Affirmative Action: Process or Product?

Paul Lauter
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: PROCESS OR PRODUCT?

There seems to be a trap lying in wait not too far down the road for those of us committed to affirmative action. Let's carry out the logic of "open hiring" procedures—if we may use that term to describe a process of broad advertising and search to fill each vacant position. Increasingly, in a tight job market, every advertisement produces a flood of applications: 90 to fill one history position; hundreds to fill another. Even the most humane committee or administrator will search for mechanical means to categorize a large number of unknown quantities. The logic of the process leads toward "weighing" applicants by as many "objective" standards as one can find. Those who score highest on the "objective" measures become finalists. That way, "merit" will allegedly emerge, and in that manner, everyone will have had allegedly equal opportunity to demonstrate merit.

But what qualities can be "objectively" weighed? Teaching ability? That doesn't even show up on a vita. Openness to new ideas and new students? Commitments to the goals of affirmative action? Hardly, since these items involve personality and politics. What can be categorized are matters of another sort: holding of "good degrees," to use a familiar administrative expression—i.e., those from an elite university. How much publication does the vita contain, and in which reputable journals? So many points for a Swarthmore B.A.; so many more for a Harvard Ph.D.; and more still for 50 pages of publications.

It is clear, even in this very slight exaggeration, that that way meritocracy lies. But it is also clear that the ladders to meritocracy are not, nor have they ever been, equally available. Even in the most elite institutions—the "ivy league" colleges and the "seven sisters," for example—many more places have been available for men than for women, for whites than for blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Native Americans, or Asians. Dozens of other forms of inequity (in funding, opportunity for admission, the quality of primary and secondary institutions), familiar by now to most people, limit the aspiration and productivity of disadvantaged groups of people. Applying the logic of an increasingly mechanical system of affirmative action can only reinforce the privilege of privileged groups, in much the way that I.Q. tests have been used to give allegedly "objective" evidence to the supposed superiority of the privileged. To say it another way: one cannot end inequality by applying presumably objective criteria which, in fact, themselves reflect the very sources of inequality.

Certainly, the alternative is not to return to the "old boys" network, with its informal and exclusionary tactics. It may be that we have to insist that another dimension be added to affirmative action procedures. The advertisement that reads, "Sociologist, Assistant Professor, Salary to $13,500, courses include Introduction, Social Stratification, Organization," leads directly into the meritocratic trap. Perhaps the ad should go on to say, "Applicants are asked to describe why they wish to teach in an interdisciplinary program with large non-traditional student population, and what qualifications they do so." Perhaps hiring committees and administrators are required to state more fully and clearly what they actually require of a new faculty member—it is always more than that certain designated courses be covered.

There are many other possibilities, but in a larger sense, they finally evade the issue. For they get back to "process," as Sheila Tobias puts it, rather than to "product"; they are designed to provide an "equal shake" to all those, rich and poor, aspiring to avoid sleeping under the bridge. No such set of processes will, obviously, overcome the inequalities that a society so stratified as ours by race, sex, and class produces. That's why the defenders of the status quo—the Hooks and Lesters—inveigh so mightily against "Quotas" or "Goals" or other "mere numerical devices." For these force the hard political questions, overcoming artificial distinctions like that between de jure and de facto segregation. And for this reason, it's clear that while processes that reinforce privilege should be avoided, realistic affirmative action goals and success in actually achieving them must remain the primary focus.

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AFFIRMATIVE ACTION UNDER ATTACK (continued)

with him on the need to replace contract compliance procedures with a mediation or arbitration system. Yet, to use mediation in civil rights disputes would constitute nothing less than a major retreat in civil rights legislation. How is mediation to settle class-action suits? How are we to defend the role of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and of the Justice Department (which is now empowered to prosecute units of state and local government for not providing effective affirmative action)? Who is to protect the claimant from being harassed? Or to keep him from going to court anyway if the arbitration goes against him?

Lester is critical of affirmative action goals also because they are outcome-oriented rather than process-oriented. He would prefer a system where the emphasis was on improving the search and referral procedures. So would we all, if this would work. But we have found that targets raise consciousness and give departments and colleges some measure of how they are doing.

One must agree with him that the new surveillance may discourage candor in assessing candidates for tenure and result in self-censorship. There is surely the possibility that adversary proceedings may lead to bitter rifts that undermine faculty self-government as we know it. And his criticism of the inconsistencies and variation in enforcement between regional HEW offices is well known and his point well taken. Yet time and greater resources will probably iron out these problems, unless of course, the new Administration decides, for reasons of its own, not to enforce affirmative action any longer.

To solve the problem of the absence of women and minority persons from the ranks of tenured and non-tenured faculty, a problem to which he readily admits, Lester would advocate an increase in the supply of women and minority Ph.D.'s. He points out quite correctly that until now universities have not been rewarded for adding women and minorities to their graduate schools. But as Tom Wicker noted, this recommendation only shifts the problem from hiring policy to admissions policy without really solving either.

What we are left with then is not a serious and comprehensive critique of affirmative action (as we were led to believe), but a list of complaints, some petty, some cogent, and a frequently reiterated insistence that until now universities have not been rewarded for adding women and minority persons to the pool of earned Ph.D.'s—even among the "ten best departments in a field" which some universities are permitted to use as "pools"—are probably not as good as the white males in these pools.

For any female who finished graduate school a decade ago only to be turned down for jobs where comparable (if not lesser) men were hired, the reading of Lester's book is a very painful and insulting experience, though it is unlikely that he intended it to be either. It is simply too early to say that discrimination against women and minorities has ceased to exist; and far too late to say it was not their fault but ours.

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