

# THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

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At first glance, Brooke Kimbrough and Jennifer Gratz seem to have a lot in common. Both women were high school students from Michigan wait-listed by their top-choice in-state college, the University of Michigan, only to be ultimately rejected. Both, instead of accepting these decisions, chose to appeal their rejections, beginning campaigns meant to question not only their individual application results but the admissions procedure of the university as a whole. And both were met with a highly polarized field of responses—some were moved to defend and support their protests, echoing the students' belief that they had experienced unjust discrimination, while others argued that their objections arose from petty vindictiveness and a short-sighted sense of entitlement. The big difference? Jennifer Gratz is a white student whose campaign, backed by larger interest parties, was the one to make it to the Supreme Court, ultimately resulting in the removal of race-based affirmative action from U-M admissions policies. Brooke Kimbrough, an African-American student, pleaded to have those considerations restored (Jesse; Woods).

Over the past few years, affirmative action in college admissions has become an increasingly controversial topic. With several high-profile Supreme Court cases—notably *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Fisher v. University of Texas*—there have been significant challenges to the decades-old nondiscrimination policy. The term “affirmative action” originated in one of the protections won in the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. On March 6, 1961, President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, which required that government contractors “take *affirmative action* to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin” (emphasis added). This groundwork was followed several years later with Executive Order 11246, issued by Lyndon B. Johnson, which reinforced the necessity of compliance with nondiscrimination policies among government contractors and assigned the task

of enforcing these guidelines to the Secretary of Labor. Since its conception, affirmative action has been significantly expanded and modified. In its present form, it also imposes bans on discrimination based on gender, disability, and sexual orientation (“Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs [OFCCP]”). Opponents argue that while the purpose behind affirmative action was to ensure equal opportunities for all, it is now used to justify what is often described as ‘reverse discrimination’ against people who are seen as more privileged: whites, and, more recently, Asian Americans. Affirmative Action has changed a great deal throughout the years, but the fact remains that its core purpose and intent was to regulate how public and private sectors dealt with the issue of race.

Some oppose affirmative action because—while agreeing with its ideals—they find its implementation problematic. In the minds of many critics, affirmative action allows less qualified minority students to take the place of more privileged, and thus better-suited, students who would be more likely to succeed. As Sarah Siskind argues in her article “Affirmative Dissatisfaction,” “[h]elping those with primarily low academic qualifications into primarily academic institutions makes as much sense as helping the visually impaired become pilots.” Siskind argues that affirmative action rewards minority students simply for their ethnicity, by implication discriminating against white students who are equally or possibly more talented. Siskind cites her own experience as a legacy student as an example of the negative effects this can have even on the students who are meant to benefit from affirmative action, recalling her self-doubt as she questioned whether she had been admitted to Harvard for her individual profile or if her acceptance had simply been a result of her father’s alumni status and substantial monetary contributions to the university.

But as Linda Darling-Hammond and Ted Dintersmith write in “A Basic Flaw in the Argument Against Affirmative Action” (their response to the above article), Siskind’s analysis of the effects of affirmative action takes an extremely reductive perspective on the college admissions process. As the authors remind us, test scores and GPA—which Siskind claims are what the minority preferences created by affirmative action compensate for—are not the only factors considered in the admissions process. Personal achievements, including extracurricular activities, leadership, and service, comprise a

significant portion of a student's application as well. As Darling-Hammond and Dintersmith go on to point out, numerical and test-based analyses of a student's abilities are often poor indicators of later success in life, and so it is hardly fair to judge minority students as "less-qualified" simply because they have a lower GPA or SAT score. In fact, they argue, membership in minority and low-income communities often creates the impetus for the development of highly-valued traits like resourcefulness, independence, and tenacity—traits that students from more privileged backgrounds might never have the need to develop, or at least not to the same extent.

It seems that there are two primary conflicts in the debate surrounding affirmative action: firstly, what affirmative action is even intended to accomplish, and secondly, whether it achieves its aims successfully. In "The Colorblind Bind," Richard Rothstein notes that those dissatisfied with affirmative action typically aim to implement alternative programs that favor students from low-income backgrounds or that are designed more generally to increase diversity on college campuses. Rothstein criticizes this latter option because it "prompt[s] universities to enroll disadvantaged minority students for [that] purpose while making no obvious attempt to remedy historical wrongs" ("Colorblind"). He goes on to state that instead of pretending that affirmative action is not grounded in issues of race, we should acknowledge its original purpose to offset the effects of slavery and its aftermath. In Rothstein's mind, those who have been systematically deprived of their rights for centuries deserve the benefits of affirmative action, not just the nebulously-defined "underprivileged" demographic.

Perhaps the most unusual thing about responses to both sides of the argument—anecdotes from rejected minorities and white students alike—is that, unfailingly, both of them are accused of a sense of entitlement at some point. Columnists may sneer at Jennifer Gratz and her Texan counterpart Abigail Fisher, pointing to their selective focus on race in college admissions as an example of an ignorance of white privilege or a misunderstanding of the holistic nature of the admissions process. However, similar (or related) accusations have been made against Brooke Kimbrough. Despite some impressive extracurricular accomplishments, the fact remains that Kimbrough's grades and test scores, like Gratz and Fisher's, were relatively low in comparison to her top university's typical academic standards. Her claims that her race

should be taken into account—that the University of Michigan needs to “support diversity” and “represent the state”—seem weak (Woods). Some interpret Kimbrough’s justification for her appeal as seeking special rather than equal treatment. More than anything else, the debate surrounding affirmative action calls into question our perceptions not just of privilege and prejudice but also of right and wrong—what we deserve, or, more contentiously put, are entitled to.

America, as a social, political, and economic system, is built on the idea of a meritocracy, a society in which the people who hold power are chosen “on the basis of merit,” as opposed to wealth, or social class (“meritocracy”). But further implications of this phrase are that our society rewards people for their individual merits—talents, abilities, accomplishments—and not for things they have little to no influence over—like class, personal connections, religion, and race. This idea, couched in more familiar language as the “American dream,” has been sustained since the founding of our country. As it was put in a special report for *The Economist* called “Ever Higher Society, Ever Harder to Ascend”:

the original colonies were settled by refugees from a Europe in which the restrictions on social mobility were woven into the fabric of the state . . . From the outset, Americans believed that equality of opportunity gave them an edge over the Old World, freeing them from debilitating snobberies and at the same time enabling everyone to benefit from the abilities of the entire population.

And yet, as the article goes on to note, it is difficult for those born into lower and middle-class families to achieve the same level of financial success as those who have inherited the advantage of wealth from their parents.

Broad statements like those of David Sacks and Peter Thiel in their article “The Case Against Affirmative Action” imply that racism is somehow no longer a problem, or at least need not be considered a factor in college admissions. In their words: “no one has accused Stanford admissions officers of being racist, so perhaps the real problem is that we are pretending to solve a problem that no longer exists.” Claims like these are insensitive, infuriating, and demonstrate a basic lack of social awareness. But other points targeting affirmative action’s flaws hit home. Sacks and Thiel argue that although

affirmative action “claims” to help the “disadvantaged,” “[i]n reality . . . [its] preferences primarily benefit minority applicants from middle and upper-class backgrounds.” Even those defending affirmative action concede that the system is still imperfect, as race-based preferences sometimes benefit those who are more insulated from the effects of systemic racism by their wealth and class, lending advantages, as Richard Rothstein puts it in “The Colorblind Bind,” to “too many Barack Obamas”—children from families who are financially well-off—“and not enough Michelles”—those who are more likely to feel the effects of racial discrimination.

If we are to adhere to what Rothstein describes as affirmative action’s original purpose—as a recompense for slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the institutional discrimination against African Americans that is still present in today’s society—then it is clear that affirmative action policies require, for the most part, only superficial revisions. But the language of the executive order from which the idea of affirmative action originates is meant to promote equal opportunity for all. Living below the poverty line—which, admittedly, is more common among non-white populations—is arguably a greater barrier to educational and professional success than race. Perhaps, if we are truly to give everyone an equal opportunity, the difficulties caused by financial need should be incorporated into affirmative action policies.

Yet, it is difficult to truly evaluate who can be described as “underprivileged”; the influences of prejudice and systemic discrimination are complex and difficult to pin to specific demographics. But in most cases, it is remarkably easy to point out who cannot. It is preposterous to paint measures such as affirmative action as any form of ‘reverse discrimination’ or ‘special treatment.’ The practicalities of trying to assign index values to innate privilege or lack thereof may seem ludicrous, but it is ultimately necessary if we are to sustain any hope of providing equal opportunity to those who have been placed at a disadvantage because of factors they cannot control. At its heart, it is impossible for a capitalist society to truly be a place of equal opportunity: inevitably, even in a system in which individuals are hypothetically only concerned with their own interests, wealth and class will be handed down from generation to generation. Those who are lucky enough to be born into an upper or middle-class family will benefit from their circumstances; for the others, it is a well-documented fact that poverty is an ugly, self-perpetuating

cycle ("An Hereditary Meritocracy"). The least we can do as a society is to offer a slim chance that, with Herculean effort, talent, and luck, it will indeed be possible for a select few to defy the weight of a system that has, from the beginning, been built against them.

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