

# The hues of affirmative action

By Trevor Corson

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

ON MONDAY morning a friend phoned me with the news: The Supreme Court had ruled against the University of Michigan's quota-like system of assigning points to various factors, including race, in selecting undergraduates. At the same time, the court had upheld the admissions policy of Michigan's law school, affirming that race could still be taken into account.

The plaintiffs against the University of Michigan believed they were qualified to attend the school but had been rejected because they were white.

Minority students, perhaps less qualified, had presumably taken their place. The legal challenge gave weight to the primary criticisms of affirmative action: that it devalues the achievements of minorities and becomes a kind of reverse discrimination against whites.

My friend and I had to chuckle. He's black, and was rejected by the University of Michigan law school, too. In spite of that, he got into an even more prestigious law school and went on to become a successful international lawyer. I'm white and was rejected by the University of Michigan as an undergraduate. In spite of that, I got into Princeton University, where I went on to graduate at the top of my department.

My friend and I agreed that neither of us could possibly have been unqualified to attend Michigan — and yet we were both rejected. I suggested that Michigan's decision against me might have been racial discrimination. Maybe I should have joined the lawsuit seeking to strike down affirmative action.

My case is a little more complicated, however, because Michigan wasn't the only school that rejected my application. Harvard and Yale did, too. So why did Princeton admit me when every other school I applied to didn't?

Here's a guess: My father went there. I suspect that I, like so many other white legacy children, benefited from a form of affirmative action at least as questionable as the one the Supreme Court held up to scrutiny.

But here's the funny part: Not only did I probably benefit from a form of affirmative action for whites, in the end, I also benefited from affirmative action for minorities. Indirectly, the kind of affirmative action that the Supreme Court upheld in the Michigan case helped me, a white person, become a productive member of society and get a job.

When I matriculated at Princeton, I had been living abroad and I was bursting with questions about what it means to reside in a country that doesn't completely accept you as its own. Members of minorities in the United States, of course, face similar issues. Princeton was a leader in affirmative action for minorities and had become a very different school from the one my father attended. A growing community of black students and professors at Princeton had produced the nation's premier African-American studies program.

Intrigued, I took several Af-Am classes and discovered that they addressed exactly the questions I'd been asking. The experience of African-Americans confronted head-on the most vital conundrums of modernity: the mixing of cultures and what it means to belong to



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a multiethnic nation. Even though I'm white, it was Af-Am at Princeton that taught me how to be an American and a global citizen.

Later, when I was looking for a job as an editor, I discovered that having an Ivy League school on your résumé doesn't get you very far in journalism. But partly on the strength of my course work in African-American studies, I was hired by a magazine that covered international culture and ethnicity.

So I can't help feeling that affirmative action for minorities benefits whites, too. Many of America's most powerful corporations support affirmative action for the same reason.

And my lawyer friend is unapologetic about the fact that discrimination against blacks, a wrong against our whole society, is partly set right by affirmative action.

ALL the same, the charge that affirmative action devalues the achievements of minorities and could discriminate against whites won't go away. Neither will the fact that legacy children like me, mostly white, continue to benefit unfairly from our own form of affirmative action. Maybe what the Supreme Court really needs to consider is whether affirmative action of the former type would be necessary without the latter.

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**Two Michigan rejects — one white, one black — null high court ruling.**