5 Reasons to Support Affirmative Action in College Admissions

By Connor Maxwell and Sara Garcia | Posted on October 1, 2019, 4:14 pm
A master’s degree graduate listens to speakers during a commencement ceremony at Harvard University, May 2017.
For much of American history, elite colleges and universities were largely reserved for wealthy, predominantly white Americans. Only in the 20th century did these institutions begin to actively prioritize diversity and expand access by adopting tools such as affirmative action—the narrowly tailored practice of considering race and ethnicity as part of a holistic evaluation of a student’s application. Affirmative action is one of the best tools colleges and universities have to promote diversity and ensure that those who are otherwise shut out of the American postsecondary system have a chance to earn a quality degree.

While the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld the use of race in admissions, some groups continue to undermine access for students of color. These forces have found a strong ally in the Trump administration, which has leveraged the might of the federal government to threaten affirmative action. After failing to demonstrate that affirmative action hurts white students, they have changed tactics and began to promote the myth that helping some students of color access education results in discrimination against well-qualified Asian American students. This harmful myth perpetuates inaccurate narratives of homogeneity in Asian American communities; disregards significant socio-economic differences between ethnicities; and ignores the stark intraracial disparities affirmative action helps to alleviate. This tactic is not new; groups and individuals that seek to preserve unfair systems have long attempted to sow division in communities of color.

Despite their efforts to impede the nation’s progress toward educational equity and pit communities of color against each other, leading civil rights groups continue to defend the use of affirmative action, and research continues to demonstrate its need. Race-conscious admissions practices remain necessary in the fight for racial equity in higher education. In this column, we explore five reasons to support affirmative action in college admissions.

1. Students of color remain underrepresented on college campuses

College enrollment and completion rates have risen significantly over the past four decades. However, students of color, especially black and Latinx students, are more underrepresented at selective universities today than they were 35 years ago. In fact, a black student enrollment disparity exists at 45 of the 50 flagship state universities, meaning that the percentage of undergraduates who are black is lower than the percentage of high school graduates in that state who are black. For example, black students constituted 50 percent of 2015–2016 high school graduates in Mississippi, but were just 12.9 percent of University of Mississippi undergraduates.
Banning affirmative action only worsens this persistent problem. For example, one study found that students of color experience a 23 percentage point decline in likelihood of admission to highly selective public colleges after an affirmative action ban goes into effect.

While much progress has been made in recent decades, students of color still remain underrepresented on college campuses nationwide. Prioritizing diversity and employing race-conscious admissions policies are critical for promoting equity in higher education.

2. Prioritizing diversity benefits students of all races

Diversity on college campuses enhances the educational experiences of students of all backgrounds. Evidence gathered by the Century Foundation suggests that racially integrated classrooms can reduce students’ racial bias, improve satisfaction and intellectual self-confidence, and enhance leadership skills. These benefits may translate to better economic outcomes and, among other payoffs, prepare students to work in a diverse global economy, increasing the productivity, effectiveness, and creativity of teams.

Institutions of higher education have placed a greater priority on integration and campus diversity in recent decades. White women may have been among the greatest beneficiaries of this effort. Between 1967 and 2009, female college enrollment more than doubled—from 19 percent of all students to 44 percent. During this period, the percentage of white women age 25 to 35 with college degrees surged from less than 15 percent to more than 40 percent.

People of color have also benefited significantly from college integration and efforts to prioritize campus diversity. Between 1976 and 2008, black and American Indian/Alaska Native people saw their share of total college enrollment increase by 39 percent and 46 percent, respectively. Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander people’s enrollment share more than doubled during this period as well.

Overall, an abundance of evidence demonstrates that systematic efforts to prioritize diversity in college admissions can improve the representation of historically excluded groups while bolstering the educational experiences and economic outcomes of all students.

3. Affirmative action in education promotes diversity in ways a focus on income alone cannot
While income can and should be considered as part of a holistic evaluation of applicants, it should complement rather than supplant the consideration of race and ethnicity. Income can serve as a good indicator of a household’s ability to cover regular expenses, but it doesn’t tell the whole story about economic well-being and access to higher education.

Wealth makes it easier for families to relocate to better school districts, purchase test preparation books and classes, and pay or help pay college tuition. But centuries of systemic racism and intergenerational transfers have provided white households with far more wealth than households of color, even after controlling for income. In fact, middle-income white households typically have twice as much wealth as their Latinx counterparts and three times more wealth than their black counterparts. As a result, students of color (especially black students) are more likely than similarly situated white students to attend underfunded and high-poverty K-12 schools.

Even when students of color have wealthy parents or attend the same schools as white students, they experience the U.S. educational system differently. For example, students of color are less likely to be referred to “gifted and talented” programs, even after controlling for test scores, health, socio-economic status, and classroom and school characteristics. Schools are also more likely to suspend or expel students of color than white students. Beginning as early as preschool, these experiences can hinder social-emotional and behavioral development; limit educational experiences; obstruct the process of identifying and addressing underlying issues; and contribute to increased family stress and burden due to challenges in finding an affordable and suitable alternative placement. Data also show that race-based bullying is on the rise, and black and Latinx students who experience bullying are more likely to suffer academically than their white peers. Until the racial wealth gap and other forms of structural racism are eliminated, income alone will be insufficient for promoting diversity on college campuses nationwide.

4. Affirmative action helps colleges take steps toward greater equity in admissions

Overall, affirmative action is a mechanism that has allowed historically excluded groups to attend college. Students of color have long faced systemic barriers in the American education system, including exclusion, segregation, underfunding, fewer resources, and lower familial wealth. As a result, students of color are more likely to fare worse on the indicators of success that colleges evaluate for admission, making it harder for people of color to access top-tier public and private colleges. Race-conscious admissions practices,
such as affirmative action, attempt to remedy these inequities by encouraging colleges to take a closer look at some of the nontraditional factors that could make a student successful—factors often overlooked in traditional admissions criteria.

Wealthier, often white, students are more likely to have had a parent that attended college—meaning those students are likely to benefit from practices such as legacy preference. In addition, white students are likely to have greater amounts of wealth and attend K-12 schools that provide multiple extracurricular activities, sports programs, and college prep resources. As a result, these students are particularly competitive applicants for top-tier institutions. Affirmative action allows colleges to use holistic reviews to consider race as one of many factors under evaluation when reviewing applicants. Therefore, affirmative action betters the chances of a student of color receiving fair, comprehensive consideration instead of being overlooked for admission.

5. Affirmative action helps promote social mobility

Despite the barriers low-income students and students of color face to gain access to higher education, research has shown that once admitted to top-tier institutions, low-income students complete their degree at higher rates and earn almost as much as wealthy students postgraduation. These findings suggest that all students, regardless of background, benefit from the value top-tier institutions provide. So while some argue that low-income students and students of color may be overwhelmed by the academic rigor at selective colleges, research suggests the opposite.

Affirmative action can help to level the playing field by ensuring all students—regardless of wealth, privilege, or background—have a chance to benefit from the advantages selective colleges provide. As a result, low-income students and students of color increase their chances of emerging from poverty and stepping into the middle class.

Conclusion

For decades, elite colleges and universities closed their doors to students of color. As a result, students of color remain vastly underrepresented at the country’s top-tier institutions. Affirmative action combats the effects of this discrimination by allowing colleges and universities to be more intentional in the ways they evaluate applicants. Put simply, affirmative action ensures colleges and universities provide opportunity to those historically shut out of the system because of their race, ethnicity, income, or identity. For this reason, it is critically important that policymakers and legislators work to protect the use of race-conscious admissions policies.
across the country. If not, inequality will continue to persist, and the American higher education system will fail to serve those that could benefit the most.

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