

Why Diversity Initiatives Fail

Symbolic gestures and millions of dollars can't overcome apathy.

November 6, 2019

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In recent

multibillion-dollar diversity industry, there is little indication that they have resulted in more diversity or less bias. And there's some evidence that some of the anti-bias strategies can actually make matters worse.

“Strategies for controlling bias — which drive most diversity efforts — have failed spectacularly,” Harvard’s Frank Dobbin and Tel Aviv University’s Alexandra Kalev concluded in their study (<https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>) “Why Diversity Programs Fail,” published in *Harvard Business Review* in 2016. Dobbin and Kalev, both sociologists, examined three decades of data from more than 800 U.S. firms and interviewed hundreds of managers and executives. The study took an especially dim view of mandatory training, which was found to trigger a backlash against those it was intended to help.

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Still, the campus turbulence around race has refocused attention on the unfinished business of diversity efforts begun in the '60s, when black students demanded more faculty of color and curricula that moved beyond a Eurocentric canon. These demands came in the midst of spiraling urban unrest that in 1967 inspired President Lyndon B. Johnson to impanel the National Advisory Commission on Civil Jovncu

Writing for the majority, Justice Lewis F. Powell said it was unfair to impose the burden of history on the innocent. The ruling meant that past discrimination of disadvantaged groups could no longer be considered in admission decisions. The burden of history, then, would not be shared by all but shouldered solely by its victims. The decision seemed to wipe the slate clean, as if history were unrelated to contemporary realities, and suggested that all members of society now operated on a level playing field. While quotas were deemed unconstitutional, diversity was viewed as a compelling state interest that enriched the overall college environment. Colleges could still consider race as one of myriad factors in admissions decisions.

The *Bakke* decision was followed in 1981 by the dismantling of federal antidiscrimination programs under the Reagan administration; affirmative action continued to be dismantled even after quotas were eliminated. By then, many of the gains made during the '60s, including school integration, had been erased, along with federal policies that had begun to close the education and poverty gap without whites' losing ground. Following *Bakke*, many, including Abigail Fisher in 2013 and 2016, have made similar claims in an attempt to undo policies helping those who had been systemically denied opportunity.

Columbia University President Lee Bollinger has been at the heart of this legal fight, and so last fall I visited him at his stately six-story limestone and brick townhouse in Morningside Heights. We met in a sitting room with high ceilings and wainscoting just off the main entrance, and he became animated when the talk turned to *Bakke*.

"We're deprived of the context that gave it a sense of mission," Bollinger said, referring to the diversity movement since that ruling. "Every college leader is told, 'Do not refer to history.' I think we have a meaningless, abstract conversation about diversity without a rationale."

Bollinger, a First Amendment scholar, had become president of the University of Michigan in 1997 and was soon initiated into the affirmative action battles. In October of that year, Jennifer Gratz, a white student who had been denied admission to the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, served papers on the university. In *Gratz v. Bollinger*, she claimed that she had been denied admission as a result of reverse discrimination.

That same year, Barbara Grutter, another white student, was denied admission to the university's law school and decided to sue. Instead of settling the lawsuits, Bollinger chose to defend affirmative action as moral and just. "I decided we would fight this to the end," he told me. "This would be the centerpiece of my six year tenure."

(Harvard Law Review)

Bollinger came of age during the civil-rights era and was not prepared to reverse course. In 2003, a year after he moved to Columbia, the Supreme Court, responding to *Gratz v Bollinger*, deemed as unconstitutional the university's use of a point system that accorded 20 points to members of underrepresented minorities. That same year it decided *Grutter v Bollinger*, this time affirming diversity as a compelling interest in college admissions.

However, the decision was not enough to

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target of opportunity faculty lines that allow them to recruit leading scholars from underrepresented groups. Resources ranged from \$125,000 annually for non-lab based lines to \$250,000 for lab based lines. Mitchell said that while the incentiv

He is especially attuned to concerns of students of color; given his academic discipline and his own Mexican heritage. He recalls growing up in South Central Los Angeles when, as an 8 year old, he was stopped by immigration authorities and questioned about his parents' immigration status. Later, in the 1980s, he was a student activist at UCLA during protests over racial issues. "Fraternities would throw beer and tortillas at us."

Many of those racial attitudes persist. An epidemic of parties and other campus events featuring white students in blackface or flaunting other racially offensive stereotypes (such as a "Bullets and Bubbly" party at the University of Connecticut Law school) continue around the country. The U.S. Department of Education reported (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/After-2016-Election-Campus/242577>) a 25 percent increase in reported hate crimes on campus between 2015 and 2016

"It's endemic," Bribiescas said. "We started to think we're leaving this behind, but it was just plastered over. Now, with social media, it's being documented. It's empowering."

Among the other challenges for university presidents at legacy institutions such as Yale are alumni, who are overwhelmingly white and male and often less inclined to champion diversity. "Sometimes you have to take a hit from the press and the alumni," Bribiescas said. "You have to admit you have a problem."

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