



# Understanding Equity and Proposition 16: A Personal Story

By Troy Myers

**It is a longstanding, alluring myth that educational and economic progress in American society are achieved largely through individual effort. We believe in luck and talent, sure, but most Americans cherish the world-view that any of us can achieve almost anything through dedication and hard work. Or better, when I say Americans, I mean white, middle-class Americans like myself.**

In 1996 Californians passed Proposition 209, which prohibits state institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity in educational admissions, state hiring, and the awarding of government contracts. Governor Pete Wilson was an ardent proponent, and the initiative passed aligning with the misconceived belief in a meritocracy and a naturally squared playing field. Its passage ended years of effort to increase opportunities for the communities that need assistance the most.

This November, Proposition 16, which would repeal proposition 209, comes before voters, and if Californians are committed to equitable social progress, the proposition must pass.

California remains one of only 8 states to prohibit gender and racial considerations in college admissions; in fact, at least 25 states explicitly provide these advantages, and affirmative action remains supported by federal law. California, the land of comparatively low state university tuition, free pre-natal care for qualifying mothers, the Venice boardwalk and windsurfers has thrown barricades for people of color across the gates of its most prestigious universities.

The term “affirmative action” was first used by President Kennedy in 1961; after his assassination, this strategy, designed to overcome centuries of race and gender discrimination, was implemented under President Johnson as an adjunct to The Great Society. Johnson argued that the United States must not pursue “equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result.” Except, it appears, in progressive California.

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How have we fared since 209?

In 1998, the first year that race, ethnicity, and gender were disallowed as a consideration in university admissions, the results at the selective UC system were drastic and immediate. At UC Berkeley, the most prestigious and competitive state-funded college in California, offers of admissions for White and Asian students rose a modest 2 percent; that same year, offers of admission for Black, Native American, and Chicano applicants decreased by thirty percent.

In light of such data, it is perplexing that 209 has lasted. Especially when we look at trends over time. In 1990, the systemwide UC admission rate for Black and White applicants was nearly identical. However, data from the years after 209 shows a consistent, twenty-plus percentage point gap between Black and White student admissions.

A common retort is that since Proposition 209 passed, those most prepared to succeed are now filling spots in the UC. But if the UC is admitting the most motivated and prepared students, one would expect an immediate leap in UC success rates. In fact, even as the UC system has become much less diverse, there has been no significant improvement in student outcomes. It is not a surprise then, that the UC Regents voted this June to support Proposition 16.

They are not the only policy makers arguing for its passage. The need to repeal Proposition 209 was recently affirmed by the California Legislature. Senator Richard Pan (D) argues that many who oppose affirmative action on the grounds that race should not matter are not “color-blind,” as is often stated, but instead are blind to our nation’s deep-set racial inequities. Senator Pan argues, “We understand that by the time you get to the college application process, structural racism ensures that people are not at the same starting point. Equally talented people are not at the same place.” Senator Pan is correct. Californians neither prepare for nor approach college with anything like equal opportunity.

How is it possible in a society that since its inception has equated hard work with individual destiny, even with eternal salvation, that we would be so blind to the firmly stratified nature of the socioeconomic ladder? How can we fail to see, as

Senator Pan argues, that persons of equal ability and ambition from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds do not participate in a level playing field?

I offer a personal story.

A couple of years ago, the academic senate at Sacramento City College tasked a subcommittee with revising our faculty hiring handbook. Driven by the need to diversify faculty, the subcommittee recommended that every hiring committee should look like our student population. At Sacramento City, as at many California community colleges, it would have been nearly impossible, if not actually impossible, to construct sufficient committees because we lack enough faculty of color. Our student body is very diverse; our faculty mostly white, like me.

I sat quietly while the issue was discussed at senate. But I recall clearly what I thought: this will not work. Such a strategy assumes that faculty of color will hire other faculty of color and pressures them to do so; there will be goal-defeating backlash from those deemed “not ready;” and the equity mindset that is working its gradual way across our campus should be sufficient to diversify our faculty hires. Also, I felt that such a principle declares faculty like myself incapable of hiring people, or enough people, who do not look like us. I felt insulted, if I am honest.

I was moved passionately enough by what I considered to be my excellent analysis that I shared my view with the other senate officers, two of whom have done equity work, and all of whom were kind enough to give me the space to writhe. Next, I dropped in on a white colleague, one of the finest teachers I know, and we had a long conversation that revealed he was having the same thoughts I was. The exact same thoughts, or nearly. Finally, when the issue came back to senate, I watched as multiple white, male professors made the same

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case that had been unfolding so proudly in my own head; one senator brought hiring data to dismiss the proposal: how good it felt to be validated!

The only faculty I recall who spoke in favor of enforcing ethnic diversity on the hiring panels in senate that day were faculty of color, and one summed up her argument by noting that whatever we were doing, it was not working.

Looking at our hiring data, I had to agree.

What struck me soon after that meeting was that every well-meaning, non-racist faculty member who said the same things that I was thinking looked like me, while every senator bravely demanding a change in the composition of our hiring committees, even if it meant bringing in faculty from outside the instructional division or from other colleges in our district, was non-white.

I wondered why was I thinking like every white guy who spoke up on senate, and I was puzzled that I did not perceive this issue like the faculty of color. That single observation, which I am sure arose from my interactions with faculty doing equity work, was enough to change my mind. Along with the other senate officers, I spoke on behalf of and voted in favor of the new language in the fall, and I watched in spring as our senate president sent committees back that were not sufficiently diverse until they were re-constituted.

Remarkably, the more than 30 new, full-time faculty who stood on stage to be welcomed at convocation two years ago looked more like our student body than any group in the 20 years I have been at my college, than any group in our history. Was it the presence of diverse faculty on the panels or the public emphasis on hiring faculty of color that made the difference? I can't say; but, in this case,

a simple reflection pushed me one step closer to what I hope is a head and heart that will strive to understand the world my students inhabit.

I share one more example. Last year, after colleagues recommended it, I took the implicit bias screening online at Harvard University. I live in the land of essays and poems, and I don't know how scientific the assessment, which measures response times as one looks at facial photographs and responds with keystrokes, ultimately is, but I was sincerely shocked when my results said I was biased against African Americans.

But, I frantically thought, my son's best friend since third grade, a boy who stayed at my house dozens of times, was mixed race and appeared African-American. I further encouraged myself with the fact that I teach about Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass, whose ideas I sincerely believe are critical to any humane democracy, in my writing classes every year. Still, that disquieting result raised my awareness, and later I noticed that I did not speak to groups of African-American students in the hallway as freely as other groups of students.

Equal opportunity is not about fairness as I long understood it or as Proposition 209 assumes it exists in the world. Treating every student or college applicant the same does not enact a functional equity. It will not lift the citizens of California who most need to rise. True opportunity requires meeting every student at the front door of their own lives. Individual effort and desire is not enough to guarantee success. We must take long uncomfortable looks at student success and California university admission data that has been disaggregated by disproportionately impacted groups, admit the truth, and take effective moral action. ■