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A New Vision of Affirmative Action and Faculty-Administrator Cooperation: Transforming Debates and Teaching about African-Americans, Race and the Law in Predominantly White Institutions

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A New Vision of Affirmative Action and Faculty-Administrator Cooperation: Transforming Debates and Teaching about African-Americans, Race and the Law in Predominantly White Institutions

Abstract

This session will present a new model of affirmative action as well as a model for how our campus conversations about affirmative action and the benefits of diversity can and should be connected to teaching undergraduate courses. The presenter will share his experiences as a professor partnering with administrators to bring debate about the (evident) merits of affirmative action into the curriculum of our institutions.

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Campus debates about affirmative action often go nowhere fast. Battle lines are drawn, public meetings are held and things seem to stay largely as they were before the debates and - oftentimes - the acrimony began. Many predominantly white institutions seem to remain just that, to the clear detriment of those institutions as well as to the potential detriment of students of color who might benefit from being part of that college or university.

This paper will achieve two goals:

First, it will present the ongoing results of one private, predominantly white institution where this difficult process of bringing diversity to a previously all-white campus is moving in a new direction. The plan, of the author's design and loosely based on models at a number of public universities, carefully targets high schools in neighborhoods in the adjacent urban area as well as in majority-minority cities and towns across the United States from which the university has generally not drawn well. Then, the admissions office contacts those high schools and tells them about a new diversity plan that our institution has developed called "Rewarding Success." This plan would grant presumptive (but not necessarily completely automatic) admission to the top two or three students at that high school. There is no question that these top students have succeeded; they managed to succeed under sometimes very difficult academic conditions. These students would be invited to campus and then, using a combination of merit and need-based aid (if necessary), the school would provide scholarships to these students.

Second, this paper will present a model of how faculty members and administrators can cooperate to transform the debate about affirmative action from public shouting matches into integral parts of courses across the curriculum.

There are generally two groups of people who object to affirmative action plans at

universities:

- people not of color who feel that they are being cheated out of something that they have "earned" based on "merit" (things like SAT scores and grades) by people of color who have been admitted based on factors other than simply standard conceptions of merit; and
- people of color who, once admitted, are uncomfortable because they know that those white people who feel cheated, feel the way they do about those people of color who have been admitted in part for diversity reasons.

The plan that I have developed tries to address both of those concerns. These students of color admitted would be able to say with pride that they were valedictorians or very nearly so at their high schools. That kind of achievement is a distinctive sign of merit and a statistically relevant indicator of success in a college setting. This may well lead to greater retention of students of color. Students not of color would know that these students adding to the diversity of their campuses were admitted based on measurable and clear merit and achievement, not potentially skewed measurements such as the S.A.T.s, which few people now think actually measures intellectual capacity or future success.

The author of this proposal has presented these ideas in the past at national and regional law and political science conferences, but those presentations have been focused on constitutional law issues and in front of specialized, faculty audiences. The author would now like to present these ideas to a far more diverse audience composed of administrators, professors and others interested in these vital matters of race and diversity.

Presenter

Akiba J. Covitz teaches and writes in the field of constitutional law, American government and politics and civil rights and liberties. A graduate of the Yale Law School, Prof. Covitz also holds a Ph.D. in constitutional history from the University of Pennsylvania. He has taught at Penn and Yale, receiving numerous teaching awards, including the Dean's Award for Distinguished Teaching and is now a professor and the pre-law advisor at the University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia. He is working with administrators at the University of Richmond to craft a reconceived and more activist affirmative action policy for a school that is progressing in many ways, but still lags behind similarly situated schools in terms of diversity.