

FOSTERING DIVERSITY

Some Major Hurdles Remain When the Playing Field is Tilted

Mary P. Rowe

Affirmative action, in the narrow sense of government regulation, “cannot get there from here.” By itself, it is not really effective. This article is no diatribe against affirmative action — I believe in it. I do not believe that meritocracy is in much danger from affirmative action or that political correctness is going to kill free speech. But I do not think that affirmative action or other negatively oriented regulation — that says essentially, “comply with these technical regulations and bureaucratic requirements or you do not get your federal money” — will turn the United States into a productive mosaic society where women and men of all races are randomly distributed throughout the world of paid and unpaid work. Affirmative action still deals with the outermost layer of the onion. While it helps with recruitment issues, compliance-oriented affirmative action alone is not sufficient to achieve healthy diversity.

Affirmative Action Regulation Has Its Shortfalls

I write from 30 years of professional experience with issues of race and gender: I worked for a decade as an economist in the Caribbean, Africa and the United States; and for the past 20 years, I was one of two

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ombudspople for everyone at MIT, acting as adjuncts to the major support services for students and employees. My African-American counterpart and I work separately, seeing anyone in the community who wishes



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our help on any subject, but we report our caseloads together. Last year we helped with a wide range of some 1,840 concerns: promotions, salaries, safety, defamation, career advice, dormitory problems, layoffs, ethics cases, dependent care, recruitment, helping with referrals, helping with transfers, and so on.

About half our caseload in recent years reflected concerns about equal opportunity, workplace mistreatment or harassment. In addition — these are not necessarily the same set of people — about half of those who called on us last year were minority members. Affirmative action and equal opportunity regulation are directly helpful for some of the race and gender problems we encounter, but many cases revolve around career and family, personal safety and security, or subtle discrimination issues.

These are areas where no current institutional response is really successful. In part, this is because academic institutions really cannot succeed on their own — and the institutional responses that do appear to help are beyond the scope of what is required by affirmative action regulation. For example, many women and some minority men drop by to talk about personal relationships and dependent care. They often bring up serious concerns about anonymous threats, obscene phone calls, stalking, emotional and physical violence — in short, security problems — at



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home, on the way to work and at work. And there are constant stories about micro-events of racism and sexism.

Career and Family

She had the baby in her first year as an assistant professor in engineering at a very competitive school. Her spouse was starting a similar job. The baby was one of those many babies who cried a lot. The mother wanted to nurse, but the school had no place to nurse, no breast pump, no support group. Her family was far away, so the only way she could cope was to take on major debt for full-time child care; debt on top of the loans incurred for her training. She decided to change careers and left the university.

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to take care of their children. Studies also show that many of today's parents will actually spend more years providing elder care than providing child care, and that the hardest hit are those who must do both at once. To meet these multiple demands, many parents stagger their schedules, spending little or even no waking time together, at high cost to their marriages. Some recent research shows children doing less well than their parents in emotional and academic terms. In addition, professionals like me are seeing more and more young people who seem unable to form happy personal and professional relationships. Despite the fact that polls continue to show "family" as the chief source of life satisfaction for most Americans, success at work is now in direct conflict with family life for many.

A constant refrain among female graduate and post-doctoral students and faculty has to do with "wanting a life." The steady 70-, 80-, and 90-hour weeks demanded of top academics seem hopeless for those who want a happy family life. Adequate dependent care may also seem impossible for a graduate student, post-doctoral student, or junior faculty on an academic salary. These questions are also important for white males. But they are especially difficult for women, who are much more likely to take care of dependents, and for minority men and women, who are more likely to come from families without financial resources to help them and to feel, instead, that they should be helping support their families of origin. These problems are also especially difficult for those gays and lesbians who lack family support and domestic partner benefits.

Safety and Security

"We wanted very much to recruit him, but he said that City XXX was no place for African-Americans to raise their children."

"I really wanted to go there for my residency but it simply is not safe for

women to work at that hospital — or anywhere in City XXX."

No one can prove whether sexual and racial harassment and assault — and gay-bashing, anti-Semitism, attacks against the disabled, etc. — are more prevalent now than they were 10 years ago; however, on the basis of the many hundreds of problems a year that I have handled as an ombudsperson, I believe that safety and security at home and at work are now more serious problems than in the early 1970s. Young minority men and women, white women, and lesbians and gays often have to think about harassment at school, as well as street violence, when they are considering where they can safely live and work. Virtually all young women I see know friends who were raped, and virtually all young blacks know a family that lost a family member to violence, or have a friend who was injured on the street.

New concerns about all kinds of harassment are not happenstance.



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Nor is it an accident that there has been a movement toward stalking laws and increased concern about domestic violence; most ombudspersons and therapists are dealing with increased numbers of people who “can’t let go” of a former lover or acquaintance or professor or academic institution. Perhaps this is related to the fact that many families can no longer take adequate care of their children and other dependents. Whatever the reasons, safety and security have become more



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important issues, especially for women, lesbians and gays, and minorities.

Subtle Discrimination

“We just did not find any qualified blacks over this last decade. It seems that no professor in our section ran into any black professional anywhere.”

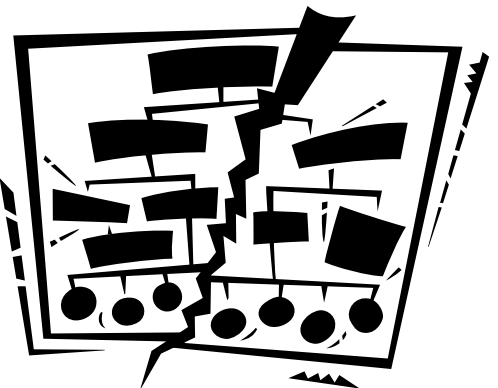
The head of the search committee mused to himself... “Anna is pretty aggressive. I wonder why it is that she is single...and Harriet so shy. I just don’t think they will fit in. Besides, Harriet will probably just leave us anyway to follow her husband.”

Subtle discrimination is made up of covert, ephemeral or apparently trivial events that are frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator and often not evident to the person injured by them. By definition they are not legally actionable; they happen wherever people are perceived to be “different.” These “micro-inequities” interfere with equal opportunity by excluding the person who is different and by interfering with that person’s self-confidence and productivity.

I studied these events in some depth for two decades. New data on this subject still arrive in my office nearly every day. I hear of racist and anti-gay graffiti, of ethnic jokes in a lab, of someone failing to introduce a minority person, or confusing the names of two people of color. I hear of someone ascribing the work or idea of a woman to a nearby male, of people who think exclusively of male contacts when a job or coveted assignment is open, of someone’s obvious discomfort at being assigned to travel with a woman or a person of another race. I hear of women who take a different path to class because of a man who seems to hang around on the path. I hear of a minority employee not notified of a vital matter at work. I hear of a woman trainee assigned to a certain office she did not want to be in, “because the man in that office was lonely and wanted to be assigned with a woman.”

Micro-inequities can predispose their perpetrators toward yet more serious discrimination and may block helpful behavior. They lower expectations of excellence, interfere with cross-race and cross-gender evaluation, and take up time and energy, both from the target and from the

people to whom the target appeals for help. Subtle discrimination corrodes continuously in the same places — skin color and gender — which I believe to be different from the effects



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produced by the more random meanness experienced by white males.

It is hard to prepare for — or deal with — micro-inequities since individual instances are not easily predictable and are, by definition, irrational. They are hard to detect in part because they are infinitely various and often not intentional. They often seem petty, so the target often does not know how to deal with them without seeming shrewish. However, these subtle inequities may have great effect. Since many women of whatever race and minority men were socialized to be super-sensitive to disap-

proval or a possible threat from white males, they may “over-react,” at least internally, to apparently minor slights.

It can be hard to stop certain kinds of micro-inequities because they are endemic and even reinforced by white male society — like sexy calendars and anti-gay, ethnic and “spaz” jokes. This endemic characteristic also produces inadvertent negative role-modeling, because minority men and women in general see so many other people like themselves put down. And it puts an extra burden on the rare senior women and minorities who are available as role models, because they must deal with their own pain as well as the pain of junior colleagues who are like themselves.

Many small studies indicate that women do randomly as well at MIT as men, over time. However, most data suggest that the stress level is higher for women — and for minority men. I believe this extra stress is real, and that much of it is due to concerns about family, safety and security, and to the constant experience of playing on a field that feels a bit tilted by subtle discrimination.

What — If Anything — Helps?

Extraordinary commitment from the top. Where the senior officers of any institution are themselves exceptionally committed to diversity, one may suddenly see real change. This is true for presidents and provosts, but also true of vice presidents, deans and department heads. I have repeatedly seen a department that had no women suddenly diversify after a new and committed head — or outstanding senior faculty member — decided to make a difference. A department may suddenly blossom with half a dozen, first-class black and Latino graduate students where there had been none. In one notable example, the appointment of a new vice president of a major institution resulted within a year in the appointment of nearly 20 minority staff where there had been

almost none. A number of notable examples abound where universities recruited women and African-American faculty.

While extraordinary commitment from the top is key to overcoming subtle discrimination within an institution, it also is essential in areas where progress depends on working together with government and other institutions. In the long run, no one employer can deal adequately with either external safety or support to families. The United States must join the other Western industrialized nations in establishing a supportive national family policy, and state and local governments must work more effectively regarding crime. Neither will happen without major pressure from chief executives working together.

Steady-state, personalized recruitment. The best faculty appointments result from individually courting the



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best people, year in and year out, sometimes over a number of years. Such people are courted one-on-one through invitations, mutual visits, phone calls, good deals and much



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collegiality. This kind of courtship also works for fostering diversity, as well it should; it ranks as the favored mode in every institution for getting the best people. A department head or other senior faculty person becomes an effective “entrepreneurial recruiter,” calling 20 or 30 other schools to identify the best candidates, personally inviting a woman candidate, or overseeing the courtship of a minority person, in the same way a Nobel Prize winner might be courted.

This approach works for many reasons. It overcomes the otherwise natural — and subtly discriminatory — tendency of most people to recruit only people like themselves, and it is likely to result in “cluster” hiring, bringing in more than one woman or minority male, which can make life easier

for those in the cluster. A steady-state search for top-notch minority members and women, across a wide sweep of possible slots, improves the chances of success compared to a single advertising campaign for one slot. And success builds on success. The next non-traditional person hears that the given department is a “good one” and is more likely to accept an offer from that department. And the “entrepreneur” who is always searching is seen as credible and serious; minorities of both genders and white women will begin to refer their best minority and female colleagues to that department. Finally, a steady-state, personalized search is not only more likely to result in attracting the very best person, but is more likely to result in a continued commitment to the success of the individual recruited.

Mentoring. By definition, there is no possibility in traditionally white male institutions that a non-traditional person can have the same possibilities for role models as would a white male. On the other hand, mentoring can and should be equally available to all. Committed recruiters of women and minorities often prove to be outstanding mentors. However, since most people need more than one mentor, and since white women and minorities of both genders often encounter special problems in finding adequate white male mentor-ship, an academic institution deliberately needs to foster this function if it is to work satisfactorily. My recommendation is that this be done rather loosely — by exhorting senior faculty to be mentors, by telling all junior people that the responsibility is theirs to find mentors, and by holding department heads responsible for knowing who the mentors are for all members of their departments — *but* not by one-on-one assignment.

Mentoring includes many functions: opening doors, coaching, sponsorship, cheerleading, supervision, giving a sense of history, helping people set standards and providing

inspiration. Mentoring also may include helping an institution to understand — and to change — its structures for meeting the needs of new people. For example, much of the impetus toward supporting family needs, and for harassment and safety programs, as well as for diversity training, has come from powerful white male mentors who see these changes as necessary for the success of mi-



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norities and women with whom they work. Effective mentoring is a particularly powerful antidote to subtle discrimination.

Networks. Networks of women, of African-Americans, of Latinos, and of other minorities are an indispensable part of an effective system to foster diversity in academe for many of the same reasons that professional associations in general are essential to professional success. Networks pro-

vide skills training and contacts for their members, they enhance mentoring, help to identify complaints and concerns, and help teach the institution what it needs to know to change its structures appropriately. Networks provide comfort and personal support, as well as providing ideas to help with family needs. Not only can they help counter the damage caused by subtle discrimination, they can help enhance safe and harassment-free environments. If they are regularly in touch with senior administrators in a collegial and mutually respectful way, networks can provide a gyroscope for an institution in a generation of turbulence, helping channel activist energy into responsible paths and helping to highlight the serious needs of new members of the community. Networks have a happy history of working for changes that benefit everyone.

Networks, however, must be voluntary; no individual should be “expected to join.” Networks should be supported openly by the institution so that those who do join are not ostracized. Ideally, they will open some of their events to everyone, in order to not only be of service to all, but to gain ideas from everyone.

Family support programs. Since support to family life is among the potentially most expensive benefits an employer can provide, it is essential that academic institutions receive expert advice in this area, and that employers be forthcoming about their budgetary constraints. However, much still can be done. Cost-effective ideas include: flexible schedules; supportive maternity and family leave policies (including the possibility of proportionately lowered salaries in return for some weeks, or even months, each year of planned and voluntary leave without pay); part-time tenure and tenure ladders; shared jobs; dependent care information and referral; and support for nursing mothers (a place to nurse, breast pumps, etc.).

The single most important support to family life is a public validation of the need for some flexibility and approval for males — especially white males — who share dependent care. Changing institutional expectations for white males in this arena is critical to ending one source of subtle discrimination against women and minorities — and, of course, critical to providing enough dependent care. Thus, leadership on this issue by senior administrators in each institution — and also in Washington — is essential.

A dispute-resolution system that provides both options — and choice of options. There is much evidence that all women — as well as minority and white males — have widely varying ideas of what they are willing to do if faced with an issue of overt or subtle discrimination. Some will talk only with a person they know, while others will only speak with someone they do not know. Some will talk only with a person of the same race and gender, while others “just want an expert.”

Some people are only satisfied with clear-cut, formal grievance procedures, while others hate formal grievances no matter what the problem may be. Such people simply dislike rights-based procedures and tend toward interest-based problem-solving: What is best for me in this situation? What do the other person and I want to have happen? Some offensive acts are subtle, ambiguous or idiosyncratic; women of every race and Asian-American men are particularly likely to ask for informal methods to deal with such offenses.

Some people prefer to handle their problems directly. Some want informal or formal third-party intervention, while others want their institution to take a generic approach, like a training program, to stop a specific offender. Some do — and some do not — want a public record made of their complaint or dispute.



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The net result is that if an academic institution wants to deal well with disputes and complaints from a diverse population, it must offer a *variety of options* to people with problems. These options ordinarily include: support to deal directly with the problem (in person or on paper); informal problem-solving; formal mediation; formal grievance channels; generic problem prevention and resolution; and mechanisms for changing the system. There should be men and women of various ethnic backgrounds available to handle the complaints.

Safety programs. Sophisticated, well-trained and well-deployed campus police can make a major difference to the security of women, minorities and gays at our colleges and universities. Requirements include a diverse police force and special training involving a wide range of issues: rape, racial assault, harassment, stalking, gay-bashing, self-defense, ob-

scene phone calls and threats, campus demonstrations, requests for restraining orders, domestic violence and home safety devices. If the campus police then routinely share their expertise in office/laboratory/dormitory crime prevention, and provide extensive victim assistance, they can alleviate some of the safety concerns of the minority, gay and female members of the community.

Here again, to address problems of safety and security adequately for women and minorities institutions must not only work together with each other, but with various levels of government.

Training programs-diversity programs. An institution that wishes to diminish subtle — and overt — discrimination, to create a safe and secure work and educational environment, and to provide some modicum of support to the idea of family life must have diversity programs to succeed. Positively oriented short-term training — like Valuing Differences and Total Quality Management programs, which mix different kinds of people together in teams working toward a common goal — are likely to help diminish subtle prejudice.

Women’s studies and race relations courses also help explore these questions more extensively. Harassment prevention is absolutely essential and should cover all forms of harassment and violence in relationships. Personal safety courses, parenting and other dependent-care workshops are all essential if the academic environment is to change.

None of these recommendations is specially mandated by “affirmative action” as conventionally, bureaucratically understood. But all are consonant with the spirit of affirmative action and, in the long run, all are likely to benefit men as well as women, whites as well as minorities. And all are necessary if affirmative action is really going to work.