

Slotting Scientists

Higher-education officials are trying to boost diversity in science departments without running afoul of the Supreme Court.

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by Neil Munro

Education association officials are working in Washington to expand the scope of racial and ethnic diversity among science faculties and their graduate students.

The advocates are trying to gradually allocate additional slots to U.S. racial and ethnic minorities, and also to protect universities' diversity policies from likely lawsuits by groups seeking color-blind admissions policies.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science is spearheading the diversity effort. "Science and engineering should look like the rest of the population, and it certainly doesn't -- and that means a lot of untapped talent is going to other fields," said Daryl Chubin, director of the group's Center for Advancing Science & Engineering Capacity.

Advocates for color-blind policies panned the AAAS project. "I don't think it will ultimately stand up to Supreme Court adjudication," said Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars. "This current Court seems more likely than not to reject arguments that push toward a racist division of the spoils in American society."

In a series of meetings over the past two years, AAAS officials have worked with university and association representatives on statistical and legal arguments to expand the role of diversity in faculty hiring and graduate admissions. In 2007, African-Americans represented approximately 13 percent of the college-age cohort and earned 9 percent of master's degrees in science and engineering and 5 percent of doctorates, according to National Science Foundation data. Hispanics were about 16 percent of the cohort and earned 6.6 percent of master's degrees and 5.5 percent of doctorates.

Much of this work is shaped by the Supreme Court's *Gratz* and *Grutter* decisions in 2003, which limited the role of race in university admissions. The Court allowed colleges to consider race only when conducting holistic reviews of undergraduate applicants, or when picking graduate students for law school.

The Court's decisions still leave room for universities to promote diversity, Chubin said. For example, many schools already offer "the kinds of support -- intellectual, financial, emotional -- to [minority] students outside of class to help them succeed" in high school and college.

Students are also helped by seeing teachers who are similar to them, he said. Chubin noted that a few colleges are hiring faculty in clusters rather than allowing individual departments to fill teaching positions one by one. "You don't leave [hiring] to the departments," he said, because if the departmental decisions fail to yield a diverse set of professors, "somebody needs to pull the plug and say this has not been an open and fair search."

Diversity is important to science departments because "people work together in teams," said Jonathan Alger, senior vice president and general counsel at Rutgers University, who is working with Chubin. "The broader the total set of perspectives and backgrounds you can bring together, the better. It's not just about race and gender, but [they] would be part of the broad equation," Alger said.

Advocates pushing to increase racial and ethnic diversity in colleges cite the work of Scott Page, a professor of complex systems at the University of Michigan and the author of *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. The research problems being studied in universities are too complex for autonomous specialists who seek narrow "single [best] way" solutions, he said. Also, he added, with diversity "we'll [be able to] look at a different set of questions."

Advocates of color-blind policies respond that universities differ from private companies: Employers may gain by hiring advertising staff or sales executives who understand a variety of cultural backgrounds, but universities shouldn't use sex or race to select faculty and students. The idea that racial and ethnic diversity can help students learn more "is barely plausible when you're talking about law, but it is not at all plausible when you are talking about differential calculus or chemistry," said Roger Clegg, president and general counsel of the Center for Equal Opportunity. University officials should rely on ability and merit in the selections process, he said, noting that the 1964 civil-rights law bars racial discrimination in employment.

Chubin countered that "nobody at all is diminishing the value of merit. We're defining merit as including evidence of either experience or contribution to diversity [and] excellence in research." Research excellence, he added, might count for 80 percent of merit.

"Brace yourself for increasing politicization of the sciences," said Christina Hoff Sommers, an ethicist at the American Enterprise Institute who campaigns against attempts to apply Title IX gender-equity laws to government-funded science labs. "What happened to the humanities [in the 1980s] has moved over to the physics lab."

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