

More Than Race

By Adam Lloyd

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The controversy over the Supreme Court's recent decisions on affirmative action stems from our nation's inability to break free from its deeply ingrained, narrow framing of the issue. One side argues reverse discrimination and holds up the ideal of a color blind society, while the other side talks about leveling the playing field and making up for past wrongs. Unfortunately, both are so entrenched in their positions that they completely overlook the central issue, that of diversity, and the relatively simple solution for achieving it.



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If we are to accept the Court's opinion that the legitimate purpose of affirmative action is to promote diversity, then it is the nature of diversity that we should more closely examine. Two questions need to be asked -- Why is diversity of value? How do we achieve it?

The argument America's universities put forth is that the value of diversity comes from the enhanced exchange of ideas and perspectives inherent in a suitably diverse community of students; that a student body comprised of individuals with varied backgrounds and experiences allows for a more complete spectrum of thought.

My own experience entering a state university reinforces the significance of diversity in education. After attending a largely homogeneous parochial high school, my exposure to the hugely diverse population at college was an eye-opener. For the first time in my life, I was regularly interacting with students of different races, religions, nationalities, political philosophies, financial strata, sexual orientations -- all with vastly different experiences, opinions and life reference points than my own. Getting to know and learn with these people did almost as much as my class work to help broaden my perspective and knowledge of the world. Two graduate degrees later, I still hold this to be true.

The utility of diversity in academia, then, is its ability to increase the range of ideas and experiences one will encounter. Yet, how can universities ensure a diverse community while avoiding the charge of discrimination or employing quotas?

The Supreme Court has said that race can be a factor when considering admission to college, but what many people seem to overlook, is that this need not be the only determinate of diversity. If the true goal of America's universities is to broaden the scope and variety of intellectual exchange, and not, as is often charged, the mere ability to show an enrollment of "x" number of students from a particular racial group, there is a simple solution.

Rather than dividing students into predetermined groups and trying to find a magic ratio, all college applications should include a box to be checked by any student who wishes to be considered for a diversity admission. Students who feel that their particular circumstance or personal history would bring a unique, diverse element to the school can support their claim with a short essay. Universities can then select those students they feel will most add to the diversity of their institution. This solution dispenses with the controversy of quotas and provides a more meaningful criteria for determining diversity.

In my experience, the girl I knew in college who cared for her dying mother and younger siblings while attending high school, brought as unique a perspective -- as much diversity -- to that campus as anyone else. The friend I had who worked three jobs in order to pay tuition and be the first person in his family to ever attend college -- he brought real diversity to our school. The boy from India who served with me on the

public opinion

Is America mentally ill?

Yes

No

That's a crazy question

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judicial council and had never before been to America -- he, too, enhanced the diversity of that university. The resident advisor in the dorm next to mine whose parents had emigrated from Mexico to East Los Angeles added diversity as well. Even I, a conservative white kid who'd been quadriplegic since the age of fourteen, managed to enhance the diversity of that academic institution.

This is what real diversity is -- a collection of individuals with different backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives on the world. Race is definitely a part of this mixture, but so too are religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, nationality, physical ability, financial circumstances, personal tragedy and triumph. If we as a nation, and our institutions of higher learning, could step back and broaden our perspectives on the diversity debate, we might find that the answers we're seeking have been right in front of us all along.

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