# Affirming affirmative action

From the Editors in the October 28, 1998 issue

The aim of affirmative-action programs, which give preference to blacks and other minorities in matters of employment and school admissions, is to bring underrepresented groups into the mainstream of American life. Making race an issue in this way makes sense as a provisional measure in service of a larger goal-that of creating a society in which race is not an issue.

But is affirmative action really moving us toward this goal? Lots of people have their doubts. Whites who think affirmative action is a noble idea in theory can be heard to wonder, privately at least, if it isn't counterproductive in practice, serving mainly to harden racial differences, deepen racial mistrust, and confirm white stereotypes about the inadequacy of blacks' skills. Meanwhile, some black and Hispanic voices complain that affirmative action is an insult to their self-respect. The African-American essayist Shelby Steele, for example, argues that affirmative action plays on the idea that blacks are victims and thereby serves to pacify white guilt rather than encourage black advancement.

In the midst of a debate based largely on anecdotes and impressions, William Bowen and Derek Bok have offered some actual data about the effects of affirmative action. And the data seem to indicate that affirmative action is succeeding, at least in the realm of higher education.

In *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton University Press), Bowen, the former president of Princeton, and Bok, the former president of Harvard, examine the experiences of blacks and other minorities at 28 colleges and universities with highly selective admissions standards (ranging from the University of Michigan to Yale) that have had affirmative-action admissions programs. Bowen and Bok surveyed students admitted over the past four decades and tracked their college and postgraduate careers. They discovered that the black graduates of these schools became unusually successful in business, law, medicine and other professions, earning significantly more money than African-Americans with B.A.s from less selective

schools, and were generally more involved in civic and professional groups than other blacks. Furthermore, these beneficiaries of affirmative action reported that they were highly satisfied both with their careers and with their college experience.

These results are, in one sense, unremarkable-they're just what we might expect from kids given a boost in life. Nonetheless, they suggest that affirmative action was hardly counterproductive for these students. And being admitted to college under an affirmative-action policy does not seem to have imposed a stigma of inferiority that shrouded them for the rest of their lives. The social benefits of increasing the number of such minority students who can be the "backbone of the black middle class" outweighs the harm (which is statistically negligible) done to the white students who would have taken their places.

Scholars will debate the relevance of Bowen and Bok's data and the soundness of their conclusions, not to mention the implications of their study. The success of affirmative action at selective colleges does not mean every version of affirmative action is equally effective. Employment programs, for example, present another arena for study. (Tamar Jacoby's recent book, *Someone Else's House*, contains a devastating account of minority set-aside programs in Atlanta, which seem to have enriched the pockets of a few black and white businessmen who knew how to manipulate the system but done little to stimulate black economic enterprise.) But Bowen and Bok have done a great service by pushing the debate on affirmative action beyond the exchange of anecdotes or the profession of good intentions to a discussion of results.