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Affirmative Action: Diverse Goals, Diverse Policies

Eric Wampler

Affirmative Action is a name that applies to a diverse range of procedures and activities designed to advance race and gender equality in society. And while the four authors in this publication focus on Affirmative Action in universities, Affirmative Action also targets increased equality in government contract, in jobs, in housing opportunities and in many other facets of life.

Although both seek equality, Affirmative Action is different from federal and state civil rights laws prohibiting discrimination, because Affirmative Action involves an active role of the institution to help bring in under represented minorities or women, whereas anti-discrimination laws play the passive role of keeping institutions from shutting the door on them. In any case, both in the public and private sector, Affirmative Action policies are largely voluntary. Whether or not Affirmative Action policies actually work, or are themselves unfair, is controversial.

What are the goals of Affirmative Action?

There are several possible goals that Affirmative Action policies attempt to realize. These goals include the following:

1) fighting discrimination, 2) compensating for past injuries, 3) striving for a fair distribution of opportunities and responsibilities, 4) seeking social well-being, and 5) promoting diversity.¹

Some of these goals may largely overlap, and not all need even be present. Which goals are behind any policy depends only on the institution implementing it.

What are the specific policies of Affirmative Action?

To achieve whichever goals the institution is pursuing, Affirmative Action policies vary widely in university admission procedures, but a range of strengths can be assessed from the weakest--or, some would argue, the least intrusive--to the strongest.

1) The weakest form of Affirmative Action involves outreach programs, notifying under represented groups of the availability of the university's education without actually employing preferential treatment in admission.

2) Providing special educational opportunities for youths in under represented

groups may be seen as next in strength.

3) Next are programs that offer financial aid to accepted applicants of under represented gender or racial groups.

4) Programs in the next stronger kind of policy would, if faced with admitting only one of two students, take the applicant from an under represented gender or racial group over the non-under represented applicant only if both applicants are of equal qualification to do the university course work and graduate in a reasonable amount of time.

5) Next in strength are programs that consider and applicant's membership to an under represented group along with other characteristics for qualification. So, if the university can only admit of two applicants both qualified to graduate from the university in a reasonable amount of time, and one is a white and the other is a minority applicant who is slightly less qualified than the white applicant, the minority applicant would get the offer of admission over the white applicant.

To give an idea of how much weight is given membership in a minority group or gender, it is helpful to consult the results of a 1992 survey of undergraduate admission policies of 2,000 two-year and four-year institutions.² On a

scale of '1' being 'not considered' and '5' being 'the single most important factor', high school GPA scored 4.0 for public schools and 4.0 for private. Admission test scores--3.6 and 3.4; essays--1.7 and 2.6; state of residence--1.8 and 1.2; high school course work--2.9 and 1.8; gender--1.2 and 1.4. The survey lists the weighted factors of 16 different consideration in all, although most schools certainly use only a fraction of these considerations.

6) A quota system is the strongest form of Affirmative Action, in which the university takes a certain number of applicants of the under represented group no matter what the relation is in qualification to the white or male applicants. Quota systems have been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, but universities have been allowed to continue to use non-quota race or gender considerations in their admissions policies as long as doing so serves a compelling state interest and is a necessary means of achieving that interest.³

The controversy of Affirmative Action centers on whether some of these specific policies are acceptable, or whether any kind of policy by the university to actively promote greater representation by minorities or women will be unjust.

NOTES

1. Lopez, Gerald P. et al. "An Affirmative Action Manual" World-Wide Web. Available at: <<http://www.law.ucla.edu/classes/archive/civaa/>> Section 2.3
2. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Challenges in College Admissions: A Report of a Survey of Undergraduate Admissions Policies, Practices and Procedures 1995. As appears in "Getting Into College" CQ Researcher Feb. 23, 1996: 169-192. p. 172.
3. Zembaty, Jane S., Chapter 7. "Affirmative Action" Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy. 5th ed. Eds. Thomas A Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997. 298-304. P. 301.