

The new affirmative action: colorblind

Business



In a country that prides itself on everyone's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, America certainly has a lot to maintain (Principles of a Free Society 1). As a nation, it has created the mindset that all men are created equal and that there are no limits; it's the nation that has a dream attached to it, the American Dream (The American Dream 1). America is a melting pot of people (Yen 1).

According to the most recent census it is 13. 1% black, 63% white non-Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 16. 7% Hispanic or Latino (U. S. Census Bureau 1). With so many races, and a large percentage of minorities, America has instituted numerous policies to benefit those deemed minorities.

It is clear non-minorities are faring better than minorities; the median net worth for a white household in 2009 was \$113, 149 compared to \$6, 325 for Hispanics and \$5, 677 for Blacks (Yen 2). It is with numerous policies that government officials aim to create an equal experience for all citizens, and carry on the standard that everyone should have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One of the most powerful tools to combat inequality is believed to be affirmative action; the policy of admitting students into a college by looking primarily at their race. It is estimated that currently 25% of students attend a college employing strong racial preferences (When Racial Preferences 1). The term " affirmative action" was created in 1961 by president John F. Kennedy in an executive order that called for equality no matter " race, creed, color, or national origin" (A Brief History 1).

Affirmative action gives minorities an advantage. For instance, in an analysis by Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton they found that African-

Americans receive a boost of 310 points on a 1600-point SAT scale (Kahlenburg and Potter 9). A similar study noted that being an underrepresented minority increases the chance of admission by 27.7 percentage points (Kahlenburg and Potter 9). Affirmative action openly gives the upper hand to minorities when applying to college.

The main argument behind affirmative action is that it will bridge the gap between minorities and non-minorities in college as well as in high-level jobs. This, although logical, is inherently wrong because looking at the skin color tells you nothing more than what you would see before you, a color. As Chief Justice John Roberts argued, the “ way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race” (Shapiro 2). Affirmative action often hurts those it’s trying to help. Mr. Hall, a Colgate minority graduate, said “ Nobody told me what would be expected of me beforehand.

I really didn’t know what I was getting into. And it all made me feel as if I wasn’t smart enough” (Sander and Taylor 1). Affirmative action places under-qualified students in selective colleges where they are more likely to fail. This is especially evident in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors. Hence, many students migrate away from more difficult STEM majors into less intensive fields.

This is why a Caucasian student is seven times more likely to get a doctorate in a STEM field than a black student (Sander and Taylor 2). Not only does affirmative action harm minorities by placing them in educational institutions beyond their capabilities, but it hurts qualified non-minorities from being admitted. In a 2011 study conducted for the University of Denver Law

Review, it was discovered that American law schools give four times as much grant aid to rich blacks as to poor whites (Sander and Taylor 3). Affirmative action creates tunnel vision, using strong racial preferences over other factors, such as socioeconomic barriers. Affirmative action fights fire with fire; it attempts to make up for past discrimination by employing targeted discrimination. Time and time again affirmative action proves that it has a legitimate problem.

Eliminating racial preferences and instituting socioeconomic-based admissions is the best remedy for the inequality created by affirmative action. A good solution to the inequality created by race-based affirmative action is called “ Percent Plans.” Percentage plans work in a simple way; they guarantee admittance to a certain college based on what percentile you fall in when comparing you to your classmates. Usually this percentile range is limited to the top 1-10%. Any applicant who falls within this range can qualify for a percent plan, even if their ACT, SAT, or GPA do not meet the university’s standards (Katel 11).

Percent plans are not race-conscious, meaning that they prevent one race to have advantage over the other. In 1999 Governor Jeb Bush issued an executive order to end admission by race. He also instituted the “ One Florida Plan” which guarantees admission to Florida state schools if a student is in the top 20% of his or her class. The plan ignores SAT or ACT scores. Governor Bush also added 20 million dollars in financial aid to pay the expenses (Toward an Understanding 1). Percent plans do not hurt students coming from underprivileged schools with little resources; if they made it to the top percent they have shown the commitment needed to pursue college.

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The plans also have the benefit of helping poor Caucasians who would have otherwise been overlooked in race-based admission. Percent plans completely bypass the color of your skin, while still capturing the minority audience (Toward an Understanding 5). Simply put, percent plans take the color out of numbers. Ultimately, percent plans work toward a common goal, “ ...

diversity, inclusion, opportunity, and a bright future for our nation in the world economy” (Toward an Understanding 6). A lesser, but still feasible solution involves dissolving a different preference system and increasing the resources given to affirmative action. This alternative preference system is called “ legacy admission.” Like the name sounds, it is a system whereby the son or daughter of a previous college graduate is accepted into the same college of their parents. The students who are legacies have a much higher chance of being accepted to the college.

The parents of these students are almost always fundamentally the same: academically sound and white. So, the disadvantage once again is placed upon the minorities who are less likely to have a parent who has graduated from college. In fact, the advantage given to white students can be extreme. Harvard accepted 11% of its total applicants, but a whopping 40% of its total legacy applicants (Katel 12).

The question as to why Harvard would do such a thing is simple; money. Legacy parents are donors. Donors are necessary for the college to maintain its edge over other universities. As Hillary August explains “ Admissions officers give more attention to legacies during the admissions process,

especially if the legacy comes from a donating family”(August 1). It is not only Harvard doing it either, many universities give the upper hand to legacy applicants.

When it boils down, it does not take much thought to recognize that where your parent(s) went to college should not make any difference in the application process. The admissions officers should be looking at the students' credentials, not the parents. If legacy admissions were eliminated it would increase the opportunity for minority enrollment. A researcher from Harvard conducted a study that concluded legacies have a larger impact than previously thought on college admissions. At Harvard, if a non-legacy had a 15% chance of admission, a primary legacy would have a 60% chance of admission (Ashburn 1). If affirmative action policies were able to absorb the power of legacy admissions they would be less pressured to find minorities.

This is logical because legacy students are almost always white, so ending legacy admission would open the door to minorities. The best solution to the inequality created by affirmative action is to institute socioeconomic preferences. This would create a race neutral policy of admitting students. Socioeconomic admissions would take into account the social and economic barriers put on a student. According to The Century Foundation(TCF), “ If college admissions officers want to be fair—truly meritocratic—they need to consider not only a student's raw academic credentials, but also what obstacles she had to overcome to achieve them.” The TCF found that severely disadvantaged students would score about 399 points lower on the

math and verbal sections in the SAT than the most advantaged student (Kahlenburg and Potter 17).

Colleges should choose to take the best students from each socioeconomic category. Based on an early 2000s report, only 3% of college students come from the lowest socioeconomic quarter. Seventy-four percent of college students come from the top socioeconomic quarter (By The Numbers 1). If socioeconomic policies were instituted, it would help both minorities and non-minorities get into college. As president Obama said, “ A white applicant who has overcome big odds to pursue an education should have those circumstances taken into account.

[Affirmative action] can't be a quota system and it can't be something that is simply applied without looking at the whole person” (Katel 1). Socioeconomic admission seems to take a detour around the shortcomings of other solutions and solves the true problem, inequality, without glaring drawbacks. Percentage plans are a good solution because it is race-neutral and benefits anyone in the top ten percent. However they have a major flaw that prevents them from being the best solution. It is very hard to compare one students' “ A” to another students' “ A” at two opposing schools (Katel 11). This is the same reason why many colleges no longer look at class rank.

It is an extremely lopsided scale. As a history professor from Texas A & M stated, “ ‘ In some school districts in Texas, 50 percent of the graduates could make it here easily...Some school districts are so awful that not one kid could graduate here, I don't care what race you're talking about ‘ ” (Katel 11).

The second solution seems adequate but has some drawbacks that keep it from working. Most of all is its cost. Ending legacy admissions to college would significantly impact the income of said college. This is because, without an incentive to donate, many college graduates would cease donating. To make up for this, colleges would have to raise millions of dollars every year; unsustainable propositions when colleges are already cash-strapped.

As Peter Schmidt explains, when colleges are confronted about legacy admissions, " ' They throw up their hands and say, There's no other way we can raise the money we need' " (Katel 11). Legacy admissions are needed at the moment to prevent a spike in tuition costs due to a budget change. This leaves us with a final alternative, and the best solution: socioeconomic policies. These policies would be race neutral and would end unfair advantages and disadvantages by leveling the playing ground for all races. Socioeconomic selection is colorblind; it sees a person for their current and past situation(s) rather than the color of their skin. The cost of transitioning from affirmative action to a socioeconomic policy is not documented but should be relatively low.

Many colleges already receive information about the social and economic status of an applicant but they choose to often dismiss it and look at race instead. Ending these racial preferences and looking instead at the whole student would create a fairer atmosphere where all races can thrive.

Affirmative action was created for a good reason, to help minorities attend college. However, in the 21st century it is time to stop looking at the color of skin; period. The time has come where the social and economic situation of

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students should take precedence over other factors like race or legacy status. If socioeconomic policies were put in place, students from many geographical locations, many races, and many walks of life could enjoy what they never have been able to; the ability to chase their dreams.