

Groups Support University of Michigan Affirmative Action Case

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By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 — A month after the Bush administration filed a brief with the Supreme Court opposing affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan, more than 300 organizations representing academia, major corporations, labor unions and nearly 30 of the nation's top former military and civilian defense officials, announced that they would file briefs supporting the university by Tuesday's deadline.

The friend-of-the-court briefs, expected to top five dozen, may challenge the record of 62 briefs filed during the court's 1978 decision in University of California Board of Regents vs. Bakke. The variety of organizations filing briefs this time reflects the broad reach of affirmative action policies in the quarter century since the Supreme Court's landmark Bakke ruling.

Speaking by satellite to hundreds of university presidents gathered at a hotel for the American Council on Education's annual conference here, Mary Sue Coleman, the president of the University of Michigan, defended admissions policies at the university's law school and undergraduate divisions, urging the Supreme Court "not to turn back the clock."

"The debate over the landmark 1978 Supreme Court decision," Dr. Coleman said, "is a debate about the future direction of this country."

Briefs supporting Michigan are being filed by 64 Fortune 500 companies, including Microsoft, Bank One, Boeing, General Motors, Shell and American Express. Among the 29 military and civilian defense officials filing briefs supporting the university are three former chairmen of the joint chiefs of staff and several four-star generals. In addition, 14,000 law school students lent their signatures to a brief defending race-conscious policies in higher education that will be submitted on Tuesday.

In each case, the briefs are arguing that racial and ethnic diversity have become an essential feature of success in the United States, whether in a university offering an education that challenges students to know others from different backgrounds and perspectives, or a medical school that sees minority doctors as opening new avenues of research, or military leaders who seek well-educated minorities to fill the officer corps.

Taken together, the scores of briefs amounted to a broad endorsement of affirmative action policies by leading sectors of society at the moment they are most in jeopardy.

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The military brief was signed by former leading figures in the armed services, including Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf; William S. Cohen and William J. Perry, former defense secretaries; and Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., Gen. Hugh H. Shelton and Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, former chairmen of the joint chiefs of staff.

Though Michigan is a public university, the court's decision will affect public and private universities alike. Its impact will be felt most keenly at the country's two or three dozen most selective institutions, said David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, which filed a brief supporting Michigan on Friday that was joined by 54 other higher education associations.

Kermit L. Hall, president of Utah State University, said that while he supported affirmative action, the court's ruling could have little impact on the large majority of the nation's campuses, including his own, because they already have policies of open admissions.