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## How to integrate economic analysis into classroom discussions of diversity?



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### ABSTRACT

The companion issues of racial preferences in college admissions and minority representation in the faculty ranks figure prominently and provocatively in social discourse today. As a result, questions related to these potentially divisive issues arise naturally in the course of classroom discussions of current events. This paper advances a set of teaching principles that serves to frame the debate and integrate economic analysis into the objective assessment of these issues. This framework is then applied to the examination of three seminal, real-world questions related to diversity in higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

It is common in introductory and intermediate economics courses to motivate the material and encourage classroom discussion by introducing current events. Some of these current events can be provocative in nature, which renders them interesting to the students but potentially challenging for the professor. One topic that generates a great deal of interest in the classroom is that of diversity in higher education and the role of the government and the courts in affecting public policy. Questions from students about these issues are almost always of the normative variety. Should we eliminate racial preferences in college admissions? Should an African American be hired as department head in the interest of furthering diversity even if she is not the most qualified of all of the applicants? Should universities seek uniform representation of minority faculty across all academic departments?

All the above questions are provocative in nature and professors, particularly newly minted ones, can easily and inadvertently wade into the *quagmire of political correctness* from which extrication may prove difficult if not impossible.<sup>1</sup> Having invited

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<sup>1</sup> The term “political correctness” may be defined in terms of agreement with the precept that individuals should be careful not to use language or behave in a manner that has the potential to offend a group of people. One way to avoid this quagmire, while not appearing to avoid important and controversial topics, is to dutifully present both sides of the issue so that students learn (i) to develop critical thinking skills and (ii) to respect alternative perspectives even though they may not agree with them. For example, a student may ask the professor what arguments s/he would use to advocate for the use of racial preferences in college admissions? The professor can answer the question and then immediately turn around and present arguments that could be used to advocate against the use of racial preferences in college admissions. The students’ perception of the professor’s objectivity turns on whether s/he can support both sides of the argument with equal vigor. In addition, it is helpful for the professor to draw upon the literature whenever possible to support the various sides of the argument. This approach has the benefit of de-personalizing the professor’s support for a particular viewpoint while reinforcing the objectivity of the discussion.

students to engage current events, it is difficult to refuse to answer a question simply because it may be provocative in nature. Nonetheless, there are ways to discuss these provocative issues that simultaneously promote student interest in current events and enlists economic analysis in providing meaningful answers. This paper provides an objective, principled framework for such analysis that is suitable for undergraduate and MBA courses in microeconomics and industrial organization.

## 2. Teaching principles to set the classroom framework

Given that economics, principally microeconomics, is the science of tradeoffs, these questions related to diversity in higher education provide fertile ground on which to demonstrate to students the power of the discipline in addressing important public policy questions. This observation notwithstanding, it is important to put in place the proper framework to work through these questions and encourage students to think objectively and rigorously about the issues. Six key principles establish the foundation for this framework (Weisman, 2012).

**Principle 1.** Transform the normative question into a positive question.

Suppose that a student poses the following question. “Should colleges eliminate racial preferences in their admissions process?” This question can easily be recast into a positive question. “What are the tradeoffs involved in the decision by the college to eliminate racial preferences in the admissions process?” The transformation of the question offers a number of advantages. First, it encourages students to think carefully about the various tradeoffs involved in all public policy decisions. Second, this approach casts the question into a cost-benefit framework. Third, it encourages the students to debate the weights that should be attached to the various costs and benefits. Finally, while the students are not likely to agree on whether the costs exceed the benefits or vice versa, they are likely to agree on the various categories of costs and benefits that should be considered.

**Principle 2.** Avoid interjecting personal, political/social views into the discussion so as not to discourage student participation and repress the free flow of ideas.

The professor in this setting should serve the role as the objective debate moderator in order to encourage a reasoned and balanced analysis of the issues. If the students perceive that the professor “has a dog in the fight” it is likely to discourage discussion out of concern that the students’ views differ from those of the professor. In fact, it is useful in this setting for the professor to present arguments on both sides of the debate so that students do not know definitively his or her actual position on the issue. If a professor can keep her students guessing, she can keep them learning.

**Principle 3.** Interject pertinent facts, survey data and empirical information into the debate to keep the discussion interesting and moving in a productive and well-informed direction.

At various times in the course of the discussion, there may be a lull in terms of student participation. This is an opportune time for the professor to “prime the pump” so to speak with objective facts relevant to the discussion. For example, in discussing the issue of diversity in the faculty ranks, the professor may choose to interject the fact that women comprise **X%** of the faculty members in English, but only **Y%** and **Z%** in mathematics and physics, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Such facts are virtually guaranteed to elicit student responses.

**Principle 4.** Keep the discussion balanced and objective by posing supplemental questions to the class to ensure that all relevant political and social perspectives are considered.

In a number of cases, the diversity issue in question has been addressed in one form or another by the U.S. Supreme Court or some lower court. These court decisions offer a useful vantage point because there are typically majority and minority opinions. For example, it is generally recognized that there is a right wing (Roberts, Alito and Thomas) and a left wing (Breyer, Ginsburg, Kagan and Sotomayor) among the justices serving on the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>3</sup> The professor may observe that in *Mickey Mouse v. Donald Duck*, Justice Breyer observed A, B and C, while Justice Alito observed X, Y and Z. Which one of the justices do you believe had the more compelling argument and why?

The objective here is not for the professor to debate her students, but to foster a classroom environment in which the students are encouraged to debate each other. Students should perceive that the professor’s evaluation of them is based on the strength of their arguments rather than the support they voice for a particular side in the debate.

**Principle 5.** Maintain the proper classroom decorum by taking steps to ensure that students with alternative points of view are given a fair and equal opportunity to present their views without fear of retribution from other students or the professor.

In the course of classroom discussion, a majority point of view can form and this can suppress discussion. The professor, serving as the objective debate moderator, can weigh in to support a minority point of view to keep the debate balanced and to ensure that all viewpoints are represented. Again, if the professor plays this role, it is helpful for her to weigh in on both sides of the debate so that students are not discouraged from voicing their opinion out of concern that the professor may hold a different point of view. Education is not synonymous with indoctrination—the objective is to develop thinkers, not “parrots.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Hyde and Mertz (2009) for statistics on the percentage of Ph.Ds. awarded to woman in the physical sciences. See also note 18 *infra*.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy is generally considered to be a swing vote and hence not classified as belonging to either political wing on the court.

<sup>4</sup> It has been my practice at the beginning of each semester to survey the students and inquire as to whether, in general, they perceive that they must answer in-class or examination questions in a certain way so as to appease the political or social leanings of their professors. No fewer than 80% answer in the affirmative – a statistic that should strike true educators as alarming.

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