

Deeply Rooted

Students, teachers discuss complex impacts of recent Supreme Court decision on affirmative action

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At the height of summer, high school seniors across the country began the stressful process of drafting their resumes and college essays. They spent hours of their vacation obsessing over every detail, aspiring for excellence, and hoping for originality in their applications. When the news headlines once again announced an impactful Supreme Court decision—this time related to affirmative action—many students couldn't bother to pay attention. Upon further inspection, however, it became clear that this decision would be directly relevant to the post-secondary futures that these students were so focused on.

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Matthew Lewis '24

On June 29, the Supreme Court ruled against race-conscious admission programs, commonly referred to as affirmative action, in two cases brought against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina. Reversing four decades of precedent in a 6-3 decision, the decision bans colleges and universities across the country from using race as a factor when reviewing applications.

Affirmative action programs, which vary widely in implementation among institutions, are meant to create educational opportunities for underrepresented students. These programs have generated significant controversy, simultaneously being hailed as an important solution to discrimination yet criticized as a biased system that pushes against merit based equality. Chip Tompson, English teacher and former assistant director of admissions at Northwestern University, believes that affirmative action is controversial partly because of its lack of uniformity.

"One of the tricky things with affirmative action is that it's somewhat nebulous," Tompson said. "It's a program that's working toward a noble ideal, but has vague goals so it's harder to find quantitative measures of success."

Even though Tompson

believes that affirmative action has overall been successful in creating a better experience for all students, he believes that the varying goals of schools, from strict quotas to vague admissions advantages, make it hard to determine what true success looks like. Kyle Yin '25* agrees with Tompson that historical discrimination has resulted in educational disparities, but argues that affirmative action was not the most effective solution to this issue.

"I think the reason some people are for affirmative action is because it increases diversity," Yin said. "However, it's well known that they are prioritizing people from certain races, which automatically means that some groups, like Asian and White Americans, can be discriminated against."

Yin believes that college admissions should be solely based on the abilities, not the race, of applicants to create a more fair system. Erik Arellano '24 echoes that affirmative action is flawed, but believes that issues with the system stem from a failure to benefit minorities rather than discrimination against privileged groups.

"When you admit minority students to top-tier institutions using race as a primary factor for admissions, it's just wrong," Arellano said. "I think it should be done by merit, because if you would admit them to a school by weighing their race more than their academic



abilities, you're basically setting them up for failure in one way or another."

Arellano emphasizes that students who get into elite schools due to affirmative action might struggle to keep up with the rigorous material and course load, impeding their future success more than if they had gone to a college less prestigious but more suited to their needs. Conversely, Matthew Lewis '24 believes that ignoring race in college admissions altogether is colorblind and disregards the struggles that many applicants face.

"I personally don't think the decision is fair because race is a factor in people's lives, in their day-to-day experiences, and in their chances to get accepted to certain schools," Lewis said.

Lewis feels that taking affirmative action out of consideration reduces colleges' ability to understand their applicants holistically. Unlike Lewis, Yin supports the Supreme Court decision, but argues that the merits of affirmative action are not as clear-cut.

"There are definitely many people like me at Stevenson who feel more confident during the college admission process," Yin said. "But also, I'm sure there are other people who are not as well off as they would otherwise have been because of past discrimination, and that decision could harm them. So I understand that even though affirmative action isn't the right solution, getting rid of it introduces new problems."

According to a study in the *Journal of Public Economics*, race-based affirmative action increased underrepresented minority enrollment in post-secondary institutions by 20 percent—more than any other factor. Yin admits that the removal of affirmative action may result in a small decrease in diversity at colleges but believes that overall affirmative action has served its purpose in creating diversity throughout the country and thus needs to be phased out. In contrast, AP Government teacher Nancy Latka believes that the progress affirmative action has achieved only serves to justify the need for its continued existence.

"Affirmative action was definitely successful based on numbers of admissions of racial minorities since the 1960s," Latka said. "However, the idea behind the Supreme Court's recent

decision, that equality of opportunity has been reached, is resulting in the nation going backwards."

After California banned affirmative action at public universities in 1996, enrollment among Black and Latino students at the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of California, Berkeley fell by 40 percent. Today, California has spent more than half a billion dollars on outreach and shifting to alternative admissions standards, like placing more emphasis on applicants' essays and moving away from standardized test scores.

Even so, California school officials haven't been able to meet their diversity goals, which has led Latka to believe that removing affirmative action nationwide would lead to a similar situation. Arellano believes that the recent court decision, at least Stevenson, will not create a similar situation to California, thanks to the existence of other support structures.

"Fundamentally, I don't think the number of historically underrepresented groups' applications in Stevenson will dip," Arellano said. "The support programs that exist for underprivileged students like myself are top-notch and do an excellent job of guiding students through the college process and easing the disadvantages of underrepresentation."

Arellano is a member of Stevenson to College (S2C), a program run by the Stevenson Foundation that provides first-generation, low-income students support in applying to and succeeding in college. S2C connected Arellano with a mentor who has helped him discover opportunities designed for low-income students such as the Federal Pell Grant scholarship and the match-based application platform Questbridge. Alum Angelica Karim notes that the support systems at Stevenson that benefit students like Arellano are a result of the plentiful resources and quality of education that make students at Stevenson privileged.

"I applied to many schools like the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Southern California; I got into those places, and ultimately ended up at Washington University in St. Louis," Karim said. "But I also went to Stevenson, which is one of the best

1 in 10

of Americans say that they have benefited from efforts to increase racial and ethnic diversity.

Source: Pew Research Center

schools in the state, let alone the country, and I already had an advantage just by going there."

Karim believes that while affirmative action does give an advantage to minority students, it's nullified by other factors such as socioeconomic differences, resource inequality, and legacy admissions. She points out legacy admissions in particular—programs where students get an advantage in applications at the often-elite schools their parents went to—as a major advantage for higher class applicants.

Under the Supreme Court decision, legacy admissions were explicitly allowed to continue. Lewis agrees with Karim that legacy admissions are a pressing issue and believes that the court's decision to continue allowing them is indicative of their motives.

"Legacy admissions are a corrupt system that allow those with privilege to get into premier institutions and take away valuable educational opportunities from people who could better utilize them," Lewis said. "The legacy decision demonstrates that the court didn't want to even the playing field but to hurt minority students from a place of power."

Lewis believes legacy admissions are evidence that the education system within the United States is skewed to provide more opportunities for the wealthy, thereby perpetuating a cycle of systemic wealth inequality. A Pew Research Center poll found that 75 percent of Americans believe that an applicant's legacy status should not be a factor in admissions decisions. Arellano is

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among this majority, believing that the court's recent decision has failed in regards to legacy.

"Overruling affirmative action, but still retaining legacy admissions is fundamentally wrong," Arellano said.

While Arellano is critical of the court's decision on legacy, he supports their decision of having socioeconomic-based admissions as a partial replacement for affirmative action to continue promoting diversity in universities. Medha Mamidipaka '24, however, notes that affirmative action and socioeconomic-based admissions are inherently connected.

"You can't consider socioeconomic status without considering race, especially with America's history," Mamidipaka said.

Mamidipaka believes that socioeconomic-based admissions may help some of the minority students who no longer have the support of affirmative action. However, without race as a factor, she adds that many minority students will be overlooked in the college admissions process. Meanwhile, Yin perceives socioeconomic status as a way to sidestep the issue of race entirely while also continuing to open opportunities for financially underprivileged students.

"People whose socioeconomic status is lower don't necessarily get the same access to resources," Yin said. "Socioeconomic-based admissions level the playing field because you are helping some people reach their potential."

Yin believes that the primary changes to college admissions will be positive: a more merit-based system with socioeconomic status primarily keeping diversity levels steady. However, post-secondary counselor Sarah English expresses concerns related to colleges' ability to continue diversity initiatives without affirmative action.

"I think there's just a little bit of nervousness in the admissions world of how to continue to have a diverse student body and make students feel supported on campus while still adhering to the SCOTUS decision," English said.

Many post-secondary institutions, in an attempt to convince students that diversity programs will not be phased out, have been reaffirming their commitment to initiatives similar to affirmative action. While colleges must comply

with the Supreme Court ruling, many high school seniors, such as Lewis, hope that colleges will continue to fight for a diverse student body.

"I was flooded with emails, just from colleges, about their response to the court's decision," Lewis said. "And I think only time will tell how schools really react to this, because I could see schools either accepting the decision or finding ways to continue maintaining diverse communities that are open to people of all races and ethnicities."

Lewis hopes that colleges will continue their role in encouraging diversity on campuses. Arellano, however, focuses on the impacts on individual students and emphasizes his belief that the ruling will empower applicants to take control of their own process.

"Race should be something that an applicant willingly talks about, and shouldn't be decided for them," Arellano said. "I'm a first-generation Latino student. I don't intend on talking solely about my race in my Common App essay, because for me, my race is not all that I am."

While Arellano believes that race-based admissions cause colleges to look at applicants through a preconceived lens, he still supports the need for diversity in college institutions. In addition, he also recognizes that there might be challenges throughout the college system in every step of the way.

"College admissions will likely never be perfect," Arellano said. "Admissions officers aren't perfect. Applicants themselves aren't perfect. And of course, the opinions related to this topic will never be perfect." ■

**Name changed to protect anonymity*

**June 28,
1978**

Supreme Court allows colleges to consider race among other factors in admissions but prohibits the use of strict racial quotas

**November
5, 1996**

California voters approve affirmative action ban

**June 29,
2023**

Supreme Court rejects affirmative action in college admissions

Playing the Numbers

According to Pew Research Center, Journalists Resource, and the U.S. Census...

Game



20% increase in minority enrollment in college due to affirmative action

75% of Americans oppose legacy admissions



169% increase in college costs in the past 40 years

49% of Americans believe that affirmative action makes the admissions process less fair

