

Let's help the students, not just the schools

Reductions in new minority enrollments at UCLA and UC Berkeley have been disconcerting, despite the predictability of these outcomes under Proposition 209 and policies established in 1995 by the University of California Regents. Advocates of affirmative action claim that this decline demonstrates the importance of affirmative action programs in ensuring equal opportunity. Affirmative action opponents counter that this year's results serve to measure the degree to which race considerations were polluting what should have been a merit-based process.

The reduced minority presence in the entering classes of UCLA and UC Berkeley draws attention to more fundamental problems. There is great disparity in the quality of California's public schools. Many minority students attend schools that cannot afford to provide the range of opportunities available to others. These students' performances suffer, and their records are not as competitive as they otherwise might be when they apply for college. This is unfair.

Affirmative action programs attempt to short circuit this unfairness, but these programs face an enormous information burden. It is impossible to know which students, minority or otherwise, have been most adversely affected by limited opportunities in their public schools. School district-level statistics can be constructed that provide a description of average effects on students, but these are an inadequate source of information for making the corrections affirmative action programs are intended to promote. Colleges don't admit school districts. They evaluate, judge and admit individuals.

The best any affirmative action program can do is to make room for students from protected groups who might merit admission but have not received sufficient opportunity to demonstrate their gifts. Unfortunately, this comes at the high cost of withholding opportunity from other, clearly qualified students. This, too, is unfair.

Two wrongs don't make a right, and we should stop trying to pretend that

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► **THE ISSUE:** Without the discipline imposed by competition, poor and mediocre public schools will never improve.

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they do. Rather than trying to increase equity for the disadvantaged by arbitrarily imposing unfairness on others, we should focus on the root of the problem: inferior public schools.

Our national efforts to ensure egalitarian access to secondary education were visionary in the context of an expansionist, frontier society. Unfortunately, our methods have not adapted well to changes in society, technology or the economy. We are entering the 21st century burdened by an anachronistic, 19th-century approach to education.

Education is a service industry. It is the process by which society develops human capital. Like most activities, it flourishes when enterprise is rewarded. In its current form, the U.S. public education industry stifles most incentives for innovation and excellence.

By dedicating public funds to the production of educational services, we insulate these providers from the forces that would otherwise drive improvements. Public schools don't have to compete for their revenues, so they don't. If their revenues depended on the satisfaction of their clients, public schools would focus on the needs of the students and families they serve; otherwise their clients would take their business and the revenues they provide elsewhere.

Without the discipline imposed by competition, poor and mediocre public schools will never improve. Unless successful developers of human capital are allowed to accumulate wealth as a consequence of success, schools of edu-

cation will never attract the best students. Why should a talented college student pick education instead of engineering? He or she should not. It is possible to make serious money as a professional engineer, but most teaching and school administration salaries are straightjacketed by our 19th century perception of education as a public service activity.

The greatest advantage of removing the affirmative action "Band-Aid" from California higher education is that we can gauge the depth of the wound underneath. The greatest lesson to be learned from the decreases in minority enrollments at UCLA and UC Berkeley is that it is time to stop subsidizing the producers of educational services and instead subsidize the consumers of these important services. It is time to take school vouchers seriously and to proceed aggressively with voucher demonstration projects.

Getting into the wealth-transfer business requires very deliberate, focused, responsible behavior. Providing public education in a way that ensures survival of the weakest institutions is irresponsible. Wealthy families can pay their property taxes and still opt for private schools. The real burden of poor education falls to poor households.

Subsidizing education consumers instead of education producers would lead to great changes in the education industry. Some public schools would not be able to compete and would eventually close. Some teachers and principals, the least productive, would lose their jobs; and some would find new and better opportunities in new entrepreneurial schools. The field would also find new participants as the best college students sought to mine new opportunities in the education business.

But the impact on present and future providers of educational services is of secondary importance. What matters is the impact on the quality of the product and the options available to families. When schools have to compete to survive, many more households will have access to good schools and the collegiate opportunities good schools provide.