

Both sides of affirmative action



Every person in this room will take or has taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT. This test is basically used to determine who will succeed in college and who won't. Sounds simple doesn't it? Because each person takes a variation of the same test, the scores can help separate students with almost equal credentials. So you would figure that if you were competing with someone for acceptance to a college and you received a 1300 and the other person, with equal qualifications, received a 1200, you would be chosen, right? Well, maybe not.

If you were a white male and the other person was a black female, it is quite possible and even likely that she would take the spot. This is what is known as affirmative action. Having just taken the PSAT and begun to look into colleges to apply to, the possible ramifications of affirmative action are very important to me. Today I will share with you the principles of affirmative action, its origin in our country, and the criticisms and praises that it has received. The idea of affirmative action is to fix the results of centuries of discrimination against minorities in the United States.

For years, blacks, Asians, women, Hispanics, and all other non-white male groups had been persecuted in this country. They had been denied education, denied full rights as citizens, denied jobs, denied the life that the Constitution promised. This is an undisputed part of our history. Affirmative action sets out to right these injustices. By encouraging the hiring of minorities in the work place and acceptance into college, the playing field, which has for so long been tilted in the favor of the white male, is, idealistically, leveled off.

The remote opportunities for minorities are increased, and our society, as a whole, progresses to a much more inclusive nation. The term affirmative action was coined in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson, when his executive order commanded federal contractors to “ take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and the employees are treated during employment without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin. ”

The history behind this issue dates much farther back, though. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments began the movement to end discrimination.

The Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, held the separate, but equal doctrine in schools. This ruling would stay in affect for 58 years, until 1954, when it was reversed and ended school segregation. It was in this time period that many civil rights initiatives, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were adopted or ordered by the President in attempts to end discrimination. Recently, the practice of affirmative action has come under harsh criticism. A popular term given to it has been reverse racism or reverse discrimination.

These opponents of affirmative action believe that past injustices cannot be corrected by the performing the same injustices today against white males. It boils down to the “ two wrongs don’t make a right” principle. Another chief complaint is that unqualified people are taking the jobs of qualified ones. This originates from the belief that, rather than an employer choosing the minority between two equal candidates, the employer looks past obvious deficiencies in the minority and, to satisfy the government, still chooses him or her.

The last, and most devastating effect of affirmative action, according to opponents, is that jobs will be taken away from white workers. They believe that enormous amounts of whites are losing out on work that should go to them, to minorities. The basic argument is this: Look, discrimination is over, it's all in the past, we never contributed to it, so why should any other group suffer now? Proponents of affirmative action do not accept this at all. They liken the situation to a 100 yard sprint, in which the first runner has a fifty yard head start.

Now, because you can't make the runner back-track, the best solution is to help the other catch up. This is what affirmative action sets out to do. Martin Luther King compared it to the GI Bill which offered privileges to veterans. He said that blacks, after their " long siege of denial deserved special, compensary measures". Proponents believe that affirmative action is the only way even the forever tilted grounds. They point out that since 1970, 16% more white females are working and 9% more black females.

This is at the same time that white male employment has only fallen 3%. They attribute the successful employment of 11 million women and minority workers to affirmative action. However, they do not believe this has done enough. They point to the fact that women still only earn 72 cents for every male dollar. Also, women and minorities make up only 25% of doctors and lawyers in this country. Their basic argument is: Now that everything is equal on paper, minorities need an extra push that they lacked for the last 200 years to make everything equal in reality.

As with all controversial issues, there will never be a perfect solution to this problem. Whether affirmative action is necessary depends on whether discrimination still exists. And due to the diversity of this country, we most likely will never completely agree on that answer. For now the best we can do is continue the dream of Martin Luther King, who sought a world where people were not judged on the color of their skin, but on the content of their character.