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Shaping the perfect classroom
Towards a deeper understanding of campus diversity

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“Beneficial dialogue is impossible without a truly diverse class – one with diversity of thought and differing political and philosophical ideologies.”

American society stresses the importance of diversity in all aspects of life, but nowhere has the necessity of diversity been emphasized more than in schools. In particular, diversity is thought to be necessary to the intellectual livelihood of the college campus. It is often said that college is more than an academic education, and diversity is believed to be one of the factors that enriches the college experience. By allowing students to interact with people that have widely differing backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions, educators hope that preconceived notions and stereotypes will gradually disappear and that a diverse community will strengthen.

Colleges believe this objective of a diverse campus to be of such dire necessity that they have implemented affirmative action policies to ensure that under-represented minorities such as African-Americans, Hispanics and Native-Americans fill a larger share of America’s classrooms. Such policies seek to achieve greater diversity by giving advantage to these specific demographics in the admissions process. Although there has been a contentious debate over the use of affirmative action to achieve diversity, it seems that the argument is mainly targeted at the means to achieve diversity, and not at the need for diversity itself.

President Bush, who supported the lawsuit against the University of Michigan’s point-based affirmative action policy, praised diversity by stating that he “support[s] diversity of all kinds including racial diversity in higher education.”

The Supreme Court also found there to be a need for diversity. Sandra Day O’Connor wrote approvingly in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, “[Michigan] Law School’s narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions [furthers] a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.” In addition, one of the main arguments used by Michigan Law in favor of its affirmative action program was that minorities who might not otherwise have been represented at the University in meaningful numbers would be “particularly likely to have experiences and perspectives of special importance” which would add “unique contributions to the character of the law school.”

Some students who happen to be minorities certainly do add unique perspectives to a university, but is it really possible to know this based on a checkbox? In order for this to be the case, the underlying implication would be that all members of a certain race or ethnicity share similar experiences, opinions and backgrounds. But this is not the case. A wealthy African-American attending Andover Preparatory School may have more in common with a Caucasian student with the same wealthy, preparatory school background than say an African-American student living in abject poverty while attending one of his city’s worst high schools. The socio-economic and

educational background of the individual has a more profound effect on his life than simply the pigmentation of his skin.

Perhaps more importantly, attention must be drawn as to why schools intensely focus solely on racial diversity. Michigan's point system, for example, gives 20 points to under-represented minorities, a full one-fifth of the number of points required for acceptance and half of the value given to a student's high school GPA. Not a single point is given to individuals who embrace an under-represented political ideology or a unique secular belief. These are individuals more likely to enhance classroom discussions than simply choosing applicants who, based on racial stereotypes, are *supposed* to share life experiences and perspectives.

The diversity of thought on campus must be at least as important as the diversity of races and ethnicities. After all, the college campus is a place for open intellectual discourse. Such beneficial dialogue is impossible without a truly diverse class – one with diversity of thought and differing political and philosophical ideologies.

Amherst student Theodore Hertzberg learned that diversity of thought is not an important goal at his prestigious university. Like similar schools, Amherst has in place an affirmative action policy aimed at selecting a racially diverse student body. The admissions office does not have any similar policy designed to ensure diversity of thought on the Amherst campus. Hertzberg, who is the chairman of the Amherst College Republicans, represents a political ideology voiced by an extremely small minority of students on campus. To provide this political minority a fair venue to voice its opinions, the Republican student applied for a conservative diversity seat on the Amherst Student Senate. Such seats already exist for homosexuals, racial minorities and international students, all minority groups on campus. His attempt to provide his minority group, conservatives, equal representation failed.

This is at a university whose faculty only identified one registered Republican, a campus where numerous crimes had been perpetrated against conservatives – namely the burning of a pile of campus conservative newspapers – and the Student Senate nevertheless refused to grant Hertzberg a conservative diversity seat.

This is a trend Rob Lichter, a Tufts student and editor of the campus conservative publication, *Primary Source*, got to know all too well. When he requested a similar diversity seat from his university, his request was denied. This is despite a wave of hate messages and physical assaults against Tufts conservative students.

Promoting diversity on campus is certainly a noble goal, but the task must extend far beyond racial lines. Diversity of ideas is as important, if not more important, than ensuring that racial minorities have their place through affirmative action programs. Universities have taken major strides in granting 'diversity seats' on student governments, but such seats cannot only be extended to preferred minorities. American universities should move past its systems far too tailored at color, and strive towards providing the most deserving applicants a college community where a diversity of ideas and political ideologies is cherished and recognized as essential to a learning environment.