Affirmative Action, Caste, and Quality of Instruction: Evidence from Engineering Colleges in India

(Robert Fairlie)

Abstract

Affirmative action, diversity, equity and inclusion, and other programs aim to address the typically large and troubling student-faculty diversity gaps found in higher education in many countries. India, for example, has the largest affirmative action program for public higher education in the world, reserving half of admissions for disadvantaged-caste students and half of faculty positions for disadvantaged-caste faculty. However, do policies that set aside large percentages of faculty positions for targeted groups lead to lower quality instruction, and if so for which students? We explore these fundamental questions about affirmative action, caste, and inequality in college instruction by using data from a sample of 12 engineering colleges in India that randomly assign students to professor-specific classrooms and use a higher-level course grading system. We find that students taught by lower-caste faculty (i.e. reservation category) faculty perform better than students taught by general category faculty. We do not find evidence, however, of positive "teacher-like-me" interaction effects for reservation category student-faculty matches. Exploring potential mechanisms, we do not find evidence that reservation-category faculty devote more time to teaching or use different teaching practices, but we find some evidence that they publish less, suggesting that they might emphasize unobserved aspects of teaching more. These findings are consistent with the view that increasing faculty diversity, even at large scale, is not detrimental to student learning.