

Harvard On Trial and Affirmative Action

by Michael Curtis



Truth will be a little late this year, a little late arriving in the Harvard University campus. No doubt it will emerge at the end of the Federal court hearing a case on discrimination in the admissions process for students. District Judge for the District of Massachusetts Allison Burroughs, Boston born though a grad of University of Pennsylvania Law School, is presiding without jury over the trial, civil proceedings, based on charges of discrimination against Asian-American applicants who are held to a different, more demanding standard than other applicants.

In Roman mythology Veritas, the goddess of truth is sometimes depicted as hidden in the bottom of a holy well. In the current trial process, Veritas, the motto of Harvard

University, if not completely concealed has been displayed in mercurial fashion as new guidelines for admissions were issued a few days before the trial started to meet criticisms of its usual policy. Harvard has shown that it's not always true to applicants in its fashion.

The issue raised in the trial has many dimensions, not only for Harvard but also for the national educational process. The wider general question is whether American elite colleges are culturally biased in decisions on admissions. What criteria are or should be most considered for admission? Harvard has no written guidelines on the use of race for consideration, and indeed race and ethnicity seem prohibited, but they are considered if they contribute to the benefits of diversity.

The question of race in college admissions is a key issue, still hotly disputed, and the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to issue a complete decisive pronouncement on the issue. At the core, and underlying the issue at the Harvard trial, is the controversial question of affirmative action programs and the quality of diversity that the Court considers is vital to universities. Harvard has been accused of "racial balancing," and of intentionally discriminating against Asian-Americans, using a criteria of "personal ratings," as well as other usual metrics, test scores, recommendations of teachers, extracurricular activities, leadership qualities, social background, and charitable work.

Was selection at Harvard balanced? For the 2022 class, there was a record application of 42,749 , of whom 8,000 domestic students had perfect grade averages, 3,400 had highest SAT math, and 2,700 had highest verbal scores. Yet, in this particular case, Asian-Americans who compose 6% of the U.S. population account for 22% of recently admitted applicants, while African-Americans account for 15% and Hispanics 12%. Nonwhites are a majority of the current class.

The basic issue is that since the U.S. is becoming an

increasingly diverse country should colleges reflect this and create campuses that illustrate this? Diversity is held to be the key to the Harvard mission, and by Supreme Court decisions, to universities generally, which is not possible without affirmative action, and therefore race must be considered to get racial diversity. The case made for diversity is that its benefits bring enlargement of understanding, career preparation, preparation for citizenship in today's multicultural democratic U.S. as well as for personal development. Diversity, it is argued, can lead to positive outcomes in school and in life, useful in communities.

Yet two factors can be considered. One is that diversity is associated with other, sometimes competitive factors, race, class, gender, sexual orientation. The other is that mere contact through desegregation in itself may not be enough to produce educational benefits to all students. In addition what is needed are racially integrated learning experiences that go beyond putting diverse students together in the same classroom.

The specific Harvard issue in the case is the "higher standard" for Asian-Americans based on personal factors. More of them would be admitted if evaluations were made only on academic factors. The specific case rests on the argument that Harvard has given lower personal ratings to them in a stereotypical and discriminatory fashion than to other applicants. This brings up the question of the "right" personality required. Personality may be defined as the totality of individual behavior and emotional characteristics, a set of traits which account for consistency.

There are various models of personality traits offered by psychologists and sociologists. A useful one that can be surveyed is in *College Quarterly* Summer 2006. It suggests a number of patterns of behavior. Extroversion (introversion), neuroticism (stability), agreeableness (antagonism),

conscientiousness (un- directness), openness (non-openness).

These are explained as follows. Extraverts are usually sociable, friendly, active, assertive, stimulating .Introverts tend to be reserved, independents.

Neuroticics, tend to experience fear, disgust , anger. Stables are usually calm, even tempered, relaxed. Agreeable are good natured, cooperative, tolerant, generous, kind, fair.

Conscientious people are organized, disciplined, diligent, good organizers, have a positive attitude, linked to educational achievemnt and will to achieve. Openness indicates imagination, and initiative.

Asian-Americans are held by Harvard to register low on these positive personal ratings. Positive factors vary, but Harvard is said to consider qualities such as likeability, courage, optimism, kindness, widely respected, unpretentious, unselfish, diligent, accomodating. But this appears biased. Analysis of the relationship between the models of personality and academic achievement vary in different studies, In some, extraversion is said to be negatively correlated with success in higher education. But there is no clear cut relationship between neuroticism and achievement. Other studies indicate there are significant positive correlations between grade point average and conscientiousness and openness.

The conclusions are twofold. One is that the supposed traits of groups may not be good predictors of behavior. The second is that the behavior of individuals in a particular group may not be the same in every situation. The different personality traits can be looked at in different ways. They may dominate whole life; they can be some basic traits for individuals; they can be relevant in certain situations.

Moreover, two issues are relevant. One is that personality group differences are based on average, and there are considerable variations within a group, A second is whether

personality differences are not innate and pre-existing but are the result of the socialization process.

No one can dispute the fact that many factors, individual, social, and national, have to be considered in decisions for admission to elite college institutions. It is fitting that Harvard has belatedly recognized this by issuing new guidelines on what personalities it wants for its freshman class. Changes that seem favorable for Asian-Americans, and for gifted students, seem to include those individuals who are reflective, insightful, quiet and studious. The qualities of diversity and inclusion may be desirable, but equally or more so are character and merit.