

White Students' Perceptions of Affirmative Action in Graduate Admission:

Directions for Programming and College Personnel Development



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Abstract

While the role and importance of affirmative action continues to be debated, researchers have found that individuals evaluate affirmative action policies differently. However, few studies have examined how prospective graduate students view affirmative action policies in graduate school admission. This study attempts to uncover prospective graduate students' perceptions and feelings toward both affirmative action and individuals thought to benefit from affirmative action policies. Participants were interviewed prior to and after acceptance into graduate programs. The theoretical concept of illusory correlation was utilized to analyze participants' verbal transcripts. Finally, we present a conceptual framework to assist college administrators, faculty, and student personnel in developing programs to enhance individual perceptions of affirmative action programming and related societal issues.

Education is a highly valued resource in contemporary American society that, unfortunately, is not readily accessible to all members of minority groups. National reports indicated that compared to whites, students of color (with the exception of Asian/Pacific Islanders in some cases) are less likely to enroll in college immediately following high school, and are more likely to drop out of high school as well as college (National Center for Educational Statistics 1999; U.S. Department of Education 1999ab). Additionally, compared to non-disabled people, persons with disabilities have considerably limited educational opportunities and as a result, few earn college degrees compared to the general population (Atkinson and Hackett 1998). Although women account for a greater percentage of the total U.S. population, fewer women received an advanced degree in 1993 compared to men during the same year (National Center for Educational Statistics 2001). Overall, these statistics elucidate the educational gap that exists between majority and minority groups in American colleges.

Recent national statistics indicate a significant disparity in the health of ethnic minority groups as compared to whites, suggesting that ethnic minorities will be the largest growing consumer population of social and health services in the next decade (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Extremely high unemployment and poverty rates among individuals with disabilities also suggest that this group will utilize increasing human service resources (Atkinson and Hackett 1998; Neukrug 2000). The underrepresentation of diverse groups in educational and social institutions impacts our ability to provide appropriate delivery of services to an increasingly diverse society, which in turn taxes limited available societal resources. Consistent with national statistics, scholars maintain that ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the social science disciplines, particularly psychology (Amirkahn et al. 1995; Rabasca 2000). Taken together, these observations warrant increased attention to developing adequately informed and trained personnel to meet those needs.

Table I

Percentage of Educational Statistics by Ethnic Group	Hispanics	African Americans	White Non-Hispanics	Asian/Pacific Islanders	American Indian/Alaskan Native
Status dropout rates of 16-24 year olds in 1999 ^c	28.6	12.6	7.3	4.3	Data Unavailable
H.S. graduates who enrolled in college immediately after H.S. in 1999 ^c	42.3	58.9	66.3	Data Unavailable	Data Unavailable
College Attrition Rates in 1994 ^a	37	37	27	26	Data Unavailable
Bachelors Degrees Conferred in 1998 ^c	5.5	8.3	79.5	6	0.7
Masters Degree Conferred in 1998 ^c	3.2	5.4	83.2	7.7	0.5

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics 1999^a, 2000^b, and 2001^c

To address these disparities, many colleges and universities implemented affirmative action programs. Affirmative action has developed into a combination of policy and practice serving to assist in the advancement of equal opportunity, as well as striving to overcome the debilitating effects of discrimination against members of minority groups. Wittig (1996) noted that although affirmative action began as a mechanism designed especially to help African Americans overcome ethnic discrimination in higher education and various job fields, it has evolved into a complex support system. She also stressed that affirmative action policies strive to promote the development of minority group representation, and when put into practice, the policies teach individuals to make decisions and selections in all areas with a continued consciousness of diversity.

Recently, affirmative action opponents have championed efforts to dismantle the programs throughout the country. These efforts appear to be a response to societal disillusionment with the practice of affirmative action, due to continued public attention to inappropriate or incorrect applications of affirmative action. Such practices have led to superficial and distorted understandings of the meaning and purpose of affirmative action, which may in turn encourage institutions to deviate from affirmative action's original goals, further damaging public perceptions of this policy. Accordingly, we intend to examine perceptions of affirmative action policies in relation to continued underrepresentation of minority groups in higher education. Our purpose is not to debate the merits of affirmative action in theory, but to discuss the potential impact of individuals' perceptions of affirmative action policies.

Beeman, Chowdhry, and Todd (2000) highlighted the difficulties of examining affirmative action as a policy, given the public's inadequate understanding of its precise definition and practice. They note that affirmative action policy has been defined by a collection of executive orders, court cases, and legal mandates that have been continually modified and distorted in response to public pressure and changing political opinions. Therefore, the fact that considerable confusion exists regarding the nature and practice of affirmative action is not surprising. Additionally, Beeman and colleagues explain the numerous "myths" that exist regarding the policy and practice of affirmative action, which often include perceptions of affirmative action as a "quota" system, a policy that promotes "reverse discrimination," and a program that facilitates utilization of "unqualified" minorities and reduction in organizational efficiency. Other myths have received similar attention, such as the claim that discrimination and prejudice no longer exist, hence affirmative action-related programming is no longer necessary. For the purposes of this paper, the authors argue that affirmative action policy and practice do not involve these ideas, and maintain that some definitional disparity of affirmative action exists depending on the nature and philosophy of the governing institution.



Significance of Study

Overall, perceptions of affirmative action policies in college admission and attitudes toward target affirmative action groups warrant examination because of their potential contribution to the educational disparity between majority and underrepresented groups in U.S. colleges. For years, state and college officials across America have implemented affirmative action programs in attempts to rectify the disproportionate representation of women, individuals with disabilities, and people from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds (e.g., blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans) in these settings. This is an important societal endeavor and as noted by Dungy (1996):

Unless our students have experiences with difference in a positive environment such as a campus community open to debate and dialogue, they will be poised to enter the workforce unprepared to meet the requirements of the marketplace. (57)

Similarly, businesses and community organizations are increasingly stressing the importance of developing a well-qualified and diverse labor force to remain economically competitive within the current commercial climate, and to achieve growth in the international marketplace (Gillie and Hossler 1991). As Freed (1990) notes, "colleges will risk their legitimacy as social institutions if they cannot provide enough educated people for the labor pool" (19).

The ramifications of drawing from a labor pool that is under-informed and poorly prepared to contend with a multicultural climate are significant to many establishments within American society. These range from businesses attempting to establish profitable consumer groups to political and social organizations attempting to understand and appropriately respond to the needs of various constituencies. In addition, several studies suggest that lack of exposure to diversity and failure to engage in a variety of experiences reduces the attainment and development of critical thinking skills (Pascarella et al. 2001; Terenzini et al. 1996). Accordingly, concerned establishments have encouraged increased examination of factors that may inhibit the development of appropriate minority representation in America's vital institutions.

Recent legislative decisions to abolish affirmative action policies (e.g., California Civil Rights Initiative, *Hopwood v. State of Texas*) and increasingly heated controversies surrounding this issue have stimulated research efforts on attitudes regarding affirmative action policy and practice.

For instance, research suggests that factors such as socioeconomic status, self-interest, political ideology, and attitudes about ethnic diversity contributed to variations in perceptions of affirmative action across different ethnic groups (Sax and Arredondo 1999). Other investigations on attitudes regarding affirmative action revealed pervasive misunderstandings regarding many aspects of affirmative action. These misunderstandings include the definition of affirmative action (Kravitz et al. 2000), distinctions in perceptions according to gender and level of education (Costantini and King 1985; Kravitz and Platania 1993), and terminology used to describe affirmative action and related programming (Fine 1992). These reports not only underscore the exceeding complexity of this issue, but also suggest that perceptions of affirmative action policies (vs. the policies themselves) may play a role in the acceptance, development, and implementation of these programs.

Today, research on students' perceptions and attitudes toward affirmative action in college admission remains limited. It is feasible for researchers, program developers in educational and business institutions, policy analysts, and college administrators to utilize theoretical conceptualizations about these perceptions and attitudes in order to gain a better understanding of affirmative action related issues. Such research may also assist these individuals in transforming affirmative action goals into comprehensive and effective programs amid constant political, social, and financial pressures. As an introductory exploration of this issue, we draw on case studies with prospective graduate students and relevant literature to serve as the basis for our discussion of improving perceptions of affirmative action programs within higher education. This paper has two primary objectives. The first objective is to explore prospective graduate students' beliefs and attitudes toward affirmative action in graduate admission. Based on prior research on people's relatively inaccurate understanding of affirmative action programs, we expected students to report misperceptions about the policy and practice of affirmative action in graduate school admission. We will apply illusory correlation theory to explain relevant issues surrounding their misperceptions. The second objective is to present the potential ramifications of our findings and provide a conceptual framework to assist college administrators, faculty, and student personnel in developing programs to enhance individual perceptions of affirmative action and related societal issues. We believe the results and recommendations obtained from this study will be applicable to other fields and educational levels.

The Study

The current investigation was designed to explore white students' perceptions of affirmative action in graduate school admission and their attitudes toward graduate students of color. Undergraduate students applying to graduate programs in psychology were recruited for this investigation. Seven self-identified, white undergraduate psychology students (average age = 22; five females) from a mid-sized, midwestern public university participated by completing in-depth, face-to-face interviews before and after applying to graduate programs (for additional queries about methodology, please contact the first author).

Findings

False Impressions about Affirmative Action: Illusory Correlation Theory

Careful review of the verbal transcripts obtained from the current case reports revealed that some participants held a variety of false impressions about affirmative action when asked what they knew or had heard about the policy with respect to graduate admission. All study participants defined affirmative action largely in terms of ethnicity, with a few students mentioning gender. Attributions about affirmative action ranged from benign associations like "funding" opportunities to more negative connotations such as "preferences," "quotas," "reserved slots," and "percentages." For example, one participant associated affirmative action in graduate admission with funding opportunities:

I was encouraged by one person, strongly encouraged that is, to put down that I am Hispanic instead of white because she [academic personnel] told me that there is so much money out there for minority applicants....Well, I know that in the context of graduate admission...I think of it [affirmative action] more in terms of money.

Some participants also reported that under affirmative action policies, underrepresented students are likely to receive preferential treatment on the basis of ethnic group membership, reducing the study participants' own graduate school admission chances. Some participants reported:

I think affirmative action might have affected it [admission chances] just because...I am not an ethnic minority so schools in Arizona and Denver may get a lot of ethnic minority applicants...that could be a factor because it is wanted by programs so they can increase their overall diversity and look good on paper.

It probably would have hurt my chances...I am a white female so that is something that probably would have hurt my chances of getting in.

These participants' responses can be explained using illusory correlation theory, which attempts to describe and explain the finding that individuals develop a false impression when they believe that two variables are correlated under certain circumstances (Myers 1993; see also Gilovich 1991; Hamilton and Gifford 1976). Because people are sensitive to the occurrence of distinctive events, the co-occurrence of two events often becomes even more observable than when two such events do not take place together (Myers 1993). Unfortunately today, negative impressions (e.g., "quotas," "preferences") about affirmative action are rampant throughout American college campuses, and as evident in our data, some respondents espoused inaccurate impressions about affirmative action policies in graduate admission. Hence, these findings are consistent with the concept of illusory correlation theory, emphasizing the notion that people do not have a clear understanding of affirmative action policy or practice (Blanchard and Crosby 1989; Kravitz and Platania 1993; Traux et al. 1998).

A second example of illusory correlation emerged when some respondents associated poor graduate school performance in minority students with affirmative action policies. For instance, when asked to respond to the hypothetical situation that one of their fellow ethnic minority colleagues was not performing up to the academic standards of graduate level work, one participant replied:

...if I noticed that they [minority students] were doing sloppy work...maybe I would be more likely to look at somebody who was black than somebody who was white...I would wonder how they got into the program considering they were supposed to take the top applicants...I think that my perception would be that obviously the university really wanted minority students and that maybe, they took somebody who was less qualified...the white student probably didn't get in because of their minority status....

These findings reveal that, in general, poor academic performance leads to doubts about intellectual ability. Specifically, some of our respondents reported that they would be likely to associate poor performance in minority students with affirmative action policies, and to presume that affirmative action policies allow under-qualified minority students to gain admission into graduate school. Students' false impressions, perhaps due to lack of education about the policy and practice of affirmative action, can potentially make target beneficiaries of this program susceptible to academic doubts and inferiority.

Positive Attitudes toward Affirmative Action: The Potential Role of Early Socialization Factors

Not all of the participants in our study viewed the policy and practice of affirmative action in graduate admission negatively. Despite their claims of repeated exposure to negative comments made by other students about affirmative action, several respondents did not equate affirmative action in graduate admission with lowered qualifications. Instead, these participants viewed affirmative action as a way of compensating for circumstantial disadvantages:

I would say it [affirmative action] is definitely a good thing.... It provide[s] advantages in order to compensate for any kind of disadvantages that might have been experienced growing up by minorities....the great thing about it would be that it sort of highlights abilities that are hidden, or potentially hidden...

These participants did not endorse the idea that affirmative action adversely affected their admission chances nor did they espouse any impressions that affirmative action allows under-qualified minorities to gain admission into graduate school. These respondents viewed both affirmative action and cultural diversity positively and when asked what factors influenced their current perceptions about affirmative action admission policies in higher education, these respondents mentioned the positive influences of parents, family, and community values most often.

These respondents also highlighted the need to more effectively educate people about affirmative action issues. For instance, one respondent noted:

I think there should be much more information given at an early age for children...more education and general public knowledge, and I also think it should be used in a positive light. I think a lot of people think of the quotas... people don't understand what the quota thing is, and totally misconceive it...[education] needs to be community wide. If you target university students, that is great, you get a good percentage of the population...but there is a large percentage of the population that don't go to college...[education] needs to start much earlier than in a college-based environment.

Summary of Findings

Based on our critical review of the data, we found that several respondents had misperceptions about the practice of affirmative action in graduate admission. These respondents also reported that they thought affirmative action might have adversely affected their chances for admission into graduate school(s). Moreover, they alluded to the notion that affirmative action policies seemed to allow under-qualified minority students to gain entry into graduate school. It is interesting to note that a majority of the students limited their observations and concerns to ethnic minorities rather than women and people with disabilities, who are also statistically underrepresented at colleges and universities. Those respondents who appeared to describe a more accurate understanding of affirmative action (although still incomplete) highlighted the importance and benefits of related programming. Interestingly, these respondents also indicated that exposure to diversity and race-related issues early in life significantly contributed to the development of their current perspectives about affirmative action.

There were several findings that warrant further exploration and programmatic considerations. Based on our data, some respondents presumed that affirmative action policies are limited to specific ethnic groups, and thereby allow under-qualified target beneficiaries to gain admission into graduate school. Our findings support the contention that individuals continue to have misperceptions about affirmative action policies, including the perception that affirmative action gives alleged target beneficiaries preferential treatment on the basis of their group membership with little or no regard to merit or qualifications (Blanchard and Crosby 1989). College officials, faculty, and student personnel who fail to properly inform and educate students about affirmative action policies are contributing to the problem surrounding students' misunderstandings about affirmative action. Therefore, it is important that educational outreach attempts be made to facilitate better understanding among students and college staff of the policy and practice of affirmative action in college admission.

Our findings also revealed that exposure to diverse cultures and race-related issues early in life may have contributed to the development of respondents' current perspectives of affirmative action. It is possible that early socialization factors and inter-group contact play an important role in facilitating positive attitudes toward ethno-cultural groups, including more accurate and positive perceptions about affirmative action. Longitudinal studies are needed to

examine the long-term effects of early life inter-group contact with diverse individuals, and the role of positive parental socialization on diversity-related issues, such as affirmative action. Based on our preliminary findings, family and community-based early intervention educational programs that address issues of diversity could also prove useful in fostering enduring positive attitudes toward minority groups and social justice issues (e.g., affirmative action).

The findings of this study are limited to perceptions of affirmative action as an admission policy, and do not address perceptions of affirmative action as they pertain to other facets of affirmative action policy and programming. Fried et al. (2001) noted the importance of examining attitudes toward specific versions of affirmative action in addition to affirmative action programming in general, particularly as ideas of the necessity of affirmative action programming shift from rectifying past discrimination and unequal representation to promoting diversity and improving organizational effectiveness. Future investigations of affirmative action perceptions could include large-scale studies that incorporate additional socio-cultural variables such as SES, educational ability, individual resources and support, and family and peer socialization influences on individuals' perceptions of affirmative action programs.

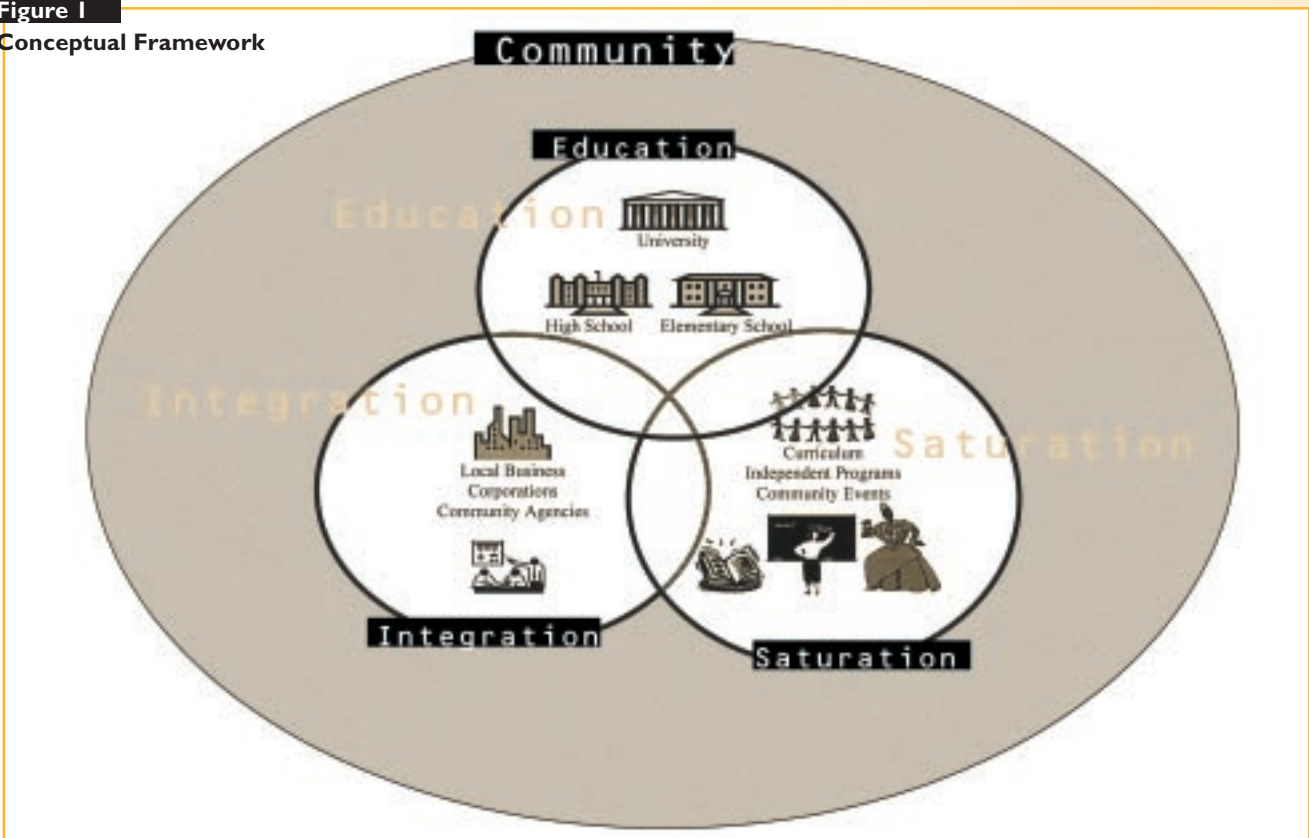
Programming Recommendations in Higher Education

Based on the current findings and prior research, it appears that misperceptions continue to surround the policy and practice of affirmative action in admission in higher education (Sax and Arredondo 1999). Undoubtedly, negative perceptions of affirmative action policy are simply one of many obstacles that college officials, student personnel, and educators face in improving educational attainment opportunities for

underrepresented groups. As previously mentioned, the development of false perceptions may be related to a number of other issues that plague affirmative action efforts. These include, but are not limited to, lack of knowledge about and exposure to diverse ethno-cultural groups, limited knowledge base about the policy and practice of affirmative action, isolation of programmatic efforts and diverse students, and competition for college and university resources. Institutions and educational personnel have likely encountered these obstacles in implementing their existing affirmative action programs. Expanding the overall institutional goals and improving perceptions of affirmative action may further address these problem areas, while improving overall program effectiveness. Therefore, it seems reasonable to work within existing structures and programs to improve perceptions of affirmative action policies in admission and retention, rather than invent a new system that would likely fragment and reduce the effectiveness of affirmative action in higher education and other non-education based programs (e.g., employment).

Accordingly, we propose the following conceptual framework, in which attempts to improve perceptions of affirmative action policies in admission and retention are not only dependent on other aspects of general affirmative action programming, but in turn are expected to augment the effectiveness of affirmative action programs. This framework consists of three integral components: (1) *Education*, which focuses on acquisition and dissemination of accurate information to all potential agents of change; (2) *Integration*, which entails eliciting the cooperation of community businesses, agencies, and programs; and (3) *Saturation*, which utilizes the mechanisms of Education and Integration to establish curriculum designed to impart applicable skills and information to individuals at all levels. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Education

Researchers have noted several public misperceptions surrounding the policy and practice of affirmative action in admission and hiring (e.g., Beeman, Chowdhry, and Todd 2000; Kravitz et al. 2000). Studies further indicate that efforts to educate students, college administrators, and individuals in employment fields on affirmative action issues are lacking, as these efforts are frequently based on materials that are inaccurate, incomplete, and provide little critical examination of the benefits and drawbacks of affirmative action issues (Beeman, Chowdhry, and Todd 2000). Most importantly, research on the effectiveness of affirmative action programming has revealed that negative misperceptions of affirmative action have deleterious effects on organizational functioning and the intended beneficiaries of related programming (Heilman et al. 1997).

Researchers have suggested that disagreements about affirmative action programming can be avoided by eliminating misperceptions about affirmative action (Kravitz and Platania 1993). Accordingly, there is a need to create broad-based initiatives designed to disseminate knowledge and information at all levels of educational institutions. This includes attempts to target not only students, but also college officials, administrators, faculty, and staff. An inclusive educational outreach measure of this kind can aid in the development, evaluation, and enhancement of affirmative action programs in a college or university. Well-informed staff and administrators who are involved with the affirmative action program at their institution will be able to offer more sound input and advice on ways to improve the institution's existing affirmative action program. Furthermore, enhanced knowledge and information can serve as a catalyst for college staff and officials to find more creative and practical ways to integrate innovative ideas for affirmative action education into the institution's existing infrastructure. Frazer and Wiersma (2001) note that many organizations have attempted to improve employee effectiveness in a variety of areas, including equal treatment of ethnic minorities. Such practice is thought to contribute to the development of positive perceptions of affirmative action, and corresponding improvements in the effectiveness of equal opportunity programming (Kravitz et al. 2000).

Clearly, inclusive educational outreach initiatives within an institution of higher education have potential benefits, but require considerable time and resources. University personnel have multiple professional obligations (e.g., committee responsibilities, tenure-promotions) that may impact their level of involvement in these educational outreach objectives. However, education should provide every member of the institution with an accurate knowledge base about the policy and practice of affirmative action. Education can then serve as a catalyst for positive change in the university climate in a number of ways. These include, but are not limited to, in-



creased awareness and open communication about affirmative action, effective diversity recruitment and retention programs, and positive climates on college campuses. As evident in prior research, nondiscriminatory environments have been shown to influence the development of college students' openness to diversity during the course of their college years (Whitt et al. 2001). Conceivably, once members of the institutional structure are knowledgeable about affirmative action, they may become more meaningfully involved in the development of the institution's goals and commitment to diversity. Ultimately, the authors believe that education can help facilitate more effective application and attainment of these goals.

Integration

Unfortunately, simply providing more accurate information to a wider audience is not enough to improve perceptions of affirmative action policies. Several studies have noted that in addition to information, other factors such as early exposure to diverse cultures, beliefs regarding the targeted populations, experience of discrimination, and political ideology influence perceptions of affirmative action (Kravitz et al. 2000; Fried et al. 2001). Accordingly, we suggest that providing individuals with accurate applications of affirmative action policy and programming is essential in developing positive utilization of affirmative action. This, as well as emphasizing individual involvement and the benefits of affirmative action programming in a variety of areas and circumstances (vs. only hiring or admission) is ultimately the means by which such programs will be correctly understood and applied. This involves incorporating a myriad of individuals, businesses, and other assets in the community into higher education based affirmative action programming to realize mutual goals. In this paper, we refer to this concept as integration.

Currently, many higher education institutions utilize what may sometimes be referred to as "special group" retention efforts as the means by which they implement their affirmative action programs, and recruit or retain such student and faculty groups to their institutions. However, "package programs" such as these ignore individual differences within ethnic groups (Wesley and Southerland 1994), limit representative exposure of targeted beneficiaries (particularly when institutions narrowly define affirmative action only in terms of ethnicity), and tax the limited resources colleges and universities have to devote to affirmative action programs. Designing and implementing affirmative action programs that assume every individual within a particular group (i.e., ethnicity, gender,

disability, etc.) has the same needs and interests ultimately limits the quality, impact, and reach of those programs, and reduces the chances of continued funding to maintain the program appropriately in future years. We are not suggesting that it is necessary to “reinvent the wheel” by developing a multitude of individual programs, but instead to work within existing institutional structures to improve perceptions of affirmative action in theory, and ultimately improve the effectiveness of affirmative action programs in practice.

Many higher learning institutions overlook available community resources that can provide financial and structural support, and more pervasive opportunities to a greater number of individuals. Most university programs could involve other educational institutions (e.g., elementary and high schools, community colleges, etc.), local businesses, large corporations, and community programs in their efforts, which would benefit all participants. For example, such collaborations may help relieve some of the financial burden for higher education, while offering recruitment opportunities, programming, and research information to corporations and businesses. Therefore, institutions that promote positive perceptions of affirmative action programming as one of their goals can benefit from integration as a means of improving the range and depth of information offered to the larger community. Such efforts can also increase affirmative action programming exposure by incorporating relevant aspects of the community into the program.

Saturation

Finally, we suggest that college administrators and student personnel interested in improving perceptions of affirmative action and the ultimate effectiveness of their programs “saturate” their audience with appropriate information such as accurate recruitment and retention techniques unique to their institutional goals. The concept of saturation involves the development of core curriculum on the philosophy of affirmative action and its goals by utilizing the aspects of education and integration described in previous sections of this paper. Saturation techniques are necessary to reduce the isolation of minority groups and related programs (such as affirmative action). Typically, education about issues pertaining to diversity and minority groups are presented as an isolated lecture, class, or conference that encourages consideration of these issues as “special” or “unique” from the “dominant” culture. The effect has been a conceptual segregation of these issues and related programs that encourage focus only on the needs

of one’s own group, and a fraction of valuable community resources to advance a multitude of individual goals or “special group” needs. This is not to say that focused educational programs are not valuable, but to note that their impact is minimal and divisive when they are the sole means of presenting information on affirmative action and minority groups.

Societal perceptions that these programs and admission policies only benefit minority groups contribute to a vicious cycle of poor communication, separation, and ultimate rejection of deliberate efforts to increase opportunities for and representation of diverse populations. Accordingly, efforts to counteract these perceptions should include offsetting their effects (e.g., segregation, minimization, etc). Repeated and widespread presentation of information pertaining to affirmative action goals will not only reduce misinformation about these issues, but also encourage the notion that racial inequality and counteractive measures (such as affirmative action) are matters that impact society as a whole, versus one or two isolated groups.

A key aspect of saturation involves the use of existing personnel, data, and programmatic structure to achieve widespread and accurate understanding of affirmative action and the problems that necessitated its development. In this sense, saturation is similar to integration. However, integration occurs at a macro-level, focusing on recruitment and collaboration of institutions and agencies as a whole in the advancement of affirmative action concepts and goals. Saturation is concerned with the day-to-day interaction of individuals, and so involves the dissemination of accurate information and the development of relevant skills at all levels of each program, organization, and educational body within the community. For example, many elementary and high schools employ curricula designed to assist students in developing career goals, and facilitating steps necessary to achieve those goals (e.g., career days, assistance with college applications, information of educational and financial resources necessary, etc.). In addition to simply providing this information to students, educational institutions encourage knowledge development, in which each successive presentation of information builds upon and augments previous presentations of materials. In contrast, diversity issues are typically presented in a discrete and finite fashion. Accordingly, we encourage educators to incorporate discussions of affirmative action and its various applications across educational opportunities and levels. This might include the repeated integration of affirmative action policies and/or diversity issues into everyday curriculum where appropriate (e.g., social studies, language/cultural classes, human sciences, etc.) at each educational level (elementary through high school and college). Educators and college student personnel are further encouraged to integrate these issues into more interactive learning experiences, such as job fairs or field trips to community organizations. These experiences should focus on interaction with community professionals and opportunities to learn about the functions of diversity programs within various community organizations, and how those programs benefit each organization. Such techniques are expected to provide individuals at various levels with increasingly complex and specialized skills for applying accurate knowledge relevant to affirmative action and diversity issues.



Summary and Conclusion

Taken together, the components of education, integration, and saturation can potentially yield positive outcomes that will not only enhance social perceptions of affirmative action, but also serve as a catalyst to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds to work more efficiently together, and bolster community and individual resources to achieve societal goals. We believe that this tri-system approach can serve as a comprehensive way of organizing and conceptualizing methods for college administrators, faculty, and student personnel to address complex challenges surrounding student admission and retention, positive race relations, and the adequate preparation of individuals to meet the demands of our increasingly diversifying society.

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