

Opinion

Diversity Necessary For Effective Merit System

By HUGH B. PRICE

Opponents of affirmative action claim that it subverts the merit system, which they revere as a racially-neutral means of distributing opportunities in our society.

But that claim is severely flawed. Affirmative action, properly applied, can help broaden opportunities and advance important societal goals without damaging the merit system.

It is an unfortunate fact that, for various reasons, including the effects of racism and poverty, Blacks as a group score lower on tests used to determine college admissions and job promotions.

Of course, we in the African-American community must work hard to assure that our children score higher on entrance exams so there isn't a marked racial differentiation on key test scores. The impressive gains made by Blacks in such tests in recent years is an indication that our hard work is showing results.

However, supposedly objective test scores do not always indicate merit, nor do they accurately predict future success.

As the regents of the University of California system acknowledged recently, the African-American students admitted to their medical school actually can do the work and almost all ultimately succeed even if, as a group, their test scores tend to be somewhat lower.

The university's attorney, Gary Morrison, noted persuasively: "Medical school is not a reward for high test scores and grades. Medical

schools have to decide who is going to fulfill the most pressing needs of society, and that doesn't correlate extremely well with test results and grades."

The crucial issue in crafting admissions and hiring policies is to define the threshold qualifications for what it takes to perform satisfactorily.

With those baseline criteria established, the institution or employer could then set selection standards that enable it to fulfill its fundamental mission.

Universities would include among their criteria their mission to train future professionals that serve all of America's diverse communities. Corporations would recruit employees whose cultural backgrounds could help capture markets here and abroad.

In our multicultural world, restrictive definitions of merit shouldn't block the necessary affirmative pursuit of diversity.

It's misleading to suggest that differences of a few points in test scores separate deserving candidates from the undeserving. Above a certain threshold all are qualified, and affirmative action corrects the distortions of artificial merit systems by assuring that opportunities are not distributed by such false measurements.

That is especially true when the predictive power of most tests is negligible. The test for law school admission, I'm told, can only reliably predict how well a student might do in the first year or so. It is commonplace to find

To Be Equal



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society's most successful and effective people scoring in the middle ranks of their class, while the top performers often failed to fulfill their potential.

Rigid reliance on tests also results in ignoring talent tests cannot measure. Employers seeking salespeople will be disappointed if they rely solely on IQ but not on the interpersonal talents indispensable to success in sales.

Such important traits as ambition, industriousness, leadership, flexibility and other job-relevant attributes go unmeasured in our standard tests, thereby undermining the effectiveness of what we think of as a merit system.

Affirmative action helps institutions tap into the complex realities of human ability, enabling them to be both inclusive and competitive, correcting the failures of a mislabeled "merit" system that no longer meets society's needs.