

## blackworld



### Affirmative Action Protests: Half Baked?

Conservative student groups across the country are using a new tool to protest Affirmative Action. The bake sales are mildly amusing, but they leave a bad taste in your mouth.

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By Malik Singleton

On a table in a highly trafficked area on the West Harlem campus of Columbia University, a bake sale was in progress. But students stopping to pick up a pastry were surprised to discover that prices varied according to their demographic classification. So black and Latina women were charged just a quarter for the same cake that cost white women 75 cents, while Jewish and Asian women paid \$1.25. (Along the same lines, black and Latino men paid 50 cents, white men one dollar, and Jewish and Asian men \$1.50).

"I think a diverse campus just challenges some people's sense of entitlement," says one student.

What's the explanation for the pricing policy at Columbia's bake sale — and others taking place around the country? It's all a bit of political theater, an attempt by conservative student groups to demonstrate what they see as the unfairness of Affirmative Action policies, which they object to for assessing

applicants on different scales based upon their race. Following last summer's Supreme Court ruling backing the use of racial information as a factor in college admissions, the Affirmative Action Bake Sales, as they're known, represent an attempt to re-ignite the debate by injecting a little shock and a lot of sarcasm. (Another protest gesture, recently launched at a Rhode Island college, is to fund special "white only" [scholarships.](#))

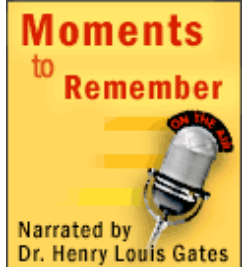
"We wanted to show how racist Affirmative Action is," said Mark Xue, a member of the Columbia College Conservative Club (CCCC), which sponsored the sale.

Some universities have shut down the bake sales, but Columbia's went on without any administrative intervention. At first the primary response was puzzlement, questions, laughs, and rolled eyes — later the scene around

### TalkBack

What do you think of Affirmative Action Bake Sales and other protests against admissions policies?

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the cookie table escalated into yelling and arguing.

"Republicans are the real minority on this campus," argued Xue, and it's easy to see how he might feel marginalized. A flyer on the mid-campus kiosk says, "Immigrant Rights Now!" Another flyer announces a forum on "Feminist Politics and the Black Community," another, "Palestinian Film Festival." The school is home to the Malcolm X multimedia project. Today's young conservatives, it seems, are feeling oppressed rather than compassionate. And they're expressing their angst in a particularly provocative bit of agitprop.

And yet Xue himself says he benefited from the kind of ethnic outreach that's part of Affirmative Action. He participated in a college prep program targeted at diverse students and it helped him prepare for college immeasurably. "I think there should be more programs like that for young people. Take funds from elsewhere and redirect them to primary and secondary school programs so that by the time students apply to college, they can be judged according to how ready they are."

It's the fear that universities award precious enrollment slots based in part on race that seems to trouble the campus conservatives. But they approve of some forms of preference. Daniel Serman, the CCCC member who proposed the bake sale, says "universities should consider economic hardship over race." (He seems unaware that Columbia already considers family income. According to its application forms, Columbia has hosted the Higher Education Opportunity Program since 1970 to assist New York state residents whose "family resources meet established low-income guideline.")

Serman is a legacy, a student whose parent or other family member also attended Columbia. Legacies are yet another group that may benefit at the expense of other classes of students — in this case, non-legacies. So what do he and other CCCC members object to about Affirmative Action?

"We agree with diversity in life experience, diversity in culture," says Xue, "but not in something as arbitrary as race. One Hispanic woman may have far more to offer than another, but how do we know which of the two the university chooses if their policy is based on race, or if they won't make their policy public?"

David Johns, a student active in Columbia's Black Studies Department, was in class when he heard something was going on. "My cell phone went off three times in class. The messages said, David, you have to come see this." In the background he could hear shouting, a voice yelling: "You people are taking our spaces."

Are they right? Are racial preferences, quotas, or sliding admission scales "robbing" qualified students of their rightful places at the Ivy League college, letting in unqualified applicants in their place?

Although Serman and Xue insist that the school won't publish its policies, Johns, who helped organize a counter-event that followed the bake sale, says, "The CCCC did not do their homework. Columbia has no Affirmative Action policy" — at least not as defined by points, quotas or sliding scales.

According to Johns, the student body of about 23,000 is 33% "of color" — breaking down to 9% black, 7% Latino, and the rest Asian. What the school does have is an Office of Multi-Cultural Recruitment, whose job it is to increase the pool of qualified applicants by recruiting more aggressively. So, Johns says, some very qualified people are admitted over other very qualified people, but the university still only admits "qualified" people based on GPA, test scores, extracurricular activities, recommendations, and an essay. In other words, Columbia's practice adheres to what the Supreme Court decided last June was a Constitutionally correct method of ensuring a diverse student body.

"I went to the admissions office, and they told me that Columbia has no quotas, no hand-outs, no points like at Michigan," Johns says, a contention

verified by a Columbia admissions officer. The admissions office refused comment about the bake sale — and would not be quoted by name — but directed all inquiries to the university's web site, which states that Columbia "does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender... in administration of its educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and other University-administered programs."

"I think a diverse campus just challenges some people's sense of entitlement," Johns says, adding that he missed the whole bake sale. "Fortunately, I was in class earning my grades."

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### About the Author

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