

Society's perception of affirmative action

Life



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BUSTER**

I both agree, and disagree with what the author is saying in this article. He starts by saying that our chances of succeeding are influenced by the generation of our family that came before us, and by our network of friends and acquaintances. He applies the term "social capital," to this. He then goes on to say that the government needs to take responsibility for ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity get a job, be accepted into a university, or move up in their company.

The next five paragraphs are spent arguing against "color-blind absolutism," that is, the idea that we should ignore race altogether. To this point in the article, I could not agree more. I believe most rational thinking people learn from their parents, older siblings and even their extended families. They see the mistakes that their families made and want to do better. In my family for instance, I am the youngest of six children. My parents grew up in farming communities and had little or no education. I was the first in the family to go straight through high school and graduate.

Only the four youngest of six children received a high school diploma or equivalent, and only myself and one of my brothers has had any education beyond that. I see this as a natural evolution that takes several generations. Some of my older siblings did not see the value of an education, or of planning your future and setting goals. While I saw the mistakes they made, it took me several years to realize that my success was dependent on setting goals, and the actions I took to achieve them. I also agree with the author's assertion that society cannot be completely colorblind.

We do not need to pretend that we are not different, we need to accept and embrace each other's differences. We need to recognize and respect the each other's cultures. Color and race will forever be used, just as height and weight are used to describe people. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging our differences, as long as we do not perceive those differences as negatives. I have to disagree with the remainder of the article. He has taken offense, apparently, to the perception that blacks need to be given preferential treatment to achieve a degree of success.

I believe that he is arguing that affirmative action is demeaning to blacks, but what he should be arguing against is not affirmative action, but white society's perception of affirmative action. Used as it was intended, affirmative action does not give minorities preferential treatment, it gives them an opportunity to compete with other applicants of equal qualifications. Human nature being what it is, opportunities do not always present themselves solely because of a person's skills, qualifications, or persistence.

I recently read that a high percentage of positions are filled not through newspaper ads, or recruiting agencies, but through word of mouth. The best place for employers to look for new employees is often from their current employees. If this is true, then unless your work place is already racially diverse, most of your new hires are likely to come from similar racial or ethnic background as the majority of your workforce. Breaking this cycle takes a conscious effort. I believe this is the case in organized labor organizations.

Perhaps there is no conscious effort to keep blacks or minorities out, but a desire to get one's family and friends in, so that they too may enjoy the benefits of a good job. I believe I benefited from affirmative action when I joined the union apprenticeship program. Had it not been for the pressure applied on unions to diversify, there is little doubt in my mind that someone's son or nephew would have received that position. And that person would most likely have been a white male. The intention of affirmative action is to level the playing field, not to tilt it in the direction of minorities.

If it is improperly used, we must not blame the program; we must blame the people that are administering it. Universities should not lower standards, but encourage academically qualified minorities to apply and support programs that help increase the pool of qualified applicants. While it is true that an individual's success depends largely on that individual's own drive and self-determination, history has taught us that things are not going to get better without some governmental intervention.