

Ready For Action?

Students, administrators and politicians choose sides in what some call the second civil-rights movement.

By Aimee Rinehart

There's a political storm brewing across the nation about the relevance of affirmative action. No matter where you stand in the debate, affirmative action — a program that requires employers and colleges to take actions to hire or admit minorities and women — has probably affected you in some capacity. The university that targets women for its chemistry program, or the scholarship for black applicants only.

Finally, this directionless generation has a cause to fight — a war to wage!

Not so fast, says Leslie Wolfe, president of the Center for Women Policy studies in Washington, D.C.

"It would be stupid to do the same movement as in the '60s. What we need is a movement for the '90s," Wolfe says. "This generation is able to build on the ground [the '60s generation] covered, to bring us to the next level: a more egalitarian society."

It's impossible to use '60s tactics to solve '90s problems — too much has changed since then. Even reliably liberal Berkeley. A professor from Berkeley declined an interview to discuss affirmative action, saying he doesn't speak with the press. Berkeley, the birthplace of activism.

Affirmative action was implemented in 1964, when "Whites only" signs were standard. Because signs are down and numbers of women and minority students enrolled in college are up [see chart], the urgent need to rectify past wrongs — through affirmative action — is an increasingly hard sell. Now, the so-called "nowhere generation" is struggling to play by the rules set by parents.

Polittickin'

Just one year ago, merely suggesting a change in affirmative-action policy would have been political suicide. But as the pendulum swings back, politicians with ideas once thought reactionary — even racist — are coming out of hiding. They're standing on a simple ideological platform: Everyone's equal; let's go home.

Proposals to do away with affirmative action are currently being written at the state and federal level. California, the state that developed affirmative action in 1964, has drafted a proposal for the 1996 election that specifically targets state and local hiring and college admissions.

Clint Bolick, litigation director of the Institute for Justice in Washington, D.C., is riding this political turnabout. He's drafting a bill that calls for an end to federal affirmative-action programs. He suggests that without them, our country wouldn't be so divisive.

"Preference programs are a leading

cause of racial division," Bolick says. "They fuel resentment and reinforce notions of group identity."

But the Clinton administration isn't buying the argument that affirmative action should be done away with entirely. Clinton has called for a full review of affirmative action and may attempt to base federal programs on economic need rather than race or gender.

The Department of Education is included in part of the president's review process to determine which affirmative-

action programs are and are not working. "We haven't changed any of our policies," says deputy secretary of education Madeleine Kunin. "We're adhering to what we have been doing [in the past], including support of race-based scholarships.... The concept of equal access to education is fundamental to our mission."

One of the two proposed bills challenging affirmative action would eliminate all racial and ethnic preferences in programs run by the federal government. For higher education, it would mean an end to many scholarships for minority students. "Affirmative action is helpful particularly to

those who've already entered the applicant pool," says Steven Roy Goodman, executive director for the College Admissions Institute of America. "It will affect where people are going, not if they're going."

James Madison U. junior Sosanya Jones says that without affirmative action, some blacks who have the potential to succeed in schools like JMU may be overlooked. "If affirmative action is out," she says, "[blacks] will flock to the black institutions."

Vivian Hobbs, assistant professor of humanities at Florida A&M U., predicts similar migration within teaching ranks. "FAMU would probably go back to all-black teachers," Hobbs says. "Florida State University would go back to all-white teachers because of the theory 'we teach our own better.'"

The Incredible shrinking budget

Supporters say that part of the movement to remove affirmative action stems from a downsizing-crazed economy. Cuts in state funding for education have made universities scale back on professors, administrators and students with financial need.

"Universities are reluctant to recruit students who need financial aid," Goodman says. "They target those who can pay because it doesn't cost [the university] anything."

Associate counsel for the American Association of University Professors

"We need to find a new way of becoming equal in society. Affirmative action just makes the numbers equal, not individuals."

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