APMA
Karina Rubio
Indiana University Bloomington
Affirmative action in the United States consists of government-mandated policies, guidelines, and programs intended to correct discriminatory practices against minority groups based upon factors such as race, gender, and disabilities. Discriminatory practices are amended by increasing educational and professional opportunities for these minorities. Affirmative action is particularly important when examining the inequalities between whites and racial minorities in the workforce and in higher education institutions. Racial minority groups tend to be subjected to racial and economic oppression and as a result, have less access to educational and professional opportunities. Affirmative action works to better represent these racial minorities, which in turn develops a cohesive society that can work efficiently in a diverse environment. Recently, however, affirmative action has been challenged in the court as opponents debate whether or not affirmative action is still needed in the United States. Critics argue that affirmative action leads to reverse racism against those not part of minority groups, but without such policies, work establishments and education institutions would weaken equality for minorities, giving the preponderance of opportunity to the white population and allowing for a lack of diversity.
Affirmative action policies have broadened opportunities for minorities in both employment and education as early as the end of the Civil Rights era. After the 1964 Civil Rights Act made racial, religious, and gendered discrimination illegal, affirmative action was decided upon as the solution to correct past discriminatory practices and to give racial minorities a chance to truly receive the benefits of equality. Today, affirmative action still works to broaden opportunities for minorities by letting employers and higher education institutions consider factors such as race when hiring or admitting applicants in order to ensure a fair and equal process. Recently, however, affirmative action has now become a common debate both in and out of courtrooms posing the following question: Is it still needed in America? Challengers of affirmative action argue it is unconstitutional because it constitutes reverse racism against the White population. Affirmative action, however, must be maintained and implemented throughout the United States in order to compensate for economic and racial inequalities between Whites and minorities, ensure equal opportunity access to higher education and employment for the underrepresented, and construct a better, more diverse society less inclined to racial profiling and stereotyping.

First and foremost, affirmative action is necessary in order to compensate for the ongoing economic and racial oppression of minority groups. This oppression ultimately creates a barrier for minorities seeking higher education or work. Among these barriers are the lower socioeconomic backgrounds minorities tend to come from, leaving them at a disadvantage due to a lack of resources required to enter the workforce or receive higher education (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014, para. 6). In 2014 for example, there was a 26.2 percent poverty rate among African Americans, a 23.6 percent rate among Hispanics, and a 12 percent rate among Asians, but only a 10.1 percent rate among Whites (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015,
The economic inequality between Whites and minority groups constitutes a disparity in opportunity. Such disparities mean some minorities are often unable to afford all the expenses of the higher education.

Due to this lack of opportunity, there is a substantial difference in the number of Whites and minorities enrolled in higher education institutions. The National Conference of State Legislatures (2014) reported, “In 2007, 70 percent of White high school graduates immediately enrolled in college, compared to 56 percent of African American graduates and 61 percent of Hispanic graduates” (para. 4). Furthermore, “of the 17.5 million undergraduate students in fall 2013, some 9.9 million were White, 2.9 million were Hispanic, 2.5 million were Black, 1 million were Asian, 0.1 million were American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0.1 million were Pacific Islander” (National Center of Education Statistics, 2015, para. 3). Such statistics prove that a high number of minorities do not go on to college because of unequal opportunities, and those who do only comprise a small number in comparison to Whites. Therefore, affirmative action policies are needed in order to increase the opportunity for a minority student to receive a higher education.

Not only is there a large gap in the college enrollment rate, but there is also a significant difference in the amount of Whites and minorities in the workforce. A report in January 2016 discovered the unemployment rate among Whites stood at only 4.3 percent, while the rate for African Americans and Latinos was 8.8 percent and 5.9 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016, February 5). These unemployment levels often correlate with a lack of education. A study conducted at Georgetown University examined employment rates during the 2007-2012 economic recession and discovered those with no degree beyond a high school diploma lost a total of 10 percent of the jobs—roughly 5.8 million—that they previously held before the
recession, while those with college degrees had no net job loss or job gain during this time (Adams, 2012, para. 10). Ergo, receiving a college education leads to a higher sense of job security. Affirmative action policies are also needed to bring a higher rate of minorities into higher education institutions that can prepare and qualify them for a future job or career.

Despite these significant gaps between Whites and minorities, Affirmative action programs have succeeded in gradually working to close them and for that reason must stay in place. Universities with affirmative action policies work to provide both financial aid opportunities and on-campus support programs and centers to “underrepresented students” in order to foster their academic success (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014, para. 5). The financial aid and support programs established through affirmative action policies work to alleviate the economic and racial disparities between whites and minorities, leveling the playing field and encouraging underrepresented students to apply to college. Between 1990 and 2013, “Hispanic college enrollment nearly quadrupled” from 0.7 million to 2.9 million students and “Black enrollment more than doubled from 1.1 million to 2.5 million students” (National Center for Education, 2015, para. 3). Therefore, the benefits—especially the financial ones—that affirmative action plans offer to minorities have worked and continue to work towards establishing a higher rate of ethnic students in universities across the country.

Accordingly, establishing a higher rate of ethnic students is necessary due to the rate at which the minority population is increasing. Higher education institutions across the U.S. must use affirmative action plans to reach for higher minority enrollment levels in order to ensure a makeup that is representative of the surrounding demographics. By the year 2020, it is estimated that 50.2% of children under 18 will identify as racial minorities (Poe, 2016). Thus, affirmative action plans must stay in place to allow those children greater opportunity to earn a degree in
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN AMERICA

order to become an active member of this increasingly diverse society. Affirmative action and embracing diversity go hand in hand, even in cases where affirmative action has been questioned in court. In the 1994 affirmative action case of Podberesky vs. Kirwan, the fourth circuit determined the need for an integrated and diverse environment in higher education institutions as a valid argument for “saving affirmative action” rather than outlawing it (Brown, 2016).

Although the minority population is gradually becoming the majority in terms of numbers, such trends do not indicate that racial and economic oppression will subdue for minorities. Thus, as the minority population continues to grow at an exponential rate, the need for inclusion and diversity in higher education establishments becomes even more crucial.

For this reason, diversity in higher education is essential because it prepares all students regardless of race to participate and work efficiently in a multicultural society, which makes minorities enrolled in college part of the driving force defying a society deeply rooted in racial stereotyping. Gladwell (2000) suggests the following theory in studying trends of neighborhood demographics throughout the United States: In neighborhoods considered to be racially “diverse”, research shows that the white population in those neighborhoods are typically comfortable with a “70-30” rule—that is, 70 percent White and 30 percent minority—before deciding to move to a more “White” neighborhood (p. 193). The 70-30 rule underlines the economic and racial oppression that minorities face. Myers (2007), however, suggests that affirmative action programs allow minorities to “demonstrate their skill and worth, thus changing prejudicial attitudes” (p. 379). Affirmative action plans offer minorities the opportunity to prove themselves as educated members that can contribute to and benefit society.

Although affirmative action allows minorities various opportunities such as becoming active members of society, some debate that it, in turn, takes away those same opportunities from
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN AMERICA

the white population. Critics of affirmative action argue it constitutes reverse discrimination because through the programs, minorities are admitted via racial preference rather than academic achievement or aptitude. Myers (2007) studied the effects of Proposition 209 to refute critics claiming affirmative action fails to address the root source of inequality and instead only leads to reverse discrimination of the White population. Proposition 209 was a California state law passed in 1996 that “eliminated preferences based on race, color, ethnicity, or national origin for purposes of public education or employment” (Jones, 1998, p.1). In this case where affirmative action was removed, minorities still remained the only group racially oppressed rather than Whites. Myers (2007) discovered a sharp drop in unemployment after the enactment of Proposition 209, revealing “relative employment for minorities fell by 2.8 percentage points as these groups left the labor force, causing non-participation rates to climb by a corresponding 2.9 percentage points” (p. 395). The removal of affirmative action plans made it difficult for minorities to enter or stay in the workforce and gave Whites greater preference. Proposition 209 also had a significant impact on college enrollment levels amongst the minority population. In 1998, the “minority student admission at UC Berkeley fell 61 percent, and minority admissions at UCLA fell 36 percent” (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014, para. 4). Critics’ concerns that affirmative action creates an unfair system prove false considering the results of Proposition 209. Rather, the elimination of affirmative action programs only constituted increased inequality for minorities whom have continuously been overlooked and underrepresented.

Evidently, many of these overlooked and underrepresented minorities have benefited from affirmative action for around 50 years now. Since its enactment in 1965, affirmative action programs and policies have diligently worked to provide equal opportunity for the minority
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN AMERICA

population. In a public speech addressing the implementation of affirmative action, President Lyndon Johnson said the following to reason why such programs were needed:

Freedom is not enough. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say you are free to compete with all the others, and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. (American Scholar, 2011, para. 1)

President Johnson’s justification of affirmative action still rings true in addressing its need in today’s society. Without affirmative action in the United States, minority groups will continue to suffer discrimination and oppression in terms of higher education and employment.
References


