

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: The Real Question

The Supreme Court ruled on June 23, 2003 that the University of Michigan's affirmative action policy for undergraduate students is unconstitutional because it violates equal opportunity statutes. This mechanical system automatically gave bonus admission points to students from certain minority groups. However, it let stand the university's law school's preference policy for minorities meaning that colleges can take race into consideration when making admissions decisions..

Amidst all of the claims of victory on both sides the real question about affirmative action has been lost, "Is affirmative action still necessary?" A recent study by the Century Foundation estimates that if the 146 most selective colleges in American stopped their affirmative action policies by only using grades and test scores around 5,000 less African American and Hispanic students would be admitted each year. With the exception of Asians, minorities are severely underrepresented at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

There is no question that affirmative action increases the number of minority students wherever it is applied. There is also no dispute that these policies have the potential to displace white students. So is affirmative action worth the price?

No one, especially minorities, wants to see discrimination against anyone including Caucasians because we know how terrible that feels. So should affirmative action practices be continued in schools?

Increasing diversity in the classroom broadens learning by bringing to the table different opinions, ideas and voices that are necessary to survive in an increasingly global

world. The purpose of academic discourse is to question all sides of an issue and how can this occur when many opinions are not represented in the discussion?

The author is one of the very few Asian American university administrators in the country and I benefited from affirmative action in the past. My first fulltime job was as a camera operator at a television station and I was referred by a minority skills bank. Would I have been hired without this help? Who knows?

What's wrong about affirmative action? Giving preferences to one group always puts another to disadvantage. Somehow the pie just never gets any bigger and just as minorities were pitted against each other for limited funds for social programs during the 1960's and 1970's the same is happening today in education and elsewhere.

Affirmative action can also lower self-esteem because it can make those of us who benefit wonder, "Did I get this position because I was the most qualified or just because I am a minority? The original purpose of affirmative action programs was to give minorities and women a boost and then they were supposed to progress after that on their own merit.

To increase the diversity of our classrooms we must make a greater effort in our admissions processes. By increasing the size the pool of minority applicants we will naturally increase the number of minorities in our classrooms. However, to accomplish this we must make our campuses an inviting place for people of color.

One way to attract more minorities is to make sure financial aid programs meet the needs of these students. The 1994 Department of Education guidelines allows for race-specific programs as one way to increase the diversity on college campuses.

The biggest challenge academically is that most instructors, at any level, are totally unprepared to deal with diversity in the classroom. Most are unaware that there are differences in learning style among minorities. For instance, while the primary mode of communication in American classrooms is verbal using lectures, studies show that many Hispanics are much more kinesthetic while Asians tend to be more visual. How many teachers take this fact into account when planning their classes so that all students have an equal opportunity for success?

Also, it takes skill and training to make a classroom a safe place to discuss sensitive issues such as people's differences and how they impact the learning experience. Few instructors are afforded the opportunity to learn how to create an open environment so they follow the next best course which is to avoid the issue of diversity except in the most academic of senses.

Education is the best cure for prejudice but it can't happen unless all groups who feel its sting are represented in the classroom. With or without affirmative action educators in America must find a way to educate our young people to the fact that we must look past people's external differences to see how similar we all are on the inside.

If we are ever to achieve true equality in this country people in positions of privilege, regardless of culture, must be willing to give up a little so that those less empowered can gain a foothold on the road towards equality. This is the measure of people's true commitment to diversity. From the University of Michigan lawsuits our commitment is low and how will we ever realize the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King and others if this continues?

In higher education administration the lack of proportionate minority representation is even larger. Many would like to believe that equality among the races in America has improved dramatically over the past 50 years but has it really?

In the American corporate world, the Glass Ceiling still exists. According to a Conference Board study on corporate board diversity in U.S. corporations African Americans hold only 392 board seats out of 7,892 Fortune 1,000 positions (5%) while Latinos hold only 86 (1%).

Perhaps we need to stop using race as a preference and start using economic status or some other technique to more fairly increase minority representation in all sectors of the country. At any rate, we need to find another way to bring equality to our classrooms and our society in general.

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