

# Affirmative Action: When Color Outweighs Character

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ione Deollos", written in a cursive style.

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## Abstract

Affirmative action is currently under fire in colleges and universities across America. The purpose of this thesis is to explore affirmative action in higher education and its' effects on the African American community. The issues of black self-doubt, poor schools, the stigma of "acting white," and racial tension will be discussed in detail. In the end, I hope that this thesis will create awareness in the reader about some of the "forgotten issues" of affirmative action and that the reader refines his or her own opinion on the controversial topic.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Affirmative action, this simple phrase has become a “hot button” in American society today; the very mention of affirmative action elicits comments that range from all out praise to obstinate indignation. Along with religion and politics, affirmative action is quickly becoming a Blacklisted conversation topic. Raging debates on the subject inundate news broadcasts, radio airways, and printed materials. Currently, debates have been focused on the use of affirmative action in higher education as a result of inquiry into the fairness and necessity of the practice. Proponents of affirmative action allege that its’ implementation is more than necessary to ensure that underrepresented minorities receive equal opportunity; those of the majority that are slighted as a result are seen as absorbable casualties in the greater war for equality. Opponents of affirmative action contend that the practice is not necessary because it does not promote equality; in fact, it creates further discrimination. Trenches have been dug and the division over affirmative action is evident all over the United States, but most notably in the African American community because of its’ noticeable implications. What exactly are these implications, how do they affect the Black community, and do the benefits of affirmative action outweigh them? Although the implementation of affirmative action in university admissions appears to be a logical solution to past and present racial bias and has helped numerous African Americans into institutes of higher learning, its’ use can do more harm than good for African Americans. This is due to the underlying problem of poor schools and cultural pressures within the African American community remaining unaddressed; the self doubt that those aided by affirmative action may experience; racial relations growing tense because Caucasians feel slighted; and the continued helpless condition of African Americans that affirmative action insinuates. In our

nation today, it is obvious that something is needed to level the playing field, but do the results of affirmative action offset the damage that it causes?

### History of Affirmative Action

To understand the consequences of affirmative action on the African American community it is necessary to understand the history of affirmative action. President John F. Kennedy's Executive Order 10925 in March 1961 first employed the term "affirmative action". The purpose of the executive order was to create the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, which would work to eradicate discrimination in the American workplace. All federal contracts were mandated to include the clause,

*The Contractor will not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, creed, color, or national origin. The Contractor will take affirmative action, to ensue that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin. (Executive Order 10925)*

The strong stance for civil rights was continued even after the unfortunate assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, through the perseverance of his successor President Lyndon Johnson, who was also a proponent for minority equality. In 1964, the monumental Civil Rights Act was signed into effect and emphasized the prohibition of discrimination in all federal financially aided institutions; affirmative action now entered the scene in the nation's public universities. During his commencement address at Howard University in 1965, President

— Johnson spoke of his commitment to leveling the playing field for African Americans in the United States,

*You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "You are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates [...] We seek not [...] just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.*

(Johnson 1965)

### — Court Challenges of Affirmative Action

The issue of "completely fair" would prove to be the hardest aspect of affirmative action to establish in the workplace and even more so in higher education. In 1978, Mr. Allan Bakke brought one of the most influential cases against affirmative action before the Supreme Court. Bakke had applied to the medical program at the University of California, Davis but was denied admission because there was no space in the program. Feeling that he was a competitive applicant, Bakke investigated the qualifications of admitted students and found that several minority students were admitted to the medical school even though they were less qualified than Bakke himself. These minority students were allowed admittance so that the university could reach its' minority quota of 16%. In the *California vs. Bakke* case, the Supreme Court set a precedent in that while race was still a viable factor in the admissions process, quota systems — could not be equated with the policy of affirmative action. In 1996, a similar court case was

— brought before the Supreme Court, *Hopwood vs. University of Texas Law School*. Cheryl Hopwood and three other Caucasian students were denied admission at the University of Texas Law School, whereas, as in the Bakke case, less qualified minority students gained a spot in the law program. As a result of the case, the United States 5<sup>th</sup> Court of Appeals suspended the practice of affirmative action in admissions at the school. In 1997, the Texas State Attorney General suggested that all public universities in the state of Texas abstain from using race as a factor in college admissions.

Although the practice of affirmative action was not banned in the state of Texas, the state of California made affirmative action illegal. Proposition 209 was voted into effect by the slim margin of 54% to 46% and called for an end to race, gender or, ethnicity as factors in hiring or admissions policies. Washington State soon followed suit in 1998 with their Initiative 200, — which also abolished the practice of affirmative action of any kind in the state. Controversy over affirmative action in higher education raged on, even into a new century. In 2000, the *Gratz vs. Bollinger* case was heard in federal court to decide whether or not the admissions policy at the University of Michigan was fair. Jennifer Gratz and several other students seeking undergraduate admissions into the university felt that they were not admitted because they were not members of a racial minority group. The process of admissions at the University of Michigan is based on a points system which takes several factors into consideration, one of them being race. The federal court ruled that this practice to increase diversity at the university was constitutional, but this was not to be the end of the debate. In 2001, affirmative action was called into question again with *Grutter vs. Bollinger*, this time, the question was admissions policy at the graduate level. Once again, an individual was not accepted at the University of Michigan — based on the fact that race was used in the decision making process. This time, the judge ruled

— against the school's policy because he felt that, "*intellectual diversity bears no obvious or necessary relationship to racial diversity*" (Bernard Friedman 2001), but his ruling was later appealed and affirmative action was once again constitutional at the University of Michigan. The resurrection of the issue was inevitable and in 2003, the Supreme Court will get a chance to redefine the constitutionality of affirmative action at the University of Michigan as a new case against admissions procedures is heard. The decision in this case will have great repercussions on admissions standards at universities throughout the United States; a perfect example of this is the current state of affirmative action at Virginia Tech. The school's Board of Visitors voted to ban the use of affirmative action in admissions policies. National groups in favor of affirmative action as well as students and staff quickly mobilized to protest the decision. Due to strong objections and in the hope that the coming University of Michigan decision would give further — guidance, the board voted again and reinstated affirmative action at the university. It can only be expected that this scene will be played out at institutes of higher learning throughout our nation as the fate of affirmative action is decided.

It is evident that the history of affirmative action is constantly changing because of the varying landscape of our country's political, moral, and social values; the policy that was put into affect over forty years ago is still being scrutinized by the very nation it was supposed to help. Time will tell the uncertain outcome of affirmative action in higher education as its' history is continually amended.

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## Affirmative Action in Higher Education

It is very apparent that many question the implementation of affirmative action in higher education, but exactly what form does this controversial course of action take at colleges and universities. The answer is not a simple one, schools that choose to adhere to the rules of affirmative action takes their own liberties when it comes to its' execution during the admissions process. Some schools, such as the University of Michigan, have well publicized admissions procedures, such as a point system to admit students into their university. Up to 150 points are allotted based on academics, test scores, and other factors, including race. An African American student applying to the university would automatically receive twenty points due to the fact that he or she is from an "underrepresented minority group." Most other schools of higher education take a less pronounced approach, but still give special attention to minority applicants. At Ball State University, affirmative action in admissions is implemented in the recruiting process, but no special consideration is given to minority groups during the review of applications. Ball State's main goal is to gather a diverse applicant pool with the hopes that they will be able to admit students that meet the academic standards of the university. Affirmative action policies are in effect at a large number of colleges and university in the United States, although there is an air of mystery around the exact methodology that most universities use to make such allowances for minorities. This air of mystery is undoubtedly due to the controversial nature of affirmative action in higher education.

Why do colleges make such painstaking efforts to make sure that their minority enrollment is healthy? What do they gain by having minorities attend their campuses? In our current day and age, diversity has become the buzzword in and around higher education circles.

*A White female affirmative action officer at an Ivy League university told me what many supporters of affirmative action now say: "We're after diversity. We ideally want a student body where racial and ethnic groups are represented according to proportion in society." When affirmative action escalated into social engineering, diversity became a golden word. (Steele 115)*

Diversity has been hailed as the saving grace of our society and the brass ring for which colleges and universities across the nation strive. The goals of a diversified campus are to: *"(1) combat racist policies and practices vested in campuses; and (2) to forge campuses that included traits and events that reflected a pluralistic society"* (Valverde 21). It is a highly touted notion that one's education is incomplete without exposure to people that are different from one's self and there is much validity in this view; college is an opportunity for individuals to clarify their principles and incorporate new concepts into their value systems. Multiculturalism at colleges and universities helps to dispel stereotypes, facilitates dialogue between people from different walks of life, and provides exposure to situations that students will encounter when they enter the world of work. To make a campus more diverse, schools look to recruit any and all types of minorities; racial, gender, and ethnic minorities are sought after as well as those persons with physical and learning disabilities. Any group that has grievances with being slighted are high commodities in higher education and African Americans are no exception to this rule.

### Why is there an “Educational Gap” between Blacks and Caucasian Students?

Institutes of higher education across the United States feel pressure from within, as well as without, to increase the enrollment of African Americans on their campuses as a result of the notable past injustices that the group has endured as well as the continual existence of an unlevelled playing field. During the 1960's, many of the laws and policies created as products of the Civil Rights Movement, including affirmative action, were mainly aimed to ameliorate the sub-standard condition of Blacks in America. It was painfully obvious that African Americans were not afforded the same opportunities as Caucasians as a result of deep seeded prejudice and social mores. As the intended effects of Civil Rights laws and policies came to fruition in the 1970's, only 107,974 of young African American students were enrolled at 4 year institutes of higher learning as freshmen in 1976, with only 5% of the Black population over 25 years old having earned a bachelor's degree (Williams 1999). Compared with Caucasian Americans, who made up an overwhelmingly vast majority of college students, African Americans had a great amount of “catching up” to accomplish. As to be expected, this tremendous gap has slimmed somewhat due to economic pressures to earn a degree and the importance that our society places on a college education, but the gap is still there.

The “educational gap” is not only apparent in enrollment numbers, but also in standardized test scores and grade point averages of graduating African Americans. If an African American child is as intellectually prepared for college as a White student, he or she is still often at a disadvantage when compared to other Caucasian students and the cause for this fact is still not entirely known.

In a study done in 1989, 10,558 high school graduates in the United States who had enrolled in one of 11 institutions of higher education were tracked. Among the students, there

were 758 Blacks and 7,673 Whites. The remaining 2,127 students were mostly made up of Hispanic and Asian students. The researchers noted the students' grade point averages and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores that were used in deciding the student's admittance into their respective schools. The disparity of the scores and GPAs between the African American and Caucasian students was astounding. The average SAT scores of the Black students was 1131 out of 1600 compared to an average score of 1306 for White students. The average grade point average for the surveyed Black students was 2.80 on a 4.00 scale, whereas the average GPA for White students was a 3.30. Factors, such as socioeconomic status, were looked to as sources for the academic gaps, but such factors did not prove to be the cause of the inequity (Bowen and Vars 1998). Proponents of affirmative action would point to the research results as proof that affirmative action is needed to level the playing field for African Americans and this may well be true, but the fundamental reason for the lower scores is still unaddressed. Affirmative action helps to smooth over the predicament at the college level, but the poor schooling that many African American children receive from the moment they enter their kindergarten class until they walk across the stage to receive their high school diploma remains. Not all Black children are subject to being caught in a failing school system, but more often than not, the unfortunate truth is that Black children are being slighted when it comes to their education.

#### Sub-Par School's Role in Propagating the "Gap"

During the 1960's and 1970's, there was an evident color line drawn in the United States, schools were either all Black or all White. Schools that were mostly Black were often located in impoverished inner cities, while schools that were made up mostly of Caucasian students were in

— middle class suburbs; to combat this problem, school boards began to bus African American students from their inner city schools to ones in the White suburbs to encourage a mixing of the races. Black families also aided the effort by moving to areas in which Whites were the majority. The results of the mixing were positive for the most part and in the late 1980's only 32% of African American students attended a public school that was 90 to 100% Black (Orfield and Eaton 2003). Regrettably, the unforeseen phenomena of "White flight," in which White families moved as more African Americans appeared in their neighborhoods, took place. As a result, the number of Black students attending all Black schools is steadily increasing. In the year 2002, 40% of all Black children, went to a school that was 90-100% Black (Orfield and Eaton 2003). Now once again it is important to stress that a majority Black school is not necessarily one that is failing based on the fact that it is made up of mostly Black students, but a fairly good number of them are. Majority Black schools in large inner cities tend to fair the worst as evidenced in the graduation rates of Cleveland, Ohio and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In Cleveland, the graduation rate was a dismal 29% for African American children. In Milwaukee, while 73% of Caucasians graduated from high school, a mere 34% of Black children received a high school diploma in 1998 (Rulon 2001). School conditions can be deplorable in the inner city as a result of inadequacies in state school funding. In a commentary on aspects of Jonathan Kozol's book, Savage Inequalities, Elena Rutherford candidly speaks about Kozol's experiences on visits to inner city schools in East St. Louis, Chicago, Washington D.C. and several other large cities. In a heartbreaking interview with a Black student attending a school in East St Louis, the student gives her take on the condition of schools in her area, "*We have a school in East St. Louis named for Dr. King. The school is full of sewer water and the doors are locked with chains. Every student in that school is Black. It's like a terrible joke on history*" (Rutherford 2002). In another

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episode, a fifth grader in Washington D.C. makes a wish list for her school, she wishes that someone would, “buy doors for the toilet stalls in the girl’s bathroom” and “make [the building] pretty,” because the “way it is, I feel ashamed” (Rutherford 2002). What kind of education can a student receive in an environment that is contaminated with sewer water and where doors on toilet stalls do not exist? If sufficient funding is not being allotted to secure basic human rights, such as sanitary conditions, imagine the funding that is available for educational materials such as books and computers? The reality is that Black children in predominately-Black schools are unable to put much faith in the education that they receive and so their college dreams are dashed before they even are afforded a chance to have them.

#### African American Culture as a Culprit in the “Educational Gap”

A second, and often overlooked, cause of underachievement by African American’s is the culture’s own pressure on Black students to view educational success as “acting White.” In his book, The Content of Our Character, Shelby Steele defines this trend,

*As individuals, Blacks cannot help but want the same sorts of things all individuals want, namely a better life – an education, a home, a prosperous career, a well-cared-for family, maybe fame and wealth. But the pursuit of these things will inevitably draw us into the American mainstream where we will surely encounter much racial vulnerability. And this is the point at which our racial identity, out of the impulse to make us seem proud and invulnerable, can become a hegemonic censor that holds us back by recompensing vulnerability in such a way that moving ahead as an individual amounts to racial betrayal. (Steele 71)*

This cultural force actually discourages Blacks from stepping out of the confines of oppression that they have been forced to endure for generations, unless the path of escape is something that society expects Blacks to excel in. Often times African American children are given a basketball before they are given a book and are praised for their athletic prowess rather than their academic achievements. Many Black children are more likely to have a favorite rapper than a favorite poet and brain cells are reserved to safeguard the newest rap lyrics rather than homework assignments.

*Across the country thousands of young Black males take every opportunity and make every effort to reach the elite ranks of the NBA or NFL. But in the classroom, where racial vulnerability is a hidden terror, they and many of their classmates put forth the meagerest of effort and show a virtual indifference to the genuine opportunity that is education. (Steele 52)*

The speech patterns of Ebonics prevail in school halls and students that choose to use proper English are branded as “Oreos,” because they are seen as Black on the outside, but White on the inside. Ronald E. Ferguson comments on the issue,

*Imagine two runners nearing the end of a one-mile race, separated by forty yards. Like the bottom three-quarters of Black and White students, who spend very little time outside of school on homework, the runners in this race are jogging at a leisurely pace [...] why is the distance between the runners not closing more rapidly? Or, why is the second runner not running faster in order to catch up? After all the front runner is only jogging. The acting White hypothesis probably*

*does help to explain why Black students are not closing the gap with Whites who make relatively little effort. (Ferguson 396)*

In a culture where being a famous basketball player overshadows being a heart surgeon, children are subconsciously, and at times explicitly told, that an education is secondary to a life of fame. It is worth noting that although this phenomenon exists throughout the African American community, many Blacks choose to ignore it and therefore place a high value on education as evidenced in a conversation by minority students attending a summer program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

*At a lunch table, over cold cuts on whole wheat, talk turns to the ultimate insult: "wanting to be White." Jocelyn Truitt, a Black girl from a good Maryland high school, says her mother, a college professor, "started early on telling me to ignore the whole 'White' thing . . . I've got White friends. People say things, that I'm trading up, selling out, but I don't listen. Let them talk. (Suskind 1)*

These African Americans realize that in an attempt to gain an education, they are in no way leaving behind their cultural heritage in exchange for a "White one," they are simply trying to take advantage of all that life has to offer them. Reacting to the judgment that she received from fellow African Americans after attending Harvard University, Debra Dickerson writes,

*At 40, it's still a knife in my heart to know that so many Blacks consider me a Tom. It no longer silences me or affects my behavior—it just hurts, it hurts because the disapproval is of the playground variety—the Head Negroes make it known who is outside the pale and quickly punish those who fail to cut the offender off [...] there is something wrong about seeing other Blacks' eyes go*

*slanted in negative judgment when I break racial ranks on a matter or principle that wakes in me a pubescent need to pretend to be something I'm not. I resist it, I leave like minds to think alike, but it saddens me. (Dickerson B11)*

### Psychological effects Black Students Face Due to Affirmative Action

What happens when an African American student is helped by affirmative action in an admissions assessment? Let us take for example a Black high school graduate from a 90% Black high school, who was not subject to a failing school district, or made the best of a bad situation and has what it takes to attend college, we will call him Joe Black. Schools are eagerly awaiting his application and when that application is received and reviewed by Sleepy University, affirmative action is used when making the decision and Joe is given 15 admissions points for being a minority. At the end of review, Joe is over the necessary points for admittance by 2 and is therefore granted admission. Mr. Black's acceptance letter will not mention that affirmative action policies were a factor in his admittance; he will simply be told, "Welcome to Sleepy University, see you in the fall." If Sleepy U. uses affirmative action in its' admissions decisions, it is probably safe to say that the student body is mostly made up of Caucasian students and minorities are actively admitted to diversify the campus. Now let us propose that Sleepy U. has a student body of 3,000 students and that Whites make up 70% of the population and Blacks account for 5%. The other 25% includes Hispanics, Asian Americans, and other racial minorities. When our Black student, Joe, arrives on campus, he is just one of 150 other African American students on campus. Coming from a school that was by and large made up of Black

students, our new freshman will undoubtedly feel out of place in his new world. After his first week of classes Joe feels overwhelmed as the only student of his race in each class and feels as though he is not being accepted on campus; thoughts begin to cross his mind that he may not be capable of making the grade at Sleepy U. Aware of affirmative action policies at the university, the emotionally overwhelmed Joe begins to feel that he was accepted not based on his academic merits, but for the color of his skin and self-doubt pervades his feelings about his genuine mental capacity. Proponents of affirmative action would argue that such a scenario does not occur frequently and that the majority of Black students admitted with the aid of affirmative action policies do not suffer from any adverse psychological consequences as a result. The proponent may further argue that such negative occurrences are only experienced by those African American students who do not truly understand the fact that affirmative action is necessary to help create equality. A valid argument against the belief that self-doubt is not frequently suffered by African American college students as a product of affirmative action is that the fact that it exists is often swept under the rug. Black students who have bouts of self-doubt are not likely to share their feelings with others and when such feelings are shared, they are dismissed as a necessary casualty in the war on inequality.

### Self-Doubt Revealed

What exactly is this notion of “self-doubt” and what are its’ symptoms? Shelby Steele best describes it in one of his numerous essays on African Americans in the United States,

*I think that one of the most troubling effects of racial preferences for Blacks is a kind of demoralization, or put another way, an enlargement of self-doubt. Under affirmative action the quality that earns us preferential treatment is an implied inferiority. However this inferiority is explained- and it is easily enough explained by the myriad of deprivations that grew out of our oppression- it is still inferiority. (Steele 116)*

Therefore, by saying that African Americans require assistance from affirmative action to be admitted into an institute of higher education, actually indicates that Blacks are incapable of competing with other applicants based on their own merits. In further examination of the issue, Steele highlights additional repercussions of self-doubt on the Black individual,

*Even when the Black sees no implication of inferiority in racial preferences, he knows that Whites do, so that- consciously or unconsciously- the result is virtually the same. The effect of preferential treatment- the lowering of normal standards to increase Black representation- puts the Black at war with an expanded realm of debilitating self-doubt, so that the doubt itself becomes an unrecognized preoccupation that undermines their ability to perform, especially in integrated situations. On largely White campuses, Blacks are five times more likely to drop out than Whites. Preferential treatment, no matter how justified in the light of day, subjects Blacks to a midnight of self-doubt, and so often transforms their advantage into a revolving door. (Steele 118)*

Stereotypes about Blacks being mentally inferior to Caucasians, sadly, still exist in our society. A chilling example of this is a conversation that a Black educator at a conference had with a White woman,

*While swimming in the hotel pool, I was approached by a young White woman who wanted to know what occasion had drawn such a large gathering of African American youth. "Is there a game or something going on?" she asked wearing a bright smile. At first, I wasn't sure what she was talking about. I guess that puzzled look on my face triggered the look of embarrassment on hers. "Oh no," I replied when I finally figured out her question. "These college students are here for a leadership development conference." "Oh," she said, looking genuinely surprised and suddenly speechless. "How nice." As she turned to swim away, I noticed that her face had turned a bright shade of pink. The experience reminded me that despite their achievements in higher education, African American youth continue to fight the stereotype of being everything but scholarly. (Fields 6)*

How many other Caucasians simply assume that an African American is more likely to receive an athletic scholarship rather than an academic one. It is rather interesting that those who whole-heartedly support affirmative action often fail to notice the exact degree to which affirmative action further ingrains the stereotype of Black inferiority into our society or simply dismiss the fact that such a stereotype exists altogether. The inferiority stereotype is one of the most stigmatizing that African Americans face in our country today.

*But two things make the myth of Black inferiority a far heavier burden- the broadness of its scope and its incarnation in color [...] Moreover, this is made unavoidable for Blacks by sheer visibility of Black skin, a skin that evokes the myth of inferiority on sight.... "They see me as an affirmative action case," one Black student told me at UCLA. This reinforces the myth of inferiority by implying that Blacks are not good enough to make it into college on their own.*

(Steele 134)

In an effort to give African Americans a leg up, a hindrance is actually being placed in their way, which hampers the success of Blacks in our society. When Black students are aided by affirmative action policies during the admission process at institutes of higher education, isn't the sinister message that they are less than worthy being propagated? Once these Black students become a part of their respective campuses, in which they are a part of a noticeable minority, the belief that they must work harder than the average student kicks into full drive. "I must work harder to prove that I am not inferior," becomes a mantra as Black students take on the role of "other" in their classes. When the first, less than stellar grade is returned to an African American student, the initial thought that enters his or her mind is, "Maybe I'm not smart enough for college." A known answer may often go unsaid, as a Black student keeps his or her hand down in an effort not to shame their race with the wrong answer.

*The myth of inferiority constitutes a very sharp and ongoing anxiety for young Blacks, the nature of which is very precise: it is the terror that somehow, through one's actions or by virtue of some "proof" (a poor grade, a flubbed response in class), one's fear of inferiority- inculcated in ways large and small by society-*

*will be confirmed as real. On a university campus where intelligence itself is the ultimate measure, this anxiety is bound to be triggered. (Steele 135)*

Self-doubt is an unfortunate reality of affirmative action in the lives of African American college students. Even without affirmative action, the students feel that they are at a disadvantage due to the color of their skin; affirmative action can often serve as another vehicle of this disadvantage.

#### Effects of Affirmative Action and Race Relations on Campuses

Affirmative action is a culprit of racial tension on a national level and college campuses are no exception as a harbor of racial anxiety. On college campuses across our nation, a powder keg of repressed racial tension is ready to explode without warning. Although affirmative action is not the only cause for racial strife, it is serving as the match that will likely set off the powder keg. With affirmative action policies in place at many institutes of higher education, it is very easy to get an opinion about the fairness of such policies. Even though the use of a quota system within the confines of affirmative action has been deemed illegal, many citizens of our society still associate the application of goal numbers with affirmative action. The average Caucasian college student would agree with the notion that more qualified Caucasian applicants are passed over in order to allow less qualified minorities admittance at a university in order to reach demographic goals. How does this inadequate assessment of the situation affect African American students at institutions where affirmative action is used? They feel that they are viewed as "Affirmative action cases" and seen as less than worthy of enrollment at their

respective schools. Racial tension is bound to take place as both races try to deal with their feelings of resentment towards the other. Steele summarizes it best, *“To highlight one’s difference as a source of advantage is also, indirectly, to inspire the enemies of that difference”* (Steele, 141). Unfortunately, society shuns open discussions about race and the ones that do occur are marked by a civility that shies away from the critical issues. More often than not, Caucasians are plagued by “White guilt” when dealing with African American issues,

*Guilt is the essence of White anxiety just as inferiority is the essence of Black anxiety [...] the darkest fear of Whites is that their better lot in life is at least partially the result of their capacity for evil- their capacity to dehumanize an entire people for their own benefit and then to be indifferent to the devastation their dehumanization has wrought on successive generations of their victims.*

*This is the terror that Whites are vulnerable to regarding Blacks. (Steele 144)*

Whenever a racial issue between Blacks and Whites is discussed, the Black debater is almost obligated to gain control by playing the guilt card; if he chooses not to bring up the past, then he risks a backlash from fellow African Americans. The Caucasian side argues, “Affirmative action is not fair, because it provides preferential treatment to African Americans,” to which the Black side predictably responds, “What is the big deal, you owe us for all of the past injustices!” Suddenly the debate takes a sudden turn as the Caucasian decides whether or not the last statement warrants a response. He can either lash out with a remark that will brand him as a racist, or just quietly accept defeat. The two sides are right back where they started from and the tension grows. It is very apparent that this lack of open communication only adds to the

racial tension. Caucasians are unable to have a negative opinion about affirmative action without being relegated to the role of racist and Black justification of affirmative action is often only based on the past actions of Whites. Neither side is able to come to any type of solution to the problem, because neither side is willing to look deeper than the surface. On college campuses throughout the country an obvious line is being drawn between the races as sides are taken on the affirmative action issue. Unfortunately, this can only add to the lack of communication, which will lead to extra pressure being applied to the racial tension powder keg.

#### Affirmative Action and the Insinuated Helpless Condition of Black America

It cannot be denied that Blacks in America are naturally at a disadvantage due to persistent stereotypes and the ugly monster of racism. Places still exist in the United States in which, in the year 2003, things still function as they did in the 1950's. Blacks and Whites live separate existences, full of suspicion and loathe for the other side; words such as "integration" and "equal opportunity" are not even a thought in the social conscience. An African American is often passed over for a job due to the "Good Ole' Boy" system. A Black man is more likely to be sentenced guilty for the same crime that a White man gets away with. The list of unequal treatment could fill thousands of volumes of books and is the very basis for the implementation of affirmative action in our society.

*In my daily life I continue to experience racial indignities and slights. This morning I was told that Blacks had too much musical feeling (soul, I suppose) to be good classical musicians; yesterday I passed two houses with gnomish little Black lawn jockeys on the front porch; my children have been called "nigger," not to mention myself; I wear a tie and carry a professional briefcase so my students on the first day of class will know that I'm the teacher; and so on. (Steele 169)*

Created with the intent to create equality, does affirmative action actually encourage inequality? Some would argue that in our current day and age, an African American is capable of achieving anything they want to in our society- even with the existence of racism, but it is the self-victimization within the race that limits their potential.

*By many measures, the majority of Blacks- those not yet in the middle class- are further behind White today than before the victories of the civil rights movement. But there is a reluctance among Blacks to examine this paradox, I think, because it suggests that racial victimization is not our real problem. If conditions have worsened for most of us as racism has receded, then much of the problem must be of our own making... We are in the odd and self defeating position in which taking responsibility of bettering ourselves feels like a surrender to White power. (Steele 15)*

In the end, does affirmative action in higher education play into the African American role of victim? Can a Black student with college aspirations not take advantage of the American Dream and work hard to attain their goal? There are

— circumstances in which a Black student may not be able to reach such a goal due to poor schooling, but how low should the leveling field be lowered with affirmative action?

Other pertinent questions need to be answered such as how long will affirmative action serve as a band-aid for the deeper problem and what happens when it is taken away? Just how long will Blacks feel that they are owed by Whites?

### Conclusion

It is well known that affirmative action in higher education results in intelligent Black students being admitted into college, graduating, and being productive citizens in our society; to argue against this fact would be a winless effort. As with many other things that produce positive effects, the negative effects of affirmative action in higher education, especially in the Black community, can be overshadowed. The question as to whether or not the positive effects outweigh the negative ones is not a question that is easily answered. The use of affirmative action itself is constantly under fire and until it is amended such that all sides are satisfied, the answer to this question, and many others, is nearly impossible to decide upon. I echo Shelby Steele's thoughts on the subject,

*I would like to see affirmative action to go back to its original purpose of enforcing equal opportunity- a purpose that in itself disallows racial preferences.*

*We cannot be sure that the discriminatory impulse in America has yet been shamed to extinction, and I believe affirmative action can make its greatest contribution by providing a rigorous vigilance in this area. It can guard*

*constitutional rather than racial rights, and help institutions evolve standards of merit and selection that are appropriate to the institution's needs yet as free of racial bias as possible (again, with the understanding that racial imbalances are not always an indication of racial bias). One of the most important things that affirmative action can do is to define exactly what racial discrimination is and how it might manifest itself within a specific institution [...] But if not preferences, then what? I think we need social policies that are committed to two goals: the educational and economic development of disadvantage people, regardless of race, and the eradication from our society- through close monitoring and severe sanctions- of racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination. (Steele 123-24)*

Only time will tell the fate of affirmative action in higher education, but I hope that it will eventually become a vehicle to benefit the African American community with fewer negative consequences.

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## **Personal Reaction to Thesis Project**

I must say that I found this project to be more emotionally involved than I had first anticipated. I took on the project because, as an African American and a female, I felt it was necessary to be informed about a topic that may (or may already have) affected me personally. I thought that at the end of all of my research and when the final product was complete, I would have a definitive answer as to my thoughts on affirmative action, but that is far from the case. My feelings on the issue are subject to revision at every moment; the ever-changing landscape of affirmative action makes it difficult for anyone to carry an opinion longer than an instant. Although in my paper I chose to write about the negative effects of affirmative action in the African American community, I am well aware of the positive effects that it offers. I personally feel that the negative consequences of affirmative action need to be noted and discussed more frequently than they are within the Black community itself. Even if affirmative action proved to be a racial equalizer in our society, the problems within the Black population remain. Problems with self-victimization, the pressure to not “act White,” and our willingness to exploit “White guilt” do not help our cause in the slightest. As African Americans, we tend to only look outward for things that cause problems in our community and neglect looking inward. It is true that Whites have treated us very badly in the past and I feel a great sense of pride for the Blacks that fought our racial oppression. The fact that I am able to enjoy many of the liberties that I take for granted is a result of brave men and women in our nation’s history. I just feel that African Americans have become complacent in placing the blame of our current situation on past injustices. It is necessary to take into account some of the things that take place in our own community, which

stunts our growth. I find it interesting the number of times I have heard “the White man” blamed for a Black person’s plight, such as not getting a job. No one takes into consideration the fact that the job may have been lost due to the lack of a high school diploma or being late to the interview. Is it possible that being black cost the person the job, it certainly is, but failing to take any personal responsibility for the outcome is a dangerous thing. Yes, there are certain systems in place in our society that can limit an African American’s potential, but to give up simply because those things exist is without excuse.

I realize that I was blessed with opportunities that many other Blacks are not given and my personal life experience is not that of the average African American. My educational path to college has been an interesting one and I’ve experienced all of the issues described in my thesis. My father was a member of the United States Air Force for 20 years of my life and so I enjoyed living in a variety of places. My elementary school years were spent at various schools in Anchorage, Alaska and Aurora, Colorado where I was always the minority, but in no way did I feel alienated. Both school districts were adequately funded and well staffed and as a result, I received a strong educational foundation. In sixth grade, my family moved to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland and I was exposed to a new world; the school which I attended was over 95% African American and I quickly felt the stigma against “acting White” for the first time in my life. Knowing too much was worse than knowing too little and speaking the “White man’s” English among peers was frowned upon. I found that I stuck out like a sore thumb and quickly took steps to hide any signs of “Whiteness” that I may have exhibited. At the beginning of my eighth grade year, my father was assigned to an air base in Belgium and

I attended an American school on the NATO post. Once again, I was part of the racial minority, but since Americans were a minority themselves, it was not an issue. The academic environment was very strong at the American school and high achievement was not only encouraged, it was expected. At the end of our three-year tour, my father was reassigned to Andrews Air Force Base and I attended a public high school in which an advanced program existed. As to be expected, my high school was once again over 95% African American and “being White” was still a questionable offense, but it was diluted by dreams of going to college.

During my senior year, I maintained a grade point average that placed me in the top 5% of my class. A local program that was headed by journalist Carl Rowan, Project Excellence, offered a scholarship competition for the top Black students in the Washington D.C. area. Each individual school held their own preliminary rounds with their top 5 Black students to determine which 2 would be sent to the next round of competition. As one of the top 5 African American students at my school, I was part of the preliminary competition, which included the presentation of a speech. From there, I was chosen as one of the two students who would move on to the next round and submit an essay about personal goals. Finally, I made it all the way to the final round and gave a speech to a panel of influential Black and White leaders in the Washington D.C. area. All of my efforts eventually earned me a full ride scholarship at Ball State University. Other offers that I personally received included a full ride scholarship to Tennessee State University as well as Washington and Lee University, an ROTC scholarship from the Army and the Air Force, and various other financial aid offers from additional institutions. I was totally overwhelmed with the decision that loomed before me and

sought advice from a friend who was salutatorian of our class. During our conversation, she appeared agitated and I finally asked her if something was wrong. She looked me in the eye and said, "I have a 4.2 grade point average and a 1470 SAT score. I hold the number 2 rank in our class and simply because I am White, I was not allowed to participate in the Project Excellence Competition. I'm applying to schools and getting admitted, but financial aid is hard to come by. Your family is military too so you know that my parents aren't able to help out much; I'm going to have to take out a loan and pay most of my own way. I worked so hard to distinguish myself and in the end, it didn't work. Kind of ironic isn't it?"

I remember coming away from that conversation with an uneasy feeling, indeed her situation was quite ironic. Even though she was from the same socioeconomic background as me, her ability to manage was based on the fact that she was White. Sure, she probably could've found a school that was more than willing to give her a wonderful financial aid package, but the fact remains that she was denied an opportunity based on her skin color.

I chose to attend Ball State University because they had a major in pre-audiology and their financial aid package was one of the best that I was offered. Being a member of the small group of Black students on campus did not bother me in the slightest, but I came to realize that my racial identity would mean more than I would have liked it to. Don't get me wrong - I am very proud of my racial identity, I just have other qualities for which I should be noted for as well. As the only Black in all of my honors classes, I was constantly called upon to shed some light on the African American experience or forced to endure someone's confessions of past racial biases. After such incidents, I came to

believe in the importance of diversification, because it is painfully obvious that stereotypes can only be eradicated through exposure. If programs, such as Project Excellence that help schools recruit talented Black students, were not in place, then I would definitely not be enrolled at Ball State University helping people to rethink their previous assumptions about African Americans. Racial tension will most likely continue during my lifetime, but being able to positively influence even one person's opinions of my race is a worthwhile task.

Did I ever suffer from self-doubt as a result of my color being a factor in my recruitment at Ball State? In a broad sense, no, I realized that I was a competent person who was more than capable of doing well at college. I would be wrong if I did not admit that my color and gender opens doors for me that may have been closed to others, but that fact does not limit my own potential. I did suffer from the delusion that I had to prove to others that my place here was earned. This was especially true in honors classes; I never felt that I was able to fully relax until I had demonstrated the fact that I was just as smart, as or smarter than the majority of students in the class. Looking back, I see that this action was unwarranted, because there was nothing for me to prove and no valid reason to feel such a threat existed. I guess that I got caught up in what nearly every African American child is taught from the time that they are born, "You're going to have to work twice as hard as every White person out there." Well, I did work twice as hard in college and have recently applied to several graduate schools. I could not help but expect that my race would play a part in my admissions decisions. Sure enough, I received several financial aid packages from universities that were earmarked for "underrepresented groups." At times it is hard to know how to take this. I am overjoyed at the fact that I do

not have to pay for graduate school, but at the same time, somewhere inside I can't help but ask the question- "Would these opportunities be available to me if I was White?"

Last semester, I came across an incident that was similar to the one I encountered with my White friend who felt that she was penalized for being White. In an honors speech class, we were given the task of presenting an argumentative speech over a controversial topic. Most of the class chose subjects such as changing the legal drinking age or not allowing people over 70 years of age to drive. One speech in particular caused me to focus closely on the speaker's arguments. A female student chose to speak about banning affirmative action because it made White candidates an endangered species. I listened as she recounted a story in which she was not given an internship, because the funding for that particular position was only for Blacks. It's hard to call, I honestly feel sorry for her predicament and I'm glad that she felt free enough to express her feelings in front of a Black student, but at the same time her strong opinions made me look around the classroom and wonder – what price, if any, are we willing to pay for diversity and will affirmative action in higher education ever really heal issues that go much deeper? Unfortunately, I am unaware of an answer that will solve the problem without causing a new one.