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Will diversity return to UC?

By Mitchell J. Chang

When Ward Connerly attended his final meeting as a member of the University of California Board of Regents last month, much was said about his “legacy” in higher education. Certainly, he was instrumental in banning the use of race in admissions and hiring throughout the state. He did this by first leading a campaign in 1995 to end UC’s use of affirmative action in any form and then by leading an effort at the state level in 1996 with Proposition 209 to achieve similar goals.

He reportedly views those two accomplishments to be the highlight of his career as a regent, a dubious distinction given that many will ultimately judge his legacy by whether or not those accomplishments advance diversity or diminish it.

Recent decisions handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court have done little to validate Connerly’s efforts. In June 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that race-conscious admissions serve a “compelling interest” and allowed colleges and universities to continue considering race as one of many factors when reviewing applicants individually. Although this important ruling has national implications, the court’s decision does not invalidate a referendum such as Prop. 209 that was approved by California voters, one that has had an alarming impact on University of California enrollments.

Yet the change — a sharp reduction in the proportion of African American and Latino students admitted and enrolled in the UC system, with the sharpest drops at UC Berkeley and UCLA — has gone largely unnoticed by California voters. When minority enrollment numbers drop precipitously, the UC Regents come under great pressure to reconfigure the admissions and financial-aid processes in ways that yield more African American and Latino students. The pressure comes primarily from lawmakers and concerned taxpayers who speak for or live in communities that underutilize publicly supported higher education. Those communities tend to have

disproportionately more African American and Latino residents and do not get the much-needed support to improve their schools so that their students can more competitively qualify for UC enrollment.

Imperfect though affirmative action might be, finding effective solutions to compensate for its absence are not within easy reach. Some common changes are to de-emphasize standardized test scores when judging applicants, to guarantee admissions to students who graduate in a designated top percentage of their high school class and to evaluate more carefully an applicant's personal essay. However, the outcomes and wisdom associated with each change are as hotly debated and contested as race-conscious admissions practices once were, making such options just as controversial.

By having an immediate and sharp negative effect on the flow of African American and Latino students into higher education, Connerly's efforts also dramatically interrupt the educational benefits of diversity that were endorsed by the Supreme Court. Whether this will be a short-term interruption or a more permanent one in the UC system will largely depend on the extent to which diversity is a public mandate for higher education. If added benefits are desired, the public must come to recognize the important public mission of higher education to broadly serve the people of California and support efforts to improve access for those in underserved communities.

After the important first step of enrolling larger numbers of underrepresented students, educators must make a commitment to maximize the benefits associated with diversity. This can be achieved by addressing past and present discrimination on campus, developing a more inclusive curriculum, nurturing the academic potential of underrepresented students, and providing meaningful co-curricular activities that engage more students on campus so that they can learn to interact freely, wisely and responsibly with one another.

The educational benefits associated with diversity have been empirically documented and were recently endorsed by the Supreme Court. The UC system can still add in unique ways to students' educational experiences and learning irrespective of Connerly's legacy. We need, however, more public action such as the one that will take place at UC Berkeley on March 3rd to reverse the drop in underrepresented minority enrollment.

Mitchell J. Chang, an associate professor at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, wrote "Compelling Interest: Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Colleges and Universities" (Stanford University Press, 2003).

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