

We must build our greatest strength: Diversity

Written by Benjamin Todd Jealous
Monday, 08 July 2013 12:11



"For a country regarded as the paramount leader in a multicultural world, the United States has yet to embrace its own diversity; continuing failure to do so will have profound consequences for governance."

That quote came from a 1996 report by Allan E. Goodman, former executive dean at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. For decades, American leaders in business, education and economics have lamented the wide racial and ethnic gaps in our education system. Last week's Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action reminded us that we have a long way to go.

In the case of *Fisher v. Texas*, the Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the University of Texas' admissions policy. The university currently allows admissions officers to consider an applicant's race among a number of other qualifying factors. The Court voted to send the case back to a lower court of appeals. In doing so, they reaffirmed the use of race in admissions, and the importance of educational diversity in the 21st century.

The decision in *Fisher* upheld an important precedent set in the 2003 case of *Grutter v. Bollinger*. In that case, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor refuted the idea that our society had advanced beyond affirmative action. She argued that the need for "cross-racial understanding" was still necessary to break down racial stereotypes, and that "student body diversity is a compelling state interest."

Justice O'Connor's argument was based on sound social research. In her words, "major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints." Like Allan Goodman, Justice O'Connor also saw diversity as a national interest.

This is even truer today. When Goodman wrote about the multicultural world in 1996, only one out of every thirteen Americans had access to the Internet. Google, Twitter and Facebook were still rough ideas scribbled in students' sketchpads. Seventeen years later, technological advances in communications, travel and trade have given rise to a new era of globalization. Leaders in business and government need to know how to work with people of vastly different races, cultures and perspectives.

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We will be stronger as a nation if we embrace our growing diversity and ensure that the pathways to leadership remain wide open. Numerous studies reveal that mere interaction is the best way to avoid intergroup conflict. Sociologists have even found that diversity increases opportunities for creativity.

In light of the Supreme Court's decision, America's educational institutions should recommit to fair and thoughtful ways to foster diversity. In the coming months, the NAACP will work with universities, policymakers, and the business community to see that qualified students from a diversity of backgrounds get a close look and a fair shot at admission to top schools.

Justice O'Connor wrote that "effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our Nation is essential if the dream of one Nation, indivisible, is to be realized." Our country's pledge is to be one nation, and our country's challenge is to lead a global economy that is increasingly flat. If America is to maintain its role as a moral and economic leader in the 21st century, we must build on our greatest strength: diversity.

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