

## Lesson 2 - Affirmative Action

*How do affirmative action programs promote or hinder representation in the sciences?*

NGSS connections: **Practices:** Asking Questions and Defining Problems; Developing and Using Models; Obtaining, Evaluating, and Communicating Information; Engaging in Argument from Evidence; Constructing Explanations and Designing Solutions; **DCI:** HS-ETS1-3.

### Starting point for instructors

- Do [Unit 0 - Setting the Stage](#) before this, and review norms if needed
- The *Introductory Activities* and *In-Class Investigations* sections below list multiple options for teachers. We don't recommend doing all of the listed activities or investigations but, rather, choosing the ones that seem like the best fit for your class community and your goals.
- Depending on the age of your students, college admissions may be an area where the topics of access and identity discussed elsewhere in the URC suddenly become even more relevant and meaningful. Some of us have found this lesson feels engaging to students in ways that other lessons do not.

#### **Instructor Note:**

This lesson used to be a part of the [Racial Privilege](#) lesson. It is now a separate lesson because, together, the two topics were too much to fit into most single-class periods. This lesson can be done without the Racial Privilege lesson but is most impactful if done after.



### Pre-Lesson Student Exploration / Bell-Ringer

*Before coming to class, students need to:*

Read [this article](#) about how some colleges are adjusting their admissions programs in order to maintain gender balance in their incoming classes. You could ask them to answer some or all of the following questions: Did anything surprise you about this? Do you think that colleges should have different approaches for applicants of different genders? How would your thoughts and feelings about this be different for a program based on applicants of different races? How does this relate to programs that support equal representation in science?

### Introductory Activities

#### *Individual Reflective Writing [5-10 minutes]*

These prompts aren't meant to be assigned as a group but, rather, offer some opportunities for personal reflection on themes related to the discussion that will follow. Choose whichever of them feel like they might be most impactful for your students - or write your own!

Whatever prompts you choose, these reflections may be quite personal to students. We encourage you to tell students that they won't be sharing their writing or, if you do want them to share, to



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modify/contextualize the activity so that they can do so honestly.

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Prompt #1: think about the achievements in your life that you're particularly proud of. Were there individuals who helped you to achieve them? Were there systems that helped you to achieve them? Upon reflection, do your answers to those questions change the pride you feel in those achievements?

Prompt #2: Think about some opportunities you've had in the past few years -- playing on a sports team, traveling, spending time with family, attending classes with good teachers who care about you, etc. Do you think everyone deserves opportunities such as this? What does it mean to "deserve" an opportunity?

Prompt #3: what are the benefits to you of a truly diverse educational community? What keeps your educational community from being even more diverse? Think about diversity in terms of racial identity, but also other social identities (and any other kinds of diversity that you can think of)

### *Setting the Stage [10 minutes]*

Students may not be familiar with affirmative action, and so some context might be necessary. Here is some language that you can use to introduce the topic if you think your students would benefit:

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"Because there are inequities in the US that make achievement more difficult for some because of their racial/ethnic identities [as discussed in the [Meritocracy](#) lesson], programs were created with the explicit goal of "overcorrecting" for these inequities by giving advantage to applicants from certain identities. Examples throughout history have included admission quotas by race, scholarships only for applicants from certain identities, and admissions processes in which having a certain identity conferred an advantage. Approaches of this kind are broadly called "affirmative action".

Supporters of these programs say they make unfair processes more fair, while detractors say that advantaging certain groups makes the process inherently unfair. These programs bring up important questions, such as:

- What does it mean for a process to be "fair"?
- How should we proceed when what's fair for an individual and what's fair for a group of people are in conflict?
- If racial disadvantage and marginalization can be perpetuated by systems that ignore race (as discussed in the [Racial Privilege](#) lesson), is the only way to create a more just society to give advantages based on race?

Affirmative action policies have been argued before and modified by the Supreme Court many times through the years. [Here](#) is a summary of important historical milestones from 1978 to 2016.

[Most recently, in 2023 the Supreme Court ruled](#) that colleges and universities can no longer explicitly make the race of an applicant a factor in their admissions process. [You can find more information about this case [here](#).]"



### Manual Thermometer [5 minutes]

The [manual thermometer](#) is a great way for you and for students to get a quick read on where their classmates' views are before discussion. Choose some or all of these prompts, or make up your own!

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Scholarships for applicants from under-represented racial groups is racism

- A. College admissions should take into account only standardized tests
- B. A racially diverse college population improves the experience I will have/am having
- C. A racially diverse college population improves the experience I will have/am having in my science classes
- D. Affirmative action in college admissions is unfair

### In-Class Investigations

#### Structured Academic Controversy [20-25 minutes]

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In a [Structured Academic Controversy](#), students learn to find value in a position on a complex issue (even if it's not one that they hold themselves) and to work in groups to learn about other positions. It moves the conversation away from debate and towards being informed.

Use this [Structured Academic Controversy activity](#) handout to help students see both sides, learn from one another and then arrive at their own viewpoints. You can vary the reading to fit the level of detail appropriate to your students - we use the two positions articulated [here](#), printed out on separate pieces of paper for groups of students to read - but be sure to choose readings that touch on the main arguments while remaining readable.

#### **Instructor Note:**

This activity, and many in the URC, embodies a tension: it is important for students to learn to listen and discuss across disagreement *and* we must not create settings in which our students' humanities are in question. Make sure that your exploration of affirmative action does not open up a space for any student, especially students of color, to feel like the class is having an intellectual discussion about whether they deserve to be in the room. (This balance and tension highlight, in some ways, the difference identified in the Discussion Norms between safety and comfort: hearing someone present a new view might be uncomfortable, but hearing that you don't belong might be unsafe.)



#### Design An Admissions Program [20-25 minutes]

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We have established that some races are less represented among scientists than in the American population ([Data Analysis](#) lesson) and that underrepresentation is a problem because (among other things) it results in poorer science ([Why Does Representation Matter?](#) lesson).



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Working in teams, design a college admission system that would ensure that the racial, ethnic, and gender profile of the next generation of scientists in the USA matches the racial, ethnic, and gender profile of the general population of the USA. Consider the following:

- What criteria for admissions would you include? What would you eliminate?
- Are there any ways in which your program is different from current admissions practices?
- What reasonable objection might be raised by someone excluded by your criteria?

After an agreed-upon amount of time, students present their created systems to their peers. If possible, use large whiteboards to streamline the presentations; students can pre-write the goals and criteria they settled on before speaking.

(If students find this experience engaging, you can share [this resource](#) with them afterward.)

*Prompts for Discussion [Whatever time remains; 5 - 120 minutes]*

Depending on the length of your period, choose one or more of these prompts for students to discuss in small groups or as a whole class

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- ❖ To address race-based disadvantage, must we take race into consideration? Or ignore it? [If you plan to use this prompt, [this debate](#) might be useful for pre-listening.]
  - ❖ Now that admissions programs that explicitly take race into consideration are no longer allowable, how do you feel about admission programs that benefit other groups: legacy admissions (preferential admission for the children of alumni), athletic preferences (preferences for students who might play on a college sports team, etc.)? Does it matter that these programs tend to benefit White applicants more than applicants of color? [Research](#) has shown that, as of 2022, more than 40% of White students at Harvard are athletes, legacy admits, the children of donors, or on the 'Dean's Interest List', whereas less than 16% of Black, Asian American or Hispanic students are, and that 70% of admits from these categories would not be admitted without these preferential programs.]
  - ❖ [History is full of examples](#) of programs that, while not explicitly naming race, benefitted White people and disadvantaged people of color (the Homestead Act, the GI Bill, Federal Housing Administration loan programs, legacy admissions). Do programs that benefit one racial identity over another, without explicitly stating that as their goal, [fit your definition of racism](#)? Does it matter whether they benefit historically privileged races or historically marginalized races?
  - ❖ [Colleges are finding it more difficult](#) to find qualified male applicants, and (unlike race) admissions departments can still legally explicitly take gender into consideration when making decisions. How is gender-based affirmative action similar to race-based affirmative action? How is it different? Does it seem strange to you, [as it does to one current Supreme Court Justice](#), that some identities can be considered but not others? What about socio-economic status? [For interested students, [this is a more technical consideration](#) of how race- and gender-based admissions programs might differ legally.]
  - ❖ College admissions - or any program that selects people from a pool of candidates - strives to choose the most "worthy" or "deserving" candidates. How do you, personally, define "worth"?



How do you measure someone's worth as an applicant? What are the advantages and disadvantages to your definition and approach, as opposed to others'? [This question strongly echoes discussions that might arise in the Meritocracy lesson.]

- ❖ College admissions can be described as a zero-sum game: there are a limited number of spots for incoming students, and so granting one student (or group of students) an advantage might be viewed as a disadvantage for other applicants. Does this apply to the scientific field you've been exploring in this class? Does diversifying the population of under-represented scientists mean a disadvantage for potential scientists from over-represented identities? Does the nature of the context - zero-sum or not - change your views on programs of advantage and disadvantage?

### Post-Lesson Homework

Look ahead to the next lesson you plan to use, and consider assigning that lesson's *Pre-Lesson Student Exploration* (from the top of the lesson plan) as homework. If, for example, you're moving on to [Implicit Bias](#), you'd want to be sure to point students towards the IAT as described there.

### Resources

Providing resources about affirmative action is particularly tricky because of the rapidly shifting cultural and legal context. That said, here are two recent podcasts that offer some historical context:

- [Podcast](#): legal challenges to affirmative action
- [Podcast](#): historical look in which Jay Caspian Kang argues, among other things, that focusing on adding a few more Black students to Harvard misses the point, that the existence of such rarefied elite status will forever be a problem no matter how diverse.



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