’s Admission by Exception policy represented an expansive form of racialized inclusion for white veterans, the University of Texas at Austin’s post-*Brown* adoption of standardized testing represented the restrictive counterpart: a bureaucratic mechanism for maintaining white educational dominance under the guise of merit. The relative merits of standardized tests like the SAT and ACT are an area of spirited policy debate in higher education today, as it has been for decades. In the post-COVID environment, some elite schools like Dartmouth, Yale, Brown and University of Texas–Austin (UT Austin) reinstated the SAT in admissions, often asserting that the test can broaden socioeconomic diversity (Beilock 2024; Corcoran 2024; see also Sacerdote et al. 2025). By contrast, the UC Regents elected to eliminate the SAT/ACT as an admissions eligibility criteria in May 2020 (UC Office of the President 2020). With respect to racial equity gaps in the U.S., the overall preponderance of the empirical evidence spanning decades indicates there are consistently larger Black–White and Latinx–White gaps on the SAT/ACT (particularly when reported as standardized mean differences) in comparison to high school grades/rank or “biodata” measures like leadership, interpersonal skills and perseverance/grit (see, e.g., Schmitt 2023, Table 6.7; Markson et al. 2023; Carnevale et al. 2019; West-Faulcon 2011; Alon and Tienda 2007; Dickens and Kane 1999; Jencks 1998).

It is worth revisiting the historical facts of how UT-Austin first came to adopt standardized testing in undergraduate admissions, shortly after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483) ruling in 1954. UT Austin had an open/non-selective undergraduate admissions policy through the post-WWII period. UT lost before the Supreme Court a few years earlier in *Sweatt v. Painter* 339 U.S. 629 (1950), where the Court ruled that Black student Heman Marion Sweatt had a constitutional right to enroll at the flagship UT Law School instead of a hastily constructed and inferior segregated law school for Black students, which resulted in years of energetic desegregation resistance efforts on the part of UT officials (Brown-Nagin et al. 2015; Goldstone 2005; Olivas 2005; Kidder 2003).

Nine days after the *Brown* ruling, UT-Austin’s Dean of Admissions/Dean of Students Henry Y. McCown wrote to UT President Logan Wilson (see Figure 3 from original letter below) with recommendations to “exclude as many Negro undergraduates as possible. . .” within the structure of its open admissions regime. The Dean of Admissions also recom-

mended requiring Black students “to first enroll in one of the Negro schools and take at least one year of the academic work required for all degrees” which would result in “keep[ing] Negroes out of most classes where there are a large number of [White freshmen/sophomore] girls.” (Goldstone 2005, p. 212; see also University of Texas 1954–1957).

for work leading to a Bachelor's degree. I believe we should give some consideration to the procedures for admitting undergraduates. If we want to exclude as many Negro undergraduates as possible, we could require applicants for professional work not offered at Texas Southern University or Prairie View to first enroll in one of the Negro schools and take at least one year of the academic work required for all degrees. This will keep Negroes out of most classes where there are a large number of girls. After a Negro student has completed the purely academic work, I think we would be forced to admit him under the Supreme Court ruling in the Sweat case. There is some question in my mind whether we would be on firm ground in requiring Negro students to take the first year of work leading to a professional degree in a Negro institution.

Figure 3. Letter from UT Austin’s Dean of Admissions to the President, 26 May 1954 on file DBCAH box 9, folder “Negroes,” UT Chancellor’s Office Records. May 26. in (University of Texas 1954–1957)⁶.

Part of the context for the letter above is that the Dean of Admissions McCown was already rebuked for admitting seven African Americans who sought admission to undergraduate programs not offered at the segregated Black colleges in Texas, students like Marion Ford, an honors graduate and football star from Houston who wanted to be a chemical engineer (Russell 2010, pp. 23–24). Early in the 1954 fall semester, the Regents and President of UT directed the Dean of Admissions to rescind admission to Mr. Ford and the other African American students who would have otherwise been the first cohort of African American undergraduates to enroll at UT Austin (Russell 2010, pp. 24–27; Time Magazine 1954).

In June 1955, a month after the Supreme Court’s *Brown II* ruling, Dean McCown proposed what Russell calls a “sturdy bureaucratic plan of resistance.” (2010, p. 26; on file with DBCAH, UT Chancellor’s Office Records, box 34, folder “Committees-Standing, Admissions Committee” in University of Texas 1954–1957). The Dean and a “Committee on Selective Admissions” provided the UT President with a draft statistical report labeled “not for publication” (see Figure 4 below, from original letter). The confidential report estimated that if interest in UT-Austin was commensurate with the number of Black high school graduates in Texas, African American freshmen enrollment could be around 300 out of a freshmen class of 2700. So, the committee recommended a new selective admission policy adopting a standardized test cut-off score requirement that, in an ostensibly facially neutral way, “would eliminate about 10% of UT [White] freshmen and about 74% of Negroes.” Then one week later, the committee presented a public version of the proposed selective admissions plan. The public version of the admissions report and appendices go into great detail about administrative costs and burdens of the new standardized test exam regime, but they omitted a reference to African Americans and the adverse impact on freshmen admissions (Russell 2010, p. 32).

<u>Not for publication</u>		
<u>Statistics for Use in Estimates</u>		
(1,2,3,4, from T.E.A.; 5,6,8,9 from Registrar's Reports)		
1. Number of seniors in Texas high schools, spring of 1954:		
White	55,670	
Negro	6,962	
Total	62,632	
2. Number of juniors in Texas high schools, spring of 1954 (students who, in part, are the seniors of 1955):		
White	64,943	
Negro	8,562	
Total	73,505	
3. Number of high school graduates, spring of 1954:		
White	50,075	(89%)
Negro	6,288	(11%)
Total	56,363	(100%)
(If 2,700 freshmen were distributed according to these percentages, 300 of them would be Negroes.)		
4. Number of 1954 high school graduates planning to attend college:		
White	24,649	(49% of graduates)
Negro	3,233	(51%)
Total	27,882	(49%)

<u>Scores</u>	<u>University of Texas</u>	<u>Three** Colleges for Negroes</u>
170-179	3	
160-169	9	
150-159	24	
140-149	78	
130-139	148	
120-129	202	3
110-119	316	3
100-109	348	10
90- 99	333	17
80- 89	272	28
70- 79	199	32
60- 69	87	36
50- 59	47	60
40- 49	20	62
30- 39	11	45
20- 29	4	22
10- 19		11
0- 9		1
Total	2,101	330
Median	102	54

**These figures from confidential reports to the Texas Commission on Coordination in Education cannot be made public. (Cutting point of 72 would eliminate about 10% of UT freshmen and about 74% of Negroes. Assuming that the distributions are representative, this cutting point would tend to result in a maximum of 70 Negroes in a class of 2,700 -- one-fourth of one-ninth of the class.)

Figure 4. Excerpts from letter and data tables from UT Austin's Dean of Arts & Sciences to the President, 13 June 1954, on file with DBCAH, UT Chancellor's Office Records, box 34, folder "Committees Standing, Admissions Committee" in (University of Texas 1954-1957).

It is well established that Yale, Princeton, and Harvard introduced the SAT in order to exclude Jewish young men—a maneuver that did not work (see [Karabel 2005](#); [Soares 2007](#)). Specifically, regarding the post-War era, Harvard President James Bryant Conant played an influential role nationally: “by requiring that all candidates for National Scholarships take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Conant gave a huge boost to the emerging national movement. . . By the time Conant stepped down in January 1953, standardized [] tests had become a pillar of the emerging system of college admissions.” ([Karabel 2005](#), p. 198; see also [Lemann 1999](#)).

By contrast, the intentionality with which standardized tests were employed by Southern universities seeking to limit access to their campuses for Black students after *Brown* has been comparatively less documented (and/or the body of scholarship on that question has drawn less attention with the passage of time). Our archival evidence shows that UT Austin’s adoption of the SAT was explicitly designed to “eliminate about . . . 74% of Negroes.” ([University of Texas 1954–1957](#)) This confirms what [Kendi \(2019, p. 101\)](#) describes as “one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies,” and reinforces [Geiser’s \(2020\)](#) conclusion that the SAT is not a race-neutral metric; rather, race is the variable that most strongly predicts SAT scores.

The UT’s adoption of the new selective admissions testing program in 1955–56 to curtail African American enrollment in a post-*Brown* world is what today we would call an “open secret.” ([Cantalupo and Kidder 2019, p. 2356](#)) Key UT officials internally explained that they kept in place their facially unconstitutional system of requiring Black UT applicants to complete lower division coursework at “one of the Negro schools” for another year in order to buy time to stand-up the new statewide testing exam system that would be applicable “equally to all regardless of racial origin”; at the same time, Dean McCown was comfortable explaining to all-White audiences of school district superintendents and Southern college admission officials the attractive qualities that it was ostensibly “based on merit” but retained institutional features of segregation from UT’s admission outcomes to separate testing rooms for the exams ([McCaslin 1991, p. 33⁷](#)). In the Fall of 1956, there were 56 African American freshmen who enrolled at UT Austin (Memorandum from Registrar W.B. Shipp to Dean Henry Y. McCown on file with DBCAH, UT Chancellor’s Office Records, box 34, folder “Committees-Standing, Admissions Committee” in [University of Texas 1954–1957](#)), which was not that far off from McCown’s estimated “maximum of 70 Negroes in a class of 2700” projection back in June 1955.

Our UT Austin case study in the mid-1950s parallels other Southern university efforts of that era to embrace standardized testing requirements in their endeavors to resist desegregation. Only seven days after a federal appellate court ordered the University of Mississippi to admit James Meredith—*Meredith v. Fair*, 293 F.2d 696 (5th Cir. 1962)—Ole Miss was one of eight Mississippi higher education institutions that adopted new ACT requirements that mirrored Dean McCown’s “playbook” above by setting the ACT cutoff below the White mean but above the Black mean ([Olivas 1992, pp. 112–13](#); [Olivas 2005, pp. 393–95](#))⁸. Similarly, the University of Florida College of Law grasped for a new LSAT cut-off requirement in 1958 in an effort to thwart Virgil Hawkins’ multi-year effort to become the first African American to enroll at UF College of Law ([Kidder 2003, p. 17 n.85](#)). Together, the UC and UT cases illustrate how ostensibly neutral rules established the template for admissions redlining, a foundation that persists in contemporary metrics.

4. Admissions Redlining as Structural Continuity

These historical strategies—expansion for some and restriction for others—established the blueprint for later “race-neutral” criteria that shape the post-*SFFA* landscape. The UC and UT case studies reveal distinct tactical choices. UC dramatically expanded admissions

exceptions in the mid-1940s for nearly all white veterans, while UT sharply restricted eligibility in the mid-1950s via a new standardized test cutoff that officials knew would disproportionately exclude Black applicants. These appear opposite in form, but both are structurally similar exercises in admissions redlining because they adjust the contours of formal eligibility in ways that maintain whiteness as property (Harris 1993).

At UC, the temporary expansion of Admission by Exception for veterans—an overwhelmingly white cohort due to racialized patterns in high school access, military assignment, and exclusion from UC-eligible coursework—functioned as a state-subsidized wealth transfer into white educational capital. While archival data from the WWII era limit the precision with which we can map racial demographics onto UC's Admission by Exception, other historical records reveal the racial ideology shaping decision-making at the time. In 1945–47, the Julius Rosenwald Fund contacted hundreds of Northern university presidents, including UC President Robert Sproul, urging them to hire African American scholars and providing a list of Ph.D. recipients from top graduate programs (Anderson 1993). Sproul's reply epitomized the posture of race-neutral denial: "To the best of my knowledge there is no group prejudice against Negroes on the staff at this University. We have employed a Negro for a part-time coaching position with the football team for many years" (quoted in Anderson 1993, p. 166)⁹. As Anderson (1993) observed, "There were virtually no exceptions to this pattern of self-denial, and even the complete absence of African American scholars from their faculties did little to shake their faith in the mythical color-blind meritocracy" (p. 167). This correspondence reflects the same possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz 2006) that structured UC's postwar admissions expansion: a formal denial of exclusion in the face of overwhelming structural evidence to the contrary, accompanied by token gestures that left entrenched racial hierarchies intact.

Justice Jackson's (2023) dissent in *SFFA v. UNC* adds contemporary context for understanding the enduring material consequences of such policies. She notes that the average white family today holds roughly eight times the wealth of the average Black family, a disparity rooted in twentieth-century state actions such as the GI Bill's racially disparate implementation, which channeled housing, education, and labor market advantages overwhelmingly to white veterans. These accumulated advantages are the same structural currents that carried UC's 1940s Admission by Exception admits into elite educational and occupational positions, shaping the intergenerational transmission of opportunity.

At UT, the imposition of a minimum standardized test requirement created a facially neutral, technically precise boundary that mapped directly onto the segregated geography of Texas high school opportunity. Neither the UC expansion nor the UT restriction emerged from research on better predictors of success; both were deliberate responses to moments when the racial status quo was threatened. Internal UT data analysis prepared after the *Grutter v. Bollinger* Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action (cited in the subsequent *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* litigation) underscores the lived consequences of such policies during the *Hopwood v. State of Texas* affirmative action ban. The report found "During the fall of 2002, nearly 90% of UT undergraduate classes with five to twenty-four students had no or only one African American to contribute their experiences or perspectives to a class discussion. Over 40% had no or only one Hispanic or Asian American..." (University of Texas at Austin Office of Admissions 2003, classroom study) This classroom-level isolation mirrored the broader underrepresentation in the student body, revealing that race-neutral admissions measures had failed to produce meaningful integration in academic spaces.

These policies parallel the logic of midcentury HOLC mortgage maps: seemingly objective markers ("veteran status," "minimum score") functioned as proxies for maintaining racially homogeneous beneficiary pools (Justice Jackson, dissenting in

[Students for Fair Admissions 2023](#), pp. 2267–68). In California, the GI Bill’s benefits, layered on top of segregated K–12 schooling, meant that “special admits” were overwhelmingly drawn from white, more affluent neighborhoods—neighborhoods already advantaged by state-sanctioned redlining. At UT, the test-score cutoff was explicitly modeled to limit Black enrollment while holding the entering class size constant, making the test a gatekeeping device for preserving white access.

The advantages created in those midcentury policies did not dissipate when the rules changed. They compounded over time, shaping which families accumulated the resources, credentials, and networks that selective colleges still value. Black/Latinx versus White multi-generational differences in financial assets are thus orders of magnitude larger than gaps in income ([Guinier and Torres 2002](#), p. 47) and have grown much larger in recent years ([Aladangady and Forde 2021](#), Figure 1). Modern admissions metrics continue to reflect and reproduce those accumulated advantages. Standardized test scores remain strongly correlated with family income, school quality, and access to commercial test preparation ([Guinier and Torres 2002](#), p. 272; [Park and Becks 2015](#)). White families, more likely to have benefited from past access to high-resource neighborhoods and schools, are disproportionately represented among high scorers ([Kidder and Rosner 2020](#); [Geiser 2020](#); [Card and Rothstein 2007](#)). At the nation’s most selective institutions, students from the top income quartile—disproportionately white—make up roughly 72% of enrollment, compared to just 3% from the bottom quartile ([Giancola and Kahlenberg 2016](#), p. 5).

Other admissions criteria similarly carry forward the racialized opportunity gaps seeded in earlier exclusionary eras. As Bourdieu’s foundational work on habitus and cultural capital demonstrates, institutions confer value on the tastes, dispositions, and forms of distinction most available to elite status groups ([Bourdieu 1977, 1984](#)). In the context of selective admissions, those forms of cultural capital have been historically aligned with whiteness and affluence ([Yosso 2005](#)). Access to weighted GPAs through AP and honors courses is concentrated in affluent, often majority-white schools ([Sadler and Tai 2007](#)). “Exceptional” extracurriculars rewarded in holistic review—particularly participation in low-participation, resource-intensive sports such as fencing, rowing, lacrosse, and sailing—are disproportionately available to high-income, white students ([Jayakumar and Page 2021](#)). These activities yield measurable admissions boosts: in the Ivy League, 71% of recruited athletes are white, and each major racialized group of color represents less than 6% of the athlete pool ([Jayakumar et al. 2023b](#)).

In the present, these dynamics are reinforced by federal policy shifts. The Trump administration’s 2025 executive order not only builds on the *SFFA* decision but goes further, directing colleges to provide applicant-level race, GPA, and test score data to the federal government, with the explicit aim of identifying “racial proxies.” James Murphy, director of postsecondary policy at Education Reform Now, warned that the new disclosure rules “would increase incentives to enroll wealthy students, who often score higher on standardized tests because of a range of advantages that start early in life” (as cited in [Saul et al. 2025](#)). Those advantages are borne out in testing data: students from the wealthiest one percent in the U.S. were *thirteen times* more likely to score 1300+ on the SAT (or equivalent on ACT) than students from low-income families ([Mineo 2023](#)). Among 2024 graduates who took the SAT, only 1% of Black students and 2% of Hispanic students scored between 1400 and 1600, compared with 7% of white students and 27% of Asian students ([Saul et al. 2025](#)). This directive’s push toward SAT/GPA dominance is not a neutral recalibration—it is a return to an exclusionary logic used historically to limit the presence of disfavored racial groups, from Jewish applicants in the early twentieth century to Black and Asian American applicants in later decades. In the current political climate, it functions as part of a broader mobilization to fortify white racial standing, rooted in racial

resentment toward perceived civil rights gains and the reframing of corrective social policy as discrimination against white students (Harris 1993; Lipsitz 2006).

Thus, the structural logic of UC's and UT's midcentury admissions redlining persists in updated form. The original rules produced a durable overrepresentation of white, affluent students in the applicant pipelines most rewarded by selective institutions. Today's "neutral" metrics—testing, GPA weighting, and valued extracurriculars—continue to channel those historical advantages forward, functioning much like the inherited effects of housing redlining: formally race-neutral on their face, but materially reproducing the racial stratification they were built to preserve.

5. Conclusions

The UC and UT case studies show that mid-twentieth-century admissions policies were not isolated adjustments to unique postwar or post-*Brown* conditions, but part of a broader racial project to secure whiteness as property through state-backed investment. Whether expanding access through Admission by Exception for white veterans or restricting it through standardized test cutoffs designed to exclude Black students, each policy mirrored the logic of housing redlining—appearing neutral while reinforcing racial boundaries to educational opportunity. The accumulated advantages generated by those decisions continue to flow through today's admissions systems, embedded in metrics like standardized testing, weighted GPAs, and valued extracurriculars that reward inherited forms of cultural capital aligned with whiteness.

The accumulated advantages produced by these mid-century policies are not historical residues but ongoing forces that structure access to selective higher education. The very families and communities who benefited from postwar investments in housing, schooling, and college opportunities remain disproportionately equipped to succeed under metrics that appear neutral—GPA, standardized tests, and extracurricular distinction. Because accumulated financial wealth shapes access to well-resourced neighborhoods and schools, these advantages begin long before the college-application process, reinforcing unequal preparation and opportunity at every stage. What institutions continue to measure as "merit" reflects the intergenerational transfer of opportunity: access to advanced coursework, college-preparatory and honors programs, experienced counselors and social networks, private tutoring and test preparation, legacy and donor pathways, and participation in resource-intensive extracurriculars and country-club athletic tracks (e.g., golf, fencing, rowing, lacrosse, sailing) that require substantial financial investment. These cumulative dynamics sustain the racialized hierarchy of opportunity that admissions redlining once formalized, showing that the possession of advantage remains both inherited and institutionally reinforced. Recognizing this continuity is essential for confronting policies that claim neutrality while perpetuating inequality.

Today, there are a small number of Admission by Exception students who do not meet UC's core admission requirements, but the legacy of the prior era remains profoundly consequential. Below our Appendix A Table A1 shows UCLA freshmen and transfers in 2017–19; out of 28,502 newly enrolled students, only 430 (1.5%) were admitted by exception. By contrast, if UCLA's peak GI Bill years of 1945 and 1946 (Figure 2) were carried forward to the contemporary era, that would equate to about 4940 incoming Admission by Exception enrollments at UCLA in 2017–19. In point of fact, these Admission by Exception students at UCLA are predominantly (84%) recruited athletes: 35% are White, and these students tend to come from higher-income families compared to UCLA's students who meet regular admission criteria¹⁰ (Jayakumar et al. 2023b, pp. 256–57).

Federal actions such as the Trump administration's order to expand reliance on SAT and GPA risk further entrenching these disparities, underscoring the persistence of the

same exclusionary logic in new guises. Recognizing admissions redlining as an ongoing structural pattern is essential to understanding both the historical roots and the contemporary reproduction of racial inequality in higher education. California and Texas, with their size, diversity, and flagship universities operating under long-standing legal constraints to corrective race-conscious actions, in both conservative and liberal-leaning state contexts, offer a revealing lens on how these logics develop, adapt, and influence policy debates well beyond their borders.

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Appendix A

Table A1. UCLA Enrolled Freshmen and Transfers from Fall 2017–2019 Combined: Profile of Regular Admits and Admitted by Exception Students.

	Regular Admission		Admission by Exception	
By Residency				
CA Resident	21,414	76%	284	66%
Out of State	3278	12%	95	22%
International	3380	12%	51	12%
Total	28,072	100%	430	100%
By Race/Ethnicity				
African American	1580	6%	109	25%
Asian	8412	30%	32	7%
Chicano/Latino	5938	21%	58	13%
Native American	168	1%	3	1%
Pacific Islander	66	0%	7	2%
White	7621	27%	152	35%
International	3380	12%	51	12%
Domestic Unknown	907	3%	18	4%
Total	28,072	100%	430	100%
By Athlete Status				
Recruited Athletes	580	2%	361	84%
Other Students	27,492	98%	69	16%
Total	28,072	100%	430	100%
By Income				
Mean	\$152,640		\$167,725	
Median	\$100,000		\$130,000	
Median Per Family Member	\$25,834		\$38,208	

(adapted from [Jayakumar et al. 2023b](#), p. 256 Table 3).

Notes

- ¹ The Court's opinion in *SFFA v University of North Carolina* is conjoined with the more familiar *SFFA v. Harvard* 600 U.S. 181 (2023) opinion, but Justice Jackson recused in the Harvard case because she had served on its board and thus only dissented in the UNC case. See 600 U.S. at 384 *.
- ² UT was also under a previous affirmative action ban after *Hopwood v. State of Texas* 78 F.3d 932 (5th Cir. 1996), that was later abrogated by the 2003 Supreme Court ruling in *Grutter v. Bollinger* until the Court's 2023 *SFFA v. Harvard* ruling. The *Hopwood* district court opinion summarizes the history of discrimination against Black and Hispanic students at UT Austin in the 1950s through the 1980s. (*Hopwood v. Texas* 1996, 861 F. Supp. 551, pp. 554–57).
- ³ This can also be confirmed by searching names in the [UC Berkeley Blue and Gold Yearbook \(1946\)](#), though the optical scan-to-text quality appears to be inferior compared to the UC ClioMetric optically scanned records.
- ⁴ These figures may understate the true magnitude of racial disparities (differential mortality by 1979 and/or if higher educational attainment positively correlated with survey response rates). Women veterans were also eligible for the GI Bill (see [Eisenmann 2006](#)), but represented about 2% of the WWII era population eligible for GI Bill benefits.
- ⁵ An overlooked contributing factor to this pattern is that at UC Berkeley and UCLA combined in 1941–42 there were roughly 600 Japanese American undergraduates enrolled (see [UC Regents 2009](#), p. 4). However, after Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 interned Japanese Americans in Spring 1942 and those of high school age were dispersed to other parts of the interior U.S. after being released from internment camps in 1944–45, the Japanese American student population at UC Berkeley and UCLA was decimated. While Japanese names can occasionally be found in the UC ClioMetric records, the 1946 UC Berkeley yearbook no longer lists a Japanese student club. We focus on undergraduate admissions, but many veterans also used GI Bill benefits to go back to professional school such as law school. At the UC Hastings College of Law (now UC Law San Francisco) total enrollment had collapsed during WWII (49 students in 1944–45) then ballooned to 583 in 1947–48 (96% men) and then receded somewhat by the early 1950s ([Stadtman 1967](#), p. 223).
- ⁶ We thank Prof. Thomas Russell for sharing these important UT archival records (originating in UT Austin Chancellor's office records) with us years ago.
- ⁷ McCaslin quotes Dean Henry McCown's address ("A Plan for Selected Enrollment in a State University," address by McCown to the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, Miami, Florida, Nov. 30, 1955) as well as advisor to the UT President F. Lanier Cox. The UT Regents had quietly insisted in 1955 that school districts with large Black populations administer their new admissions test using segregated testing rooms.
- ⁸ Eventually the U.S. Supreme Court, in *U.S. v. Fordice*, 505 U.S. 717, pp. 737–38 (1992) ruled this ACT requirement was a vestige of segregation with ongoing discriminatory effects: "[T]he ACT requirement was originally adopted for discriminatory purposes, the current requirement is traceable to that decision and seemingly continues to have segregative effects, and the State has so far failed to show that the 'ACT-only' admissions standard is not susceptible to elimination without eroding sound educational policy."
- ⁹ Archival information from Cal Athletics makes clear that the reference in President Sproul's letter is to Walter Gordon, who had full-time jobs as a lawyer and police officer while also serving as an assistant football coach at Cal. Mr. Gordon was also the first Black graduate of UC Berkeley's Law School and later served as Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands ([UC Berkeley Athletics 2023](#)).
- ¹⁰ UCLA represents the high water mark at UC as far as recruited athletes and Admission by Exception. At several UC campuses with smaller NCAA Division I programs, Admission by Exception represents well under 1% of freshmen.

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