Breaking Barriers to Elite Education: Evidence from Sciences Pos Affirmative Action Policy*

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Abstract

This paper examines whether affirmative action in elite higher education can expand access for disadvantaged students without generating mismatch effects or efficiency losses. We study Sciences Pos Conventions Éducation Prioritaire (CEP) programthe first affirmative action initiative implemented by a French Grande Écolewhich reserves seats for students from high schools in disadvantaged areas. Leveraging the quasi-random assignment of oral examiners with varying leniency levels, we implement a judge design instrumental variable strategy to estimate the causal effect of admission on students academic trajectories and predicted labor market outcomes. Using new linked administrative data combining Sciences Pos admission records with national education databases, we find no evidence of mismatch: CEP students admitted through the program are as likely to complete their degrees as comparable non-admitted applicants. In contrast, the gains from admission are larger for CEP students than for regular applicants, reflected in higher access to selective Masters programs and improved predicted early-career earnings. Within Sciences Po, early performance gaps between CEP and non-CEP students narrow over time, consistent with the effect of institutional support and adaptation mechanisms. Taken together, our results show that the CEP policy expanded access to elite education without reducing overall efficiency. Affirmative action beneficiaries not only succeeded once admitted but also exhibited higher marginal returns to admission, implying that broadening access can enhancerather than compromisethe efficiency of elite higher education.

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