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[Equity Matters - Episode 4.m4a](#)

Transcript

Bob Bifulco

Welcome to Equity Matters, the podcast series produced by the Program on Educational Equity and Policy at Syracuse University. I'm Bob Bifulco, the host of today's episode. Today's guest is Doctor Amy Lutz, a sociologist at the Maxwell School here at Syracuse University. Amy has published a series of papers over the last two years on affirmative action in higher education and has recently released the policy brief with her co-authors Pamela Bennett and Rebecca Wang entitled "Affirmative Action Is A Successful Policy." Given the pending Supreme Court decision on affirmative action cases involving Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, we wanted to give this platform to Amy to discuss key issues related to affirmative action and particularly race conscious admission policies in colleges and universities. Welcome Amy.

Amy Lutz

Thank you very much.

Bob Bifulco

OK, your brief is titled "Affirmative Action Is A Successful Policy." Success in this context might mean different things, or at least have multiple dimensions. For instance, one dimension on which affirmative action might succeed is increasing the diversity of selective colleges and universities. However, you seem to have other dimensions of success in mind. So let me start by asking you what you mean when you say that affirmative action is successful.

Amy Lutz

So for the past several years, the emphasis on affirmative action has been on diversity. The thinking goes that diversity benefits all students, but the emphasis has not always been on diversity as such. So if we go back to the ways that Lyndon B. Johnson thought about affirmative action, we see that there was much more of an emphasis on social mobility. So there's this famous quote by Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1965 speech at Howard University that I want to share with you. I'm going to read the quote, it's a little long, but I think it's important. So Lyndon B. Johnson said, "you do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say you are free to compete with all the others and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates." So Johnson thought a lot about affirmative action in terms of providing underrepresented minority students with the means for social mobility. So if we think about affirmative action in that way, we can't just think about affirmative action as a tool for diversity for diversity's sake. We must also think about graduation from those selective colleges because graduation is the real springboard to social mobility. In this respect, affirmative action policy has been very successful because as we find in our

research, the odds of graduating from a selective college or university for black and Latino students, once admitted, are not different from the odds of white students. Further, we also find that when you compare Black and Latino students at selective institutions to white students who have similar socioeconomic status and academic experiences, those black and Latino students are more likely to graduate than similar white students, and that graduation puts them on the road to opportunities for social mobility. And that's why I think affirmative action is a successful policy.

Bob Bifulco

OK, great. So when you're- so you're talking about these are the graduation rates are similar across black and Hispanic students and white students at institutions that have kind of race conscious admissions policies?

Amy Lutz

Yeah. So we look at selective colleges and universities, as defined by U.S. news and World Report.

Bob Bifulco

OK. So it's specifically these policies that use race in making- as a factor in making admission decisions that you're referring to as successful here. So the legal challenges to the use of affirmative action by Harvard University and the University of North Carolina are currently before the U.S. Supreme Court, and I think a lot of onlookers believe that the court may end up forbidding the use of race conscious admissions policies at American colleges and universities, and if they do that these colleges and universities are going to find- need to find alternative ways to ensure meaningful access for African Americans and other groups. So what are some of those alternatives to race conscious admission?

Amy Lutz

So there are several alternatives and I'll talk about each of the alternatives and then I'll give you a little thought about, you know, what the problems with those alternatives might be, or what the solutions might be. So the first are top percent plans. So some states, Texas being the most famous one, have top percentage plans whereby if you're one of the top students in your class, you have a guaranteed place in the state's public institution. The problem with these policies in terms of racial diversity is that they're built on a premise that schools are segregated. So to the extent that schools are integrated, the programs would be much likely- much less likely to produce racial diversity in colleges and universities. So that's one thing that's been tried.

Bob Bifulco

Can I stop you there for a second, Amy, and ask about the top 10% plan?

Amy Lutz

Sure. Yeah.

Bob Bifulco

So I can see in a world where we have more integrated schools that may not achieve a lot of racial diversity, but how has for instance, Texas' plan worked in so far as creating diversity?

Amy Lutz

Well, Texas doesn't just use the top 10% plan and I think the percent changes every year, as I understand. But the University of Texas at Austin is also using affirmative action in addition to that policy. So it's not a real test of how that plan would work.

Bob Bifulco

OK, So what are some of the- Why don't we get some of the other alternatives out on the table and discuss those a little bit.

Amy Lutz

OK, so a popular idea is using class instead of race. So some have argued that in lieu of race, affirmative action should be based on social class. The problem with this option is that black and Latino students are actually a small part of the low-income population and shifting to a class centric policy would likely reduce racial ethnic diversity. There is an exception to this though. So Sigal Alon in her 19- in her 2015 book, has done some simulations to see if class based affirmative action could replace race based affirmative action in the US and still produce racially diverse cohorts of students. So for the most part, she finds that class cannot successfully replace race and produce racially ethnic, diverse cohorts. But she does find one exception. So class based affirmative action could replace race based affirmative action and still produce racially diverse cohorts of students at selective institutions only if these institutions got rid of all other preferences, so including legacies, children of donors, athletes, celebrities- so this would also require an increase in the amount of funds college targeted for financial aid, because if they're basing admissions on class and they want those students to come, they need to make college affordable.

Bob Bifulco

And that would also achieve progress on racial diversity under those conditions.

Amy Lutz

Under those conditions, that's what she finds.

Bob Bifulco

So it's interesting this study, which I was not familiar with because there's a- in the world I'm a little more familiar with and with elementary and secondary school integration, Sean Reardon at Stanford University has run similar types of simulations and have found that integrating elementary and secondary schools by class would not achieve a whole lot of integration by race. So it's another instance where you know there's obviously some overlap in race and in class, but they're really not close proxies for each other.

Amy Lutz

Yeah. So most studies find what you just described that class is not a good proxy for race. So this is a very specific situation and I think one that colleges might be hard to accept- to do away with all of these preferences.

Bob Bifulco

OK, so there's a top 10%. There's trying to do kind of affirmative action based on class rather than race. Are there other options?

Amy Lutz

There are. There are a few others. So going back to what you were just talking about, enhancing K through 12 education. This is something bigger than what any university can do but is crucial to creating a diverse post-secondary environment. So Thomas Espenshade, a sociologist at Princeton University, has argued that enhancing K through 12 education for all students to make it more equal is key to creating diverse student bodies in the absence of affirmative action. And this, I think, is also a very difficult thing to do, especially because it's not something that universities and colleges have much ability to do. So this is a much bigger project. So another thing is targeted recruiting and already I'll call this: do this. So this involves universities going to high schools of underrepresented students and trying to recruit those students to apply to that institution and I would argue that this should be done, but likely on its own will not produce significantly diverse cohorts of students without affirmative action.

Bob Bifulco

And it's interesting, my understanding is that some of the states that have moved towards banning affirmative action in higher education have also tried to include bans on this type of targeted recruiting.

Amy Lutz

Yeah, that's true. That's true. Yeah. OK, another option is going SAT optional. So because SAT scores tend to be lower among underrepresented groups, some colleges are going SAT optional and particularly with the pandemics, colleges and universities have been moving in this direction. This again, as I feel, is something that should be done, but likely on its own will not produce significantly diverse cohorts of students without affirmative action. So those are the alternatives and most of them are not very successful in- or would not be very successful in producing diverse cohorts on their own. You know, I think the research shows that there are two things that could work. But both are very difficult. So the first as I mentioned is Sigal Alon's work: switching to class based affirmative action, providing a lot of financial aid and eliminating all other preferences, such as legacies, children of donors, celebrities and athletics. And the second is equalizing our K through 12 schools so that white students aren't so advantaged in the years leading up to college. So those are kind of the options for the future.

Bob Bifulco

If we tried to pursue all of those alternatives simultaneously in the absence of race conscious admission policies, do you think we would be able to achieve the same level of success that you're finding for current race conscious admissions policies?

Amy Lutz

I don't know, I mean I think that these are things that are worth colleges and universities doing. But I'm not sure that they will bring us to the level of diversity that we have with affirmative action.

Bob Bifulco

So take another aspect of this discussion and ask you to kind of respond to some of the critics of affirmative action. There's some critics who make an argument that's something like this: once criteria

of merit, such as high school grades and other accomplishments, are accounted for, race should have no effect on the likelihood of succeeding in college, and thus is an irrelevant consideration for making admissions, thus providing black and Hispanic students better chances of admissions than white students with similar indicators of merit is unfair to those white students. So how would you respond to that argument, which I think is a fairly typical one that's made in this area?

Amy Lutz

Yeah, I think this is a question of access rather than success. So white students have many structural advantages in applying for selective colleges and universities and getting into those colleges. Legacy admissions advantages white students in the admissions process. Another advantage is participation in sports. So selective institutions are often trying to fill sports teams like golf and crew where white students have an advantage. Donors often tend to be white and their children may have an advantage in this admissions process. And then finally, white students often have academic advantages in the K through 12 system. So ending affirmative action without addressing these advantages of white students leaves underrepresented minority students at a distinct disadvantage in the admissions process, so I think such a system would be unfair to underrepresented minority students.

Bob Bifulco

Let's pretend we're speaking to the Supreme Court justices now. They got this what could be a very momentous decision coming up. If you were able to make an appeal to the Supreme Court justices, what would that appeal be?

Amy Lutz

I'm hoping that they choose to preserve affirmative action. It provides a path to social mobility for many underrepresented students, and I think it's something worth preserving as it exists today. The policies that would create racial diversity in absence of affirmative action are very difficult to implement. So if the court forbids the use of affirmative action, I think that it's likely that what happened in states that banned affirmative action is likely to happen across the U.S. and that we will see a decline in the numbers of black and Latino students in selective institutions, and a shift for those students to non-selective institutions. And I think that would be a very bad thing. Selective colleges and universities are routes to positions of power and financial success in the United States. And I think we want to create greater opportunities for students of various backgrounds to move into those positions.

Bob Bifulco

OK, so I- you know, I think there is a strong case myself for kind of race conscious admissions policies. We know they're effective at increasing the diversity of various types of institutions, particularly the more selective colleges and universities. I think what your research really highlights quite well is these students who are admitted through these race conscious admissions policies do well, right? They're very likely to graduate at similar rates as whites. And that these types of outcomes, these- the graduating from a selective college or university has- can have pretty important impacts on individual lives, and so those are all important reasons to maintain these policies that have been successful. But I think I- you know, I'm- I don't follow this real closely, but I think most people are predicting that this Supreme Court, given its partisan makeup, is not going to support race conscious admission policy and is likely to forbid

them. So if that's the world we're going to live in beginning very soon, what would you recommend for colleges and universities like Syracuse University moving forward?

Amy Lutz

One thing I would recommend would be a drop in preferential treatment in admissions for legacies, children of donors, celebrities and athletes. Another thing I would recommend, which is something that Syracuse University has already done, is to go SAT optional in a way that doesn't penalize merit scholarships for those who do not submit SAT scores. We in our research find that SAT scores are not a particularly good predictor of whether a student will graduate from a selective institution. But they can be a barrier to entrance for students of color. Something else for predominantly white institutions to work on is making their campuses feel safe and to be attractive places for students of color. So one thing that Brown and Hershman in their 2006 article found is that when Washington State banned affirmative action, application or enrollment of students of color was reduced, including Asian American students, and that was related to lower numbers of application among Asian American students because they didn't feel like the campus would be a welcoming environment for them. So I think that it's very important to make campuses feel safe and attractive for students of color. And finally, students need colleges to be affordable so that selective colleges and universities need to make financial aid offers that are attractive to students who might not have the means to attend based on the current tuition.

Bob Bifulco

So that sounds like a way forward, which I think unfortunately we're going to have to be thinking hard about and trying to make progress on this issue of racial equity and access to higher education in the face of what may be upcoming decisions that are going to make this more difficult. I think it would be a real shame if we're not able to avail ourselves to policies and practices that have been shown by your work and others to be successful. So any closing remarks that you'd like to offer, Amy, before we end the episode?

Amy Lutz

Well, I think- I think that I want to emphasize that affirmative action has been a successful policy that has led to high levels of graduation among students of color, and that it's launched them on to successful careers. And I don't agree with the idea that we should forbid the use of affirmative action.

Bob Bifulco

Well, that's our show for today. Thanks, Amy for coming and talking to us and kind of, I think making an appeal and at least bringing your research to bear on what's an important policy currently. So I want to encourage all of our listeners to read Amy's policy brief on affirmative action as well as the journal articles she has published on this issue in recent years. So thanks again for joining us, Amy.

Amy Lutz

Thank you very much for having me.

Bob Bifulco

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