

# Affirming Diversity

## Are Race-Based Admissions Used At Your School?

By Michael Dougherty

**A**ffirmative action may be one of those phrases that sparks a brief second of recognition—could be something you've heard on the news, or a phrase you absorbed in an American history class.

So why is it that students at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the University of Florida, the University of Texas, the University of Michigan, the University of California, and other schools across the country are holding rallies, taking over buildings, and organizing '60s style protests in the name of affirmative action?

### The Basics

There are many people who believe affirmative action at the university level—legislation that allows universities to admit students and hire professors according to race or gender—is the most important issue in higher education.

Affirmative action affects admissions, faculty (hirings, firings, promotions and tenure), financial aid and curriculum. A school's policy holds lasting ramifications for every student—educationally and socially. Who gets in? Who teaches? What will they teach?

So how does it affect you?

Practically every state university system in the U.S. has some form of affirmative action policy, a plan to ensure that the student body and faculty reflect the diversity of America.

But recently those plans have come under legal attack in many states, sparking passionate debate both for retaining and eliminating race- and gender-based admissions decisions.

Everyone knows a student who got into school for athletic ability, or an uncanny talent for the oboe, but applications are also evaluated for cultural factors, such as country of origin, number of people in the family who have gone to college, socioeconomic background, and race.

### The Controversy

Over a half-century ago, affirmative action was introduced as the next step in making America a more perfect union. Its purpose was to take an unfortunate past and make it a fortunate future. Affirmative action was designed to aid minority groups (including race, gender, religion, age and ethnicity) in achieving equality in business, education and society.

It may sound pretty good, but affirmative action policies are some of the thorniest subjects on campus these days, attracting the interest of national civil rights leaders and turning campuses into hotbeds of activism and protest.

Affirmative action has been abandoned by many universities because its legal defensibility is no longer certain—court after court has overturned the policy, proclaiming it unconstitutional.

But for those students committed to enhancing diversity on campus, the repeal of affirmative action is seen as a step back in time.

Jason Rigby, a student at Indiana Purdue University/Fort Wayne, said he believes affirmative action is the best way to ensure that potential students get a foot in the door.

"The university is the largest melting pot of the city, [where] mind power is the most important thing. We need to pay attention to make sure everybody is getting a fair shot."

### The Next Steps

Despite the fact that universities can no longer rely on affirmative action policies to admit minority students, many schools

are still working overtime to make sure their admissions policies reflect their commitment to diversity.

In addition to special recruitment efforts designed to reach out to minority students, many schools have embraced complex admissions policies that seek out students with non-traditional backgrounds.

If you applied to a state school this year, it's probable that your application was evaluated on a point system that factors in things like: the quality of your high school, your racial background, how much money

**Check out your own school's affirmative action policy—you might be surprised to find that students are admitted according to race, gender, and economic background.**

your family has, and if you are the first member of your family to attend college.

It's even possible that you were admitted or rejected because of these circumstances—a situation that has sparked some students to initiate law suits against their state universities, including the University of Georgia.

Maybe you aren't even aware of it, maybe you are. But rest assured: affirmative action policies and their offshoots are shaping your college experience. •

## Related Links

For more information about affirmative action in higher education:

**Diversityinc.com**

**soyouwanna.com** (search for affirmative action)

**cpnet.com** (search for affirmative action)

**washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/affirm/affirm.htm**

**infoplease.com** (search for affirmative action)

**wdn.com/cir/cr-aa.htm**

There are lots more links to affirmative action sites at **steamtunnels.net**



Bill Lovejoy, Santa Cruz Sentinel/AP