

## Learning Civic Engagement without Diversity?

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**A**rticles in this issue of *Peer Review* argue that involving students in hands-on experiences to address social problems enhances their learning and deepens their understanding of their civic responsibilities. It does so because students are exposed to a broader world—both on- and off-campus. Out in the larger community, they begin to see the world through someone else's eyes. The capacity to do that comes with practice and proximity.

This facet of learning is a key reason why so many higher education institutions chose to publicly affirm their support for the University of Michigan's affirmative action policies in scores of briefs filed with the Supreme Court this past March. These institutions, along with many other national leaders from business, public policy, and even the military, understand that the strength of our democracy and its institutions depends not only on an engaged citizenry, but on citizens who understand, value, and have had experience learning from one another across many differences.

The two Michigan cases before the Court will likely be decided just as this issue is reaching your desk. While they may not directly affect colleges and universities that do not have selective admissions, the decisions will have a profound effect on our entire nation. They will serve as an important milestone in our nation's often troubled march toward integration and

equality. Today's students see the importance of this decision. In large numbers—representing institutions large and small, private and public, selective and open admissions—they demonstrated on the steps of the Supreme Court the day oral arguments were heard. They don't want to return to the all-too-recent racially segregated U.S. colleges of earlier periods.

That is what is at stake. Will our most prestigious and selective institutions be forced by the Supreme Court to try to educate students for civic engagement in institutions lacking serious racial diversity? It would be a bit like trying to learn how to swim without water. Let us all hope that the Court has the wisdom to see that nothing could be more compelling a national interest than, at once, ensuring that all citizens have access to selective institutions that represent such important doors to opportunity and helping today's college students learn from one another in diverse environments.

It would be tragic for education and for the nation to derail the significant progress of the last four decades that had begun to create genuinely multiracial, multicultural campuses. Research clearly shows that integrated campuses are good for the quality of students' learning and good for our democracy. For all students, whatever their background, studies show that engaging diversity on campus, in the curriculum, and in service and community-

based learning experiences, promotes intellectual development, reduces prejudice, and improves intergroup relations. Research also shows that students who experience diversity on campus are more likely to challenge racial discrimination and choose to live in integrated communities after graduation. This is surely one of the most important realms of civic engagement that higher education should be encouraging if our diverse democracy is to remain strong.

While there is broad consensus in the academy and many other sectors of society about the value of the kinds of policies and programs that the University of Michigan and many other institutions have developed to advance diversity and learning, we should not pretend that this consensus alone will ensure progress. The road to equality in America is littered with setbacks—legal, political, and economic. The abolitionist movement of the 1830s collided with the Dred Scott decision in 1857 denying blacks citizenship. The Emancipation of black slaves in 1863 was followed by Jim Crow laws. New Japanese American citizens were stripped of property and sent to internment camps during World War II. The history of these setbacks should, in fact, be part of every college student's curriculum—and the Michigan case, too, will surely be one that every student should study as a part of their civic education in college. ■