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Affirming the Affirmative Action Intention

Barbra Jotzke

I shall argue that Affirmative Action, while commendable in theory, does not work on the university level. Affirmative Action would better serve its purpose if it were implemented in the K-12 education level.

In order to discuss Affirmative Action in the University, an important distinction is needed between 1) the purpose of Affirmative Action, including its goals and aims and 2) the specific implementation that we have currently.

The first step must be then to understand the purpose of Affirmative Action as it was initially conceived. One goal of Affirmative Action, on which I will focus, is to create a just society in which each member has an equal opportunity and resources to achieve the best in their particular lives. This does not necessarily imply that each person should be given equal outcomes, but equal opportunity.

The goal, as stated by President John F. Kennedy was "equal opportunity in employment" by eradicating the then widespread practices of racial, religious and ethnic discrimination.¹

President Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1965 commencement address at Harvard University, argued that fairness required more than a commitment to impartial treatment.

You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "you're free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates... We seek not ... just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.²

Thus, in order to reach these goals, extra assistance is given to those, women and minorities, who have been disadvantaged traditionally in the United States.

This aim, providing all people the resources needed for advancement and providing particular assistance to individuals who, for reasons of social convention, are not adequately equipped to compete on an equal level, is fundamentally commendable and should drive our lawmaking decisions.

However, considering the second part of the division made earlier, the particular implementation seen in universities does not facilitate the aim of Affirmative Action. Affirmative Action in Universities has been implemented as:

1) a two tiered system whereby students of particular minority groups are accepted based on less strict standards;

2) quotas whereby students are accepted to represent a particular racial mix among students regardless of academic ability;

3) different, unstated, performance standards where minority students are not challenged to achieve high standards; and/or

4) active recruitment of minorities and women.

Affirmative Action in these forms injures both the people it is intended to benefit and the University system.

Consider an example close to us and recently publicized in the news. University of Michigan appears to have a two track system of admissions.³ This was discovered, even with widespread denial, by finding charts used in determining if individuals met basic entrance criteria. Carl Cohen obtained the top secret

charts through the Freedom of Information Act. The charts referred to the race of applicants often and appeared to have different and lower selection criteria for minority applicants.⁴ In such a system, applicants were judged by different criteria, in this case the minimum GPA and sat scores required for admittance, depending on their race.

This practice does not benefit the students whom it intends to benefit. Because students of particular minority groups are admitted with lower requirements, they may not be as adequately prepared to succeed. Considering the University of Michigan example, those admitted through the Affirmative Action criteria are 2 ½ times more likely not to graduate in six years than other students. Affirmative Action is not working if students don't graduate.⁵

Also, the university as an institution, and all students it intends to serve, suffer. The university is structured so that it builds upon basic skills and specializes those skills into specific fields. The criteria for admission are intended to select students who have a particular level of mastery of basic skills. Without this guarantee classes are unable to begin with each member having an equal opportunity to succeed.

Because of these two reasons and the number of individuals who may require assistance to even reach the university level, the university is not the best place to implement Affirmative Action practices to bring about an ideal just state.

The benefits of Affirmative Action as currently implemented have diminished in time. When formed, Affirmative Action may have gone a long way to equalize the treatment and the opportunities afforded minorities and women. However, times have changed and Affirmative Action practices must as well. To reinvigorate Affirmative Action so that it may reach its intended end, we should focus our attention on giving all people the opportunity to achieve the academic level required to enter the university on a single scale.

It is thus the K-12 educational system which needs to be reevaluated and renewed. Affirmative Action practices should work with students in K-12 so that they may be prepared for a university. So that they have the tools needed to compete with other members of society.

The exact method for creating this change is still largely unknown. However, confidence should be placed in those individuals

who have an expertise in education to develop the best programs for a positive outcome. Some changes have already begun and others are needed. For instance, funding should be equalized so that even schools in economically depressed areas can provide competitive education. Mentoring programs should be developed for minorities and women by individuals who have succeeded in academic and professional pursuits. University recruitment of minorities may not be the best system to encourage them to attend school.

Encouragement to attend college should begin early in a student's academic career. The K-12 school system is the most appropriate place for setting expectations for students to achieve admittance into college.

Affirmative Action should not be required at the university. With initiatives such as these and others in K-12 schools, all people will be given the opportunity and equipped to excel and achieve entrance to the university system. By doing so the goal of Affirmative Action will be better served. Having all people equally prepared for university, we are one step closer to having a just society.

NOTES

1. From "Stephen Cahn on the History of Affirmative Action (1995)" found at <http://humanitas.ucsb.edu:80/projects/aa/docs/Cahn.html>
2. *ibid.*
3. "TRB from Washington: Numbers Racket"
The New Republic December 22, 1997. Page 8.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*