Affirmative Action in Higher Education

Affirmative action issues in higher education today are far more contentious than affirmative action issues in employment. Indeed, many commentators feel that a case concerning affirmative action in higher education may soon be accepted by the Supreme Court. The last time the Supreme Court considered affirmative action in education was in 1978 when it decided *Bakke v. the Regents of the University of California*. Why is affirmative action in education so contentious? First, the infrastructure of affirmative action differs between education and employment. Second, the systemic problems in the nation's approach to education undermine the role of affirmative action. And third, the difficult-to-capture nuances of concerns and attitudes play a role in the nation's view of the effectiveness of affirmative action programs in general.

In employment, the effects of any affirmative action plan can be measured in the straightforward calculation of costs and profits. Profits are irrelevant in education. In business there are codified affirmative action procedures, implemented and overseen by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP). Much of the heat in affirmative action in education debates centers around a lack of standard ways to implement affirmative action policy.

From a systemic perspective, consider the situation at the University of
California (UC). According to the Master Plan for California Education, the University is expected to educate the top 12.5% of graduating high school seniors. Statistics reveal that more than one third of graduating seniors in California are Latino; yet less than 20 percent of UC’s students are Latino.

Careful study reveals some systemic problems that disproportionately affect Latino students. One problem concerns Advanced Placement courses. Students applying to the University receive more credit for an A in an Advanced Placement course than for an A in a regular course. This sounds fair. However, a problem arises because indigent schools — where a disproportionate number of Latino students receive their secondary school educations — have fewer AP courses per student than affluent schools. So, the most talented Latino students are placed at a systemic disadvantage from the outset.

Discovery of the structural problems led the Regents of the University of California to change the admissions policy so that talented minority students would not be inappropriately kept out by technicalities. Affirmation action was, in this sense, remedial. It compensated for deficiencies — but the deficiencies were in the system, not in the students.

A third reason for the passionate debates about affirmative action in education concerns the attitudes and concerns of students, their teachers and parents. In America today higher education is seen as the bridge to the good life. More than ever before, a bachelor’s degree spells the difference between low wages and a decent salary. For those who would like to see the United States as the land of opportunity, it is essential to envision that any talented and hardworking student has a crack at obtaining a college education. And that these students would learn in a supportive environment free of discrimination. These prevailing attitudes and concerns directly impact the future of affirmative action in education.

**Forms of Affirmative Action in Education**

In principle, affirmative action in education operates along the same lines as in employment. Essentially, universities that receive public money (either because they are public institutions or due to contractual agreements) may monitor the demographic characteristics of their student populations to see if the demographics match those of the general population deemed qualified for admission. When there is a mismatch between utilization and availability, corrective programs are inaugurated.

There are several different forms of affirmative action in undergraduate, graduate and professional schools. One type of affirmative action program involves extra effort on the part of the school. For example, many colleges and universities have extensive outreach programs that concentrate recruiting efforts on school districts that are traditionally underrepresented (like inner-city schools) while paying virtually no visits to the wealthy, white suburban schools that traditionally send them many graduates. In addition, many schools spend more time and money on attempts to assess the qualifications of minority applicants than they spend on assessing the qualifications of majority applicants.

A second type of affirmative action program pushes even further the idea of special investment in some applicants. At many schools, applicants from underrepresented groups or groups that have been discriminated against are eligible for special scholarships or benefits, such as a free airline ticket to visit during recruiting week. Similar privileges and bonuses are not offered to applicants from historically privileged groups.

The third and most disputed form of affirmative action in education involves adjustments in the criteria of admission. Prior to the famous Bakke case, many schools maintained separate lists for white applicants and applicants of color. With Bakke, such lists became unconstitutional. Many universities currently employ a “points added” approach to admissions. Essentially, each applicant is given points on a number of dimensions, often including factors such as high school academic performance, standardized test scores, quality of the high school, in-state or out-of-state permanent residency, close relatives having attended the institution (legacy status), extracurricular involvement in the high school and/or the community, family economic status and race/ethnicity.

Institutions vary in exactly which factors are considered and how many points are awarded for each factor. The important point is that race/ethnicity is one of many factors taken into account in making admissions decisions. And it is possible that a white applicant with, say, a score of 100 is not granted admission, while a black applicant
with a score of 101 is granted admission. It may then appear that ethnicity is a decisive factor for those two applicants when in fact it is only one of many factors in the decision-making mix.

Within the last decade, a number of lawsuits have been brought by white applicants against public universities using the “points added” approach. In Texas, Washington and Georgia, courts have declared that schools may not include ethnicity, race or gender as factors in the admissions formulae. In Michigan, where the University faces two court battles, the situation remains unclear until the full panel of the Federal Court of Appeals completes its deliberations.

Those who object to affirmative action in education generally argue two points. First, they see the policy as unfair to majority group members. They ask the question — is affirmative action in education unfair to white or male students? Second, they claim that the policy is unfair to the underrepresented group members themselves.

The Benefits of Diverse Student Populations
Rarely do the opponents of affirmative action consider the benefits of building diverse student populations. Patricia Gurin and her associates at the University of Michigan conducted three linked studies, all of which show the benefits of diversity in educational settings. One of the studies analyzed the data from a massive national survey of 11,383 students (including 10,465 white students) from 184 different colleges and universities who completed questionnaires in 1985 (the year they matriculated) and 1989 (the year they graduated). The results showed that the more students had contact with other students from different ethnic groups, the more they made gains in intellectual engagement and self-assessed academic skills.

A second study, involving 1,582 students (of whom 1,129 were white) at the University of Michigan, tracked students over four years (1990-1994). As with the national sample, the Michigan sample showed that educational engagement — active, engaged thinking — increased in students as they increased their contact with students from other backgrounds. For both studies, democratic values also increased as a function of diversity.2

Gurin’s third study involved a quasi-experiment which contrasted the experiences and feelings of 87 students who had participated in a course providing inter-ethnic, inter-group relations training with a matched sample of 87 students who had not received the training. Even four years later, the two groups differed in their orientations toward constructive disagreements. The students who received the intensive training were more motivated than the comparison students to take the perspective of other people, to understand that difference and democracy can be congenial, to see that conflict can be constructive and to actively engage in causal thinking.3 It would be hard to escape the conclusion that diversity in the educational setting benefits all students, including the numerically dominant group: white students.

The Long-Term Benefits
Nor are the benefits of affirmative action limited to the time when students are in school. The long-term benefits of race-sensitive policies have been amply documented in an extraordinary book entitled The Shape of the River, published in 1998.4 Written by William Bowen, former President of Princeton, and Derek Bok, former President of Harvard, the book presents detailed analyses of the records from more than 80,000 students who matriculated at 28 elite colleges and universities in 1951, 1976 and 1989. Among the students were some African American students who were “special admits.”

Of critical interest to the investigators was the civic service involvement of the alumni years after graduation. Bowen and Bok found that African American male alumni participated even more than European American male alumni in seven out of ten types of civic activities surveyed. A similar pattern emerged when comparing the civic contributions of African American and European American women who worked full-time.

The African American graduates in Bowen and Bok’s study not only contributed generally more often than their European American peers, they were also more likely to assume a leadership role and to embrace leadership responsibilities in more than one civic endeavor. When focusing on graduates with advanced degrees — MDs, PhDs, JDs — the differences were even more noticeable.
Civic participation plays an important role in creating, maintaining and improving a healthy society. Given the elevated levels at which African Americans “pay back” to society for special opportunities, we all benefit from increasing African Americans’ access to selective institutions of higher learning. Elite, highly educated African Americans become active, generous participants in the larger society, carrying more than their share of the burden of civic duty and serving as catalysts for positive change.

Does Affirmative Action Harm Minority Students?
One popular argument against affirmative action in education is that the policy undermines the performance of minority students. Some people argue that it is an exercise in frustration to allow “special admits” to elite universities because the allegedly underprepared students will do poorly, become demoralized and drop out. Bowen and Bok’s data show just the opposite: African American students graduate at a higher rate from elite schools than African American students attending non-selective schools.

Bowen and Bok also show that African American students within each SAT interval graduated at higher rates in colleges with the highest average SAT scores. Thomas Kane confirms the findings of Bowen and Bok. Analyzing data from a broad range of higher education institutions, Kane found that African Americans admitted to selective institutions graduated at higher rates than African Americans with equivalent test scores, grades and family backgrounds who attended less selective institutions.

Moreover, Bowen and Bok show that African Americans at highly selective institutions were just as likely as whites to attend the most demanding competitive professional schools and to become doctors, lawyers and business executives. These African American students were far more successful than African American students who graduated from all four-year institutions. These findings contradict the idea that African American students who attended the most selective institutions through race-conscious admission policies would suffer harm or that they would have been better off educationally had they attended less selective institutions where average SAT scores matched their own.

However, the harm argument continues to be made against affirmative action. New York University Professor Madeline Heilman claims, “a stigma of incompetence arises from the affirmative action label.” Heilman’s studies are based on the presupposition that most people see affirmative action as a system in which unjustified or
arbitrary preferences are accorded to some groups. The presupposition may not be as true as Heilman assumes.

Recent studies show that most people do not view affirmative action as preferential treatment or as a quota system, but rather as a monitoring system. For example, ethnic and racial minorities are more likely than white people to see affirmative action as a monitoring system rather than as a quota system. Similarly, women are more likely than men to see affirmative action as a monitoring system. It is hardly surprising then that white women and people of color also endorse affirmative action with more vigor than white men.\(^6\)

Among racial and ethnic minorities, and women, various factors affect perceptions of affirmative action as a policy and a practice. To the extent that people strongly identify with their underrepresented group, they tend to feel that they have personally benefited from affirmative action and therefore endorse the policy. Underrepresented students who feel that their campus is not genuinely tolerant of diversity are especially likely to support affirmative action.\(^7\)

Heilman’s conclusions are based on a series of laboratory studies involving selections made on the basis of merit or demographic characteristics, such as gender. One early experiment showed that women who were told they had been selected for a position because of their gender were devalued themselves. This did not occur for the men selected on the same basis. However, both women and men who were told they had been selected on the basis of merit exhibited self-confidence.\(^8\)

While Heilman argues that all preferential treatment harms beneficiaries, she recognizes that certain conditions are more likely to give rise to stigma. Specifically, the recipients of preferential treatment experience the most negative outcomes when no unambiguous information is available about their qualifications and the selection process.\(^9\) It is then sometimes assumed that underrepresented individuals gain admission based on preferential treatment.\(^10\) As a result, affirmative action recipients may be judged as having low qualifications and therefore a low likelihood of achieving success. In most of the circumstances studied by Heilman, however, the negative impact is erased when the subjects in her experiments are provided with unambiguous performance information.

Does the positive endorsement of affirmative action among most underrepresented students mean that they see the policy as problem-free? No, it does not. A number of studies show that underrepresented students are aware that affirmative action allows white students and even white faculty to doubt that they, the minority, are as capable as majority students. While underrepresented students acknowledge that others may doubt their abilities, they believe that others would doubt their abilities regardless of affirmative action. In other words, these students generally understand that it is their underrepresented status — and not affirmative action policies — that sometimes cause them to be stigmatized.

Testing Phenomena and Stereotype Threat
Over the past decade, a burgeoning area of research suggests that without affirmative action, the admissions application process is actually unfair to minority students. This is because of a subtle factor in most testing situations. Underrepresented students often face what social scientists refer to as stereotype threat, and stereotype threat causes these students to do more poorly on tests than their white counterparts of equal talent.

Stereotype threat is a testing phenomenon that takes place within individuals and impairs their execution of a certain task. It happens to individuals who care about their performance on a task, but are also aware that a negative stereotype about their group predicts that they will do poorly, e.g., the negative stereotypes that women are not as capable as men at calculating advanced mathematics, or that blacks cannot score as highly as whites on achievement tests. Because individuals are conscious of the negative stereotype but still wish to do well on the task, the stereotype becomes an additional burden or distraction for their performance. As a result, individuals do worse than if they had not thought of the negative stereotype in the first place.\(^11\)

Research finds that the stereotype does not have to be explicitly mentioned. Simply placing individuals in testing
situations related to their respective negative stereotypes is enough to elicit the stereotype threat phenomenon. Additionally, the individuals do not need to believe that the stereotype is true. As long as the individuals care about their performance on the related task, being aware of the negative stereotype is enough to negatively affect them. Research has even confirmed that reminding individuals of positive stereotypes about their group is not detrimental (it can sometimes even help performance!), but subtle reminders of negative stereotypes often diminish the performance of those who want to do well.

Affirmative action does not decrease the risk that stereotype threat will depress the test scores of underrepresented students, but it can help institutions dismantle the hidden impediment to assessing true merit among all students — minority as well as majority.

**A Final Thought**

In an editorial in *The New York Times*, former President Gerald Ford pointed out that affirmative action and the inclusiveness it fosters are an essential part of our national education for democracy. America likes to see itself not only as a democracy, but also as a meritocracy. Much of the heat about affirmative action in higher education erupts from our legitimate concerns about merit. Those who oppose affirmative action paint the policy as one that sacrifices merit for diversity. But another possibility exists. Perhaps most of the furor over affirmative action in education springs from our profound discomfort with any reminder of a shameful past in which we assumed that merit was an attribute exclusive to white males. Whatever the cause, affirmative action in education is clearly in jeopardy. Let us hope that we do not lose ground in providing equal opportunity for people of all races, ethnicities and genders.

*The writing of this article was a collaborative project. The Psychology Department at the University of Michigan and the Social Psychology area of the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) enjoy close ties. The five UCSC graduate students worked under the direct supervision of Faye Crosby with both inspiration and guidance from Patricia Gurin. The UCSC program emphasizes the study of conceptually important social justice issues in meaningful applied contexts.*

**Endnotes**