

Editorial: Ensure diversity by admitting top 10% graduates to college

by Keith Butler
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Since Michigan voters have banned the use of affirmative action in college admissions, the University of Michigan and other prominent public universities and colleges must find other ways to bring diversity to their campuses. They must also find ways to give opportunities to minority and economically disadvantaged students who would not otherwise have a chance to be admitted.

The solution may be to follow Texas' lead on admissions.

In 1996, a federal court outlawed affirmative action in the Hopwood v. Texas case, in which Hopwood and three other white students claimed they were unfairly denied admission to the University of Texas law school because it gave preferential treatment to minority students.

In 1998, Texas legislators created a plan that guaranteed admission of high school graduates to any state university if the graduates ranked in the top 10 percent of their class.

Now the state's flagship universities, the University of Texas (at Austin) and Texas A&M, are drawing students from a greater number of high schools and a broader geographical area, benefiting both white and minority students.

In the late 1990s, 45 percent of U-T's incoming students resulted from the 10 percent law; last year, it accounted for 71 percent -- due in part to the university's aggressive outreach to minority and disadvantaged students in urban and rural areas.

The Longhorn and Century scholarship programs offered by U-T and A&M are critical to the success of Texas' admissions law. The Longhorn scholarships are awarded to top students from about 70 high schools in economically disadvantaged areas that historically have sent few students to UT-Austin. A&M's Century Scholars are selected by similar criteria. Some of these students later return to their high schools to recruit other students.

Michigan legislators and higher education leaders should consider creating Michigan's own top 10 percent law to ensure more diversity on state campuses. This is especially important since Michigan has 36 "hold-harmless" school districts that receive significantly more education money per student, well over the amount received by rural and urban school districts. Students should not be penalized because their parents cannot afford housing in affluent areas with top-flight schools.

The top 10 approach would give students in every school district an equal opportunity to acquire an excellent college education from any Michigan institution of higher learning.

The mission statement of the American Civil Rights Institute, which spearheaded passing the state's constitutional amendment on affirmative action, is "Race has no place in American life or law." While that is an ideal to shoot for, it's a naïve approach for dealing with the reality of this state's educational problems.

Until race no longer is considered in life and the law, Michigan must ensure all students have an equal opportunity to get a college education. The top 10 percent approach may be the best way to go.

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