

Prop. 16 should not be passed, race should not be a factor in admissions

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Body

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, the UC Board of Regents unanimously voted in support of the repeal of Proposition 209 - which had banned preferential treatment by government bodies based on race or ethnicity. If Proposition 16 were to pass and repeal Prop. 209, then the UC system would be able to directly consider an applicant's race as a factor in admission. As a firm believer in equality of opportunity for everyone, I disagree with this decision.

I consider myself a strong supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement. As someone who loves studying history, I can recognize the devastating legacies of slavery, colonialism and imperialist exploitation, and how they shape the balance of power on the international stage. I've seen, studied and spoken to friends who have experienced how the legacy of Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, racial profiling, redlining and exclusionary zoning continues to haunt communities of color in the United States to this day.

Needless to say, the color of a person's skin by itself does not, and should not, affect their academic abilities in any way. Liberal or conservative, this statement is a common ground for humanity. However, this statement is in conflict with the UC system's endorsement.

The sentiment behind the endorsement is well-intentioned - because race is often closely tied to an individual's socioeconomic status, the community they grow up in, the resources their neighborhood schools offer and related opportunities, affirmative action acts as a form of "positive discrimination" to address disparities in academic achievement that are a result of centuries of oppression and institutional inequalities.

The current norm for college admissions is to consider students in context, as a means of addressing historical educational inequities. This makes sense; it's unfair to directly compare the achievements of someone from an affluent neighborhood with access to plenty of extracurriculars and tutoring services to those of someone with an equally strong work ethic and intellect who has other pressing life responsibilities outside of academics.

But the repeal of Prop. 209 could mean that race itself becomes a factor in school admissions. And as a result, schools may admit less-qualified students with the aim of increasing diversity, hurting both more-qualified, rejected candidates and less-qualified, accepted candidates.

Students who are admitted to a school where they are underqualified academically may find themselves at the bottom of their classes, struggling to keep up with the demands of rigorous coursework and failing exams, and end up unprepared to enter the workforce. When admitting a student, the goal of admissions committees is to set them up for an academic and professional career of success. Simply admitting more underrepresented minorities to a school and declaring victory may in reality not achieve this goal.

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Put more bluntly, the tough exams and the notorious grading curves at competitive universities don't care what color your skin is. There's no affirmative action in grading standards once you're in a top school; that would be blatant discrimination.

In addition, the negative stigma that students of color may face from their peers in selective institutions where affirmative action is present often hurts their self-esteem and can also contribute to poorer educational outcomes. I've repeatedly seen students underestimate their peers who are students of color, some even going so far as saying outright racist phrases such as, "She only got in because she's Black!"

While this claim is objectively false, as Prop. 209 clearly establishes, the repeal of Prop. 209 could blur this boundary. Moreover, preferential treatment by race in admissions can often stir up racial tensions among students, as those who don't get this supposed preferential treatment find it unfair.

The reasoning behind reinstating affirmative action is that race is often correlated with other factors that may affect a student's academic performance, such as socioeconomic status and opportunity. But instead of letting skin color serve as an indicator, these other factors themselves should be considered directly.

As aforementioned, when evaluating students, admission officers should continue to consider a student's achievements in the context of the environment they grew up in and the opportunities they had and made for themselves. Although this system is not perfect, it is more equitable than allowing race itself to be a factor.

California as a state celebrates an incredible diversity. If admission officers can consider applicants' contexts effectively, then this diversity will naturally be reflected in the incoming classes of students every year. The goal of education is to enable students to succeed in the academic and professional worlds, and by investing more heavily in primary and secondary education in under-resourced communities (which are often also communities of color), the California public education system can ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed in the face of competitive college admissions, academic challenges and the real world.

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