

**Reply to Stephan Thernstrom**

**RE: Alamo in Ann Arbor; a test case for racial preferences.  
National Review, September 8, 1999**

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In a recent article which appeared in the September issue of National Review, Harvard history professor Stephan Thernstrom excoriated the University of Michigan for defending the right of universities to build their entering classes using an admissions policy that is both flexible and committed to a diverse student body. Such a policy may include race as one of many factors in the admissions process. Thernstrom likened the University of Michigan's position to the last stand at the Alamo. The symbolism of his choice of history lesson is both compelling and palpable: a small band of patriots stage a futile defense of their outpost against overwhelming odds. Thernstrom's article suggests that history will repeat itself in the Michigan case, painting the university as an outpost of dated thinking on the matter of affirmative action which is to be defeated by an overwhelming logic based on close scrutiny of facts. However, history also records that the siege of the Alamo became a rallying cry for an expanding nation and one that eventually claimed victory against the very forces which sacked the Alamo. Thernstrom's arguments and use of facts are both misleading and deserve close scrutiny themselves as the nation considers just how to meet its expanding educational needs. Thernstrom's critique is piercing, but nonetheless it is off the mark, and for a number of reasons.

The first misleading point is Thernstrom's reference to a "dual admissions" program based on race. In reality selective colleges operate with dual purposes for their admissions programs and this idea has been amply developed by a number of thinkers, perhaps most notably former Carnegie Foundation President Ernest Boyer. The dual purposes can be summarized as providing opportunities for individual empowerment on the one hand, while on the other hand addressing important societal needs through education. The training which leads to becoming a doctor or engineer, for example,

certainly empowers the individual to achieve personal goals, but that is not its sole purpose as it also serves the common good *and this, too, is an underlying purpose for providing access to higher learning.* This is a point completely ignored by Thernstrom and others who would deny colleges and universities the right to structure the student body in such a way as to advance the common good even as they empower individuals.

Thernstrom's use of such terms as "race-based admissions" or "racial preferences" is but a provocative means of obscuring the real purposes of selective admissions and thereby deflecting attention from the truly important need for flexibility in the admissions process. Universities develop talent for the future and every university recognizes both that such talent exists in all races and that we should monitor, even adjust our policies to ensure that access to higher education is not limited to particular races. The only way to accomplish this is to pay attention to race along with the other factors considered in the admissions process. Universities also recognize that although cognitive factors, such as those measured by standardized tests, are important, they represent only a portion of the variety of factors that contribute to college success and that flexibility in admission decision-making is not only desirable, but often indispensable as well.

Thernstrom refers to President Gerald Ford's op-ed piece in the New York Times, which defended Michigan's admission policy, and emphasizes Ford's story of his football teammate Willis Ward who was forced to sit out a game against Georgia Tech in the 1930s because of the color of his skin. Thernstrom concluded that the lesson to be learned from this sad tale "is the vicious irrationality of treating blacks and whites differently..." I could not disagree more. It seems to me that the real lesson of Willis Ward's tribulation, rightly acknowledged by Gerald Ford, is the irrationality of denying one the opportunity

to compete based on racial prejudice. This is categorically different from allocating the scarce resource of higher education for the dual purposes of individual empowerment and serving the common good through a process that selects a wide diversity of students to receive this benefit. Such a gross misreading of history leads one to wonder if Professor Thernstrom truly does not see the irony of his interpretation or if it is mere sophism.

Much of Thernstrom's argument is built around such statistics as high school grade-point averages and scores on the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) and he emphasizes the well-known mean differences in such scores between blacks and whites as he attempts to craft a narrow definition of merit as the only authentic basis for college admissions. Yet, educational researchers have known for generations that the best predictor of future academic success is past academic success in whatever environment the student happened to be located. Thus, mean differences in test scores, for example, do not alter the basic equation and in both blacks and whites, students with stronger credentials tend to outperform students with weaker credentials. But as every student at Michigan will tell you, ability alone is not enough to ensure academic success in a competitive college environment; such factors as work ethic, motivation, and ingenuity are widely recognized, by both students and faculty, as important in a student's overall success as well. In fact, at selective schools all over the nation these kinds of factors hold considerable sway and Thernstrom's reference to students who entered Michigan in 1991-92 will help make the point.

Thernstrom asserted that "alarming large numbers of students admitted as a result of racial preferences fail to graduate" and noted a 35 percent drop-out rate for African American students who were admitted in the 1991-92 academic year. This is

another troubling example of Thernstrom employing a "fact" to construct a misleading statement to imply an explanation that is, in fact, missing. The statement is especially misleading because of the context in which it is used, implying that many of those admitted do not have a high probability of succeeding in college and as result fail to graduate. The actual circumstance is considerably more complex.

In reality, odd as it seems at first blush, the fact that some students do not graduate is not necessarily indicative of failure at all. That is because many reasons can lead to a given student's decision not to return to a given campus; such decisions are made many times over each year even though such students may have been quite successful. Some students may not graduate but instead directly enter a professional program in law, medicine, or pharmacy, for example. Contrary to popular belief the baccalaureate degree is not a requirement for acceptance to professional school. Consider, as well, that some students may simply transfer to another campus, for example from Michigan's Ann Arbor campus to its Flint or Dearborn campus; still other students transfer to entirely new institutions. Thernstrom's reference to the number of Michigan students who "fail to graduate" includes students in these and other categories. But the leading reason African American, and many other students, do not graduate is financial. Now, financial difficulty can evolve into academic difficulty as students devote more time to work than to study in an effort to meet college costs, but we should make no mistake about the root cause. Michigan is a selective, even elite university, which attracts far more applicants than it can admit in any given year. The cost of attendance is higher than all other public colleges in the state, and for non-residents of the state of Michigan the cost of attending rivals that of elite private institutions, earning Michigan a sobriquet

shared by few other schools, that of "a public ivy." This may help to explain why African American non-residents represented less than 25 percent of blacks admitted in 1991-92, but 40 percent of those who did not graduate, a majority of whom were in good standing academically when they left. For the same year, the proportion of whites who did not graduate and who were non-residents is roughly the same as their percentage in the admitted class, about 30 percent, and a majority of these students were in good standing as well.

Additional light is shed on the matter by considering what kind of progress these students had made before they decided not to return to Michigan. For both blacks and whites, the measure of academic progress is bimodal and may be understood by use of the nominal reference point of a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0, the minimum required for good academic standing and progress towards graduation. It should be pointed out that minimal performance is not a goal, rather it is an index, or floor, below which one should not go because of severe consequences. For Black students who dropped out with a GPA above 2.0, the mean number of credits earned towards graduation was 75.2; white students who dropped out with a mean GPA above 2.0 had earned a mean number of credits towards graduation of 62.1. Black students who dropped out with a GPA less than 2.0 had a mean number of credits earned towards graduation of 49.3; while white students who dropped out with a GPA less than 2.0 had a mean number of credits earned of 40.1. In fact, for each category of drop-outs, blacks had earned more credits towards graduation than whites.

The concern with drop-outs is provided here only because Thernstrom focused on it and his portrayal deserves circumspection. The really important story, however, is the

progress that students have made and the context in which it occurred. Blacks represented fewer than 400 students (about 7%) in the class that entered in 1991, while whites numbered more than 3,300 (about 65%). The nature of numbers means that fluctuation among relatively few cases can have a big effect on a small number, while the fluctuation of many more cases will have only a negligible impact on a large number. Consider that if only four black student athletes left Michigan to turn pro in a given year, it would make a noticeable dent in the retention rate for black students. The same number of whites turning pro would have a negligible effect; in fact ten times as many white student athletes would have to leave Michigan for professional sports careers in order to have the same impact as the relatively few defections by black students. In other words, the truly remarkable thing, which President Ford got right, is the record of accomplishment demonstrated by students who faced numerous obstacles and challenges, but still succeeded in attaining a college education. The most obvious challenge may be the surface one of racial differences in test scores, but more important are such considerations as family income, the community in which one grew up, and the quality of high school attended. The willingness to face obstacles and to persist towards one's goal despite them, may well be the most important characteristic that successful students demonstrate, be they black or white. Colleges and universities must be allowed to weigh all such pertinent matters as they consider whom to empower to address the challenges of the future through a college education. Perhaps one of the most important lessons of the Michigan experience is that we should not overemphasize a narrow definition of merit in making admissions decisions. As the evidence shows, even students with high scores can drop-out, while those with low scores can succeed.

In his book America in Black and White, Thernstrom "decried the national obsession with race" and urged that we act in a manner that obviates it. Unfortunately, the obsession is more than an abstraction to those who suffer the ill-effects of racial discrimination and so the social construct of race cannot simply be wished into non-existence. That is why higher education is so vitally important to the task. Future leaders are shaped in the college classroom, not as a single-minded monolith, rather as critically observant citizens who must recognize both the values and the limitations of our national ideals. Education truly is our last best hope for shaping a society in which all are provided the opportunity to compete for the trappings of individual empowerment. At the same time, prospects for addressing the common good of society must be incorporated into the educational process as well. When it comes to access to higher education, we must approach the matter with level-headed liberalism, rather than narrow minded conservatism.

Table 1.

Progress towards graduation of students who "dropped-out" of Michigan.

	Michigan Residents		Non-Residents	
	GPA>2.0	GPA > 2.0	GPA<2.0	GPA > 2.0
Blacks				
CTP	46.3	87.0	55.2	63.3
n	36	29	17	27
Whites				
CTP	39.9	68.6	40.6	50.3
n	129	191	34	106