Forget Diversity

By JAMES TRAUB
February 2, 2003
NY Times Magazine

“Diversity” must be a very, very good thing; President Bush used the word, or a variant of it, 10 times in his speech last month announcing that the administration would seek to have the Supreme Court declare the undergraduate admissions policies at the University of Michigan unconstitutional. “I strongly support diversity of all kinds,” said the president, with his flair for hijacking the key words of his opponents, “including racial diversity in higher education.” As the president knows very well, "diversity" is precisely what the University of Michigan says its admissions program is designed to ensure. The two sides disagree only about the acceptable means of attaining this supreme good.

What, exactly, is so great about diversity? After all, when the process formerly known as affirmative action was first established, in the 60's, the goal was to help black people overcome the historic legacy of discrimination. As President Johnson famously put it in 1965, it is not enough to "take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains, and liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with others.'" The goal of affirmative action in employment, which Johnson mandated by an executive order to his Labor Department (and President Nixon continued), was not to create a "diverse" workplace but to overcome hiring practices that had traditionally excluded or disadvantaged blacks. That remains the rationale for the highly circumscribed workplace affirmative action programs of today.

But "affirmative action" carries an explicitly zero-sum connotation; if one group of individuals is being advantaged, another group is, of course, being disadvantaged. From the outset, affirmative action, unlike older policies designed to spur integration, was attacked for establishing invidious racial categories. Universities eager to boost black enrollment fell under suspicion for the same reason. And then came diversity. In 1978, Justice Lewis Powell declared in the Bakke case that universities could offer a "plus factor" to minority students -- not to overcome the legacy of discrimination but to ensure a diversity of viewpoints. Diversity has proved a much harder rationale for the plus factor than the leg-up metaphor of President Johnson's speech, and for a simple reason: its central message is "Everyone benefits equally." Encountering new people and new ideas is a core aspect of the college experience. In "The Shape of the River," a scholarly brief for affirmative action, William G. Bowen and Derek Bok cite survey data showing that both white and black graduates of elite universities attach great importance to the ability to get along and work effectively with people of different racial and cultural backgrounds and also attribute "a great deal" of their ability to do so to experiences in diverse settings in college. The University of Michigan has tried to take this claim one step further by conducting a study that purports to show that both white and minority students learn better in racially diverse classroom.

Well, really. Does that mean that George W. Bush would have improved on that famous C average if the Yale undergraduate population of the mid-60's had been, say, 12 percent minority rather than maybe 2 or 3 percent? Does that mean that grade inflation is really a dependent
variable of diversity? The idea seems absurd on its face. What's more, while I wish I had attended a more diverse institution (I graduated from college in 1976, when affirmative action was young), it's pretty low on my wish list. And my impression from talking to students at two campuses of the University of California, and at the University of Texas Law School, is that for most white students diversity is a pleasant side benefit, like a nice library. It was, on the other hand, a tremendous boon to minority students, who otherwise would have attended less elite institutions.

The difference in the nature of the benefits is so obvious and overwhelming that I have trouble believing that people really mean what they say about diversity; the whole thing feels like an elaborate charade to keep us from knowing what we're doing. What's more, diversity has a kind of self-perpetuating genius. The old remedial idea of affirmative action implied a time limit, when all contestants would be ready to line up together at the starting line. But since diversity, by contrast, is a good for all, there's no earthly reason to ever stop awarding a plus factor to minority students.

But diversity, or rather, affirmative-action-as-diversity, is not good for all. In addition to the longstanding problem of disadvantaging some in order to advantage others, the diversity rationale also insultingly assumes that black students bring a black "point of view," Asians an Asian one and so on, thus reifying the very barriers of race and ethnicity that affirmative action is meant to erase. And why should racial and ethnic "points of view" outweigh those forged by class or culture? Why, as a professor recently suggested to me, shouldn't the presence of the R.O.T.C. on campus be seen as a means to ensure representation of a "military" point of view otherwise absent from elite universities?

Diversity distracts us from a simple but painful truth, which is that persistent black educational failure (and Hispanic failure, to a lesser extent) has made it impossible for the most selective schools to become substantially integrated using their own traditional criteria of merit. The problem is minority access to elite institutions, not white access to minority students. And perhaps we should say that if an elaborate charade is the only way to guarantee such access, then we shouldn't make a fetish of transparency, or even honesty. Perhaps. But I wonder if eliminating that mechanism wouldn't force universities -- and the rest of us -- to do something about the educational failure that has made affirmative action necessary in the first place.

*James Traub is a contributing writer for the magazine.*