

Carnegie Mellon Supports Affirmative Action

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Excerpts from President Jared L. Cohon's state of diversity address, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, January 20, 2003

America's colleges and universities find themselves at a critical—and somewhat unnerving—turning point this Martin Luther King Day. The United States Supreme Court has agreed to hear during its current session two challenges to affirmative action in university admissions, both involving the University of Michigan. . . . Since Michigan is a state school, the plaintiffs in this case have argued that the university's affirmative action policies represent illegal racial bias on the part of the state. Carnegie Mellon is, of course, a private institution. But like all private research universities around the country, we depend heavily on funding from the federal government, which is why we feel the ruling in this case could have a significant impact on what we do here as well.

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. . . the Supreme Court has essentially agreed to review its 1978 decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*; a case similar to the Michigan cases, in which an unsuccessful white applicant to medical school sued the university for discrimination. . . . In a 5-4 decision, the court ruled that, while quotas were impermissible,

universities could legally take race into consideration during the admission process.

Though the *Bakke* case has been used to justify affirmative action programs, the court's decision did not provide unambiguous guidance. In effect, the why and how of affirmative action have remained unresolved for the past 25 years. . . . Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr. . . . argued that the creation of a diverse student body was also a compelling state interest, and could therefore justify the consideration of race during the admission process. It is this. . . interpretation—that **affirmative action in admissions is important because the quality of the university and its programs depend, in part, on diversity**—that the University of Michigan is defending. I have decided that the stakes in the Michigan case are so high and diversity is so important to our university, that Carnegie Mellon will actively support the University of Michigan by filing a friend of the court brief in favor of their position.



Affirmative Action: What Does it Mean at Carnegie Mellon?

Twenty-five years after the *Bakke* decision, and almost 35 years since the death of Dr. King, why does the practice of affirmative action continue to roil our universities, our workplaces, and our country? Part of the controversy surrounding affirmative action stems, I think, from the fact that it means different things in different contexts. . . . With this in mind, I'd like to tell you a little bit about what affirmative action means in the case of undergraduate admissions at Carnegie Mellon.

First, I need to talk about what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that we have quotas, or set-asides. Second, and more important, it doesn't mean that we are admitting students who are unqualified to be here, or who are incapable of doing the work, just because they are members of an underrepresented minority. I can't stress this strongly enough: **everyone who is admitted to Carnegie Mellon deserves to be here, both for academic reasons and for what he or she contributes outside of the classroom, and everyone is highly capable of excelling academically.** If they weren't, we wouldn't admit them. It wouldn't be fair to them, and it wouldn't be fair to the academic community as a whole.

Carnegie Mellon is in the privileged position of having more excellent students apply here each year than we can possibly admit. . . . Over the past five years, Carnegie Mellon has attracted between 13,000 and 16,000 applicants annually. What this means, then, is that **we have the luxury of admitting students who are both academically qualified and who contribute something else to the university community.**

So each year, once our admission committee has identified all the academically talented students—the applicants it knows can do the work—it asks a second set of questions: What will this particular applicant contribute to the mix of students? How will he or she help make our student body the finest it can be? There are a lot of answers to these questions. Some of our applicants are excellent athletes. Some come from abroad. Some attended public schools, and others, private. Some have parents who went to this university; others have parents who never went to college. Some applicants are black, some are white, others Asian American, Hispanic or Native American. Some are women and some, men. There are many important attributes, all of which we want to consider in the admission process.

. . . So what do I have to say to you on a day devoted to celebrating one man's vision of a vibrant, multicultural America, an America strengthened by recognizing the diversity of its people? It is simply this: Affirmative action is not unfair. Affirmative action has not outlived its importance. Affirmative action does not mean lowering our standards, and it does not require sacrificing quality. Rather, **affirmative action is essential to making Carnegie Mellon a diverse university, which is crucial for making it the best university that it can be.** And that, in my opinion, is something very much worth fighting for – all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary.

Vision for Diversity at Carnegie Mellon

Carnegie Mellon embraces diversity as a core value – central and indivisible from the pursuit of intellectual and artistic excellence.

We are committed to establishing a campus culture that reflects a fundamental respect for one another, because of our differences, not in spite of them. We intend to assure every individual the opportunity to reach her or his potential.

Carnegie Mellon will be a university where all members of our community feel a sense of belonging, perceive that their contributions are valued and respected, and view the environment as one in which they can flourish.

Why Diversity?

Why Affirmative Action?



By Carnegie Mellon President Jared L. Cohon

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