The Historical Impact of Affirmative Action on Overrepresented Minorities

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According to a statistic reported by Harvard College, the undergraduate college of Harvard University, a well-renowned research university and academic institution, African American students comprised 15.2% of admitted undergraduates in the fall of 2022 (Harvard College). Jane Nam, holder of a Ph.D. in social and political philosophy from the University of Oregon and staff writer for BestColleges, an accredited source of information for students regarding college preparation and admissions, commented on this record-breaking percentage, stating, “Since President Johnson mandated affirmative action in 1965, the number of Black student enrollees has drastically increased” (Nam). Today, affirmative action, or “the use of policies, legislation, programs, and procedures to improve the educational or employment opportunities of members of certain demographic groups (such as minority groups, women, and older people) as a remedy to the effects of long-standing discrimination against such groups” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), still stands in many states and protects the opportunity gain of historically underrepresented minorities. The implementation of affirmative action by employers and institutions has truly affected the previous ethnic imbalance between majorities and minorities at these locations. Yet, ever since affirmative action was implemented, the practice has been met with much hostility, and, even now, is in the midst of deep controversy. Nine states have successfully banned its use, likening its practice to systematic racism. Although the implementation of affirmative action has provided more professional opportunities to statistically underrepresented minorities when applying to certain positions, its effect on members of statistically overrepresented minorities is unclear, as they must compete with others of their minority for admission to academic institutions, employment opportunities, and entry to need-based programs, making their entry requirements far more selective than for candidates from underrepresented minorities, even though the latter candidates may be less qualified. This begs the question: how has the historical usage of affirmative action affected the professional opportunity of statistically overrepresented minorities?

The most commonly used modern form of affirmative action is the holistic admissions process that many universities utilize when determining if an applicant is suitable for admission. According to Zachary Bleemer, an Assistant Professor of Economics at the Yale School of Management, “Since at least the 1970s, many universities have implemented affirmative action (AA) admission policies designed to increase low-income and under-represented minority (URM) students’ enrollment, in part intending to facilitate socioeconomic mobility by promoting disadvantaged students’ human capital formation” (Bleemer). The idea behind the induction of affirmative action within each university remains the same: diversifying the student body, thus promoting socioeconomic mobility in the future. Nam notes that despite the intention of universities to encourage diversity, affirmative action has harmed the admission rate of statistically overrepresented but ethnically underrepresented applicants (Nam). Historically, affirmative action policies have been utilized extensively by numerous universities to limit the number of qualified applicants from overrepresented minority groups, such as Asian Americans, from being admitted to these universities. According to the article “Asian-Americans Question Ivy League’s Entry Policies,” written in 1985 by Michael Winerip, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and columnist for the New York Times, “Two years ago Prof. Uwe Reinhardt first questioned whether Princeton was limiting the number of Asian-American students it would accept…‘My hunch is if you look at the top 20 percent of the Asian-Americans being rejected at Ivy League schools,’ said Dr. Reinhardt, a professor of political economy at Princeton, ‘they are better qualified academically than the bottom part of the class that is accepted’” (Winerip). Bleemer concurs, noting that recently, judicial threats have been brought against affirmative action policies by Edward Blum’s Students for Fair Admissions, particularly that of Harvard University and the University of North Carolina (Bleemer). While affirmative action in the holistic admissions setting has been prominently discussed in recent decades, new controversies have revealed that in some instances, it has functioned as a form of “reverse discrimination,” creating a hostile environment for statistically overrepresented minorities, requiring them to gain additional qualifications to meet the same expectations as statistically underrepresented minorities, which may be unconstitutional.

Historically, affirmative action has most often been implemented by employers seeking to diversify their employee population. According to Jackie Mansky of the Smithsonian Magazine, the official journal published by the well-renowned museum, education, and research complex known as the Smithsonian Institution, until the early 1960s, racial discrimination was prevalent in most instances of candidate selection, especially during the hiring processes of employers (Mansky). As a result, many qualified applicants from historically underrepresented ethnic groups were prevented from being employed and gaining the same level of professional opportunity as the white majority. To allow affected minority groups to gain a similar level of opportunity and prevent racial discrimination from continuing to occur, a solution involving governmental intervention was necessary. Thus, according to the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity (OEOD) from the University of California, Irvine, a very highly accredited institution renowned for its research opportunity, “On March 6, 1961 President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order (E.O.) 10925, which included a provision 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’” (OEOD). The American Association for Access, Equity, and Diversity (AAAED), the longest-standing civil rights organization in America, describes how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 expanded the scope of employers affected by E.O. 10925 to all with over 15 employees (AAAED). However, despite the original intention of Kennedy to eliminate racial discrimination in employment opportunities, affirmative action allowed for a form of “reverse discrimination” to occur, in which overrepresented applicants from ethnic minorities faced higher expectations than their underrepresented minority counterparts. According to Tracey Lien of the Los Angeles Times, an example of this can be seen in the recent technological revolution in the 1980s, where a multitude of Asian Americans were hired by startup companies in the technological industry, but now have it far more difficult to climb to the executive levels (Lien), similar to the phenomenon regarding the unofficial quota created by the Ivy Leagues in the early 1980s that Winerip discusses (Winerip). While it is abundantly clear that race-based affirmative action implemented by employers can be highly beneficial to the employment rate of statistically underrepresented minorities, it is again clear that it is detrimental for statistically overrepresented minorities, who must gain additional qualifications to meet similar expectations.

Yet, affirmative action isn’t just utilized in holistic admissions or employment opportunities. Oftentimes, affirmative action is also used in need-based preferential treatment programs. According to Santa Clara University, accredited for its exceptional student engagement and retention rates, "[Preferential treatment] programs are designed as temporary measures to increase the employment and educational opportunities available to qualified women and minorities by giving them preference in hiring, promotion, and admission" (Andre et. al). The AAAED concurs and describes a variety of need-based programs that are preferentially selective due to race-based affirmative action (AAAED). Examples of this include financial aid and support in finding employment, which, historically, has been a greater issue for those of underrepresented minorities than overrepresented minorities. However, Lien notes that overlooking members of statistically overrepresented minorities who face similar barriers presents a greater issue: the perpetuation of the stereotype that these groups never face such problems. This stereotype encourages the idea that these groups never need special accommodations or support, suggesting that they are infallible simply due to their ethnic group.

Despite the capacity of affirmative action in holistic admissions, employment opportunities, and need-based programs to provide support for historically and statistically underrepresented minorities, it has, for multiple decades, eroded the potential of preferential treatment programs to create an environment of true equality. Rather than focusing on minorities with greater need, such programs focus on the racial aspect of affirmative action, causing a host of detrimental effects and making professional opportunities far harder to gain for members of statistically overrepresented minorities. Thus, a reform of the current affirmative action system is necessary, perhaps to focus more on individual necessity than race.

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