



The Ambiguity of Belonging: The Pros and Cons of Affirmative Action

Some arguments in favour of Affirmative Action

- Diversity is the best cure for racism. It shouldn't be left to chance. Many students live very segregated lives up to college, so it is essential that colleges represent a wide range of backgrounds. Without AA, this will be much harder to achieve. Elite schools may even be dominated by majority groups.
- Generally speaking, minority students often start at a disadvantage. Although they may be just as gifted as other students, their environment (inner city schools, violent / drug-infested areas...) might make it considerably harder to achieve the same good marks as other students. Additionally, these students often come from disadvantaged families who normally wouldn't steer them towards academic training. Despite all progress that has been made, "the playing field still isn't level" for minority students (cf. number of PhD degrees awarded to black and white students).
- AA might help to break old stereotypes. The more minority people there are in responsible positions, the less will they be considered as "special". Minority students need AA to show that they are just as capable – and this is what will ultimately swing people's opinions.
- AA is a way to compensate minorities for the mistreatment their ancestors were subjected to in the past (slavery, oppression, denial of constitutional rights etc.). Its consequences can still be felt today, so AA might be able to heal some of the wounds inflicted on US minorities.

Some arguments against Affirmative Action

- AA distorts true achievement, i.e. minority students will always have to face the question whether they were admitted because of their personal achievements or only because of their race/ethnicity. Thus, minority students might be subjected to even more racism or bias. ("It is a strange cure that generates its own disease", <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/the-case-against-affirmative-action>) A racist past cannot be undone through more racism – and this is what AA would ultimately cause.
- Academic admission should be based on achievement alone – not just marks, but also other kinds of personal achievements (e.g. sports, extracurricular activities etc.). Race and gender, however, are no personal achievements but traits.
- AA gives preference on racial, ethnic or gender reasons but not, as it claims, on the basis of disadvantage. There are also disadvantaged students in groups that receive little consideration in AA programs (e.g. poor whites or poor Asians). Therefore,

preference should be given on the basis of disadvantage, not on the basis of race or ethnicity.

- AA subverts Martin Luther King's dream of a colour-blind society. If race or ethnicity is made a criterion for selection, people will automatically associate ability with race or ethnicity, which is racist in itself. Heightened racial sensitivity will often cause tensions or bitterness, thus perpetuating racism instead of ending it.