

Affirmative action: if it goes, how can US universities ensure diversity?

Can effective outreach programmes help institutions to reach the hard-to-reach? asks Chris Parr

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By [Chris Parr](#)



Some issues are perfect for debating. There are valid points on each side of the argument, the subject matter is of huge importance and there are passionate advocates in both corners.

Affirmative action in university admissions is one of those issues. Should universities be allowed to consider race and ethnicity when allocating places to students? Or is that unfair? Not meritocratic?

It's a subject I've written about a couple of times. First, [back in January 2013](#) as US higher education awaited a Supreme Court verdict on *Fisher v. the University of Texas at Austin* – a landmark case that could have spelled the end for affirmative action. It didn't – the verdict, which many called a “fudge”, failed to rule either way, instead [referring the case back to a lower court](#).

Fast forward to today, and the Supreme Court is [back on the case](#). *Fisher v UT* is still at the centre of ongoing discussions, and the judges are having their say once again. You can read what they had to say last week [here](#) (it could be months before a verdict is reached).

What interests me is how universities might look to ensure diversity on campus if affirmative action is deemed unacceptable. It is something I looked at in [a short analysis piece for Times Higher Education](#) a couple of years ago.

Joseph Hotz, professor of economics at Duke University, co-authored a paper that compared undergraduate graduation rates for Hispanics, blacks and Native Americans in California before and after the state prohibited the use of affirmative action in public education admissions in 1996.

It makes for interesting reading. While graduation rates among these minorities did increase after affirmative action was banned, overall enrolment rates in many colleges fell. A larger proportion of a smaller number of minorities were graduating.

The 2006 freshman year at the University of California, Los Angeles, comprised little over 2 per cent African American students, for example.

California tried a number of approaches to maintain campus diversity, Hotz told me. “They set up counselling programmes for getting students better information about what [college is] like, and emphasising the importance of getting through the first year. It's a different world, and a shock to the system – especially for minorities, who often haven't been in this situation before.”

When last we spoke, it was still too early to evaluate how effective these programmes have been.

However, another scholar I spoke to – Richard Cherwitz – is encouraged by the potential for alternative outreach programmes (and as a professor in the departments of communication studies and rhetoric and writing at UT Austin, he is well placed to comment).

“My personal opinion is that eventually we will see the end to affirmative action,” he told me when I was putting the article together.

“Even most advocates of it recognise that. It should be used as a mechanism until it is no longer needed, but people will continue to debate when that point might be.”

Cherwitz founded, and is now director of, the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium at the university. Known as IE, the initiative comprises a diverse range of programmes that encourage students of all ages to think about the type of education that would be right for them.

The It Could Be U project, for example, offered intensive mentoring and “college readiness services” to secondary school pupils throughout Austin.

He realised early on that IE was reaching students from communities traditionally under-represented at universities – including those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

“After around 4,000 students had gone through our courses, we noticed that the demographics were interesting. At that point, about 9 per cent of University of Texas graduate students were under-represented minorities, compared to 25 per cent of IE participants,” he says.

However, despite the successes, Cherwitz was wary of whether abolishing affirmative action in university admissions is the right thing to do.

“I don’t know that IE could replace affirmative action, but its philosophy gives us hope for expanding the number of under-represented, first-generation, economically disadvantaged students who go to college,” he told me.

“Whether we’re dealing with high school kids, middle school kids, graduates or undergraduates, by helping them to understand how to own and be accountable for their passion we do a lot of good things. One of those things is to increase diversity.”

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