

On the Importance of Diversity in Higher Education

The American Council on Education (ACE) has a longstanding record of commitment to access to higher education for all qualified Americans and to the advancement of equal educational opportunity. This commitment is reflected in ACE's positions on public policy, its programmatic activities, and its employment practices. It has been expressed repeatedly in resolutions by the ACE Board of Directors regarding affirmative action, nondiscrimination, equity, equal opportunity, and admission standards.

America's colleges and universities differ in many ways. Some are public, others are independent; some are large urban universities, some are two-year community colleges, and still others are small rural campuses. Some offer graduate and professional programs, others focus primarily on undergraduate education. Each of our more than 4,000 colleges and universities has its own specific and distinct mission. This collective diversity among institutions is one of the great strengths of America's higher education system, and has helped make it the best in the world. Preserving that diversity is essential if we hope to serve the needs of our democratic society and of the increasingly global scope of the economy.

Similarly, many colleges and universities share a common belief, borne of experience, that diversity in their student bodies, faculties, and staff is important for them to fulfill their primary mission: providing a high-quality education. The public is entitled to know why these institutions believe so strongly that racial and ethnic diversity should be one factor among the many considered in admissions. The reasons include:

Diversity enriches the educational experience. We learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment.

It promotes personal growth-and a healthy society. Diversity challenges stereotyped preconceptions; it encourages critical thinking; and it helps students learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds.

It strengthens communities and the workplace. Education within a diverse setting prepares students to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork; and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions.

It enhances America's economic competitiveness. Sustaining the nation's prosperity in the 21st century requires us to make effective use of the talents and abilities of all our citizens, in work settings that bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

American colleges and universities traditionally have enjoyed significant latitude in fulfilling their missions. Americans have understood that there is no single model of a good college, and that no single standard can predict with certainty the lifetime contribution of a teacher or a student. Yet the freedom to determine who shall teach and be taught has been restricted in a number of places, and come under attack in others. As a result, some schools have experienced precipitous declines in the enrollment of students

from underrepresented minority groups, reversing decades of progress in the effort to ensure that all groups in American society have an equal opportunity for access to higher education.

Diversity on college campuses is not achieved through quotas. Nor does diversity justify or warrant admission of unqualified applicants. However, the diversity we seek and the future of the nation do require that colleges and universities continue to be able to reach out and make a conscious effort to build healthy and diverse learning environments that are appropriate for their missions. The success of higher education and the strength of our democracy depend on it.

ACE Board of Directors, June 2012