The History of Affirmative Action in Education

#DiversityMatters

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court fundamentally changed education in America by declaring that "segregation is inherently unequal." This landmark decision opened the door to a more culturally diverse learning environment through desegregation in 17 states and Washington, D.C., which had always segregated schools by law.

Many colleges and universities in 19 states that created separate public colleges for black students and excluded them from white colleges were required to desegregate. Many other colleges turned to voluntary affirmative action—the policy of recruiting and admitting members of a disadvantaged group who suffered from discrimination or have been historically excluded, often admitting students who would not otherwise be accepted—to help integrate.

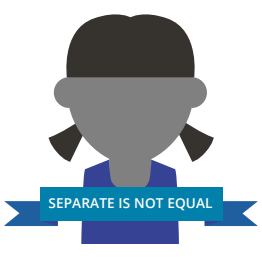
Since then, we've seen the benefits of racial, cultural, and, more recently, socioeconomic diversity for all learners. Students in diverse schools have access to more educational opportunities, demonstrate improved critical thinking skills, and are better prepared for the world in which they'll live and work.

However, the history of equal educational opportunity in America is one of great leaps forward, followed by frustrating inertia. The courts have limited the use of race and ethnicity in college admissions, and the legal foundation for these practices have remained largely unchanged since the late 70s. This timeline highlights some of the key legal decisions and policies that have shaped the affirmative action debate.

Pivotal legal moments in racial diversity and college admissions

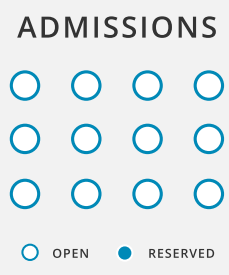
1954

Brown v. Board of Education declares segregation "inherently unequal."



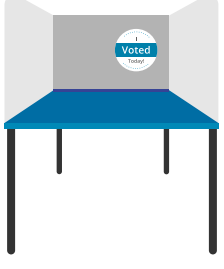
1978

Regents of the University of California v. Bakke forbids the use of rigid quotas.



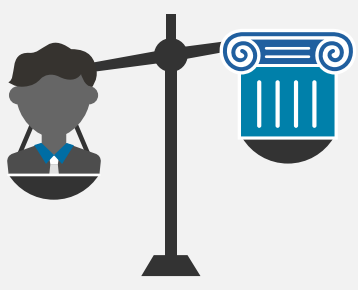
1990s

Civil Rights Ballot Initiatives outlaw the consideration of race in several states.



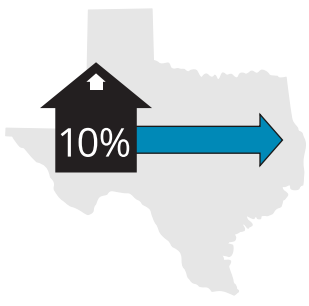
1996

Hopwood v. Texas rules that race cannot be a factor in college admissions.



1997

Texas Legislature's Top 10% Rule turns to a high school rank system to ensure diversity at state-funded universities.



2003

Grutter v. Bollinger overrules *Hopwood* decision and affirms racial diversity as a compelling interest for universities, but permits affirmative action only as one factor among many in a holistic admissions process.

2008

Colorado Amendment 46 tries to ban race-based admissions. The ballot initiative fails, but universities take notice.

June 2013

Fisher v. University of Texas reinforces the Grutter decision, sustaining limited use of affirmative action and emphasizing the responsibility of judges.

April 2014

Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action declares Michigan's ban on affirmative action constitutional.

2015

Institutions strive to provide the best education possible and recognize the benefits a diverse student population provides for all learners. In the face of a shifting legal landscape surrounding race-based affirmative action, colleges and universities continue to explore alternative approaches to maintaining cultural diversity on their campuses.

Learn more about why diversity matters in education.

www.pearsoned.com/diversity-matters

Sources: Class and Race, Inside Higher Ed, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/07/08/essay-calls-consideration-class-affirmative-action