Official: Case won't affect Purdue policies

By Marc B. Geller, Journal and Courier

Purdue University has no intention of changing its policies in response to the Supreme Court's decisions Monday in two of the most important affirmative actions cases in decades, a university official said.

"Purdue University continually seeks to prepare and encourage minorities to consider higher education, but the university does not use a race-based admissions practice," said Douglas L. Christiansen, Purdue's assistant vice president for enrollment management.

"Purdue does utilize affirmative action in its marketing and recruitment of students, but not in its admissions policy. Based on a preliminary reading of the Supreme Court's ruling, it appears that Purdue's policies are not affected, and we have no plans to change our policies."

In split decisions, the court ruled that colleges may consider race in admissions decisions "to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body," Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote. But what's not acceptable is using inflexible or automatic racial preferences.

"Diversity is one of the major elements of Purdue's strategic plan, and our efforts are supported by programs that provide scholarships and K-12 outreach," Christiansen said. "Our goal is to ensure that our student body reflects the increasingly diverse American nation. It enriches the academic experience for all students as they experience, and come to appreciate, diverse ideas and perspectives."

According to Purdue's strategic plan, "Enhancing human and intellectual diversity to build a student body, faculty and staff that reflect our society, while fostering a climate that values inclusivity and equity, assures respect for human dignity and positions Purdue as a place of choice, of support and of pride."

In January, Purdue president Martin Jischke faxed a letter to President Bush urging him to support the University of Michigan's race-conscious admission policies at issue in the Supreme Court cases, Grutter vs. Bollinger and Gratz vs. Bollinger.

"Purdue and the other Big Ten universities historically have recognized the need to bring students to our campuses from many diverse backgrounds in order to enrich the academic experience," Jischke wrote.

"We do not use or seek quotas nor do we support systems that tolerate reverse discrimination. We do support programs like the one at Michigan that make sure qualified minority candidates can bring their skills and experiences to our student bodies."

Programs in place

With the court's recognition that student diversity is a compelling interest, Purdue will continue its outreach efforts to underrepresented groups and minority students, said Alysa C. Rollock, the university's vice president for human relations.

These include, among others, the Graduate Schools' Historically Black Institution Visitation Program, the Krannert School of Management's Business Opportunities Program and the joint Minority Access to Research Careers and Access Internally for Minorities program.

The HBI program dates back to 1988, said Dwight E. Lewis, director of minority programs for Graduate Schools.

"It's a program where we target mainly about 11 historically black colleges, and we bring three to five students from each of..."
those 11 schools to Purdue every November to visit the campus," he said. Thirty-two participants in the program have received doctorates from Purdue.

The Business Opportunities Program began in 1968 as an outgrowth of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and a response to the lack of racial diversity at the time.

"It has been a program that we've used to provide scholarships primarily to underrepresented minority students," said Richard A. Cosier, dean of the management school Leeds Professor of Management.

"We've had about 800 students go through this program since its inception at both the master's and bachelor levels. Our program seeks a larger pool of applicants that would include underrepresented minorities."

To enlarge the pool, Cornell A. Bell, associate professor of management and director of minority programs, contacts high schools, calls parents and visits families, Cosier said.

MARC/AIM dates back to the early 1980s, provides undergraduate summer research opportunities for underrepresented groups and seeks, ultimately, to increase the number of faculty from these groups.

"It's trying to prepare people to apply for graduate school," said Victor W. Rodwell, professor of biochemistry and, until last December, longtime MARC/ AIM director.

"Lots of the kids have earned master's degrees. Lots of them have earned M.D.s. Sixty-two have received Ph.D.s, and 30 of those were received at Purdue."

Diversifying the workforce

Purdue also maintains an affirmative action program in compliance with a presidential executive order affecting federal contractors, including the university.

"That program is largely focused on employment, and it has to do with taking affirmative steps to increase the pool of qualified applicants from those who are traditionally underrepresented in employment," Rollock said.

Purdue has two affirmative action plans. One deals with ethnic minorities and women. The other deals with veterans and people with disabilities. Neither will be affected by the Supreme Court decisions, Rollock said.

Rollock acknowledged there is some confusion among the public about what affirmative action means.

Affirmative action, whether in employment or admissions, is about making people aware of the opportunities they have and eliminating barriers to opportunity, she said.

"We're a society here in America where we believe that people are judged on their own individual merits, and I certainly agree with that," she said. "I think what happens is that when we say that we're going to provide people with opportunities, sometimes it's confused with we're going to provide people with the outcome."

On the Net

Supreme Court opinions: www.supremecourtus.gov/opinions/02slipopinion.html

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