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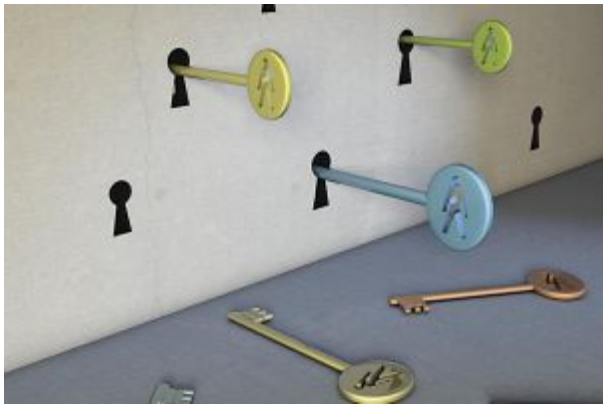
# Class-Based Policies Are Not a Remedy for Racial Inequality



Randy Lyhus for The Chronicle

By Carson Byrd, Wornie Reed, and Ellington Graves

The election of Barack Obama seemed a harbinger of a postracial society, a powerful embodiment of a new, colorblind ethos, providing evidence that America had finally shed its racial baggage. For many people, the Obamas illustrated the argument that middle-class and affluent blacks had no need of race-based consideration and should be judged without regard to race.

That argument is not new, of course. The passage of legislation during and after the civil-rights era led to similar rhetoric, and recent decades have seen growing support for a class-based alternative to affirmative action in college admissions. We do not deny the injustice perpetuated by legacy admissions, nor do we dismiss the need for socioeconomic diversity in higher education. But conflating class and race will not solve the problem of racial inequality. Low socioeconomic status has not been the basis for systematic exclusion of students from higher education; race and ethnicity have.

Denial of access to higher education is part of a long history of exclusion faced by racial and ethnic minority groups. One consequence for African-Americans, Latinos, and American Indians has been disproportionate poverty levels and substantially lower levels of wealth. But even members of racial and ethnic minorities who achieve middle- or upper-class status face discrimination every day. Money does not shelter people from racism. Racial and ethnic inequality has been part of the structure of our society throughout U.S. history. We must acknowledge that disadvantage in the development of college-access policies.

Many people assume that class-sensitive admissions policies will increase racial and ethnic diversity on college campuses, given that greater proportions of minority groups are poor. Those people forget that in America, there is no such thing as what the historian and ethnographer Ronald Takaki called "equality of context." That is, class-based policies assume that regardless of people's race or ethnicity, they have (and have always had) the same resources and opportunities

to prepare for higher education as anyone else in the same socioeconomic stratum. But disparities in academic outcomes remain apparent, with poor white and Asian-American students benefiting from higher GPA's and test scores than those of poor blacks, Latinos, and American Indians.

Jonathan Kozol has documented the inequity experienced by poor minority students in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (Crown, 1991) and *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (Crown, 2005). Kozol's work shows that impoverished African-American and Latino children face an uphill battle to earn their high-school diplomas. While poor white children also face substantial obstacles, their difficulties are not exacerbated by racial inequality and prejudice; the correlation between poverty and stigmatization is also much stronger for minority children. The stigma of poverty, in concert with structural impediments, has consequences for students' social, emotional, and academic experiences and negatively influences college readiness. Therefore, when we assume that class-based affirmative-action policies will automatically help low-income minority students get into college, we also assume that poor minority students are just as prepared as poor white children for higher education, which is not the case.

One of the authors of this essay is a white male who was raised in a working-class family in Appalachia, and very likely would have benefited from class-based admission policies. Yet we all agree that such policies fail to recognize that more than socioeconomic disadvantage afflicts many minorities in our society. Evidence of racism is everywhere: in our biased criminal-justice system, which has arguably changed the life course of young African-American men from college bound to jail bound; in the racial segregation of housing; in the concentrated poverty of African-American communities; in the stereotypes and stigmas associated with some Asian-American ethnic groups; and in the negative experiences of recent immigrant groups to the United States.

College-admissions policies based on socioeconomic status are unlikely to increase racial and ethnic equality in higher education, and putting them into practice is like pushing air; we may feel as if we're making progress as we glide forward, but we do little to accomplish our goal. Such an approach leaves intact the larger structural problems in society relating to race, and it limits our understanding of how past injustices influence the present and future lives of many people in our country.

Class cannot serve as a proxy for race and ethnicity, or vice versa. Our research and discussions about affirmative action and college access should take into account the need for both race-conscious and class-sensitive approaches. Only then will American higher education begin to provide equal opportunities for all students.

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