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ABSTRACT

Affirmative action remains one of the most controversial of social policies in complex democracies. Altman and Promise (1995), in their article entitled "Affirmative Action: The Law of Unintended Consequences," focuses on the phenomenon that almost every action of government, no matter how well intentioned, has unexpected results. They suggest that "institutional hypocrisy" and "intellectual mush" are the two unintended consequences of affirmative action. Spence (1993), in "Affirmative Action at Mid-Life," maintains that the most repeated and least substantiated criticism of affirmative action is that it undermines merit selection. He suggests that affirmative action merely adds race, ethnicity, and gender as additional criteria that may be used in choosing among the qualified. Cross (1994), in "What If There Was No Affirmative Action in College Admissions?," uses statistics to support his case for affirmative action. He concludes that under strict merit-based admissions, based solely on Scholastic Assessment Tests scores, blacks would obtain only about 1.5 percent of all admissions to the top U.S. colleges and universities, denying the majority of black students now enrolled at such schools the top-quality education they are receiving. (MDM)

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Running head: Affirmative Action in Higher Education: Three

Affirmative Action in Higher Education:
Three Approaches to the Issue

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Affirmative Action in Higher Education: Three Approaches to the Issue

Affirmative action as a concept was formulated in 1941 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraged minority employment by ordering defense contractors to cease discriminatory hiring (Yates, 1993). Today, affirmative action remains one of the most controversial of social policies in complex democracies (Stimpson, 1993). Supporters of affirmative action insist that affirmative action programs ensure that qualified minorities have access to institutions while opponents argue that these same programs are quota systems that often admit unqualified applicants ("Affirmative Action," 1996). Affirmative action as a topic of discussion has created views that are as diverse as they are profound. A summary of three articles that give different perspectives to the meaning and possible approaches to affirmative action follows.

Altman and Promis (1995) discuss affirmative action in terms of the "Law of Unintended Consequences." This phenomenon notes that "almost every action of government, no matter how well intentioned, has unexpected results" (p. 9). Altman and Promis (1995) suggest that "institutional hypocrisy" and "intellectual mush" are the two unintended consequences of affirmative action. In discussing institutional hypocrisy, they state that not much has really changed over the last twenty years of "enforced" affirmative action. White males still control the upper ranks of the professoriate and administration at the majority of institutions. In addition, affirmative action goals are more focused on numbers instead of quality assurance. Even a respectable journal like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* frequently contains announcements of faculty positions without

specifying disciplines which suggests that academic qualifications are less important than minority status.

Intellectual mush is concerned with “mushy thinking on the part of those perceived as the intellectual elite” (Altman & Promis, 1995, p. 9). Affirmative action opponents state that “it is against American principles of justice to sacrifice the rights of individuals for the benefit of some group” (p. 10). This view is considered intellectual mush because it does not reflect the reality of the working population subsidizing the retired, the disabled, and welfare recipients. Neither does it reflect tax paying citizens that subsidize farmers, everyone who defaults on a federally guaranteed loan, and foreign aid recipients. All and all America has a long history of taking from one to benefit another. Altman and Promis (1995) conclude by suggesting that supporters and opponents of affirmative action should study the meaning, impact, and ramifications of affirmative action to determine how it can best be dealt with in the “real” world.

Spence (1993) focuses on two criticisms of affirmative action in his article, “Affirmative Action at Mid-Life.” He responds to the charge that affirmative action undermines standards and to the claim that it is unfair to white males. As far as Spence (1993) is concerned, the most repeated and least substantiated criticism is that affirmative action undermines merit selection and the use of qualification criteria. His argument is that if affirmative action lowers standards, then their should be demonstrable declines in academic excellence. However, no one has suggested that the overall excellence of the nation’s most academically competitive colleges and universities has been compromised as a result of diversity in their student body. Instead opponents of affirmative action focus on the evidence that blacks and Latinos may have lower grade point averages, standardized

test scores, and lower graduation rates. He adds that blacks and Latinos' under-performance is not surprising since they are more than likely to come from weaker backgrounds, and that minority group status brings special challenges to any college situation. As a result, graduation rate data must be considered in terms of these challenges along with academics. He suggests that evaluation of minority students' academic performance should be used to assess whether students are benefiting from the educational opportunity.

In terms of the charge that affirmative action treats white males unfairly, Spence (1993) notes that affirmative action is consistent with the tradition of this nation's history. "A universal reality of competition for a finite number of positions is that some candidates, though qualified, will be turned away" (p. 29). Affirmative action merely adds race, ethnicity, and gender as additional criteria that may be used in choosing among the qualified. He suggests that these attacks on affirmative action stem from a "deeply held assumption that a qualified white male is entitled to prevail over qualified minorities and white women" (p. 29).

Spence (1993) concludes with strategies to confront opponents of affirmative action. One of these strategies suggest that proponents "reinforce the idea that including race, ethnicity, and gender as criteria for choosing among qualified applicants reduces the effects of historic and current discrimination and fosters richer educational and work environments" (Spence, 1993, p. 29).

Cross (1994) uses statistics to support his case for affirmative action. In his article, "What If There Was No Affirmative Action in College Admissions?" he makes the point that "the strong moral force that argues for abolishing the injustice of affirmative action

must also be judged by the practical consequences of doing precisely that” (p. 52). The first statistic that he addresses concerns the mean SAT score of 1291 for all students who enroll at the nation’s twenty-five top-rated universities. In order for this score to be met, blacks would have to score an average of 650 on both the math and verbal portions of the SAT. Statistics from the College Board show that in the entire country only 1,523 blacks scored above 650 on the math SAT and only 603 blacks scored above 650 on the verbal portion of the test. This is in contrast to over 74,000 whites who scored above 650 on the math SAT and over 23,000 whites who scored higher than 650 on the verbal SAT. In percentages, of all the students who scored above 650 on the verbal and math portion of the SAT, blacks represent only 1.7 percent for the verbal and 1.4 percent for the math.

Cross (1994) adds that “under strict merit-based admissions based solely on SAT scores, blacks would win only about 1.5 percent of all admissions to the nation’s top colleges and universities” (p. 53). In numbers “roughly 2,300 black students per year would be denied the top-quality education they are now receiving with the benefit of preferential admissions” (p.53). Given that 800 is the perfect score for each portion of the SAT, it must also be noted that blacks make up only .6 percent for the verbal portion and .7 percent for the math portion of those students who score at 750 and above. If there were no affirmative action at the 11 universities with the highest mean SAT scores, it is most likely that only 150 blacks would gain admission as opposed to the 1000 that are currently enrolled. With affirmative action, the nation’s top-rated institutions are admitting large numbers of black students with SAT scores that are far lower than the scores of white students that these universities admit.

Without preferential admissions, very few blacks would be admitted to law schools or medical schools, and lower scoring but qualified blacks would be left without places in higher education. In conclusion, Cross (1994) raises a thought provoking question. "Is our nation--either by legislative, court order, or public pressure---prepared to return our great universities to a near lily-white state similar to that which existed 25 years ago?" (p. 55).

The aforementioned articles are only a small sample of the vast number of articles written on affirmative action; however, these articles cover an array of ideas, opinions, and facts that are important to the understanding of affirmative action. It would seem that regardless of the approach, discarding affirmative action from the educational system would be more detrimental to society than living with real or perceived negative impacts.

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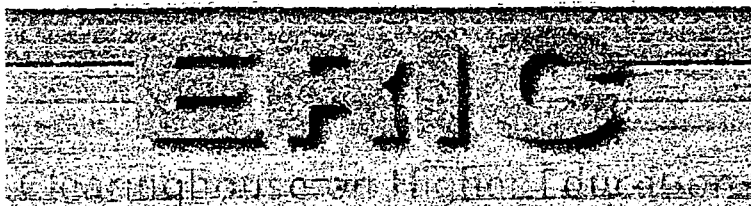
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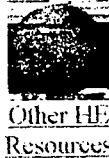
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