

THE CASE FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

AACRAO
March 30, 2005
3:45 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.

Bob Laird

Introduction

The January 15 version of Aaron McGruder's comic strip "The Boondocks."

Focus of this session

First, on affirmative action at the undergraduate level, using California's experience as a warning to the rest of the country because of the immense damage from Proposition 209.

Second, on affirmative action at the graduate level, especially on law schools, on medical and dental schools, and on graduate business schools, again focusing on California's experience.

Why it matters I:

UC Berkeley's fall 2004 freshman class

- 108 African American students out of a class of 3,671—2.9%, the lowest figure in more than two decades (257—7.3%—in fall 1997) (one-year persistence rate)
- 27 of those 108 African American freshmen—24.8%—are recruited athletes
- 39 of those 108 African American freshmen are male
- 14 of the 39 African American males are recruited athletes. That means in a freshman class of 3,671 students, there are only 25 African American males who are not recruited athletes. Talk about a critical mass.

African American, Latino, and Native American students make up 12.6% of the fall 2004 freshman class at Berkeley compared to 44.7% of the June 2004 public high school graduates in California.

That 12.6% for fall 2004 is far below the 21.4% figure for fall 1997, the last year that UC could consider race and ethnicity in undergraduate admissions.

Why it matters II:

Graduate and professional schools

For the 2002-03 academic year, six University of California undergraduate campuses ranked in the top 40 sources of law school applicants nationwide. The two UC campuses most heavily damaged by 209--UCLA and Berkeley—were number one and number 3, respectively.

The goals of affirmative action

1. To enrich the education of all students
2. To help integrate all levels of American society
3. To help build a fair and equitable society in which affirmative action will no longer be necessary

The key issue

The core issue in the debate over race and ethnicity in university admissions in the United States appears as a conflict between two democratic ideals: a fully integrated society on the one hand and a color-blind society on the other.

Color-blind means a society in which no one is penalized legally or socially on the basis of race or ethnicity. It does not mean some sort of bland melting pot but a society that acknowledges, values, and celebrates differences, a society in which most people understand and appreciate the richness of diversity.

Neither of these ideals—a fully integrated society or a color-blind society--has fully existed by itself in our history, let alone co-existed with the other. How we resolve this conflict will determine to a significant extent how close we come as a society to achieving the professed ideals of America.

Affirmative action, imperfect as it may be, is one of the few mechanisms that move us toward the goal of a fully integrated, color-blind society. To eliminate affirmative action, as California has done through Proposition 209, before we repair the basic social and economic inequities in our society—so many of which are tied to race—makes it almost certain that we will never achieve that goal of a fair society. Rather than eliminate affirmative action now, we need first to eliminate the inequities that have led to the need for it. When we no longer need affirmative action, we can let it go.

What about the substitutes for the consideration of race and ethnicity?

1. Socio-economic affirmative action
2. Outreach
3. Percentage plans
4. Community college transfer

Five dangerous or pernicious trends:

1. “It is so if we say it is so.” The public relations campaign against affirmative action.
2. Hostile appointments by the second Bush administration, with more to come.
3. The Mismatch Myth
4. The failure of many colleges and universities to seize a major opportunity.
 - “We can’t afford it.”
 - Texas A&M has done it without preferences.
5. Michigan Civil Rights Initiative in 1996

Summary comments

- White privilege
- Christopher Edley
- Richard Atkinson