



## Affirmative Action in Education

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Without affirmative action, it is likely that our nation's premier colleges and universities would be mostly occupied by white men and Asian American students, who tend to score higher on standardized tests than women and other minorities. As a nation that is growing increasingly diverse, we need to determine what kind of future we want and what standards we are going to use to allocate educational opportunities.

Like most Americans, colleges and universities recognize the power that emanates from education and the benefits that accrue from integrated educational institutions where people of various backgrounds might talk, argue and think together. The primary purpose of affirmative action in education has been to involve qualified students of all backgrounds in our nation's most rigorous educational offerings. As Justice Powell wrote in the *Bakke* case, "Diversity in our colleges and universities improves the learning process for everyone. . .the nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to the ideas and mores of students as diverse as this nation of many peoples."

Too often people mistake affirmative action with educational preferences for unqualified students. *In fact, affirmative action rewards merit.* Recent studies of test scores and high school grades—the traditional and presumably "objective" standards for measuring student qualifications—have called into question the accuracy of these tools in predicting future success for all students, particularly for minorities and women. Few people could rationally argue that test scores and grade point averages alone objectively measure the stature and potential of an individual. What has been the life experience of an applicant? What obstacles have they had to overcome? What are their ambitions and hopes? How have they benefited their community in their youth? These standards may seem less tangible than numerical figures, but they are more accurate predictors of future educational success than standards of pedigree, inheritance or other attributes of privilege—other standards colleges often use to admit children of alumni, faculty, or patrons.

Unfortunately, without affirmative action, most blacks and whites would be cast into separate learning environments without opportunities to engage in educational discourse or to join one another in testing the rigors of the mind. Similarly, assumptions about the intellectual course for women's lives have too often confined them in roles that stifle initiative, creativity and life options.

Affirmative action in education provides grants and fellowships, tutorial programs and other initiatives that help minorities and women achieve levels of academic attainment that were denied to them until very recently. Furthermore, affirmative action in education prepares women and minorities for fields in engineering, medicine, business, math and science, and other vocations which have been traditionally, and sometimes exclusively, occupied by white men.

Dismantling affirmative action in education would result in severe backsliding, contrary to our national value of improving educational opportunities for all. Integrated educational settings are particularly important for our children who will face an increasingly diverse, multicultural America. By relating to one another in positive ways in schools, a new generation of children can help our nation overcome separation in our neighborhoods and prejudice in the workplace. Eliminating affirmative action would only further entrench racial discrimination and hold back our progress as a country.