

Affirmative actions: The paradox of race-conscious admissions

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As the Supreme Court issued its ruling upholding, in a limited way, affirmative action, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor expressed the hope that in 25 years higher education will not require "race-conscious" admissions programs. Her remark underscored the provisional nature of affirmative action: the idea is to eliminate racial preferences in the future by employing them now.

The seemingly contradictory aspect of this effort strikes many Americans—and some Supreme Court justices—as illogical, like turning left in order to go right. We would argue that it is not illogical but paradoxical, and that sometimes reality itself is paradoxical. In fact, affirmative-action programs have already shown success in the real world, as the court acknowledged in its 5-4 decision supporting the diversity program at the University of Michigan Law School. The benefits of racial diversity in educating and recruiting leaders "are not theoretical but real," O'Connor wrote, and she cited business and military leaders to buttress her case.

Corporations and the military have concluded that if they are to operate successfully in a global marketplace and in a racially diverse society, they need a diverse set of leaders. The notion that elite institutions need to "look like America," and that they can do so while retaining high standards, has become widely recognized as practical wisdom. The court has now legitimated the practice.

Yet the paradox remains: the goal of affirmative action is to speed the day of its demise. And affirmative action of whatever type can be only part of the effort to reach that goal. Affirmative action is relevant in admissions only at selective schools, and only a fraction of colleges and universities are selective. Most minorities who go on to higher education—like most whites who do so—attend nonselective schools.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 20) reports that each year affirmative action programs affect only about 5,000 black and Hispanic undergraduates nationwide. The report compares that figure to the 20,000 minority students in California alone

who are likely to be shut out of college altogether because of cutbacks in funding for community colleges. As the *Chronicle* suggests, the biggest obstacle to higher education for most minorities is not the lack of affirmative action at selective schools, but the lack of any affordable college opportunity. One education official remarked, "Nobody didn't go to college because they didn't get into Berkeley," but there are many minority kids who won't go to college at all if they can't afford to go to a community college.

Justice O'Connor is right in declaring that the nation's goal should be to become a society of fully equal opportunity that is free of racial preferences. Reaching that goal will involve both affirmative action at elite schools and a sustained investment in those nonselective schools that are educating most of the next generation of black and Hispanic leaders.