

The Case for Affirmative Action

By Charles J. Ogletree Jr.

After centuries of bias, we must stand by policies that redress past wrongs.

My dreams became reality as a result of my Stanford education. My father, who grew up in Birmingham, Ala., and my mother, a native of Little Rock, Ark., never finished high school. They grew up in a segregated South that offered few opportunities and many obstacles for African Americans. I grew up in Merced, Calif., in an environment where many of my peers viewed merely staying alive and getting a job as a successful course in life. But, with a push from my parents, I was determined to be the first in my family to attend college. With help from high school counselors, I discovered Stanford. And thanks to an aggressive minority outreach program by the admissions office, I was given the opportunity of a first-rate education. Without affirmative action, I would never have applied to, and certainly would not have attended, Stanford.

We must keep affirmative action—and keep refining it. It is a small but significant way to compensate victims of slavery, Jim Crow laws, discrimination and immigration restrictions. It is also a means to assure that institutions such as Stanford will celebrate and foster that which they simply cannot avoid: diversity in a democratic society. Affirmative action admissions policies seek to realign the balance of power and opportunity by doing what is, at heart, quite simple: affirmatively including the formerly excluded.

There are critics of affirmative action who claim it is no longer needed, or unfairly discriminates "in reverse" or "stigmatizes" admitted minority students. I disagree.

Those who claim affirmative action is no longer needed believe that the field has been leveled. But they ignore alarming figures. Last year, only 1,455 African Americans received PhDs in the United States. During the same year, 24,608 whites were awarded PhDs. The truth is that while America has made progress on racial issues, these changes are recent, vulnerable to being reversed and in fact nowhere near completed.

Those who cry "reverse discrimination" base their views almost exclusively on a belief that minority test scores are too low. But they fail to acknowledge that test scores and subsequent performance in college have a correlation that is, to say the least, inexact. When we insist on test scores as an ultimate measure of merit, we exclude, once again, students who have not had access to good public education or to funds that pay for preparatory courses for those tests. We exclude those who, given the opportunity, will display their ability.

Finally, those who would eradicate affirmative action because it "stigmatizes" minorities have two flaws in their argument. Stigma is the product of racist attitudes that still persist today. As a result, killing affirmative action would do little, probably nothing, to ameliorate the stigmatization of minorities. Indeed, one wonders, even for the few whom affirmative action might arguably stigmatize: Would they feel better and achieve more being excluded from a good education entirely? That question ties into the second flaw in the "stigmatization" argument: Opponents rely on the exceptional case, not the rule. (Just as they tend to point to the minuscule number of failures rather than the many successes.) The majority of minorities strongly favor affirmative action because of the benefits and opportunities it affords.

I was attracted to Stanford precisely because of its affirmative action programs. Here was an institution that clearly recognized that some people enter life with different abilities and opportunities, and that standardized tests were not the only way to judge issues of character, creativity and intellectual promise. When I arrived on campus, I found there was no affirmative action in course selection or grading. I was expected to compete with my peers on an equal basis. I learned that success was not automatic. I got my bachelor's degree in three years and graduated with distinction. I spent my fourth year obtaining my master's degree, and giving serious thought to the next stages of life.

The experiences of many of my minority classmates is a ringing endorsement of affirmative action. Most came from families where the parents had not gone to college, and many were from single-parent households. Moreover, many went on to become successful doctors, lawyers and business leaders, and others are prominent school teachers, public servants and entrepreneurs.

It is my hope that one day we will no longer need affirmative action. As our society becomes more diverse, the need for specific programs aimed at targeted groups will obviously diminish. However, that time has not yet arrived. My two teenage children, who are both college bound, are far better qualified to navigate the educational waters than I was 25 years ago. Despite this laudable progress, they are still judged in everyday life, by race. They are constantly reminded by comments, innuendo and circumstances of their ethnicity precisely because we have not been able as a society to overcome the issues of race.

The affirmative action policies promoted by Stanford recognize that, for more than 300 years, African Americans were treated differently because of their race. The important efforts over the course of the past 30 years by government and private institutions have gone a considerable distance in facing up to this history. It will not take 300 years, or even 100 years, to address the sad legacy of our nation's past. We have made a lot of progress. This is no time to turn back.

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