

# Affirmative Action and the Demotion of Truth

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - June 24, 2014

For several decades, the number of students attending college in the United States has been growing rapidly: Over the last 20 years or so, enrollments have risen by about 50 percent, and over the last 50 years they have more than quadrupled. During this time, especially the last two decades, the polarization of our politics has markedly intensified.

This does not prove that American higher education causes political polarization, or even noticeably increases it. But it is suggestive. Discerning readers are liable to find themselves wondering about that correlation while tackling a new book by economist and political scientist Tim Groseclose. His title, “Cheating: An Insider’s Report on the Use of Race in Admissions at UCLA,” captures his topic. But his research and own experiences suggest that the higher education establishment’s determined promotion of progressive politics may be a factor fueling political polarization.

A tenured professor at UCLA when he wrote the book (he has since accepted an offer to join the faculty of George Mason University) Groseclose aims “to expose the disregard for truth” that in his view “is slowly becoming a habit among university professors and administrators.”

In the pursuit of what they perceive to be racial justice, Groseclose argues, university administrators and professors cultivate duplicity and thwart the free exchange of ideas.

He focuses on UCLA’s concerted effort beginning in 2006, in defiance of California state law, to significantly increase the number of black undergraduates by taking race into account in admissions decisions while assiduously denying that it was doing so. As Groseclose notes, there is no good reason to suppose that this tale of institutional duplicity is restricted to UCLA.

In the summer of 2008, Groseclose resigned from UCLA’s Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Relations With Schools, the faculty panel assigned to oversee admissions. He did so to protest UCLA’s denial of his request for university admissions files, which he needed in order to ensure that the committee was properly discharging its responsibilities.

A social scientist whose professional expertise includes statistical methods and data analysis, Groseclose suspected the data would reveal that the large increase in the number of black students UCLA admitted in 2007 was the result of unlawfully taking race into account in the admissions process. He believes that his colleagues on the admission oversight committee, who ridiculed his request for data and blocked his access to it, and the university administration, which stonewalled, knew what he would find.

Race-based affirmative action was banned at public universities in California as a result of a 1996 ballot initiative, Proposition 209, which added a section to the California Constitution providing that “the state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.” It passed with 54 percent of the vote, despite near-universal opposition from the state’s liberal elites, and has withstood court challenges ever since.

Yet in the summer of 2006—only a few months after 200-300 students had protested outside his office because of record low numbers of black students admitted to the freshman class—UCLA Chancellor Norm Abrams met with the faculty oversight committee apparently to encourage preferential treatment for black applicants. He told them, according to Groseclose, that “several constituencies of UCLA are distressed and upset”; “political angst and concern is enormous”; and that pressure had been exerted upon him to increase the number of underrepresented minorities on campus.

The next year at UCLA, “the admission rate of African-American applicants rose from 11.5 percent to 16.5 percent”—an increase of nearly half from the previous year’s total—even as the rate for Latino students, who faced greater socioeconomic hardship, “dropped from 18.3 percent to 16.8 percent,” and the rate for Southeast Asian students, who faced socioeconomic disadvantage about equal to that of black students, “dropped from 28.6 percent to 21.4 percent.”

In part because of the publicity generated by Groseclose’s resignation, UCLA eventually commissioned a study of the admissions data. One could question just how independent a review the UCLA administration really wanted: They chose UCLA sociology professor Robert Mare, whose compensation depended on them, to do the study.

Nevertheless, Groseclose commends Mare’s analysis, which was made public in 2012. But Groseclose excoriates UCLA’s characterization of it. According to the school, the Mare study vindicated the lawfulness of its admissions process. Groseclose does indicate various subtle ways in which Mare’s characterizations of his findings softened their implications. Yet Groseclose demonstrates that Mare’s analysis provides “significant evidence of racial bias in UCLA admissions.” For example, Mare found that but for “disparities”—a euphemism for racial preferences—in the admissions process, approximately one-third fewer African-Americans would have been admitted in 2008.

Eventually, UCLA did turn over admissions data to Groseclose, but only after he and UCLA law professor Richard Sander—the author, with journalist Stuart Taylor Jr., of “Mismatch: How Affirmative Action Hurts Students It’s Intended to Help, and Why Universities Won’t Admit It”—filed a formal request in March 2009 under the California Public Records Act.

After fending off university efforts to deny access on the canard that the data would compromise applicants' privacy—Groseclose and Sander had carefully explained in their original letter to UCLA how they would protect students' privacy—the two professors were ultimately given an unusually rich data set. It included records on academic achievement, socioeconomic circumstances, and racial and ethnic backgrounds for approximately 300,000 students who applied to UCLA over a six-year period.

The Groseclose and Sander analysis—for which Groseclose provides copious documentation on his [website](#) so that any researcher can examine his calculations and reasoning—confirms the Mare analysis. Even after adopting in the 2006-2007 academic year a “holistic system” designed to take account of socioeconomic disadvantage, UCLA broke the law in order to increase black student enrollment. Had it not provided in a special second stage of review racial preferences to black applicants between 2007 and 2009, Groseclose argues, UCLA would have admitted during those years 40 percent fewer African-Americans.

Along with the work of Sander and Taylor and that of Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom in “America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible,” Groseclose’s book presents a formidable challenge to the conventional wisdom about racial preferences.

Contrary to the widely accepted view, these authors argue based on abundant empirical evidence that racial preferences in admissions are frequently not small but significant. Nor do racial preferences merely break ties between nearly equally qualified applications. Often, they provide admissions to black candidates with substantially inferior academic records. And perhaps most importantly—especially for those who care about actual educational consequences—racial preferences in many cases do not benefit black students over the long haul; those who receive them are more likely to find themselves in academic environments for which they are poorly prepared and in which they thus learn markedly less than they would have had they attended universities with students with similar academic preparation.

The challenge to the conventional wisdom about racial preferences has had little effect on professors, deans of admission, and university presidents. Groseclose contends that this is not because faculty and administrators attach no importance to the facts but because for a sizable majority of the academy, the urgency of advancing social justice by increasing the number of blacks on campuses outweighs the requirements of honesty. In this assessment, I believe, Groseclose actually underestimates the problem.

Bad habits are human. But when they are rationalized as virtues, they become vices that corrupt character and distort conduct.

Administrators’ and professors’ demotion of truth in one area reverberates throughout campus life in others, warping the curriculum and stifling the spirit of inquiry. It sanctifies conformity to the party line, denigrates impartial scholarship and inhibits liberty of thought

and discussion. It sustains speech codes and permits the evisceration of due process in campus disciplinary procedures. It turns liberal education into illiberal education.

But, some will object, "so what?" Who outside universities actually pays attention to professors' pronouncements and publications? And after four years, students graduate and get on with their lives. What lasting effect does hothouse campus illiberalism really have?

That, as the scholars like to say, is an empirical question.

Groseclose does not go there, but it would be a rich subject for social scientists and ethicists to investigate. What are the long-term effects on students of the systematic suppression of facts by the university in pursuit of a partisan interpretation of social justice? One hypothesis is that such a practice reflects and fosters a pervasive ideology that creates an atmosphere that encourages young Americans to disdain argument and evidence and scorn those who hold opinions that differ from their own.

Through systematic study of the impact of the culture of higher education on college graduates' character, our scholars might render a public service by shedding light on the political polarization of our age.

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