

Starting Down the Slippery Slope

We have now had some thirty years of affirmative action on college campuses, long enough for the full extent of its destructive impact on higher education to become fully apparent: affirmative action has sharply increased the professoriate's normal leftward tilt and changed the character of the campus left, now as a result dominated not by liberalism but by an increasingly irrational radicalism; it has spawned mischievous new pseudo-disciplines that are in reality little more than collections of political activists who undermine the academic integrity of their institutions; it has damaged the campus climate for free expression both through speech codes designed to protect the sensibilities of minorities, and through the creation of a campus political monoculture; it has led to a rampant grade inflation that is in large part a response to the problem of students mismatched with academic environments for which they are not prepared and in which they can not compete; it has damaged the prospects and the morale of countless numbers of those mismatched students; it has been the largest factor among the pressures to dumb down college curricula by deemphasizing indispensable knowledge of the history and thought of western civilization in general, and our own country in particular, and that in turn has produced a generation ignorant of much that previous generations knew with only a high school education; it has helped to establish the campus hegemony of an intellectually vacuous and ignorant postmodernist relativism; and paradoxically, it has severely damaged the chance for its intended beneficiaries to enjoy the excellent education through which previous have-not groups (e.g., Italians, Jews, Irish) have been able to climb the social ladder to achieve full equality of opportunity.

And yet when it began, affirmative action seemed so modest and circumscribed, so limited in scope and so well-intended that it was impossible to imagine the damage it would do. In retrospect, however, it is possible to see that once the smallest first steps were taken the future course of events was inevitable. As a newly appointed Dean of the Graduate Division at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1977, I oversaw those first steps on my campus. This is a story of how a monster grew from seemingly innocuous beginnings, and of how easy it was for agencies of the federal government to use even quite minor pressures to induce university administrators to take those first steps down a slope whose disastrous

slipperiness they never imagined. If there is one moral to this story, it is that there is no such thing as a little sin, and no such thing as a small departure from principle.

As I began my term of office as dean I faced the same pressures that all new professor-administrators face as they take what is in effect something of a time out from their real work of teaching and research. Two aspects of those pressures are relevant to my story. First: to justify taking this detour from their primary work, academics instinctively feel that the rationale for their new job can only be that they are working to create the conditions in which colleagues who are still doing the primary work of teaching and research will be able do the best that they are capable of. And that usually means finding more money—money that will translate into better students, better faculty, better facilities, and thus better teaching and research.

The second factor relevant to this story is the great variety of competing demands on their time that academic administrators face. This is not something they are used to. Professors are rather single-minded individuals: whether in teaching or research they are concerned with a relatively distinct set of ideas that dominate a single field of inquiry. Theirs is a life devoted to the pursuit of truth, a rather uncompromising notion and a sharply focused kind of pursuit. But when they are appointed as academic administrators, those same people suddenly face demands on them from people in all kinds of different disciplines about all kinds of quite different issues, and they suddenly need to understand the value of small compromises that will allow them to get things done. When you have one goal in mind, you may need the help of someone who has something quite different on his mind, and so he may want something from you with respect to a completely unrelated matter. And so these seekers after truth in their fields have to get used to giving something here (even when they are not completely persuaded of the case for doing so) if it will get something bigger there. But since this is not the way they habitually think, they are not likely to be very good at it. Judging the different values of apples and oranges in a given situation is a valuable skill; it is not one that most academics have.

As the beginning of my term as Graduate Dean at UCSC we had as yet no affirmative action program for graduate student admissions. And so when my office chief-of-staff got wind of a soon-to-be announced federal program of grants to campuses to provide fellowships for minority and women graduate

students, we both had the same thought: of course we'd like more money to support our graduate students--but mainly we want more money, whatever it may be earmarked for.

It does not take an administrator long to find out that getting money for a restricted use is first and foremost getting money, period: all money is green. If you get money that is restricted to a certain purpose, you were probably already using some of your existing money on that purpose anyway, and already planning to use more, which means that the new money will free up a good deal of old money for other uses. Moreover, the simple act of spending more in one area, e.g., fellowships to support students, will often mean that there will be less pressure on other areas of the budget, e.g., funds to appoint graduate students as teaching or research assistants. But in the case of this particular federal program, the general notion that more money for one thing automatically means more for everything was even more true than usual, because with each block of money to be paid directly to the graduate students for their support came an equal sum for the administration's own use as a so-called "institutional allowance." The federal government certainly knew how to get the attention of administrators; this block of completely unrestricted money would—if we succeeded in getting our hands on it--mean that some of our most cherished plans could be implemented right away.

And so a large part of our response to the news was simply the standard administrator's response to any similar situation: there is more money to be had, and we should get it. Of course the specific purpose seemed a worthy one, but so would many others; the main point was that to get anything worthwhile done we needed above all to increase the total office budget.

Hindsight tells us where all of this was leading, but at the time what was being asked of us was so modest that it was not at all difficult to believe in the usefulness of the program. Nor did this seem to be a case of a small compromise here to get a greater good there; there was barely any question of a compromise at all. All we needed to do to satisfy the federal bureaucrats (and so earn the money that was being offered) was to establish a good outreach program. By now it is hard to imagine that there was once a time when it was still almost universally accepted that this would not involve preferences being given to minorities or women in admissions to graduate programs, but such was indeed the case at this time. Our job was to look diligently for potential minority and women graduate students in places and in ways we

might not have used before, and to motivate them to apply, but that was the end of the matter. They would sink or swim on their own merits in the application process. None of this was inconsistent with what would later become California's Proposition 209, and to this day campaigns to outlaw racial and gender preferences in admissions still insist that they have nothing against "good" affirmative action, i.e., looking for and motivating minorities and women to apply.

To be sure, the new fellowships made available by the federal program were earmarked for minority and women students, which would not be allowed by 209, but to any knowledgeable observer at the time this would have seemed an unimportant point because departments did not admit more graduate students than they could support in one way or other. From a practical point of the view what was important about the new program was not that the student support funds were earmarked, but rather the institution of an outreach program—one of finding and motivating more of certain kinds of potential applicants.

We exploited our advance warning of the new federal program by quickly putting together a proposal that outlined a vigorous outreach plan, and sent it off to the program director almost before the program was officially announced. We were not the only ones anxious to get started: the program director too wanted to get things moving, and in a very short time we had received a large block of fellowships with all of the attendant institutional grant money.

The outcome was exactly what might make academic administrators feel good about having temporarily abandoned their real work of teaching and research: we had kept a watchful eye for new sources of money, we had nimbly pounced on one just as soon as it came into view, to the great benefit—or so we thought—of our campus and its programs. The result looked to be something of a triumph: UCSC's graduate program was by far the smallest of all the nine UC campuses, yet we got more money than all the other eight combined in this first year of the federal program, and that state of affairs even continued for a year or two. We had easily beaten to the punch all of the larger, older and more prestigious campuses of the UC system.

There is no greater truism than the old saying that nothing succeeds like success. With this outcome behind us, it was easy to persuade the campus administration to fund the staff we needed to do the

job that we had outlined in our written proposal, and we soon had an excellent man on the road drumming up good minority graduate program applications for us. Everything seemed to be going well—so well that the other UC campuses scrambled to catch up with us and get some of the federal money for themselves. But we had not seen deeply enough into the situation. What we did not grasp was that we now had staff within the graduate dean's office who had a real stake in a certain kind of outcome: their professional success and reputation was geared to a rise in minority and women graduate student numbers. There is another word for this: a lobby. This was nothing to do with any personal characteristics of the individuals involved—it was simply a structural fact.

Regardless of this, in the short term success continued to make for more success. The university's systemwide administration must have noticed what was happening, because it now joined in by making yet another large sum available for fellowships to support minority and women graduate students. And once again, the real effect of this was to make more support money available for all students. Further, since this followed hard on the heels of the increase brought by the federal program, departments began to notice that the amount of money that flowed from my office to support their students kept growing appreciably. We were gaining credibility and goodwill, and that in turn had the effect of making it easier to get other things done. I'll give a few illustrative examples of how this effect worked.

One day the phone rang, and when I picked it up there was an angry voice shouting at me. It was a well-known member of the California state senate, and he was phoning to give me a good scolding over the fact that my campus was proposing to begin a new Ph D program in a field where (as he saw it) the state was already well served. Because of their budgetary implications, all new graduate programs were reviewed by the state government before approval. The senator had seen our program proposal and wanted to tell the guilty party—me—that this was a shameful waste of state resources when we already had so many other Ph D programs in this field in the state. He went on at some length about my lack of restraint. Finally, I manage to interrupt his harangue with a question: I asked him whether he knew that the federal government had liked our proposed graduate student affirmative action program so much that it had given us more money than all of the other eight UC campuses combined. He calmed down and wanted to know more. (The senator was a Hispanic.) We talked—very pleasantly now—for some time about the

matter. Finally, he ended the call by telling me to keep up the good work. We got our Ph D program approved.

On another occasion, a rabble-rousing junior faculty member started to agitate publicly for formal ethnic representation in the appointment process for a senior position in my office. I knew that that way lay a dysfunctional appointment process, but the problem soon went away when I appealed to some senior ethnic faculty friends for help. I imagine they told him to pick on somebody else in the administration to harass—not someone who was already on the right side of this issue.

Remember once more that administrative work—unlike professorial duty--routinely involves weighing the pluses and minuses of compromises. In this situation, that calculus seemed strongly tilted to the positive side. We had gained large advantages of all kinds in exchange for a small and seemingly innocuous compromise. But this turned out to be a bad miscalculation, and the first hint that it might be so came soon enough. The staffer who was leading the job of seeking out minority applications for our graduate programs began to pout about the fact that too few of them were being accepted by the departments. On average, one in three applicants was accepted into a UCSC graduate program at that time, but the figure for minority applicants was one in four. (Our graduate program was still fairly new--established graduate programs are usually able to be still more selective.) It was easy enough for me to explain the discrepancy: when you are trying to find and motivate people who might not otherwise have applied, the average applicant that results from this process will likely be not quite as strong as those who applied all by themselves. But the staffer was still despondent, because from his point of view the results of a great deal of time and effort were being met with much less than enthusiasm. This was not an unreasonable reaction; everyone tries to maximize the scope and effectiveness of his office, and it was perfectly understandable that he should do so too. But this was the first sign that the federal program had in fact planted a Trojan horse on the campus. Staff who looked for minority applications naturally took an interest in how they fared; they inquired of departments, they expressed disappointment that an applicant whom they had thought promising did not get in, and in effect they lobbied for them.

The mostly liberal faculty did not like to seem completely unreceptive to advocates for minority students, and in any case they too gradually began to respond to the fact that more money and more

credibility came to people and departments who joined the bandwagon, and as a result they started to give the outreach staff a more sympathetic hearing. At the outset, our proposal to the federal program director had been quite clear about the fact that all applicants would be treated equally, but within a short time that was obviously no longer true, and it was the dynamic created by the program itself that led inexorably to that result. And once the climate began to change, the speed with which that change progressed was astonishing. Within ten years of the start of the program, one large department deliberately rejected all male applicants and admitted fifteen women. Another received ten black applicants and admitted all ten, the result being a virtually all black first year graduate class. So extreme did the climate become, and so quickly, that I even had two irate Marxist faculty members protest to me about their department's now mindless automatic admission of black graduate students.

With hindsight, it is possible to see how the process of deterioration worked. The initial small lobby for overriding merit-based application decisions grew slowly with each compromise that was made. With each faculty appointment and student admission made with the intent of increasing the numbers of minorities and women, the lobby for more of the same the next time round was numerically stronger—and the time after that it was stronger still, and so on. Given this process of intensification, the virtual collapse of merit-based admissions in some departments was inevitable. Still, the collapse was an amazing thing to watch. At each stage, as one's breath was quite taken away by what was happening, there was always the thought that things could not possibly get worse than they were. But they always did: the downward trajectory simply continued until an absolute bottom was reached, one in which minorities and women were admitted for the sake of admitting minorities and women, period.

Why was it seemingly so impossible to hold affirmative action measures to a level that was reasonable and defensible? Why did the whole thing run away with us and become a cause that overwhelmed other values? I had plenty of time to think about this after I decided to quit my deanship and return to teaching and research. And I finally understood what had happened, and why it was never possible to stop the slide down the slope to the bottom once the process had begun.

Before all of this started, life in the academy was governed by the principle that all students deserve equal consideration. That does not mean that they were treated equally—their individual

characteristics make that impossible—but it does mean that any inequality of treatment derived from their performance as students, not from any other considerations. Now when we decided to spend more time looking for and motivating certain kinds of students, defined not by their abilities but by their skin color or gender, we had made the decision to deviate from that principle, to be sure in a rather small way, because we saw that deviation as serving a good cause. The crux of the matter is this: once we had departed from our basic principle the question must arise, if a small deviation from the guiding principle of equal consideration is a good thing, why shouldn't a slightly bigger deviation be an even better thing? And once that had been done, why should not an even bigger deviation be an even better thing? To all of these demands for more there is only one principled answer: it is wrong to treat students other than with equal consideration. *But that was the argument we gave up when we took the very first, smallest step:* it was no longer available once we had decided to take that first step. And that is why nothing can stop the slide down the slippery slope. With the first step we had abandoned the only principled defense against being pushed into taking the next, and the next, and the next.

This realization brings with it an unambiguous judgment on the so-called “good” affirmative action: there is no such thing. When the federal government asked us to institute modest, outreach-only affirmative action, it was in effect cutting us loose from the principle that had organized our lives as university teachers, and that led inexorably to the catastrophe that was to come.

Before I left office, I was to see the full horror of what I had set in motion at the beginning of my deanship. When departments at UCSC make the decision to expel graduate students from their programs, those students have the right to appeal their dismissal directly to the dean as a last resort. Few took that opportunity, but suddenly there were two such interviews on my schedule, both with black students whose departments had decided that their work was not such that they could ever be expected to get a Ph D. The two interviews were virtually identical in character. Both students were absolutely devastated; they had been led to expect that they could attain the exalted rank of Doctor of Philosophy, only to be thrown out with nothing. They were extraordinarily bitter and hostile. They poured out their resentment at the system that had betrayed them. They charged the institution in general and their departments in particular with racism and bigotry, but reserved their most bitter criticism for their faculty advisers, whom they accused of the vilest prejudice against black people. That alone told me how much damage we had done to these two,

for I knew the two faculty advisers well. One was the only black man in his department, an enormously decent man who took very seriously what he regarded as his obligation to help black students as much as he could. The other was a white liberal scholar who was well known nationally both for his writings on race relations, and his advocacy of racial equality. The two students were so filled with hatred for the institution that had failed them that they were blinded to the fact that these two members of our faculty were the last ones that anyone could accuse of racial prejudice.

These two interviews were decisive for me. The human cost of what we had done was now clear. We had intervened in the normal process of people finding their own level through their own qualities—their interests, their preparation, their intelligence, their level of determination--and so distorted what should have been the result of this natural process that the outcome had been cruelly destructive for the individuals concerned. Nobody who sat through those two interviews with me could have failed to see the scale of the damage of which we, with all our good intentions, were guilty. And since that time I have opposed affirmative action-- not just the kind that gives preferences in admissions and appointments, but outreach affirmative action too, because I had now learned the hard way that the one removes any defense against the other.

John M Ellis

144 Bay Heights

Soquel CA 95073-3026

831 476 1144