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Racial preferences have taken their toll at Umass

By Robert M. Costrell

Now that the University of Massachusetts at Amherst is scaling back its race-based admissions policies, it is time to examine the toll racial preferences have taken.

The first casualty was truth. Just two years ago, a UMass-Amherst spokeswoman wrote on these pages, "UMass-Amherst does not have race-based admissions or hiring policies or segregated dormitories."

Even now, university officials continue to tell the Globe that minimum academic standards were always met and that preferences were small, used mainly to break ties.

Would that it were so. In the fall of 1997, the Board of Higher Education standards for regular admission (slightly simplified here) required a very modest high school GPA of 2.75. The actual GPAs of entering first-year students averaged 3.12 for whites, 2.99 for Asians, 2.80 for Hispanics, and 2.53 for blacks. A limited number of applicants who fell below 2.75 could be accepted as "special admits."

UMass-Amherst will not release the racial breakdown of "special admits" by the BHE definition. But under its own closely related definition, "special admits" comprised 49 percent of black enrollees, 42 percent of Hispanics, 22 percent of Asians, and 2 percent of whites.

Admission policies are but the tip of the iceberg; race-based policies permeate many other aspects of campus life. The faculty hiring set-aside program instructs departments to "cast around for minority or female candidates," but then warns against revealing the program's race-and-gender restrictions to those candidates.

President William Bulger's general counsel began examining this program almost two years ago and promised to issue a legal opinion. It never came, and the practice has become even more brazen. Various departments are now authorized for ethnically specific faculty hires - Hispanic for one department, Asian-American for another. About one-sixth of these jobs have gone to noncitizens, while white male citizens are all but barred from competing for them. Last fall professor Gordon Sutton had had enough and asked the administration, "Isn't this illegal?" Of course it is, and everybody knows it.

Dormitory segregation is obscured by the disclaimer that all minority "special interest" dorms are also open to "allies." Owen Hurlburt and Kha Le learned better. Best friends from home, they lived on the Asian floor "for students of Asian descent and for others interested in Far Eastern culture." Hurlburt, a white student, majors in Japanese. In the spring of 1996, residents were summoned to a meeting and, as Le told me, the authorities "kicked all my non-Asian friends off" the floor for the following fall.

The Student Senate has set-aside seats appointed by the ALANA caucus (African, Latino/a, Asian, Native American). Two independent elected senators, Carlos Alvarez and Robert Chirwa, found the federal precedent declaring the set-aside illegal and demanded an end to it. As a result, Chirwa, a South African black, was kicked out of an ALANA caucus meeting and told to "look in the mirror and check your color."

This is what our students learn about respect for law and diversity of thought from the official group identity policies at UMass-Amherst.

Race-based policies and programs also include a minority-specific job fair, \$10,000 "Diversity Fellowships" for graduate students of specified races (baldly denied by Chancellor Scott), and a policy that "No ALANA student will be denied admission without a review of his/her application by an ALANA staff member."

The culture of racial preferences is woven deeply into the policies and infrastructure of UMass-Amherst, and it will not yield gracefully to the law. High administration officials denounce court decisions they are obliged to uphold as "evil," rooted in "greed" and "political malice."

The fundamental problem is that UMass-Amherst has expanded its mission from education to "social justice." Contrary to the judiciary, UMass defines justice in terms of official group identity. That impoverished notion undermines the individuality of students like Chirwa, Alvarez, Hurlburt, Le, and Lenny Holston, a Cape Verdean from Providence who told the Springfield Union-News that racial preferences put "an asterisk on our achievements" that suggests "you are only here because you are a minority."

The rule of law has suffered. Just last week, Chancellor Scott told the Graduate Student Senate: "I knew that particular [admissions] policy that was in place was quite illegal at the time. To say that you're going to recruit 20 percent students of color was actually even illegal in 1993." And yet UMass-Amherst reaffirmed its 20 percent policy commitment to appease campus activists illegally occupying a university building in March 1997.

In the fall of 1997, Bulger stepped in to end two decades of policy by takeover in Amherst. And now his general counsel has directed a reluctant Chancellor Scott to end the 20 percent admissions policy. The task of restoring the Constitution and respect for truth has just begun.

Only when Bulger completes this task will the individual dignity that is the birthright of all Americans flourish at the Commonwealth's flagship public campus.

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