

Could a Supreme Court ruling re-segregate college campuses?

I was serving on the University of Michigan's board of regents in 1997 when the Center for Individual Rights brought the now-famous lawsuits against our affirmative action admissions system.

In essence, the system gives extra points to applicants who are minorities... or who live in the Upper Peninsula, or whose parents are U-M alumni, or who have overcome things like physical handicaps, or who possess special skills like running with footballs, or etc.

The legal basis for the policy is the Supreme Court's 1978 Bakke decision, in which the court held (narrowly) that universities could take race, among other factors, into consideration when making admissions decisions.

The case will go to the Supreme Court this spring. The Bush administration then submitted a brief opposing affirmative action.

With a subject as complicated and as emotionally charged as this one, it's important to sort out the sense from the nonsense. Based on my experience as a regent, this column tries to do just that.

The first issue is quotas. President Bush's speech last week condemning the U-M's policy used the word "quota" three times and the phrase "numerical targets" once. But neither the university's law school or undergraduate admissions system work by assigning a "maximum number, as of people, that may be admitted to... an institution" - the dictionary definition of "quota."

As U-M President Mary Sue Coleman pointed out, "It is unfortunate that the President misunderstands how our admissions process works." President Coleman was being, well, diplomatic.

President Bush (or his speech writers and lawyers) understands perfectly well how the U-M's system works, but he also understands (even better) just how unpopular the word "quota" is across the political spectrum.

The second issue is race and academics. The U-M's system for undergraduate admissions uses a maximum of 150 points in weighing applicants. A total of 110 points are possible for purely academic factors such as high school grades and overall academic strength and standardized test scores.

Black, Hispanic or American Indian minorities are awarded an extra 20 points, the same that can be given to a low-income student, but applicants cannot get points for both.

Critics of affirmative action argue that any favoritism based solely on race is morally wrong

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and that, in any case, assigning 20 admission points (or 13.3 percent) to race is just too much. And I must confess there is something intrinsically offensive about a system that arbitrarily awards X admission points just because of race.

So what about formulas? Most elite universities give race some factor when making admissions decisions, but they have avoided lawsuits because they don't set out explicit numerical formulas and use imaginative ways to disguise what they're really doing.

Does affirmative action admissions really make a difference? In my view, yes and no. The U-M certainly has been more successful in achieving a diverse student body than most other elite schools; undergraduates are now 8 percent black and nearly 5 percent Hispanic.

I believe most people agree the basic objective of achieving a diverse student body is absolutely right. The issue is how best to do it. Plainly affirmative action-based admissions plans do it, but at a cost.

At the end of the day, I fear that if the Supreme Court throws out affirmative action in admissions, the inevitable result will be the large re-segregation of college campuses all across the country.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at ppower@homecomm.net.

King's voice would be loud today for peace and equity

Monday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a time to reflect on the life and ideals of the civil rights leader and the history that thrust him into the spotlight.

This year's holiday comes at an odd convergence of events that draw on King's history and speak to the never-ending conflict of ideas in which King was so brilliantly engaged.

On Saturday, thousands of concerned citizens rallied to protest the Bush administration's threats of armed conflict in Iraq. Many of these protesters believe passionately that any war is wrong and unnecessary.

Toward the end of his life, King was outspoken in his opposition to the war in Vietnam. King argued that the resources that were used to burn through the jungles of Vietnam could be better spent on housing, food and education for those who struggled to survive in this country.

Last week, the Bush administration filed a brief opposing the University of Michigan's affirmative action programs in two cases before the United States Supreme Court.

Bush, of course, said he was all for diversity and fairness but that U-M's program was a "quota system" that is "racially discriminating."

When evaluating students for admission to its undergraduate school, U-M has a 150 point system. The weight of those points, 110, are for academics.

King would probably have been at the protest in Washington Saturday lending his eloquent voice of caution and admonition. King argued that the resources that were used to burn through the jungles of Vietnam could be better spent on housing, food and education for those who struggled to survive in this country.

Hugh Gallagher is the managing editor of The Observer Newspapers. He can be reached by phone at (734) 953-2149, by e-mail at hgallagher@homecomm.net or by fax at (734) 591-4279.

The university also awards one to four points for being related to an alumnus. This was too much for George W. Bush and his conservative supporters. Bush favors a system similar to that in Texas which awards scholarships to all students who finish in the top ranks of their high schools.

This is especially a problem here in Michigan, which has considerably more segregated schools than Louisiana or Mississippi according to a recent Harvard University study.

We do need a program that emphasizes fairness, opportunity and diversity. Will some academically talented white students be beat-out for a position by an academically talented black student with slightly lower GPA or test scores?

I think Dr. King would probably be lamenting that a United States president would make such statements against the U-M admission policy while offering nothing of real substance as an alternative.

Last week we lost one of our own at The Observer. Our Canton Observer editor, Tedd Schneider, died following a battle with cancer.

Tedd was a compassionate conservative before the president gave it a name. He argued his positions cogently and was an important voice in editorial deliberations.

King Day has been recognized as a holiday for the last two years in Canton. This year, township employees attended three training sessions on diversity.

Tedd would be proud that Canton has stepped up and taken his views seriously. He understood how important it was to make the American Dream a reality for everyone.



Phil Power



Hugh Gallagher

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