

Should Affirmative Action policies be eliminated?

Affirmative action is an outcome of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, intended to provide equal opportunities for members of minority groups and women in education and employment. In 1961, President Kennedy was the first to use the term "affirmative action" in an Executive Order that directed government 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." This policy was not fully adopted until the 1970s.

Affirmative action policies are those in which an institution or organization actively engages in efforts to improve opportunities for historically excluded groups in American society. Affirmative action policies often focus on employment and education. In institutions of higher education, affirmative action refers to admission policies that provide equal access to education for those groups that have been historically excluded or underrepresented, such as women and minorities. Controversy surrounding the constitutionality of affirmative action programs has made the topic one of heated debate.

One notable example is a case argued a few years back in the Supreme Court concerning admissions to the University of Michigan. The school had a policy of rating potential applicants on a point system. Being a minority student earned you more than twice as many points as achieving a perfect SAT score. Three white students sued citing this as race-based discrimination. School officials said that diversity is desirable and affirmative action is the only way to achieve true diversity. Several other cases involving affirmative action have followed similar arguments. The two sides of this argument are outlined below.

Yes: Eliminate Affirmative Action

1. Affirmative action leads to reverse discrimination. Affirmative action is designed to end discrimination and unfair treatment of employees/students based on color, but it in effect does the opposite. Whites who work harder and/or are more qualified can be passed over strictly because they are white. Contrary to many stereotypes, many minorities fall into the middle or upper class, and many whites live in poverty. Unfortunately, the way things are set up now, a poverty-stricken white student who uses discipline and hard work to become the best he can be can be passed over by a rich minority student who doesn't put in much effort at all.

2. Affirmative action lowers standards of accountability needed to push students or employees to perform better. If a minority student can get into Harvard with a 3.2 grade-point average, why should she push herself to get a 4.0? Although some students or employees are self-motivated, most people need an extra push or incentive to do their very best. By setting lower standards for admission or hiring, we are lowering the level of accountability. We should reward hard work, discipline, and achievement; we shouldn't reward a student simply because he or she is a certain race, nor punish another student simply because he or she isn't.

3. Students admitted on this basis are often ill-equipped to handle the schools to which they've been admitted. Imagine a AA minor league baseball player suddenly asked to bat cleanup in the majors, or a high school science fair contestant suddenly asked to take a rocket scientist job at NASA. There's a possibility of success in these situations, but it's more likely they will be in over their heads. Schools like Harvard and Yale have high GPA and SAT requirements because it is extremely difficult to graduate from them. Thus, when they're forced to lower standards to achieve a minority quota, some students can't keep up. This isn't to say these students are less capable, but chances are that if they can't meet minimum requirements, they probably aren't ready to go there. The lower graduation rate of minorities is testament to the fact that they are too often going to schools that don't match their need or ability. The original application criteria of schools were put in for a reason. We should adhere to them.

4. It would help lead a truly color-blind society. When you apply for a job or fill out a college application, how often are asked about things like your hair color, eye color, or height? Unless it's for a modeling or athletic position, probably never. Why? It's because hair & eye color or height don't have any effect on your ability to do a job or succeed at a school. There's no association between hair/eye color and intelligence, discipline, ambition, character, or other essentials. Thus, it's useless to even ask about the information. Conversely, there's no association between skin color and intelligence/discipline/etc. So why do we keep drawing attention to it? Wouldn't it be great if we one day lived in a society when skin color was ignored as much as hair & eye color?

5. It is condescending to minorities to say they need affirmative action to succeed. When you give preferential treatment to minorities in admission or hiring practices, you're in effect saying "You're too stupid or incapable of achieving on your own, so let me help you". It is condescending and insulting to imply that minorities cannot achieve their goals through hard work and ability.

6. It demeans true minority achievement; i.e. success is labeled as result of affirmative action rather than hard work and ability. Ask Condi Rice or Colin Powell how they got to where they are -- hard work or affirmative action? Both were hired because they are bright, articulate, and well-suited for their positions. My guess is that both would be offended if you said they got to where they were strictly because of affirmative action. The same can be said of minority doctors, lawyers, business leaders, etc. Too often, their achievements are demeaned by people who believe preferential treatment got them to their current positions. Minorities must then work twice as hard to earn respect.

No: Don't Eliminate Affirmative Action

1. Diversity is desirable and won't always occur if left to chance. Part of the education process is learning to interact with other races and nationalities. Many students live very segregated lives up until the time they start college. Thus, opinions of other races and nationalities are based on stereotypes. Interaction allows students to learn that persons of the opposite race are people too, more or less just like themselves. The movie *Remember the Titans*, based on a true story, is an excellent illustration of this. In the beginning, the football players portrayed in the movie are heavily segregated and antagonistic to the other race. The coach forces them to room with a player of the opposite color as well as learn some essential facts about each other. Since this diversity is desirable, we want to make sure colleges represent a wide range of backgrounds. Unfortunately, without affirmative action, this diversity is much less likely to occur. It's possible schools will become segregated like in past decades. Elite schools may become increasingly dominated by majority students. Diversity is important; we can't leave it to chance.

2. Students starting at a disadvantage need a boost. Minority students, generally speaking, start out at a disadvantage in their college or job application process. They usually come from lower income families and have less opportunity to go to private schools as white students. Some inner city youths must also live their childhoods in high crime, drug-infested areas. Sincere, hard-working minority students are every bit as capable as white students, but because of these disadvantages, they may not have the same paper qualifications. Affirmative action evens the playing field a bit.

3. Affirmative action draws people to areas of study and work they may never consider otherwise. Whether it's men being brought into nursing, women brought into technology fields, or minorities brought into Ivy League schools, it is always desirable to bring people to areas of study or work that they may not have considered otherwise. The more we change stereotypes, the less we'll need affirmative action in the future.

4. Some stereotypes may never be broken without affirmative action. For decades blacks were considered less capable than whites. It took affirmative action to give blacks the opportunity to show they are every bit as capable. These and other stereotypes have started to change and will continue to change with the help of affirmative action.

5. Affirmative action is needed to compensate minorities for centuries of slavery or oppression. The first several centuries of the U.S.'s existence saw whites enslave and oppress blacks, Native Americans, and other minorities. Minorities gave decades of unpaid labor, had land taken from them, were subject to brutal punishments, and were denied most of the fundamental rights provided by our Constitution. The effect of these actions can be seen for generations, and this history can explain the wealth and income gap between whites and minorities, as well as the lack of economic opportunity and erosion of family stability, especially African Americans. Affirmative Action simply provides a way to compensate the descendants for the wrongs done to their ancestors and equalize their effects.

6. Discrimination still exists in both overt and subtle forms making Affirmative Action necessary to make up for maltreatment. Plenty of evidence exists indicating the minorities and other groups are still discriminated against today. Not all Americans see these groups as equals and as a result these groups are at a disadvantage through no fault of their own. Affirmative Action aims to level the playing field so that these groups can get the education and jobs they deserve.