

Reflections of a Current College Student on the End of Affirmative Action

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“What colleges are you applying to?”

It’s a question that reverberates painfully through teenage minds and hearts, that calls upon tremendous stress and fear and longing for exactly the right kind of education. Maybe you can relate to this. I, personally, do not have much experience with such a question. Within my spheres of family and family friends, we don’t ask, “What colleges are you applying to?” We ask, “Do you know *if* you’re applying to college yet?”

At home, my mom always painted college not as a possibility but as the next step. I always planned to attend college, to be a commuter, probably at a CUNY, maybe a local private university if I got lucky with financial or merit aid. This was up until my junior year of high school, when I first started to consider a different future, a more impossible one. Though those closest to me did not attend—or even consider applying—to selective universities, I decided to be a first.

A few months ago, I saw one of my second cousins for the first time in over a year. I learned she would be entering her senior year this fall, and, of course, I asked if she knew if she’d be applying to college. When she expressed that she didn’t know, I told her I understood. “It’s a really big decision,” I said. It wasn’t a big decision for me, but my circumstances were unlike hers. My cousin and I, even being of the same family, grew up with very different resources. Coming from a white-collar household, having attended private Catholic schools, I am more financially and educationally privileged than my cousin, and thus, was propelled towards higher education in ways she hasn’t been.

“So... how do you apply to college?” she asked me shyly. In our conversation, I realized she didn’t know what the CommonApp was, or about personal statements. Didn’t know she needed at least one letter of recommendation, hadn’t heard the phrase “supplemental essays.” The world of college applications was not one my cousin had ever heard of, let alone been welcomed into. I thought to myself, “Isn’t her school supposed to teach this stuff?” But I think we all know that’s not how it goes at many public schools, especially those in minority communities. Black and Brown kids are often left uneducated, unencouraged, or worse yet, discouraged in these matters, with few tools to reach for a better future.

At the end of the conversation, I told my cousin that if she decided to apply to college, she should text me, and I’d help her through every step. Especially today, there’s so much a student has to do to gain admission at any university. Learning all of this information only a few months before entering the admissions process and then undergoing it with little or no guidance—it’s confusing and overwhelming to say the least. But still, success is achievable for my cousin, for kids like her. Or it was.

Affirmative action is over for the foreseeable future, and this has consequences beyond just elite admissions. For those who come from families and communities where college education is a norm, considerations of affirmative action stay at the top, centering *which* top 50 or top 100 schools students “should” and do get into. We’ve allowed people with impressive academic profiles and unachieved Ivy

Plus aspirations to become foremost voices in conversations about affirmative action, to launch claims to victimhood over a rejection from Berkeley and enrollment at the still-very-prestigious Georgia Tech. The truth is: They'll be fine. Affirmative action policies have 'winners' and 'losers,' but, as affirmed by economist Zachary Bleemer, because white and Asian students had alternative access to high-quality public and private universities, there is little evidence that they benefited from the end of affirmative action at UC – with the data showing that these students experienced similar degree attainment and postgraduate wages before and after Prop 209. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for California's underrepresented minority students, who took a massive hit to degree attainment and postgraduate wages after the end of affirmative action. I'd argue that these folks are the victims, that these are the voices that should be spotlighted in discussions about affirmative action. But, of course, the more privileged voices will always be the more heard and respected.

With the end of affirmative action, we can expect less Black and Brown kids to enroll in and graduate from college. And, indisputably, this is a tremendous evil. Especially with the college premium growing, attending college, any college, is incredibly powerful. In truth, affirmative action's greatest project was not educational access, but mobility. Education changes lives, and I think that's more clear to those of us who come from environments where it's more of a scarcity. My mom, born dirt poor in a remote river village on Colombia's Caribbean coast, attended a local public university in her country, and she used this degree to achieve a middle-class life for herself and her kids in America. My dad, also a poor Colombian immigrant, spent his twenties working many jobs to pay his way through CUNY night classes. Education freed my parents from the intergenerational poverty most of their siblings still live in, and I share their stories because the end of affirmative action has robbed people with backgrounds like theirs of a brighter future. With the recent Court decision, the American dream has faded further into mythdom.

I caught up with another second cousin of mine, also a rising senior, also a NYC public school kid, a few weeks ago. She also asked me how to apply to college because she had absolutely no idea. There's countless other minority students who have been deprived by the system, but I guess this country doesn't care to uplift or even just understand them. I feel a great sadness not only for these kids but also for the world that is missing all of their talent.