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Discussing Affirmative Action: Past, Present & Future Considerations

Elizabeth M. Neeley

Jose Soto
Southeast Community College

Becky Gould
Nebraska Appleseed

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Affirmative Action - Some Love It; Some Hate It

"Affirmative action" is a simple phrase that continues to invite controversy and heated argument that is commonly fueled by fiction, myth, and emotion rather than fact and reality. "Affirmative action" often divides lay and professional opinion down distinct lines of political party affiliation and notions of social philosophy and social justice, as well race, gender, and socio-economic status.1 "Affirmative action" is a phrase that means different things to different people for different reasons. "Affirmative action," some love it; some hate it; some love to hate it; and some hate to love it.2 In Nebraska, in 2008, we are, for better or for worse, engaged in a battle to preserve it or to end it.3

A Conceptual Context for the Discussion about Affirmative Action

The attacks on affirmative action, particularly in higher education settings, have increased significantly. The efforts are well orchestrated, well funded, and designed to dismantle a system that has just started to have an impact. California, Texas, Michigan, Washington and Florida are a few of the states that have served as the battlegrounds in this "war" against affirmative action. The list has grown to include anti-affirmative action initiatives in Nebraska, Missouri, Arizona, Colorado, and Oklahoma, and as the battles are becoming more frequent, the "casualties" are likely to increase. And while the results of these battles have been, and will continue to be, mixed and open to interpretation, the over-arching message is clear… the assault on affirmative action has just begun, and these aggressive efforts to eliminate it as a tool of equal opportunity will not soon cease.

Equally important is that the mood throughout the country, including Nebraska, is such that it seems to support and justify the attacks on affirmative action. Too often, we hear that sufficient progress has been made; that affirmative action is no longer needed; that the social "debt" incurred through years of constitutionally protected discrimination and exclusion against certain groups in our society has been paid. In the minds, words and actions of the increasingly emboldened many, affirmative action as a tool of social equalization has done its job… it’s no longer needed. For a number of reasons, many individuals, even some who are on the more liberal end of the political and philosophical spectrums, are saying, "Enough is enough."

A final point that rounds out the context is that judicial, legislative and executive branch scrutiny of affirmative action programs has increased significantly at all levels of government and in increasingly more sectors of our society. For example, our national judiciary has made pronouncements limiting affirmative action as an appropriate remedy for discrimination. And while these pronouncements may only limit affirmative action, too many "supporters" have reacted as if these decisions and initiatives have tolled the death of affirmative action. These court decisions and legislative initiatives have created in addition to negative coverage in the popular media, confusion and wavering support for affirmative action. They have also served to sway the lukewarm and "fair-weather" supporters of affirmative action toward a less aggressive and less controversial posture of mere verbal support.

Meaningful Action Needed

The predictable and observable result is a willingness to talk...
of support for affirmative action in principle, and, too often, an unwillingness to take any meaningful action in response to the attacks on affirmative action. This is especially true if the response in support of affirmative action as a tool toward increased inclusion and participation of minorities and women means expending significant political, personal or professional capital.

In our opinion, these musings reflect the social, political, philosophical and legal contexts that must be understood if we are to continue to give life to the existing commitment to affirmative action, equity and diversity in this country. It is a reality that must be acknowledged and that must be countered with a heightened sense of urgency, purpose, resolve, and willingness to contribute to saving affirmative action as a tool of equal opportunity.

If advancement and protection of civil rights continues to be an important part of our institutional commitment, then our civic and business leaders must continue to be vocal and unwavering in promoting and supporting affirmative action, equity and diversity. If redressing social injustices is still deemed a worthy endeavor, something more than a perfunctory "fight" in defense of affirmative action must be mounted. Immediate, meaningful and sustained action is needed, lest these much needed programs fade unceremoniously into history, relegated to a mere footnote in the annals of the civil rights movement.

The choice seems simple: we must either continue to zealously support affirmative action, or we must dispense with the empty rhetoric of social justice as a core principle of our personal and organizational philosophies. We trust the vast majority of us will choose to continue to assiduously support the cause and the work of those who have advanced and benefited from affirmative action. Further, we are hopeful this effort will

Elizabeth Neeley

Elizabeth Neeley is the Senior Research Manager of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center’s Access to Justice core priority area. Her primary role is as the director of Nebraska’s Minority Justice Committee, a joint initiative of the Nebraska Supreme Court and Nebraska State Bar Association to address racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system. In this capacity Liz serves on the Board of Directors of the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts. Liz also serves on the editorial board of Court Review, the official journal of the American Judges Association and is a member of the Nebraska Supreme Court’s Interpreter Advisory Committee and the Nebraska Crime Commission’s Subcommittee on Disproportionate Minority Contact. Liz received her B.S. in Sociology at Doane College in 2000, Master’s in Sociology from UNL in 2001 and her PhD in Sociology in 2004.

Jose J. Soto

Jose J. Soto has served as Vice President for Affirmative Action/Equity/Diversity at Southeast Community College in Lincoln, Nebraska since 1992. In this capacity he has planned, developed, and implemented a comprehensive AA/EEO/Diversity program for the college. He has successfully coordinated and implemented efforts in the area of policy development, training, recruitment/retention of employees, investigating complaints of discrimination and unfair treatment, and ongoing management training and organizational development activities. Soto is a Certified Affirmative Action Professional (American Association for Affirmative Action), a trained mediator, and an administrative hearing officer. Soto has been a member of the Nebraska Minority Justice Committee since its inception. Soto received a Bachelor of Arts degree (Summa Cum Laude) from the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico - San German (1975), with majors in Psychology and Social Sciences. He obtained a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Law in 1984.

Becky Gould

Becky Gould is Executive Director and Director of the Low Income Self-Sufficiency Program at Nebraska Appleseed. During her time at Appleseed, Becky has litigated and won several large class action law suits on behalf of low-income recipients of public benefits in both state and federal court. Becky is a member of the Nebraska State Bar Association and is admitted to practice before the Nebraska State Courts, U.S. District Court for the District of Nebraska, and the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. Becky is a member of the Robert Van Pelt Inns of Court, the Nebraska State Bar Association’s 2007-2008 Leadership Academy, and the Nebraska Minority Justice Committee. She received her BA with High Distinction in History with minors in Political Science and Psychology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1998 and her JD with Distinction from the UNL College of Law in 2001.
serve to publicly renew a collective commitment to enhancing and ensuring diversity, inclusion, and representation within our organizations.

A Historical Context - Affirmative Action a Response to Discrimination

Exploring the evolution of affirmative action as a social justice principle and equity program is a lesson in U.S. history, both recent and remote. It is, in part, a shameful story of long-standing, systemic, and systematic discrimination, exclusion, and limitation of opportunity based on race, color, and gender. It is also a pride-filled tale of a citizenry that recognized the injustice of legal and social exclusion and set out to remedy past wrongs, improve opportunities for "minorities" and women, and give life to our national credo that "all men (and women) are created equal...." 7

The progress toward equality and inclusion engendered by the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's, 60's and 70's is legend, and well known to young and old in this country and abroad. Individually and collectively we are rightfully proud of the number of legislative and judicial actions that mandated equality of access and opportunity to all during that era. 4 However, the reality for many, if not most, persons of color and women in this country belied our national rhetoric of equality, inclusion, and equal opportunity. Without some affirmative, deliberate and focused policies to counter entrenched attitudes and practices in hiring, college admissions, and contracting, the status quo of discrimination and exclusion remained, despite the new "law of the land" professing equality for all. It is this historical context, the desire for progress, yet the reality of limited progress, that gave birth and life to "affirmative action" as a tool to "level the playing field." 8

Executive Orders Establish the Need for Affirmative Action

John F. Kennedy is often cited as one of the first to use the phrase "affirmative action" in his 1961 Executive Order 10925 requiring federal contractors to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin." 9 In 1965, Lyndon Johnson used similar language in his Executive Order 11246. 9 Johnson's rationale for affirmative action at that time is worth quoting, as it still rings true for advocates and supporters of affirmative action as a tool to advance opportunity, fairness, and to promote diversity. He stated, "You do not take a person, who for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still believe that you have been completely fair." 9 In 1967, Johnson expanded his Executive Order to include affirmative action requirements to benefit women. 10

Affirmative Action - Still Beneficial and Still Supported

Over the ensuing years, affirmative action has been promoted as necessary and timely by some, 11 and pilloried as unnecessary and anachronistic by others. It has been banned by law or policy in certain localities, supported and advanced in others through the defeat of legislative and policy initiatives to eliminate it. 12 13 14 And while the effects and desirability of affirmative action have often been debated, maligned, and are often misrepresented, the fact remains that, used appropriately, affirmative action is legal, 15 and enjoys broad-based support from leaders in the military, 16 executives in the business and industry sector, 17 18 politicians, 19 and leadership within education. 20 21 22

In fairness, we must, and do, admit that considerable progress has been made over the past 40 years toward attaining more equal opportunities for minorities and women. Affirmative action programs have achieved more fairness regarding employment opportunities for qualified women and minorities. These programs have resulted in attainment of higher wages, advancement opportunities in the workplace, and opening the doors to nontraditional careers for women and minorities. Successful affirmative action initiatives in the employment arena have included:

- Recruitment and outreach efforts to make sure that qualified women and minorities are in the talent pool when hiring decisions are made;
- Training, mentoring, and workforce diversity initiatives to give all employees a fair chance at promotions; and
- Management tools for measuring progress in opening opportunities such as flexible goals and timetables.

However, continued use of affirmative action in employment and contracting is necessary to help break down barriers to opportunity that still exist, and to ensure that all Americans have a fair chance to demonstrate their talents and abilities. Despite our best efforts over the years, inequalities and disparities remain, and, thus, the need to continue our affirmative action efforts.

Diversity in Higher Education is a Compelling State Interest

Similarly, the doors to higher education have been opened to those who historically had been excluded from participating in and benefiting from the college experience. Over the years, affirmative action has ensured that colleges and universities are proactive in identifying and attracting interested and qualified
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individuals from groups that have historically been underrepresented, or unrepresented, in our academies. Diversity on our college campuses is critical to the future strength of our increasingly pluralistic society and our inevitably global economy. Affirmative action allows colleges and universities to admit students based on a wide range of criteria that includes test scores, unique talents, extracurricular activities, and life experiences, including elements of diversity. Inclusion and exposure to diversity on our college campuses improves the learning process for all students - male and female, regardless of race or gender. To enrich the academic experience of all students, affirmative action is needed to ensure that full background and life experience of all qualified applicants is a consideration when making admissions decision. So what are the compelling interests in attaining a diverse student body? Noteworthy, in these regards, are the various "substantial, important, and laudable educational benefits that diversity is designed to produce" cited by the Supreme Court in Grutter, including the following:

- Cross-racial understanding and the breaking down of racial stereotypes.
- Diversity promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce, for society, and for the legal profession.
- Major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints.
- High-ranking retired officers and civilian military leaders assert that a highly qualified, racially diverse officer corps is essential to national security.
- Moreover, because universities, and in particular, law schools, represent the training ground for a large number of the Nation's leaders, the path to leadership must be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity.

Nebraska Becomes a Battleground

Early this year Nebraska became one of five states to face a ballot initiative to amend the state constitution to prohibit affirmative action policies in higher education, hiring, and government contracting. The petition drive was sponsored by the Nebraska Civil Rights Initiative (NCRI), an organization that was propped up by Ward Connerly, a California business man, and other out-of-state interests looking for places with simple initiative processes to further their cause of eliminating affirmative action programs across the United States.

While the NCRI had a handful of local supporters, the bulk of the funding for the initiative has come from Michigan and New York. To date, NCRI does not have a single endorsement from a Nebraska organization and cannot point to a local outcry calling for the constitutional amendment they are seeking. When Nebraska became a target a number of community groups, including several legal organizations, came together to protect equal access and equal opportunity in Nebraska. Among these groups are: Nebraska Appleseed, the NAACP, ACLU, and the League of Women Voters, as well as a large, well organized and energized student group, Students United for Nebraska and many concerned members of the community formed a coalition, Nebraskans United.

United to Ensure a Fair Chance

These groups shared the common principle that all Nebraskans should have a fair chance to reach their full potential. The programs that would be eliminated by the proposed constitutional amendment are an integral part of ensuring that qualified and talented women and people of color have a place in our institutions of higher education, in all professions and at the bargaining table for state contracts.

As the coalition expanded its efforts it became clear that these are principles that garner broad support across Nebraska. Before long, the Lincoln and Omaha Chambers of Commerce came on board, as well as the University of Nebraska, Creighton University and many other educational and business and professional organizations. This kind of wide-ranging support reveals that ensuring a diverse and talented community, whether it be in the classroom or the workplace, is important to Nebraskans from a wide variety of perspectives.

The Fight for Opportunity Continues

- NCRI was successful in meeting the signature deadline and for the moment, it appears that the constitutional amendment will appear on the November, 2008, ballot. There will likely be legal challenges surrounding the initiative prior to the elections. At the end of the day, it is critical that we not only understand what this initiative will mean for our state but that we think carefully about the kind of community, classroom, and workplace we want for ourselves, our children and grandchildren. In particular, it is important to consider what this amendment would mean for diversity within the legal community.

A Commitment to a Diverse Legal Profession

- In 2003, the Nebraska Minority Justice Task Force, a joint initiative of the Nebraska Supreme Court and the Nebraska State Bar Association to examine issues of racial and ethnic fairness in the court system and legal profession, released its 18 month study. The study documented the drastic under representation of minorities in the legal profession and examined trends in law school admissions as well as recruitment, hiring, retention and advancement opportunities available in the pro-

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Minority Justice Committee Activities to Promote a Diverse Profession

Call to Action Initiative

In an effort to promote diversity in Nebraska’s legal profession, the Minority Justice Committee coordinated a Call to Action Initiative. Modeled after successful initiatives in other cities, the Call to Action Initiative encourages law firms and corporations to sign on to a basic statement of diversity principles and agree to participate in Nebraska State Bar Association programs in pursuit of these principles. In essence, the Call to Action Initiative creates a network of firms and corporations that can work collaboratively and innovatively to promote diversity in the legal profession. To date, fifty-seven firms and corporations have joined the initiative.

LSAT Prep Scholarship

The Minority Justice Committee recently established an LSAT Prep Scholarship Program for minority students with economic need. The program provides a scholarship for a Kaplan LSAT Prep Course and covers the costs of registering for the LSAT exam. The Scholarship Program was funded by the generous financial contributions of: Koley Jessen PC LLO (Platinum Level Sponsor); Baird Holm LLP, Berens & Tate PC LLO, and Husch Blackwell Sanders (Gold Level Sponsors); and Legal Aid of Nebraska and McGrath North Mullin & Kratz PC (Silver Level Sponsors). The first round of scholarship recipients are: Elizabeth Baxter, Elisabeth Dority, Jannette Taylor and Stacy Marie Henry.

Outreach to the Malone Center

The Minority Justice Committee is involved in outreach to youth. On June 24, 2008, representatives from the courts, probation and the legal profession met with a group of 10-14 year olds at the Clyde Malone Community Center to discuss careers in the justice system.

Diversity Summit

The fourth annual Legal Diversity Summit will be held on September 5, 2008 in Omaha at the Holiday Inn Convention Center. The Summit provides law students of color from the region with new education opportunities, contacts and interviews with Nebraska firms and organizations. The Summit also provides Nebraska’s legal employers with new ways of understanding the value of a diverse workforce and strategies and opportunities for recruiting and retaining attorneys of color. Register for the Summit at: www.nelegaldiversity.org

A Threat to a Diverse Legal Profession

Efforts to ban affirmative action pose a threat to a diverse legal profession. Given the fact that over 90% of attorneys in the state of Nebraska graduated from law school in Nebraska, the diversity of our legal profession is inextricably tied to the diversity of our law schools. Law schools in states with affirmative action bans have suffered in terms of minority enrollment. Minority admissions at the University Of Texas School Of Law dropped 50% following an
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affirmative action ban and minority admissions dropped 80% at UC Berkeley School of Law.3

Potential Minority Lawyers are Lost at Each Step

In addition to the immediate drop in law school admissions, bans to end affirmative action will also decrease the "pipeline" of potential law school applicants by reducing the diversity of institutions of higher education. The term pipeline refers to the natural progression of students through the schooling and application process necessary to be admitted to law school. Potential minority lawyers are lost at each step in the pipeline. For instance, young minority students do not consider the law. Thus they choose career tracks in high school and college that do not prepare them for law school. Some of those who are prepared do not take the LSAT. Those that take the LSAT may not choose to attend a Nebraska law school. Decreasing the pipeline of minority students for law school is particularly of concern in Nebraska, where the applicant pool is small to begin with. For example, in 2001, only 13 blacks who listed Nebraska as their home state took the LSAT.32 Any plan to diversify must affect the pipeline and begin in primary and secondary schools, and continue through undergraduate studies in order to increase the number of interested minority Nebraskans in the years prior to seriously pursuing law school admission.

Affirmative action bans in other states have effectively diminished state and community colleges' ability to attract a diverse student body, causing a critical blow to the pipeline. For example, following the affirmative action ban in California, the number of Black students admitted to UC, Berkeley dropped from 562 in the fall of 1997 to 191 in the fall of 1998. Hispanic admission numbers plunged as well, from 1,266 to 600.33

Conclusion

"Access to legal education (and thus the legal profession) must be inclusive of talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity, so that all members of our heterogeneous society may participate in the educational institutions that provide the training and education necessary to succeed in America."34 Our law schools' ability to recruit, admit, and graduate minority students directly affects the likelihood that Nebraska's legal community will be as reflective and inclusive of the growing diversity in the state as we believe it should be. Given the impact affirmative action bans have had in other states on access to law school, and higher education in general, the choice then seems straightforward: we must either zealously support affirmative action in principle and in practice, or we must dispense with the empty rhetoric of social justice as a core tenet of our personal and organizational philosophies. The Nebraska State Bar Association's Executive Council voted to oppose the concept of the petition language to end affirmative action and will continue to participate in and lead initiatives designed to have our profession reflect the rich diversity that is Nebraska.6

Endnotes

1 The issue of affirmative action is divisive. Opponents like (Ward) Connerly suggest it takes jobs from qualified white people, while proponents, such as civil rights groups, say the programs are necessary to promote ethnic diversity and eliminate inequalities. ("Connerly gearing up for wider crusade: Affirmative action for consider launching campaigns in 9 states," by Leslie Fulbright, San Francisco Chronicle Staff Writer, Thursday, December 14, 2006).

2 The coalition backing a statewide affirmative-action ban says a new survey shows most Nebraskans support eliminating race and gender preferences in hiring and admissions decisions. ("Survey: Voters support ending preferences," by Melissa Lee/ Lincoln Journal Star, Tuesday, Jun 24, 2008).

3 Lincoln, NE. - A prominent affirmative-action critic is targeting Nebraska as one of five states where he hopes to get voters to decide in November 2008 to end the use of racial, ethnic and gender preferences by public colleges and state and local agencies. ("Affirmative action critic trying to end policies in state", by Kevin Abourezk/Lincoln Journal Star, Saturday, Oct 13, 2007).

4 For example, Brown v. Board of Education and the other cases striking down segregation; the Equal Pay Act of 1963; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA); the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

5 “Even after passage of the civil rights laws beginning in the 1960s, however, the road to equal opportunity for minorities and women was difficult, and programs often very slow. These judicial and legislative victories were not enough to overcome long-entrenched discrimination…” Review of Federal Affirmative Action Programs, Report to the President, Washington, DC, 1995.

6 “…private and public institutions alike too often seemed impervious to the winds of change, remaining all-white or all-male long after court decisions or statutes formally ended discrimination. As a result, both the courts and Republican and Democratic administrations turned to race- and gender-conscious remedies as a way to end entrenched discrimination. These remedies were developed after periods of experimentation had shown that other means too often failed to correct the problems.” Review of Federal Affirmative Action Programs, Report to the President, Washington, DC, 1995.

7 Executive Order No. 10925 Establishing the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (March 6, 1961).


9 In an eloquent speech to the graduating class at Howard University on June 4, 1965, President Johnson framed the concept underlying affirmative action, asserting that civil rights laws alone are not enough to remedy discrimination.


11 Omaha - An anti-racism activist from Tennessee says Nebraskans should not be duped into supporting a ballot initiative that would ban affirmative action, thinking it will prevent minority applicants from getting jobs they're not qualified for. ("Activist says Nebraska still needs affirmative action," by Timothy Ross/The Associated Press, Thursday, May 01, 2008).

12 Three states - California, Michigan and Washington - already have passed such bans. And in Florida, former Republican Gov.
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Jeb Bush curtailed affirmative-action preferences in state government through a 1999 executive order and persuaded the governing board of the state’s universities to follow suit. (Lincoln Journal Star, Saturday, October 13, 2007, Lincoln, NE)

19 A state lawmaker has withdrawn a resolution that would have put a constitutional ban on affirmative action before Nebraska voters in November. (“Senator withdraws affirmative action measure.” By Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Monday, February 25, 2008).

18 Brief of Amici Curiae of Media Companies in Support of Respondents, Gratz v. Bollinger (2003) upholding the use of race in admissions decisions. Reiterating America’s commitment to affirmative action, the Court concluded that “effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our nation is essential if the dream of one Nation, indivisible, is to be realized.”

17 In June 2003, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision on affirmative action [Grutter v. Bollinger (2003) and Gratz v. Bollinger (2003)] upholding the use of race in admissions decisions. (Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Saturday, October 13, 2007, Lincoln, NE)

16 The University of Nebraska Board of Regents on Friday gave its unanimous disapproval to a proposed constitutional ban on affirmative action, following complaints regents hadn’t heard both sides when they first voted in January. NU is committed to diversity, President J.B. Milliken said. (“Regents re-do affirmative action vote,” by Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Friday, March 30, 2008).


14 Allied of the Missouri Civil Rights Initiative, an effort to end race- and gender-based affirmative action similar to the one being waged in Nebraska, failed to gather the petition signatures they needed to get the issue on that state’s ballot by the Sunday deadline. (“Affirmative action ban won’t be on Missouri ballots,” by Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Monday, May 21, 2007).

13 A state lawmaker has withdrawn a resolution that would have put a constitutional ban on affirmative action before Nebraska voters in November. (“Senator withdraws affirmative action measure.” By Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Monday, February 25, 2008).

12 The University of Nebraska Board of Regents issued a re-do on a resolution opposing a proposed constitutional ban on affirmative action, following complaints regents hadn’t heard both sides when they first voted in January. NU is committed to diversity, President J.B. Milliken said. (“Regents re-do affirmative action vote,” by Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Friday, March 30, 2008).

11 Nebraska Democrats Sunday declared their opposition to the initiative proposal to eliminate affirmative action programs. (“Democrats oppose initiative attacking affirmative action.” By Don Walton/ Lincoln Journal Star, Monday, June 23, 2008).

10 The University Of Nebraska Board Of Regents on Friday gave its unanimous disapproval to a proposed amendment to the state’s constitution that would ban affirmative action in public education and employment. (“Regents oppose affirmative-action ban,” by Melissa Lee/Lincoln Journal Star, Saturday, January 19, 2008).

9 The Nebraska Civil Rights Initiative has raised more than $181,000, mostly from the American Civil Rights Initiative’s Super Tuesday for Equal Rights Fund. New York businessman Paul Singer has given $50,000 to backers of the measure. (“Anti-Affirmative Action Ad Targets Ex-Obama Pastor,” by Anna Jo Bratton/Associated Press, Tuesday, June 3, 2008).

8 People involved in the NECRI: Professor Marc Schniederjans - Proponent; Ward Connerly-Mentor; Founder, American Civil Rights Coalition. (http://www.nebraskacri.org/about.html)

7 California Grad Schools, Science (277), 5326: 633-634.

6 “Petitioners Believe They’ve Gathered Enough Names,” by The Lincoln Journal Star, Thursday, March 6, 2008).

5 People involved in the NECRI: Professor Marc Schniederjans - Proponent; Ward Connerly-Mentor; Founder, American Civil Rights Coalition. (http://www.nebraskacri.org/about.html)


3 “Petitioners Believe They’ve Gathered Enough Names,” by The Lincoln Journal Star, Wednesday July 2, 2008).


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