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On U. of Texas' Flagship Campus, Soul-Searching Over Diversity

A Supreme Court case echoes across a university, and for some students, it's personal

By Libby Sander

Austin, Tex.

Not long after the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear Abigail Fisher's case against the University of Texas at Austin, a lighthearted joke made the rounds at the Warfield Center for African and African-American Studies here on the flagship campus. At its core was a high-energy fifth-year student from Houston named Tedra Jacobs.

Ms. Jacobs, an administrative assistant at the center, was admitted in 2008 as part of the freshman class Ms. Fisher had sought to join. Neither Ms. Jacobs nor Ms. Fisher graduated in the top 10 percent of her high-school class, a status that would have entitled her to admission under Texas law. So both were considered for admission under the university's "holistic review" policy, which includes race and ethnicity among many factors in weighing applications.

Ms. Jacobs, the daughter of a single black mother and a white father, got in. Ms. Fisher was rejected, and promptly sued.

"Tedra, it was you!," the student's co-workers teased. "It was you who took her spot!"

Ms. Jacobs, who is majoring in both economics and African and African-diaspora studies, recalls the jesting with a laugh. But as the university grapples with a major legal challenge to its affirmative-action policies, views about race, discrimination, and the value of all kinds of diversity—not just racial and ethnic—are coming to the fore. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the emotional current appears to be particularly strong among minority students, who now make up roughly half of the university's enrollment.

The case resonates so clearly, some say, because it involves their own university. But they also take the legal arguments and policy debates to heart.

"I can't imagine turning a blind eye to something like the *Fisher*

case, that's happening at my school and that will have deep repercussions for many, many years," says Joshua Tang, a fourth-year student from Houston. Over the past few months, he's worked with a fellow student, Samantha Robles, to raise awareness of the case on the campus. On Wednesday he was in Washington to attend the oral arguments along with several other student leaders.

Mr. Tang, who was admitted under the holistic-review process, says the university's checkered record on racial issues has shaped the campus debate. Statues of Confederate soldiers still dot the grounds here, he points out, and the community is smarting over allegations of racially themed off-campus parties and of bleach-filled balloons purposely dropped on minority students. (He narrowly dodged one himself last summer.)

So to hear comments that he was given an unfair advantage, or that his admission to the university had violated another person's constitutional rights, he says, "makes it personal."

Ms. Jacobs, an enthusiastic Longhorn to the core, has wrestled with similar sentiments. The university's climate isn't perfect, she says. "But if I'd gone anywhere else," she says simply, "it wouldn't have been the same."

Diversity in Action

The University of Texas sits a few blocks north of the state's Capitol, the campus's sprawling canopy of red-tiled roofs and live oaks punctuated by the stands of Texas Memorial Stadium and a looming clock tower. Just before 12:30 on Tuesday, as thousands of students swarm the campus in a rush of backpacks and burnt-orange garb, a first-floor auditorium in Burdine Hall starts to fill up. One of the university's most popular classes is about to begin.

Leonard N. Moore, a professor of history, has taught "The Rise of the Black Power Movement" since his arrival here, in 2007. At that time, fewer than 100 students enrolled in the course. Most were black. Today, 500 students pack the auditorium. More than 200 are white.

The students take their seats in clusters that, by this point in the semester, Mr. Moore has committed to memory. White sorority sisters, middle right. Football and basketball players, back right. Second-generation African students, front right. Back left, conservative white males. Front left, religious black students.

Mr. Moore, who is nothing if not bold in the classroom, teases them for it. "This is the most unique class in all of higher education!," he booms from the stage, where he strides back and forth, a

microphone pinned to the lapel of his jacket. "Five hundred students, super-diverse—and look how you all sit. It's amazing how you all sit." The students laugh as he stares out at them.

He backs off. "We tend to sit with people we feel comfortable with," he concedes. "I give you all credit for taking the course."

And so begins the day's discussion. He throws out a question inspired by the *Fisher* case: What is white privilege?

The responses come quickly, and from all corners of the auditorium. "Because I'm white, life is going to be a little bit easier," says one student. "It's a crutch," says another student, who is black.

The students call out questions, too: "Can you say that every job that white people get is white privilege? Where do you draw the line?" asks another white student.

Mr. Moore keeps the class moving. He talks about 1960s voter-registration drives in the South and activism among black students at the University of California at Berkeley. Always, he loops back to the present, connecting the history he's teaching with the lives his students are living. A few weeks ago, for instance, there was a heated class discussion—lots of yelling, one student recalled later—about allegations of racially tinged parties held in the West Campus neighborhood, an area that is home to many of the university's Greek organizations.

Toward the end of the class, Mr. Moore poses a question. "What is your generation's response to the black freedom struggle?" he asks. "Or are we in a postracial world where none of that stuff even matters?"

There's a pause. A black male student speaks up. "I feel like a lot of us don't believe we're in a postracial society," he says. "But we act like we do."

'The Path I Needed to Take'

Toward the front of the auditorium sits Jarius Sowell, a 21-year-old student from Dallas. As a teenager, he kept the University of Texas in his sights as a way out of the rough neighborhood where, each night, he and his brother would count ambulance sirens before drifting off to sleep.

He arrived in the fall of 2009, armed with several scholarships and having graduated in the top 10 percent of his inner-city high-school class. What he found was exhilarating—and terrifying. There were faces that were wholly unfamiliar: white, Asian, even African students. ("From Africa!," he recalls thinking.) Classes were

impossibly hard. But, he says, "I just literally saw how enclosed I was in this bubble, and how much more important it was for me to get out of Dallas."

Before long, though, he was right back where he started. Mr. Sowell failed all of his classes that first semester. University officials placed him on academic dismissal.

During the eight months that followed, Mr. Sowell worked a variety of retail jobs, and, for a time, lived out of his car. A mixup over unpaid traffic citations sent him to jail for four days. There, he recalls, "I had nothing but my thoughts." So he came back to college the following year, determined to make it work.

Since then, Mr. Sowell—who now has a 2.74 grade-point average and is scheduled to graduate in 2014—has thrown himself into a variety of campus groups. He no longer feels intimidated when he walks into a class and sees no other black faces. He's gotten to know students from foreign countries, sports a T-shirt from last year's Latino Leadership Summit, and has taken an interest in issues like same-sex marriage.

Branching out and getting comfortable in different settings and among new people certainly hasn't been easy, he says.

"I could say, 'That's the path I've tried to take,'" he says. "But I see it as, 'That's the path I needed to take.'"

A Broad View of Diversity

In recent months, there have been panel discussions, teach-ins, marches, and front-page headlines in *The Daily Texan* about the *Fisher* case. Next week, Mr. Tang, Ms. Robles, and some fellow campus activists plan to hold a rally about the case.

But not everyone here is tracking the case so closely. On Wednesday, students flooded across the campus as usual, past sandwich-board signs advertising everything from Bible studies to bike races. Along the busy strip of Guadalupe Street known as the Drag, eateries and coffeehouses served a steady stream of students in search of burritos, pita pockets, or free wi-fi.

It's football season, for starters, and Saturday's loss to West Virginia University has consumed quite a bit of campus energy. But the issues and policies at stake in the case are creeping their way into classes like Mr. Moore's, and some campus groups, particularly in the university's LGBT community, hope that soul-searching about diversity might help their efforts, too.


Mr. Sowell, an aspiring lawyer, has read the legal briefs. He's

digested Abigail Fisher's arguments, and the university's, too. His conclusion is that perceptions, stereotypes, and assumptions fuel a complex social engine at this university of 50,000 students. Why else would he feel perfectly comfortable sitting in a class full of white students, for instance, but not strolling through West Campus?

It could be, he says, that "that's just the way it is." But maybe, he suggests, the students really aren't as different from one another as they think.



"The only thing that separates us as students is how we started," he says. "We finish the same."

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 **benno** 37 minutes ago


WOW!

The recipients of the "ADMITTED" computer-generated letters are grinning and skipping across Bevo's campus.

While the recipients of the "REJECTED" computer-generated letters are having to hire (and pay) attorneys for YEARS to represent them in court and naturally don't get a chance to grin or skip across campus at all.

In our allegedly race-blind and fraudulent "diversity-at-any-cost" fantasy, who would have guessed?

Holistic? C'mon, that's just feeble PC mumbo-jumbo code-speech for... "we're gonna get you in with your inferior grades while we prevent others with higher academic achievement from even setting foot on campus, for the sin of not being as "holy".

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