

# WELCOME

President Derek C. Bok, Harvard University

Thank you all for coming here for such an important conference. I know that this is not an occasion for rhetoric. We have all been involved too long in the quest for affirmative action to listen to more platitudes. For myself, I started as a volunteer mediator to settle cases of discrimination in factories and unions in the 1960s just after the EEOC was first formed and mandated by legislation. I know that many of you were involved long before that date and perhaps the great majority of you have spent more hours than I have since. But I thought I might just say a few words about how this program and this effort looks to someone in my position and why I think this conference is an important one.

I would be dishonest if I were to tell you that the work that I do in affirmative action is the most pleasant of my responsibilities. The pressures and misunderstandings are intense. Representatives of underrepresented groups are understandably suspicious and very quick to interpret delay as evidence of deceit or discrimination or manipulation of some kind; conservative faculty and other groups are equally quick to suspect reverse discrimination and to view every target and goal as a quota in sheep's clothing.

The government is also a source of concern. Certainly, all of us who stop to think can appreciate what a terribly difficult job it is for government officials to try to move this leviathan of higher education with limited powers while being constantly told that there isn't really a problem; or that qualified people simply aren't available; or that public officials don't really understand the peculiar complexities of a campus environment. But there are some other legitimate concerns which I think we must guard against if the long-term viability of the program is to be insured. There is the temptation to confuse form with substance by concentrating so much on complicated systems of data collection, computer print-outs, and forms, as not only to burden institutions financially but distract people within them from the really serious, difficult, and ultimately important job of implementation and actual results.

There is also a temptation to indulge in excessive regulations. Once you have a mandate for equality on campuses, anybody with any imagination can regulate not simply discrimination but every aspect and every detail of university administration and life in the name of equality. And there is the danger too of insufficient coordination within the government, because the federal bureaucracy is so vast, so variegated, and so fragmented. The lack of coordination with which we are most familiar is one very common to all of labor relations and personnel relations and that is the problem of coordinating the various different independent agencies in government that have some jurisdiction in the field. But there is another form of coordination which is equally important. In the end, the government must recognize that we are dealing not just with employment, even though that may be the focus of a particular regulation. We are also dealing with a continuous process of

opportunity which includes not only employment, but the process of education by which equal employment becomes ultimately realistic and possible. And one must be concerned, as I am concerned, that this coordination is not carried out as well as it might be.

We all know that one of the most serious problems in affirmative action is the need to increase the proportion of minority faculty members. Although the government can badger any individual institution to hire more minority faculty, in the long run we will not do much to solve the problem if the percentage of minority Ph.D.'s is tiny and the number of traineeships, fellowships, and other forms of financial support are being cut back in graduate education so as to minimize the opportunities of more minorities and other underrepresented groups to obtain the credentials and the training they need to compete successfully for academic jobs. And because there is this link—this necessity for coordination between the educational process and the employment process—I am particularly happy to see that you have included the *DeFunis* case in your agenda for today. I feel very strongly about the *DeFunis* case. This university submitted a brief for the first time in its history in a case before the Supreme Court. And we did so in part because we recognized the link between education and equal employment opportunity and concluded that if litigation like *DeFunis* succeeded in mandating some spurious and illusory form of objectivity on the admissions process, not only educational values but the cause of affirmative action would inevitably be set back.

But despite these problems, and despite concerns, we must never allow particular disagreements to obscure our basic sentiments toward the affirmative action program as a whole. We must recognize that affirmative action is important and valuable not merely for minorities, for women, for underrepresented groups—but because it promotes the interests of the entire institution. Affirmative action benefits the universities, first of all, because it furthers the deepest ideals of an educational institution. It is important also because we know as educators that you cannot expect to impart values and ethical principles to your students in the classroom unless the institution itself is making a serious effort to abide by those ideals and those ethical principles in its everyday operations. And finally, we must always remember that a properly administered program of affirmative action is not merely a concession to particular groups, but a means of improving the quality of the personnel within the university, which is a matter of maximum concern to any right-thinking educational administrator.

What affirmative action really implies is a special effort to identify candidates for all positions from groups that have hitherto been overlooked, and once that identification has been made, a conscientious effort to make personnel decisions on the merits for the job in question without discrimination either way based on race or sex or ethnic origin. This process should ultimately improve the quality of personnel not only by creating diversity, but by enlarging the pool of candidates for every position from which final selections can be made. In this regard, I am gratified to see how many people there are on this campus who initially complained about the introduction of more comprehensive forms of search and then came back saying how happy

they were to discover candidates for different positions that they would not have known about in prior years.

Despite the fears I hear around me that affirmative action means lower quality appointments, I would assert that those who make lower quality appointments in the name of affirmative action are suffering not from affirmative action but from their own weakness. Clearly, the law does not require lower quality appointments. Indeed, the law explicitly prohibits reverse discrimination.

I stress these points not because you need to be convinced, but because there is a shift in this country—a political shift—which creates a danger for the ideals of affirmative action. In recent years, a large segment of American people have come to distrust government, along with other large institutions, and to resent particularly the government's efforts to engage in social engineering of various kinds while failing to solve their more basic material problems.

If affirmative action is to withstand this mood, then people like myself will have to stand up and defend the program. And people like yourselves will have to reason, and communicate and work with the program in order to make sure it is clearly understood and that it is made more effective and interpreted with wisdom and care so that ultimately it will win the respect it deserves within the American public. It is this effort, I am sure, that brings all of you here today. For this reason, I am particularly thankful that you have come to give of your time so that we can make affirmative action better and more effective and allow it to enjoy a long and useful life. Thank you so much.