

# Scholar: real issue is skin color, not race

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## Scholar: real issue is skin color, not race

By DANIEL STURM

As the date approaches for the Supreme Court to hear arguments on the University of Michigan's affirmative action policy, an MSU professor says the real issue is not race but skin color.

"We shouldn't qualify people on the basis of race, because race has no biological significance," says Ronald E. Hall, an assistant professor of social work.

Hall argues that hiring studies show that white people tend to give more favorable ratings to light-skinned people of color applying for jobs. "They are not alone in their discrimination," wrote Hall in a 1997 study called "Fixing Affirmative Action." "People of color under the same circumstances give more favorable job hire ratings to darker-skinned applicants."

In order to avoid such discrimination, says Hall, affirmative action laws should eliminate the term race from the categories of discriminatory attributes - color, gender, sex, religion, national origin - and "emphasize skin color as the basis for hiring" diverse employees.

The social scientist, who opposes the Bush administration's effort to eliminate affirmative action laws, said that these attacks didn't surprise him, because affirmative action laws have been "so poorly written on the basis of race." He referred to lawsuits filed by white students claiming "reverse discrimination" and argued that current anti-discrimination policies can have the effect of discriminating particularly against white males or darker-skinned applicants of Mediterranean descent, for instance.

Hall notes that affirmative action was first applied in 1935 for the benefit of non-unionized white males who sought redress for discrimination by employers. The National Labor Relations Act, or the Wagner Act,

ignored discrimination based upon gender or ethnicity. Back then, a job announcement might typically advertise for a "white male," preferably of "non-Jewish stock."

It was on the basis of the Wagner Act that 30 years later civil and women's rights activists pushed Congress to pass the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, passed in 1972.

Although Hall would like to see affirmative action be revised, he opposes Bush's engagement in the U-M case. "The issue here is race and power," said Hall, who himself graduated from University of Michigan. U-M admits students according to criteria beyond test score results, such as geography, class and family, alumni status, and athletic ability. "People are comfortable with these advantages, but they aren't with race."

The Supreme Court, which will hear arguments in April, has received legal briefs from more than 300 organizations in favor of affirmative action. If it were to judge cases based on the sheer volume of briefs submitted, the University of Michigan "would have no trouble prevailing in its defense of its race-conscious admission politics," commented the Chronicle of Higher Education in a Feb. 28 report.

But unlike the protesters, which include Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, more than 60 private colleges, seven prestigious private universities, 65 Fortune 500 Companies, and 54 higher education associations, the MSU Board of Trustees hasn't officially taken a stance on the issue.

"The university is neither pro nor con," said Terry Denbow, MSU's vice president of university relations.

A number of MSU student groups, including the Black Student Alliance, the North American Indian Student Organization, the Womyn's Council and others have recently started to campaign in support of affirmative action, urging MSU to take a clear stance. "We're really disappointed that the university didn't file a friend of the court brief," said Ernesto Mireles, who co-chairs Culturas de las Razas Unidas. "I think it's very indicative of the administration's attitude." The students launched a campaign called REACTION, which stands for Reminding Every American Citizen That It's Our Need.

James Gill, president of the Lansing NAACP, said he sent a letter to MSU's president, Peter McPherson, urging him to support affirmative action. "MSU recruits predominantly African-American athletes to bring dollars to the university, but they can't support affirmative action? That doesn't make sense," Gill said.

Although university officials have publicly avoided taking sides, MSU does belong to the American Council on Education, which on March 3 filed a friend of the court brief claiming that "student diversity is a compelling governmental interest." Asked whether this statement didn't contradict the trustees' silence, Denbow said: "We didn't take our name off their letter. But we simply didn't file a legal brief on our own."

The university's hesitance to take a stance fits into the larger historical trend on controversial policy issues, says political activist Michael Price, who remembers racism in housing in East Lansing in the 1960s. In April 1965 students from seven civil rights campus groups picketed a rental residence after a landlady rejected racially mixed roommates as renters. On May 25 some 100 students protested at City Hall. According to a State News story, MSU President John Hannah was forced to fly back from a meeting of the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights, which he chaired. When he arrived, he ordered MSU buses to round up the protesters and take them to Ingham County Jail. Sixty students were arrested.

Looking back to the turmoil, Price said, "MSU had academic programs all over the world including in Africa, yet its own community was segregated." Price remembers how civil rights activists planted the

rumor that Martin Luther King Jr. was looking for a northern city like Lansing in which to expose "the hypocrisy of the North." A series of rallies brought East Lansing into national news. Finally in 1968, spurred on by King's assassination, East Lansing adopted an ordinance prohibiting landlords from practicing racial discrimination.

Almost 40 years later, a newly formed MSU student coalition is trying to revive the activists' legacy. The Lansing NAACP and Direct Action! have announced that they will support the effort to rally for affirmative action. On March 31 students plan to participate in a rally for educational justice at the University of Michigan. The day after, students from across the country plan to rally in Washington.

Louis Brown, the ASMSU Student Assembly vice chairman for external affairs, accused the administration of being hypocritical. "They advertise 'diversity' and put 'affirmative action' on their letter head, yet less than half of the African-American students who come to MSU actually graduate." Brown, an international relations and political economy senior, said he was concerned that Michigan's budget cuts and Bush's intervention could lead to cutting programs for minority students.

Although MSU claims to support all disadvantaged students, its affirmative action report does not monitor socio-economical background. The Office of Affirmative Action's 121-page compliance and monitoring report contains data on women, disabled, and minority enrollment, but no information regarding family income or education levels. "It's almost impossible to monitor socio-economic disadvantage, because we do not ask for family income on the application," said Pamela T. Horne, MSU's director of admissions. She pointed out that applicants can apply for special consideration under the College Achievement Admissions Program, a supplemental admissions process for high school seniors who have demonstrated academic promise, but who have not yet been able to show their potential due to socio-economic factors. The program's enrollment last fall was 474, of which 417 were minority students. This is roughly 6 percent of the entering freshman class.

Unlike University of Michigan, MSU does not assign point values to factors such as race and economic background when it makes undergraduate admission decisions. Instead, the university specifically targets minority groups by recruiting them. However, the resulting overall minority enrollment is similar. Out of a total freshman enrollment of 6,949, 10.2 percent are African-American, 3.5 percent are Hispanic and 0.8 percent Native American. At U-M, the percentages are 8.9, 6.1, and 1.1 respectively.

Horne, who came to MSU last year after being assistant director of U-M's admissions office, said that MSU monitors numbers, and when there's a significant dip, recruiting efforts are increased. In contrast to U-M's point system, MSU does a "holistic review," according to its admission's director.

The criterion that landed U-M in front of the U.S. Supreme Court - the use of race as a specific category in selecting the freshman class each year - is handled differently at MSU. Ann Arbor awards 20 points in its 150-point system for the status of underrepresented minority or socio-economic disadvantage. While Michigan State does not award points for race or economic status, it does ask applicants to spell out their special circumstances on a separate sheet, and there is voluntary space to indicate ethnic information.

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