Campus diversity remains without help from quotas

By Katie Wall
Staff Writer

Colleges and universities across the nation are continuously confronted with a pressing question: how to diversify classrooms effectively and fairly.

Affirmative action policies are continuing to cause controversy at many schools.

At Purdue University, there are no admission points awarded to students based on race, gender, or socioeconomic background, but instead the University takes a holistic approach to diversifying the campus.

Last June, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the University of Michigan Law School using race as a factor when deciding admissions.

However, the Court did cite Michigan’s undergraduate program’s use of a point system as unconstitutional, implying that a school cannot systematically award points based on race. Now, residents of Michigan are petitioning around the state to put an initiative on next fall’s ballot that would keep Michigan’s colleges and universities from selecting students based in part on race, striking down any sort of affirmative action policies.

Aside from race, the initiative would prevent gender, ethnicity, or national origin from playing a role in admissions policies as well as local and state government.

Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who voted with the majority in the Michigan ruling, said in order to create effective leaders, classrooms need to represent the cultural diversity that America reflects.

Purdue Dean of Admissions Doug Christiansen said that no one is accepted to Purdue that does not deserve to be here, meaning that all admitted students meet the academic qualifications, but the administration also takes into account the broader package of a student’s activities.

"Every student admitted to Purdue University must first be academically qualified," Christiansen said. "No one will be admitted to Purdue without meeting certain academic requirements."

For instance, Purdue considers 10 strict factors that must be met before a student is admitted: subject matter units (English, math, language, and science), grades in the intended major, how well a student does throughout their entire high school career, class rank, overall and core GPA, strength of the college prep program, the time of year and space available when applying, ability to excel at college, test scores, and the overall attributes and characteristics of the applicant.

It is the last factor that plays a part in diversifying Purdue’s campus. The overall attributes and characteristics of the applicant include factors such as geographical location, race and gender. However, the 10 requirements must have been met first and foremost, and only then will diversity factors play a role in admittance; which is similar to the University of Michigan Law School’s admissions policy.
"When thinking about building a class at Purdue, we think about what can this student bring to that class," said Christiansen. "One student is not better or worse; it is simply different experiences that add to the whole dynamic of a class."

"I believe that Purdue is doing a positive thing with their attempts to bring diverse representation to Purdue," said Celia Byrnes, senior in the School of Pharmacy.

Purdue implements a number of programs that were devised to recruit under-represented students to Purdue, such as the Science Bound Program.

This program is a coalition between Purdue University, Indiana public schools, and the business community. The Science Bound Program specifically targets racial minorities, but will not exclude anyone who wishes to be involved. At the beginning of students' eighth grade year, every month they will visit Purdue's campus and learn about science, technology, and agriculture. If the students stay with the program throughout high school and meet the academic requirements, they will receive a full scholarship to Purdue.

"We want to create a broader pipeline of students," said Christiansen. "What we are really trying to do (with the Science Bound Program) is bring young students to campus so they are admissible when it is time to apply to college."

"People often associate affirmative action only with race," said Byrnes. "But affirmative action programs include so many other aspects of students' lives which diversify our campus."

"It is important to understand why diversity is important and why we try to have students with various backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs," said Christiansen. "Diversity and quality go hand-in-hand; more views brought to a class discussion make that discussion all the more valuable."

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