

Affirmative Action -- and Reaction; Admissions (and Denials) of Responsibility

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On Tuesday the Supreme Court will hear arguments in two cases challenging the University of Michigan's admissions policies, which award minority applicants extra points. The court's decision could change admissions policies nationwide and has prompted a debate about diversity on campus and affirmative action in higher education.

Opponents of affirmative action hold that justice in matters of race requires strict adherence to a policy of "colorblindness." Many Americans share this view: I know because I used to be one of them.

Despite its superficial appeal, colorblindness is a false ideal. No understanding of the American social order that ignores racial categories is possible, because these socially constructed categories are embedded in the consciousness of all of us. Because we use race to articulate our self-understandings, we must sometimes be mindful of race as we conduct our public affairs.

This fact lies at the heart of the University of Michigan's defense of its admissions policies. In our racially stratified society, diversity is a necessary part of an effective college education. To attain such diversity, in turn, the explicit use of race in the admissions process is necessary.

The case the Supreme Court will hear next Tuesday is the most important affirmative action litigation of the last quarter-century. The stakes for American higher education could hardly be greater. College and university administrators, both public and private, are nearly unanimous in their conviction that blacks and Hispanics should be present in meaningful numbers among those inducted into the upper ranks of American society.

But the significance of these cases reaches far beyond the ivory tower. Elite higher education is the primary place in America where access to influence and power is rationed. If blacks and Hispanics are to achieve genuine equality in this society, they must be able to participate in these institutions.

The designation each spring of the fortunate young people who will enter prestigious colleges and universities is a publicly visible, high-stakes civic exercise. These "selection rituals" are political acts, and their perceived fairness is crucial to the legitimacy of our social order. Supporters of affirmative action recognize that the presence -- in more than token numbers -- of blacks and Hispanics at selective colleges and universities is necessary to assure this perception, and the reality, of fairness. That is, racial diversity at the most selective institutions is required to demonstrate the genuinely democratic character of the process through which we, in effect, choose our elites.

The argument about affirmative action in college admissions is really a dispute about the meaning of racial justice. A powerful civics lesson is provided by these disputed policies: by using race as a factor to determine who will have access to their ranks, exclusive colleges and universities publicly confirm that a racially integrated elite is an essential element of a just society.

Taking race into account, in university admissions or in other aspects of life, does not require abandoning a commitment to individualism. One can hold that race is irrelevant to a person's moral worth -- that people, not groups, are the bearers of rights -- and still affirm that to deal effectively with individuals, we must consider the categories of thought in which they understand themselves.