

On campus, equality matters but so does diversity

University admissions programs that seek to treat all applicants equally must reconcile two notions that, at first glance, seem contradictory: that we are one blood under the skin, and that we are different.

America has made its historic progress in race relations by accepting that all people are fundamentally the same. To assert, in the words of the Apostle Peter, "God has made of one blood all nations," is not simply to acknowledge a scientific truth but to affirm a shift in humankind's moral maturity.

At the same time, this ideal doesn't mean that difference, or diversity, doesn't matter. The very definitions of "success" and "leadership" are culturally mediated.

We cannot talk about the fundamental ways in which we are one unless we are able to understand and communicate across the ways in which we differ. But affirming diversity is more than appreciating differences in food, dress and social customs: It is the hard work of getting outside of and examining our very notions of what counts as excellent, moral and useful. A monochromatic organization is blind to the many colors of success open to it.

Higher education has a role in enabling students to deal with the different ways those of different cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds may approach the same set of circumstances. An educated person must know how to identify the common values that allow bridges to be built between those differences.

Schools that consider race and ethnicity among the many factors for admission aim to put students of widely divergent backgrounds into an academic rock tumbler that knocks the edges off their assumptions about each other's experiences. They usually emerge with skepticism about blanket statements about any group and with a willingness to listen hard to those who at first seem different in order to find the things they have in common.

Those who oppose affirmative action ignore this crucial function of higher education. Instead, they mistakenly presume that some combination of high school grade-point average, class rank and standardized test scores yields an objective measure of academic achievement. They assert that a student with a higher score must necessarily be more academically qualified than one with a lower score, and that treating all equally means that universities



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should admit students strictly by their scores.

In their view, to admit students with lower scores, whether they are athletes, children of alumni or students of color, is to admit the less academically able, the less deserving.

Admissions officers know that any quantification of achievement is at best a rough predictor of academic success. Grade-point average and class rank are school specific: A student in the top half of a highly competitive high school class may be better prepared for college than a student in the top tenth of a school where most students don't aspire to higher education. Standardized test scores have even less correlation than grade-point average to achievement at universities.

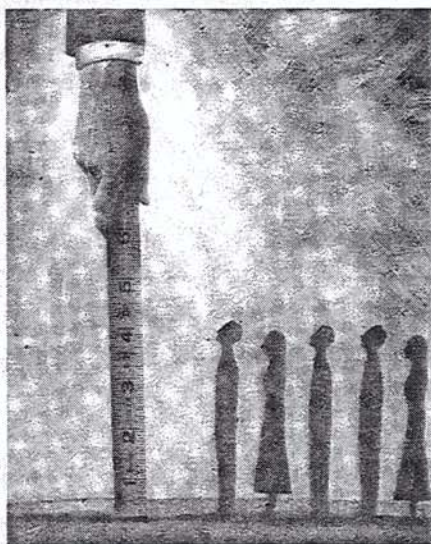
Most institutions use measures of prior academic achievement not to exclude students but to set institution-specific floors below which a student is not likely to succeed. Ninety-five percent of America's 3,000-plus higher education institutions admit virtually every applicant who exceeds institutional academic thresholds. Only in the 100-some schools that accept fewer than one in two

applicants does choosing among academically qualified students become an issue.

A selective college or university that has assembled a pool of applicants, all academically strong enough to graduate if admitted to study, has always applied other criteria to create a diversity of background, experience, talent and aspiration in an entering class.

Allegations that "better qualified" students have been denied opportunity because of affirmative action policies rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of how admissions decisions are made. Human equality and human difference are complementary notions.

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