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Race ruling has schools worried Some fear effort to limit race as factor in admissions

Last week's Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action has some university officials concerned their efforts to build a diverse population will be impacted.

"I am a supporter of taking proactive steps to make sure that everyone has access to education, which is still the best means out of poverty," said Kimberly Barrett, vice president of multicultural affairs and community engagement at Wright State University. "As we look at the increasing economic divide, we have to be very careful in making sure that we have equal opportunities available to all groups."

The court upheld the state of Michigan's decision to allow voters to decide whether race can be considered a factor in state college or university admission decisions.

Although the Supreme Court decision doesn't directly apply to Ohio, some conservative experts said there has been speculation that affirmative action opponents may seek to put Michigan-style amendments on ballots in Ohio and other states.

"If the schools won't stop on their own, I hope that the political branches will act through a ballot initiative or through legislation," said Roger Clegg, president of the conservative Center for Equal Opportunity.

Race a factor at OSU, Miami

How the court ruling will shake out for Ohio is yet to be seen, but for now, some Ohio schools consider race as one of a several factors they consider when deciding admission.

“The Supreme Court said they are not going to intervene,” said M. Dolan Evanovich, vice president for strategic enrollment planning at Ohio State University. “It will continue to be a local decision at the state level.”

The decision, he said, means, “state universities can use race in a very limited, very tailored way.”

Ohio State and Miami University in Oxford consider race in applications as part of a holistic approach to admission, said Evanovich and Michael Kabbaz, associate vice president for enrollment management at Miami.

Building diversity in the student population is an imperative for the universities, they noted, adding that diversity encompasses more than racial and ethnic factors. Additional considerations include socio-economic diversity, geography, lifestyle, or whether a student is a first-generation college attendee.

Educational institutions are trying to diversify themselves around a whole spectrum, Kabbaz said.

“At Miami we really talk about this as being an imperative to build a community of diverse backgrounds, experiences, to be competitive and to prepare our students for citizenship in the 21st century,” he said. “True diversity in a classroom makes it a better experience for everyone in the class.”

Ohio State’s Evanovich said the university’s goal is to attract top students — not just in Ohio, but throughout the country and the world.

Ohio State received about 43,000 applications for admission this year. Among the criteria for acceptance are diversity of experience, rigor of courses, test scores, grade point average, geography, whether the student would be a first-generation college student and other factors.

In many cases, the readers review applications more than one time during the process to ensure they are finding the right fit of students, Evanovich said.

“We read every application,” he said. “It’s a very comprehensive review. We’re not just basing a decision on one or two factors. We’re evaluating the whole student.”

Ohio’s Chancellor opposes limiting race as a factor

Ohio Board of Regents Chancellor John Carey said the state needs as many citizens with degrees as possible — regardless of race.

“We need as many college graduates with an associate’s degree or bachelor’s degree as possible,” he said. “We really want to give students options to further their education.”

Carey said he hasn’t heard about a push to limit race as a factor in admissions in Ohio.

“I would hope that we wouldn’t because I just don’t think it’s necessary,” he said. “It’s better to concentrate on getting students to colleges and universities — on getting degrees into the hands of students, regardless of race.”

Pro and con

Peter Kirsanow, a partner at Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff in Cleveland, said the court decision was “a no-brainer.”

Kirsanow, who is serving a third term on U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, said he wouldn’t be surprised by more initiatives like Michigan’s in the coming years. The bottom line, he said, is that the Supreme Court’s decision was a good one.

“Ultimately it will end up that all students will fare better and compete at their level,” he said. “The people of Michigan said something really radical. They said the state of Michigan can’t discriminate on the basis of race.”

Kirsanow said that preference in college admissions, “actually harms the purported beneficiaries.” Students who are given preference based on race are more likely to fall in the lower half of their class, flunk out or avoid more rigorous educational paths, he said.

At issue, he said, is that some students who are admitted to more prestigious schools can’t compete because they haven’t had academic preparation to help them compete at higher levels.

“We want real results,” he said. “We want to truly help minorities succeed. We want students to compete at the level for which they are prepared.”

But Miami’s Kabbaz said it’s critical for universities to focus on reaching out to diverse applicants as part of the push to build a strong and diverse community.

For example, he said, Miami has an urban recruiter who is tasked with finding the best applicants from urban environments.

“We have to continue to build the applicant pool full of diverse students,” he said. “It falls on us to recruit aggressively. I want the best and brightest students to have Miami on their list regardless of background.”

Criteria Miami University considers for admission as part of their holistic approach to admission (in alphabetical order):

- Class rank (6-semester cumulative), if available
- Demonstrated leadership

- Employment status during high school
- Extra- and co-curricular involvement
- First-generation college student status
- Grade point average (cumulative g.p.a., grade trends)
- Legacy status (family members that have graduated from Miami)
- Letter(s) of recommendation
- Life experiences
- Obstacles overcome
- Potential contributions to diversity (breadth of experience, geography, ideology, lifestyle, race/ethnicity, world view)
- Quality of high school (% of graduates going to 4-year colleges)
- Significant extenuating circumstances
- Socioeconomic status
- Special abilities, talents, and achievements
- Standardized test scores
- Strength of high school curriculum (depth in each core academic area, honors or accelerated courses, AP/IB courses, PSEO)
- Strong, ongoing commitment to social service and/or volunteer activities
- Writing ability

Source: Miami University admissions website:

<http://miamioh.edu/admission/high-school/application/admission-review/index.htm>