

Most of America's colleges and universities have more than once suffered the consequences of ill thought out efforts by politicians to influence everything from what subjects can be taught, who is fit to teach, who should be allowed to study. Too often such interference is a short-sighted effort to exploit public fears and passions of the moment for immediate political gain. The long term costs to citizens is high because politically motivated intrusions into academic policy lead in the long run to educational mediocrity.

Once again harmful political forces are gathering strength to intervene in university affairs. This time they originate in California, where the Governor and his appointed regents have ordered the University of California to dismantle its time tested and effective affirmative action policies by next year. A ballot initiative eliminating government affirmative action programs entirely is slated for a vote in November.

This California tide is sweeping eastward with alarming strength.

Inspired by California's example, more than a dozen states are now reported by the Washington Post to be considering similar legislative initiatives to end affirmative action in admissions, hiring and financial aid decisions. The University of Maryland at College Park lost its lengthy legal struggle to defend a scholarship program that was restricted to black students. In Michigan, legislative proposals to curtail affirmative action plans are making their way through the state capitol. And the Supreme Court just set a higher legal threshold for race-related federal

Recent surveys have found that two out of three Americans oppose affirmative action. Unfortunately, the public perception of affirmative action is clouded as never before by inflamed rhetoric on all sides. Academic leaders are in part to blame, since in our rush to cite the very real successes of affirmative action programs for minority students, we have often failed to cite commensurate or greater gains for majority students and faculty.

A long hidden truth is being lost in attacks on academic affirmative action programs, and it's this: affirmative action programs wind up helping not just minority groups, or women, or the handicapped. They have proven to benefit all groups, whites included.

Colleges and universities across the country have found that efforts to improve outreach programs to high schools with large numbers of minority students often lead to increases in the number of white students accepted from those

same schools. And once the students get on campus, affirmative action plans designed first to help minority students help majority students improve their academic performance, too.

That's the case, for instance, at the University of Michigan, where white enrollments have held steady even though students of color now make up 25 percent of the student body -- an 87 percent increase over the past seven years. How did that come about? By increasing the total number of students admitted - not by keeping white students out. Most universities, like Michigan, haven't reduced the number of white students but have increased the total number of students on campus.

Just as important, white students often benefit directly from academic programs designed to help minorities. Through such programs we are learning to improve our teaching methods and to vary them to accommodate different learning styles to the benefit of all students not just minorities. The gains for everyone can be dramatic. Special programs at Michigan, Stanford, the University of California at Berkeley and other institutions have found that in difficult introductory science, math, and economics courses, computer based instruction originally designed to assist minority students, in fact raised the performance level of all students by as much as a full grade point. Michigan's 21st Century Program, recently highlighted by ABC News, is an experimental program combining an academically enriched and nurturing living environment is demonstrating improvements in everyone's classroom performance. Michigan's Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, which was designed to help minority students get better grades, also helped white students improve their grade point averages and stay in school. And this pattern is being echoed at institutions of higher learning across the country.

Students are not the only ones to benefit from the affirmative action reforms. Faculty hiring is now a more open, rigorous and fair process than ever before and this enhances professional opportunity for white males as much for anyone else. No longer can a faculty hire be sealed by one phone call to a colleague. There are now policies and practices in place to assure a more objective evaluation of qualifications for faculty, staff and administrators. And they do not involve quotas. To increase minority representation among faculty and staff, many universities such as Michigan provided incentives over and above regular budget that allowed departments to add new fields to strengthen their course offerings and research benefiting students and faculty alike..

Yet such time-tested programs at institutions like these at University of Michigan and the University of California system are under fire as never before. Why? The impact of politicking on the debate cannot be ignored. In this uncertain election year, too many candidates for public office are trying to woo record numbers of angry, disaffected voters seeking a scapegoat for their unhappiness. So the candidates are lashing out at federal and university-based affirmative action programs in frantic attempts to score political points by "getting tough" on such initiatives.

The short-term struggle to win votes is destroying thirty year's worth of programs with proven success rates for helping all students. Universities have labored for decades to improve minority representation on the campus green in thoughtful ways that enhance and enrich the campus community for everyone. But in the current national climate, these programs that help all students are being whipsawed between angry voters and desperate politicians.

This intensifying political pressure on our nation's great public universities is a threat to their unique historic role of providing a world class educational opportunity to all students who have the will and ability to succeed. And if politics today influence university admissions policies, what will be targeted next? Curriculum? Faculty Hiring? Research?

Responsible politicians would do well to consider the full merits of affirmative action programs, rather than using them as a football in a political game that nobody wins. They might also pause before unleashing destructive political forces that all too easily can grow beyond their control and strike at the heart of public higher education in America.