

Facilitated Discussion: An Interactive Discussion on Affirmative Action

Jill S. Tietjen, P.E.
Assistant Vice President
Stone & Webster Management Consultants
Englewood, Colorado

Kristy A. Schloss
President
Schloss Engineered Equipment, Inc.
Aurora, Colorado

Panelists:

Steven T. Halverson, Regional Vice President, M.A. Mortenson Company, Denver, Colorado
James Mejía, Executive Director, Agency for Human Rights and Community Relations, Denver, Colorado
Kristy Schloss, President, Schloss Engineered Equipment, Inc., Aurora, Colorado

joined by:

Dr. Yvonne Freeman, Provost and Vice President, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia

What is affirmative action?

Affirmative action is about goals, good faith efforts, and opportunities. It is not quotas nor a welfare program. It is not unqualified individuals and it is not handing opportunities to anyone on a silver platter. It is providing opportunities for all qualified individuals and allowing all people to compete equally. It is also an extremely political and emotional issue in the country today.

Myths about affirmative action

Five myths have been spread about affirmative action in the media. With thanks to *Working Woman* and other sources:

Myth 1: Women no longer need affirmative action.

Reality: Women now earn approximately 76% as much as men compared to about 60% in the mid 1970s. According to a study conducted by the Glass Ceiling Commission, working women are clustered in only a handful of industries. Nearly 75% of employed women work in business services (such as education, health care and nonprofit organizations), finance, real estate, insurance, and retailing. Although women make up 35% of the federal professional work force, according to the White House review of federal affirmative action programs, they hold 86% of the clerical jobs. Furthermore, women own 40% of the businesses in this country, yet receive less than 2% of all federal contracts.

Myth 2: Affirmative action rewards gender and race at the expense of merit.

Reality: In real life, the playing field is not level and the most deserving candidates don't always get the jobs. Standing in the way of the proverbial level playing field are nepotism,

brown-nosing, club ties, alumni considerations, corporate politics, and discrimination. The Glass Ceiling Commission found that white men with four or more years of college were 40% more likely to hold administrative, managerial, and executive positions than should be expected given their numbers in the work force. Similarly educated black women were underrepresented by 12% and white women were underrepresented by 33%. When matched pairs of candidates were sent on interviews for the same job, white men consistently received more jobs offers or advanced further in the hiring process than equally qualified women or minority men.

Myth 3: Quotas are the backbone of affirmative action programs.

Reality: Most Americans support the goals of affirmative action and equal opportunity, according to public opinion polls. When the words quota or preference are used, however, the support drops off. The only circumstance in which quotas are used is as a last resort, court-ordered tool to redress rampant discrimination uncovered as a result of a successful lawsuit. Under the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, vacant jobs must go to the most qualified candidates, no position can be held open until a suitable minority or female candidate is found, and qualified white men cannot be passed over in hiring or for promotions because of their color.

Myth 4: Affirmative action has caused a backlash among white men.

Reality: Affirmative action may be blamed for troubles in employment among white men, but the real issue appears to be limited opportunities. What with corporate downsizing, or rightsizing, or whatever the euphemism, there is an underlying insecurity among workers in America today. The economy is shifting as we become part of the global economy and the shifting sands make many nervous.

Myth 5: If affirmative action is dismantled, diversity in the workplace will die too.

Reality: In a survey of 140 CEOs of major companies, almost 75% said they would continue their own affirmative action programs even if federal or state laws were weakened or repealed. One reason is that the new entrants to the work force by 2000 are expected to be approximately 15% white male, 55% women (42% white, 13% minority), 7% minority men, and the rest immigrants. Another is that diversity improves business results. A more diverse work force also gives companies an edge in selling to a more diverse customer base, and as companies branch out globally, diversity becomes even more important. However, diversity in terms of top management may lag, as companies shove affirmative action to the back burner because it is difficult and draining.

Why should companies support affirmative action or diversity?

Three drivers for affirmative action exist wholly apart from governmental and other political pressures, at least for the design and construction industry, in particular.

First, the design and construction industry needs a stable, long-term, fair environment for its business. The environment cannot be unfair, with social unrest. The environment must have social justice and stability in order for communities and businesses to wish to construct new facilities. All members of the community must have a fair shot at participation in order for the community to experience economic growth and prosperity. States that tend to be inclusive and fair tend to prosper; the design and construction business within those states will also tend to prosper.

Second, the changes in the workforce that are occurring are profound. The design and construction industry must be able to find trained and competent white and blue collar workers. The environment has to be a hospitable place for women and minorities to work

in order for the industry to be able to attract the talent that it needs. Individuals do not want to work in an environment that isn't comfortable. Industry leaders generally feel a need to provide a hospitable environment. Those enlightened ones understand that an hospitable environment is key to recruiting and retaining all qualified individuals.

Third, affirmative action is the right thing to do. People intuitively know the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Industry and organizations cannot rely on political pressure or promote divisiveness between groups. We are all trustees for the future. We need communities that work; that have a sense of social justice and fairness.

Industry has a financial stake in redefining or restructuring society for the benefit of the community. These skills are transferable to government and communities.

How should universities view affirmative action?

The audience appeared to believe that universities were not as far along in implementing affirmative action as corporations.

The point was made that universities need to understand the demands of one of its customers - the organizations that hire its graduates. These organizations need to have a diverse work force in terms of women and minorities. The "product" the universities are producing (its graduates), therefore, needs to be diverse in nature. The product comes from many sources: there are about 16,000 school districts whose graduates attend approximately 3500 universities including 117 historically black colleges.

Education is needed for all groups in order to have an opportunity to start leveling the playing field. However, the point was made, that even with many well-educated women and minorities, top levels of management were still being filled almost exclusively with white males.

It may not be adequate or effective just to have an open door or level playing field for admissions of candidates to engineering schools. And GPA and test scores may not be the best indicators of educational success in college. Even with current admittance standards, attrition rates can be as high as 25% per year, so maybe GPA and test scores are not the best criteria for predicting success in an engineering curriculum.

In some cases, remedial math and science education may be appropriate to prepare students for the rigors of an engineering education, particularly if their preparation was not complete in these areas. Otherwise, the math and science requirements might be so overwhelming that engineering no longer is a viable career option. Some institutions offer special programs for academically at risk kids, such as summer programs to get them ready for college. These programs are not a panacea, kids still drop out, but some make it into engineering that wouldn't have otherwise.

There are proposal opportunities for enrichment programs for minorities, women, and the disabled through federal government agencies. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory has a model program for summer internships. There is a Geospace Academy for at risk youngsters. The new interface and equalizer is computer technology.

More women and minority faculty members will help make women and minority engineering students more comfortable. Most engineering colleges around the country are quite homogeneous. Role models and mentors have proven to be very effective in retaining women and minorities in the engineering profession.

How can colleges work with corporations to place students, particularly colleges not generally found in the Top 20?

Corporations need to realize that in order to get a diverse workforce, it may not be enough to recruit from the colleges they have always recruited from in the past. Mortenson has expanded its recruitment effort to include eleven new colleges with a special emphasis on diversity. They are also moving into "partnering" with colleges to support research, teach classes, and generally get to know students better to be able to identify unpolished gems, instead of just stars. Networking with high schools is also an area that Mortenson is investigating. A program being considered is sponsoring kids from when they are juniors or seniors in high school through college. Then when they graduate, they come to work for Mortenson.

What can/should be done about the current political climate and governmental policies at all levels (local, state, and Federal) regarding affirmative action?

In Colorado, there appears to be mixed support for affirmative action. On one hand, the Mayor of Denver established an affirmative action task force that developed policies regarding contracting and subcontracting. In addition, a joint budget committee in the Colorado legislature has appropriated money for a disparity study. Such a study is required to determine through rigorous scrutiny if there is proof of previous discrimination. If there is proof of discrimination, then appropriate affirmative action programs can be implemented.

However, statewide, two procedures with regard to employment and hiring have been withdrawn after challenges by the Attorney General. The citizens of Colorado may have an opportunity to vote on a ballot initiative in November 1996 that would repeal affirmative action in employment, hiring and contracting. The wording for the initiative has been cleared; signatures are currently being gathered and will need to be verified.

Affirmative action is not gone but groups across the country are trying to repeal it. One of the key roles of affirmative action was to provide opportunities - those opportunities didn't exist because of barriers in place. The pipeline of "qualified" women, minorities, and people with disabilities does exist, but social barriers preclude many of them from achieving.

If affirmative action policies to date have not resulted in improved outcomes, are there alternative approaches that should be tried?

Women are only 3.5% of mechanics and repairers, and only 1.9% of construction workers. Women are only 6.2% of boards of directors at Fortune 500 and Service 500 companies. Women are only 8.6% of engineers.

It was suggested that education is one of the most critical steps in removing impediments to women and minorities. Root causes should be addressed, "not the symptoms but the actual disease." Education from the pre-kindergarten level through college should be a possibility for all interested parties. And the group facing the largest challenge is women of color. Some reeducation of guidance counselors is probably in order.

Industry, state and federal agencies could benefit the educational system and youngsters at risk. Three ways to do this include community outreach, mentor-protégé relationships, and focus on people by providing job opportunities. Particularly key are summer jobs for

youths at risk. Many of these youngsters at risk have never had role models to show them how to get a job; how to be prepared to go to work. Many have never had someone take an interest in them; to give them the "Dare to be great" speeches. Support groups and support for individuals are needed.

More women and minority-owned businesses are needed, to build capacity in the industry. As such organizations are strengthened, there should be more business opportunities. Structural barriers industry by industry need to be recognized and worked through. For example, the design and construction industry has strong associational ties and requires high levels of capitalization. And there needs to be significant attention paid to utilization of the entire workforce.

How can negative attitudes from affirmative action be combated?

Women and minorities are often uncomfortable with the notion of affirmative action as their accomplishments may be minimized - they may feel that they were hired to fill a quota or selected for a job as the "token" but not qualified. Thus affirmative action may mean that some women and minorities are not viewed as competent or capable, and this may cause the women and minorities to believe that they are thus not competent or capable.

Discussion conclusions

It appears that affirmative action is being attacked from many sides. One reason could be the perception that after many years of affirmative action being in place, not much progress has been made when numbers of women and minorities in top management positions are examined. However, it also appears that many organizations believe that in order to be competitive in a global economy, diversity of the work force will be necessary. Universities need to turn out a diverse group of students; this objective would be aided by more diverse faculty. The engineering community has a lot of work to do to ensure that women and minorities are aware of the profession, are interested in pursuing an engineering education, and are welcome in the profession during their careers.

Bibliography

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