

PERSPECTIVES

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Community Perspectives on the Affirmative Action Debate

Since its inception in the 1960s affirmative action has provoked strong opinions from supporters and opponents alike. Opponents of the policy view affirmative action as contrary to the principles of equality espoused during the civil rights movement and see it as reinforcing divisions along racial, gender, and other social lines that the civil rights movement was intended to overcome. Proponents of affirmative action see it as a crucial mechanism to address inequitable access to education and employment which, along with other factors, are keys to upward mobility.

On Election Day this November, Michigan residents will cast a vote on Proposal 2—an initiative that will, if passed, eliminate the use of race- and sex-based affirmative action in public contracting, public employment and public education in the State of Michigan. This measure, put forth by the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI), is modeled after similar ballot initiatives that were successful in California in 1996 and the state of Washington in 1998. Regardless of the viewpoints individuals may hold about this important issue it is incumbent upon all Michiganders to be aware and fully informed of the potential impact of this ballot proposal

An important component to understanding the legitimacy of affirmative action programs is the voice of regular people, who have their own perspective on issues of inequality and fairness based on their daily experiences. This edition of *Perspectives* is intended to illuminate the issues surrounding affirmative action and educational inequalities from the point of view of local community members talking about college access. It is not the intent of the authors to take a position on the pending ballot initiative nor to present the history of affirmative action. Instead the sole purpose of this edition is to consider the words and opinions of residents from across the state regarding their views on affirmative action.

Access to Democracy Project

For the past two years, over 120 organized dialogues have been convened across the state in a variety of communities from Grand Rapids to Jackson to Detroit to Sault Ste. Marie about higher education and college access in Michigan. These discussions have been part of the *Access to Democracy* (A2D) project, a statewide initiative that engages community members, students, and civic leaders in dialogues on topics such as who should be attending college, what are the benefits associated with obtaining a college degree, and what are the ways to make college accessible to those who wish to attend.

Affirmative action was not explicitly the focus of this initiative, but a number of themes emerged from the conversations that offer insight into how Michigan residents view educational equity – and the intersection of race and education – in the state. These themes, which are often intertwined in practice and can serve to limit access to higher education for some, included systemic barriers, financial constraints, and preparation (or under-preparation) for higher education. We discuss each in detail below, as well as our own assessment of how affirmative action fits into the conversations.

Affirmative Action

The *Access to Democracy* dialogues did not directly ask participants about their opinions on the topic of affirmative action but the materials used to guide the discussion included references to affirmative action. Questions were asked about who should be attending college and what barriers might exist for students. Affirmative action was specifically mentioned 17 times across all the dialogues. Most who mentioned it were in favor of continuing the policy, but they also believed affirmative action should not be the sole means by

which a “level playing field” is achieved. For example, a woman from Grand Rapids Community College stated,

You’re right, our color shouldn’t matter, but it does. It’s a big difference. So yes, we need affirmative action, but we also need need-based action. I don’t think that you should just be accepted [to college] because you’re Black, but I don’t think you should be rejected because you’re Black.

Primary and secondary education reforms were brought up frequently in the dialogues, both as part of the “level playing field” conversation and as a critical issue that people believed should accompany affirmative action discussions. In a comment that is consistent with beliefs expressed by many of the dialogue participants, a man from Jackson commented that:

...the emphasis shouldn’t be based on affirmative action entrance situations. It should be dealt back down more into the secondary education system, and maybe putting different school systems on a more even playing field.

An equally important finding stems from what dialogue participants *did not* say about affirmative action—or rather, their frequent avoidance of the term. It appears through the dialogues that, while people avoided the discussion of affirmative action directly, they did talk about race, sex, class and inequality, all of which are part of the affirmative action conversation. Affirmative action is a contentious issue and it is not easy for many people to talk about, particularly in large groups.

Systemic Barriers

A number of people in the dialogues agreed that there is an “unlevel playing field” where education is concerned; in other words, injustices still exist in society today based upon socially constructed characteristics, most notably race and class. People believe that racism still exists today, although it may materialize in ways that are less transparent than in the past. According to a Grand Rapids Community College student,

...people said that race shouldn’t matter and it shouldn’t matter – we are all the same and our brains are all the same – but realistically it does matter ... we live in a world where there has never been a black president ... in our children’s schools the educational quality is lower, they’re not pushed to be in AP classes.

The idea of social reproduction, where the most privileged and powerful groups in society ensure that their offspring receive top quality education, often at the cost of access to education for less privileged groups, was a related theme throughout the conversations. Many people noted the importance of family and community support systems and the importance of successful role models. A participant in the Detroit dialogues said,

I think that wanting to go to college and thinking that you can actually go to college are two different things ... especially when you are in the Detroit community and more urban communities and the more Black communities. Not many of them think that it is a reality ... they don’t think it is actually possible because they don’t see many people in the neighborhood or in their families who actually go.

Some participants discussed the stigma attached to educational attainment in some minority communities. In other words, being educated is equated with “being White,” and by proxy abandoning one’s own racial identity. Community members believe that this pressure can deter minority students from pursuing higher education.

Financial Constraints

Lack of money and competition for limited resources to fund higher education for needy students was a major topic of conversation throughout the dialogues. Many believed that trends in higher education funding which has generally shifted toward loans and away from scholarships/grants, is a special problem for minority and low income students. Even loans themselves may not be sufficient. An educator from Washtenaw County mentioned that

...a lot of the students [who were in college with me] – mostly minorities, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds – have been qualified to get into school and perform well but had to leave because they could not afford school. There was a cap on how much we could take out in loans.

Where competing for limited college admissions is concerned, several dialogue participants discussed expensive services such as the SAT or ACT test preparation programs which they believe improve a student's chances of being admitted to a selective university – but which cost a great deal of money. Such “extras” are perceived to be purchased or used disproportionately by non-minority groups to gain an unfair advantage.

Preparation for Higher Education

Many residents agree that the state's primary and secondary schools are not equal in terms of quality or financial resources. A student at Grand Rapids Community College stated,

...you've got to be honest; the inner city is not afforded the same curriculum as the schools in the suburbs.

Dialogue participants generally believe that districts in poorer, urban, or heavily minority areas are lower in quality. According to another Grand Rapids Community College student,

...in our children's schools the educational quality is lower. They're not pushed to be in AP classes. That's usually reserved for the richer, wealthier students.

A related point that emerged throughout the dialogues was that certain schools demand more out of their students. Additionally, dialogue participants believe that some districts have higher expectations of students, which translates into increased student aspirations and college-going behavior. For example, an educator in Washtenaw County observed that:

...okay, maybe college isn't made for everyone, but my concern is: Who is deciding that? In Detroit Public Schools, you see a lot of ROTC courses and vocational courses that

you don't see in suburban schools. So who is saying that “these students are not made to go to college, and students in suburban schools are?”

People similarly believe in the importance of family support for students who aspire to attend college. Components for this support include involvement in primary and secondary school academics (e.g., parents making sure that their children complete homework), assistance with getting through the college selection, admissions, and enrollment processes, and ongoing encouragement and financial assistance while a student is enrolled in college. As a man in Detroit noted,

...some people have a stronger support system at home. It is based on the students themselves to take on the responsibility and go the extra mile, but those who have those parents on top paying attention, and helping with the test to actually help prepare them for college, things like that – a lot of people don't have those advantages.

A high school teacher in Bloomfield Hills concurred, reflecting on her own experiences:

I was raised as “we don't go to college. We are blue collar workers. We don't go to college. If you are a woman you get married.”

Conclusion

As is often the case in heated political debates, the voices of ordinary individuals are drowned out by the intensity and the rhetoric of the election campaigns. The sentiments represented by the Michigan residents to whom we have listened conveys ongoing concerns about inequalities that are based on social class and race. The comments by these individuals were communicated in the context of their overall anxiety about the inequitable access to higher education and what this inequity of access means for them and their families. To many people, the affirmative action debate is not one of abstract theory or political positioning, but rather a reflection of their legitimate concern about society's fairness.

As responsible citizens, voters have an obligation to be informed about the issues and candidates for

which or for whom they cast a ballot. The debate about affirmative action can be confusing and intense. Both proponents and opponents of Proposal 2 use arguments about fairness, equity and social justice to support their position. This edition of *Perspectives* has attempted to re-insert the point of view of regular people in the current debate. Regardless of where one stands on the proposal it is important that we consider the perspectives of others as we act upon our civic responsibility.

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Please feel free to share this document with others. If you have not received it directly but would like to receive future issues, e-mail us at ndaunba@umich.edu. Additionally, we always welcome comments and suggestions as we continue to foster and facilitate the conversation about promoting educational success in Michigan.

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