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## PROFESSOR KWAN'S QUANDARY

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### INTRODUCTION

Christopher Kwan, a math professor at a local public school, was reading his morning paper when he came across an article on education in the United States. He thought it must have been a sign because he had recently been looking into affirmative action and pondering the various barriers to education that his students face. Professor Kwan had always been passionate about education and was an advocate for equal access to opportunities. As he read the article, the following passage stuck out to him, “Education is supposed to be a tool that allows any individual, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status, to achieve success so long as they work hard. We would like to believe that this is true, and that education can help lessen the economic and racial divide, but decades of research has shown that education only expands disparities.”.<sup>1</sup> Professor Kwan prided himself on being a good teacher, one that genuinely cared about his students, but as he read this article on affirmative action, he wondered whether there were other factors that were limiting some of his students and whether affirmative action was enough to bridge this gap.

### AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Affirmative action was created to help rectify the effects of centuries of racism within the United States that had resulted in admission offices favoring white students as a result of earlier educational advantages. The policy has inspired a lot of debate and litigation amongst the academic community over the years. Once schools began to set aside a certain number of seats for students who were identified as economically or educationally disadvantaged, other students began to pursue legal action in the belief that they were unfairly denied admissions. The Supreme Court has stood by the policy and reaffirmed its importance in promoting diversity in higher education.<sup>2</sup>

Studies have shown that schools with a high-poverty student body were less likely to exhibit academic excellence and research shows that high-poverty schools have increased by 60% from 2000 to 2011.<sup>1</sup> Many have argued that affirmative action should place greater weight on the socioeconomic status rather than the ethnicity of incoming students. Others feel that this would only add to racial issues in the country.

## **CHRISTOPHER KWAN**

Christopher Kwan was a graduate of Ivey University, where he studied mathematics and political science before pursuing his degree at a teacher's college. During his time as a student, he was involved in several clubs that advocated equality and access to education. He now teaches grade 12 math where many of his students were starting to apply for college and he has heard mixed opinions on the topic of affirmative action. From the conversations he's heard it seems that students had three opinions on the matter: some students believed that race was the most important barrier that needs to be addressed through affirmative action, others believed that socioeconomic status was the most important barrier and others believed that affirmative action was not warranted at all. He wondered whether he could use his students' recent test scores as a sample to see whether ethnicity or socioeconomic factors influenced academic performance and whether there was a clear disparity amongst different groups of students.

## **CONCLUSION**

As Professor Kwan sat at his desk taking a final look at his students' scores, he wondered if there was a chance that some students had an inherently disproportionate advantage over others. Were there factors beyond his students' control that played a part in their success with his tests? If so, how could he intervene to try and level the playing field for everyone? Professor Kwan was a strong proponent of equal opportunity for all, so he was committed to ensuring his students had a fair chance not only in his classroom but as they applied for post-secondary education as well.

## EXHIBITS

### Exhibit 1. Student test scores and basic information (prior year)

gender	race/ethnicity	parental level of education	lunch	test preparation course	math score	reading score	writing score
female	group B	high school	standard	completed	55	69	67
female	group A	master's degree	standard	completed	56	74	71
male	group C	some high school	standard	none	53	56	47
female	group B	associate's degree	free/reduced	none	74	78	77
female	group C	bachelor's degree	standard	completed	55	57	64
male	group C	some college	standard	completed	90	78	83
female	group C	some college	standard	none	76	96	91
male	group D	some college	standard	none	94	92	90
male	group C	some college	standard	none	82	83	80
female	group E	some high school	standard	none	67	71	73
female	group D	some high school	standard	completed	53	72	70
female	group B	some college	standard	none	60	69	65
female	group C	associate's degree	free/reduced	completed	66	74	76
female	group C	associate's degree	free/reduced	none	34	58	50
male	group C	master's degree	standard	none	73	67	68
male	group B	high school	standard	none	56	46	44
male	group B	some college	standard	completed	55	64	58
male	group C	high school	standard	none	61	65	64
male	group B	high school	standard	none	67	53	52
male	group C	bachelor's degree	standard	none	63	61	54
male	group B	associate's degree	standard	none	61	49	51
male	group D	master's degree	standard	none	94	81	83
male	group B	high school	standard	none	64	64	56
female	group B	some high school	standard	none	61	60	59
female	group D	high school	standard	none	66	75	77
female	group D	high school	standard	none	74	92	86
male	group D	master's degree	standard	none	76	73	67
male	group C	some college	free/reduced	completed	70	61	61
male	group B	some college	free/reduced	none	45	45	42
female	group C	high school	free/reduced	none	56	75	64
female	group D	bachelor's degree	standard	completed	69	76	81
female	group B	some high school	standard	none	53	55	59
male	group D	some high school	free/reduced	none	67	70	65
female	group D	high school	free/reduced	none	62	62	65
male	group B	some high school	standard	completed	86	87	93
female	group D	some college	free/reduced	none	47	47	51

\* Full data attached as spreadsheet

## **References**

- <sup>1</sup> Barshay, J. (2020, June 29). A decade of research on education inequality in America. Retrieved November 23, 2020, from <https://hechingerreport.org/a-decade-of-research-on-the-rich-poor-divide-in-education/>
- <sup>2</sup> Torres, G. B. (2020, January 06). Affirmative Action in Higher Education: Relevance for Today's Racial Justice Battlefields. Retrieved November 23, 2020, from [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human\\_rights\\_magazine\\_home/black-to-the-future-part-ii/affirmative-action-in-higher-education--relevance-for-today-s-ra/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/black-to-the-future-part-ii/affirmative-action-in-higher-education--relevance-for-today-s-ra/)