

Cal Poly students consider affirmative action

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Byline: Catherine Allen Catherine Allen Matthew Bornhorst Daisy Kuenstler Catherine Allen Harrison Kirk Mason Ogden

Body

This year, California voters have an opportunity to revive affirmative action in the state. With the growing push for diversity on campus, the Cal Poly community is weighing whether or not it's an opportunity worth taking.

In 1996, Californians passed Proposition 209 - a ban on affirmative action in public employment and education, which prohibited discrimination or preferential treatment on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity and national origin. The 2020 ballot's Proposition 16 would reverse that ban.

In a Mustang News poll posted on Instagram and Facebook, 52.3% of respondents said they were against Prop. 16 out of 478 responses total.

"As a person of color and a female, I find that opportunities for me aren't exactly equal compared to everyone else," economics sophomore Emily Ye said. "Prop. 16 seemed like it would give people like me and other people of color more opportunities ... Because without prompting it, it's likely that we won't have these chances."

Business administration junior Juan Cuevas said the diversity that would be achieved by affirmative action would benefit the school overall. As a predominantly white university, the perspectives are very much the same since the majority of students grew up in similar cultures, according to Cuevas. With a more diverse student body, Cuevas said there'd be new perspectives to hear from, in and out of the classroom, because the individuals who would benefit from affirmative action would "just bring something different to the table."

According to Cal Poly's Office of Institutional Research fall 2019 data that was self-reported by students, the least represented ethnicities are African American, represented by only .84% of students, and Native American, accounting for .14% of students. About 54% of students are white, which Cal Poly Media Relations Director Matt Lazier says is a record low.

Males make up approximately 52% of Cal Poly students, though there was a 2.6% increase in female students from 2018 to 2019. Three students reported they were non-binary.

People may agree that Cal Poly needs more diversity, but the way of achieving that tends to be contested.

Civil engineering junior Kaila Bishop says affirmative action shouldn't be the go-to solution for colleges. While Prop. 16 would improve the hiring process for government contract workers whose backgrounds aren't fully captured in

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the hiring interviews, Bishop says universities could instead simply provide an essay platform for applicants to share their story because "people are more than their race."

"We need to fix the actual foundation of the problem, rather than just putting affirmative action," Bishop said.

Cuevas said allowing affirmative action could still result in discrimination, and to him, giving priority to one student over the other is the opposite of equality.

"It's kind of like a step backwards," Cuevas said.

For computer science senior Sanjana Gundala, affirmative action is a way of "understanding that not everyone grew up with the same opportunity" and providing a way to level the playing field.

She's referring to the lack of resources in schools across the state, which disproportionately affects students of color. This could mean not being able to afford SAT prep courses or even not having quality teachers, class sizes or curriculum.

According to the research organization Brookings Institution, the wealthiest 10% of school districts in the U.S. spend about 10 times more funding than the poorest 10%, and "many schools serving low-income and minority students do not even offer the math and science courses needed for college."

"It doesn't mean you're less qualified to attend university, it just means you didn't have those resources that can give you an advantage," Gundala said. "Well deserving students still are admitted into colleges."

But civil engineering junior Mason Dambacher says that while more diversity is good, a concern is that if an applicant is accepted based on race or gender yet has a low GPA or test score, "that's putting that student in a much worse position coming into Cal Poly."

Even if Prop. 16 passes, the next hurdle would be figuring out how to implement it. According to Lazier, not only can the proposition face legal challenges even after being passed, but the California State University as a whole would also need to determine exactly how affirmative action will change the admissions process.

Cal Poly currently relies on Multi Criteria Admissions , which calculates acceptance based on points for different categories, such as GPA, SAT scores and, if the student held a job, the number of hours worked.

But the Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that affirmative action could not be implemented by granting points to students based on race, gender or other qualities. Similarly, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of UC Regents v. Bakke, that using racial quotas to reserve a specific number of seats for each ethnicity was also unconstitutional, so that's not a possibility if Prop. 16 passes.

With these complexities and more, Lazier says it's too early to tell how Cal Poly will tie affirmative action into admissions.

Still, the admissions decision process alone doesn't acknowledge that many students of color may not even have Cal Poly on their radar or be interested in applying to a predominantly white school at all. As ethnic studies professor Grace Yeh put it, "Cal Poly has a certain reputation that might inhibit people from thinking, 'that's a school for me.'"

According to Bishop's talks with Jamie Patton, Cal Poly's Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion, "we just aren't getting enough applications."

"For me personally, what scared me off is just seeing the less-than-1% Black rate," Bishop said.

But that's why affirmative action can often be used before decision time. According to Yeh, affirmative action could be incorporated into Cal Poly's outreach to prospective students as well, which could include rethinking what schools or regions admissions dedicates their recruitment efforts to.

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Even at the national level, the U.S. Department of Labor states that for federal contractors, "affirmative actions include training programs, outreach efforts and other positive steps."

Gundala, who's met with College of Engineering Dean Amy Fleischer to discuss creating a more inclusive environment, added that students of color sometimes choose not to come to Cal Poly even if accepted.

"Having affirmative action would 100% help colleges like Cal Poly because it would just expand the recruitment efforts to kind of focus more on students of color and encourage them more to attend Cal Poly and make them feel supported here," Gundala said.

Lazier said that with the affirmative action ban, "diversifying the campus community is not a simple process." Still, Cal Poly has already begun tapping into other avenues: outreach and recruitment.

This could be a more effective approach to affirmative action as a way of securing a diverse applicant pool before it's even time to make admission decisions. So far, Lazier said it's been able to help start diversifying campus, while still being in compliance with the affirmative action ban.

According to Lazier, Cal Poly's current initiatives include the Scholars program, which works to attract "lower-income and first-generation students who are academically qualified," then grant them significant financial aid. The program's revenue comes from the school's Opportunity Fee that has been placed on out-of-state students since fall 2019.

"These are academically qualified under-represented students, who were more likely to turn down the university's offer of admissions because they can obtain greater financial aid at other campuses," Lazier said.

Four years ago, Cal Poly also eliminated Early Decision Enrollment, which harmed low-income students who didn't know their full financial aid package before the early decision deadline. Lazier says eliminating early decisions "immediately yielded the most diverse incoming class in Cal Poly's history in fall 2017."

Even the small programs run by student organizations can make a big difference. For Gundala, those welcome programs and recruitment efforts served as a deciding factor in committing to Cal Poly. But if those efforts were instead run by the university under affirmative action, Gundala said she thinks they could have a much bigger impact.

Still, from blackface incidents to the lack of diversity in greek life, Ye said Cal poly isn't doing enough to not only stand for diversity, but also stand against racism. When asked if she thinks Cal Poly is genuinely working to increase diversity and inclusion, Ye said, "to be completely honest, I don't think so."

"As a person who came here thinking that there's going to be a lot of change, there isn't much Cal Poly has done," Ye said.

When students are weighing whether or not affirmative action is Cal Poly's missing ingredient, Yeh said students need to "do their homework," explaining that the swarm of misinformation surrounding affirmative action mostly comes from not understanding what is and isn't constitutional based on past Supreme Court decisions, such as the ban of the quota system.

"As an instructor, I want to make sure people go into any decision basically with their eyes open," Yeh said.

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