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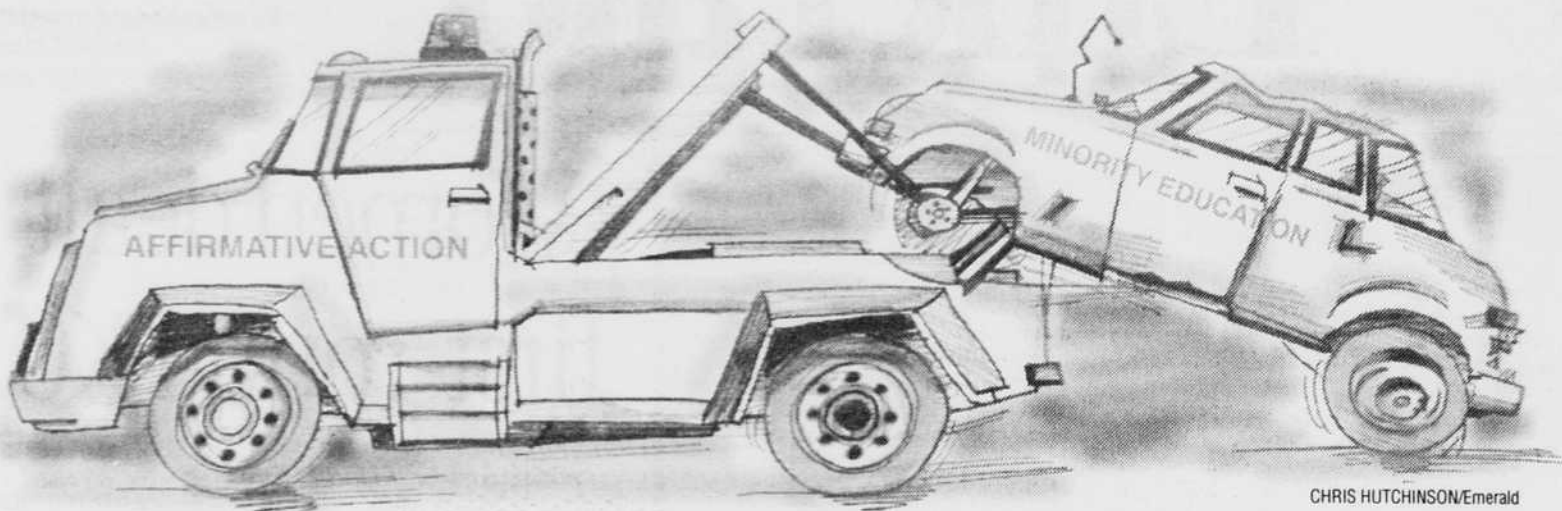
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PERSPECTIVES

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Solve unequal education at its source



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

"The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting." — Proposition 209

When Californians passed Proposition 209 in November 1996, it wasn't just bigots who supported it. Many liberal intellectuals and academics felt it was a good idea. They argued that any system based on racial preferences was the opposite of what a democratic meritocracy should be. Advocates figured that,

OPINION



Chris Kenning

when based purely on academic merit, minorities would enjoy equal opportunity and a chance to enter universities.

Despite the egalitarian intent of its authors, Proposition 209 has had the unfortunate effect of resegregating California's top universities and law schools.

Between 1996 and 1997, the number of African-Americans accepted at the UCLA School of Law fell from 104 to only 21—only eight of whom enrolled. At Berkeley's prestigious Boalt Hall Law School, the number fell from 74 to 15—with only one enrolling.

Those who advocated Proposition 209 failed to take into account the role the disturbing gap in test scores between whites and minorities would play. For example, of about 70,000 national law school applicants, only 103 blacks and 224 Hispanics, as compared with 7,715 whites, score above the 82nd percentile of the LSAT. While certainly fewer minorities take the

LSAT than whites, the number is still highly disproportionate. These figures are especially significant in light of Boalt Hall's average: the 97th percentile.

"Because the gap in scores is so wide, it's simply not possible to admit many African-Americans without taking race into account," Jeffrey Rosell wrote in *The New Yorker*.

Many academic institutions are now faced with the prospect of either the resegregation they've worked so hard against, or the large scale lowering of standards in an effort to redefine merit to include factors other than academic performance.

Yet most policy-makers and academics have missed the point completely by simply calling for a return to affirmative action or lowering admission standards and dropping the LSAT requirement for applicants.

In the rush to redefine merit, proponents and critics alike have glossed over the essential question: the disparity in test scores. Solving this root problem would eliminate the need for measures that treat issues symptomatic in nature.

In 1997, three University of Texas law professors filed a brief with the Supreme Court that said affirmative action needed to continue, "barring a miraculous improvement in elementary and secondary education for minority students."

This kind of thinking reinforces the idea that universal, high-quality education is a next-to-impossible dream. Yet it is lower-echelon education that can most concretely address gaps in minority test scores.

Clearly, attacking problematic education policies, such as school funding based on property taxes, are more beneficial than treating the symptoms of inequality in higher education.

Additionally, the causes of the gap in scores go much deeper than education policy. A recent report by the Milton Eisenhower Foundation noted that as the division between the rich and poor widens, the poor are becoming disproportionately black and Hispanic. (The median family income for Hispanics and blacks is only 55 percent of their white counterparts.) The report concludes that the remedy lies with educating disadvantaged kids, but is anyone listening?

Many once opposed to affirmative action now support it on practical grounds. But without serious efforts to close the socioeconomic gaps in minority education, the alternatives involve only superficial solutions. And lowering standards is the last thing our education system needs.

Striving for a color-blind system in which individual merit is weighed objectively is certainly admirable. But without taking into account assumptions of privilege that underlie our society, abandonment of affirmative action programs without first solving racial inequalities of wealth and class will only lead to resegregation—not equality.

Chris Kenning is a student activities reporter for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

Quoted

"We're going to be right there in the middle of all this hot higher ed action."

ASUO Vice President Ben Unger, describing an upcoming trip to a Washington, D.C., conference, in the March 6 Emerald.

"You always want to pick up a few more chicken legs."

Unger, comparing student government to a buffet line, in the Oct. 1, 1997 Emerald.

"There isn't an average student anymore. To try to say the hours meet the average student's needs is silly. No student that I know leads an average life."

Unger, arguing for extended library hours, in the Jan. 8 Emerald.

"We just super-herooed student government."

Unger, after the Programs Finance Committee approved the ASUO Executive budget for next year, in the March 3 Emerald.

"The ship's not going down. We haven't hit an iceberg; we're cruising on. This is more like a speed bump."

Unger, after a formal grievance was filed against him and ASUO President Bill Miner, in the Feb. 11 Emerald.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Eugene rejects bigotry

Elitist, bigoted, prejudiced, ignorant, selfish, hateful and misinformed is Barry Williams. Exactly which two-thirds of the population agrees with his message? Two-thirds of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, perhaps.

How soon the members of the OCA forget that Eugene does not condone this kind of blind bigotry. How many times must we remind you that there are many ways to be a person? Here in the United States in general, and Eugene, Ore., in particular, we accept all kinds of people. We accept short people, tall people, black people, white people, skinny people, fat people, straight people and, yes, we even accept homosexual people. Remember Measure 9?

Get with the program Barry Williams and please bring the OCA

with you. It is 1998, and the majority of the population does believe in this concept of freedom. Maybe you've heard of it? If it really bothers you that much what one does with their sexual life, I suggest that you take a long, hard look in the mirror and re-examine your priorities. Perhaps dealing with your own insecurities instead of attacking others would be a more productive way for you to be spending your time.

Jessica Klausmeier
Biology

Who created homosexuality?

Finally, Barry Williams of Junction City has shown his true colors (ODE, Feb. 25). He belongs (proudly) to the Oregon Citizens Alliance. According to him, two-thirds of the nation is homophobic and abhors this "deviant behavior" of homosexuals. Even the Bible turned

against it. But did not God create homosexuality, too?

Hilde Cherry
Eugene

OSPIRG works for change

I am writing this letter to express my support for OSPIRG. With so many problems in the world, it is nice to see an organization that works to make a real change on campus and in the community. OSPIRG acts as a voice for students at the University. Without this highly effective statewide organization, students would not be represented on a wide scale of issues, such as the environment, consumer protection and hunger and homelessness.

I have worked in coalition with OSPIRG on many projects, including their most recent pesticide action campaign. Right now there are

9,000 pesticides registered for use in Oregon, and we are exposed to pesticides every day on campus and in the food we eat. The health effects related to pesticide exposure range from reproductive disorders to cancer. This is why we need a right to know about the pesticides that are used in our community.

This is why OSPIRG's pesticide action campaign is so important. It educates students about the issue and teaches people the skills to fight for the right to know about pesticides. So far OSPIRG has collected over 7,000 postcards statewide to let the governor know that students in Oregon are concerned about this issue. For all these reasons and more, OSPIRG is an asset to our University and community.

Grace Frances
Workshop coordinator, Women's Center

CORRECTION

In the article, "PFC grants money to three groups in special session," (ODE, March 13) the story should have said that the decision to deny MUN an appeals hearing was handed down by Dave Koch. MUN's total PFC grant for 1998-99 was \$575, with another \$4,000 coming from a special request.

The Emerald regrets the error.