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## Court Should Uphold Race Factor In College Admissions

By Leo I. Higdon Jr.

The U.S. Supreme Court will soon announce its decision in a case that could affect diversity on college campuses nationwide. Given the compelling reasons why diversity is critical on our campuses, the court should uphold its previous decisions that allow race to be considered as part of a holistic admission process.

In *Fisher v. University of Texas*, Abigail Fisher, a white woman, claims she was denied admission to the University of Texas at Austin based on her race. The University of Texas, like many colleges including Connecticut College, considers race as one factor among many in admissions, as allowed by past Supreme Court decisions, most notably the 2003 case against University of Michigan, *Grutter v. Bollinger*.

At Connecticut College, we work to create a community that enables us to achieve the goals of our mission statement: "Connecticut College educates students to put the liberal arts into action in a global society." To achieve our mission, we need to create a campus community in which students can have experiences with people of different backgrounds, as they will when they graduate and become productive members of society.

That means we seek students who represent diversity in its various forms, such as socio-economic background and geographic region, as well as a student's culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation and, yes, race. We review each application for the academic qualifications and personal qualities needed to succeed at our highly selective liberal arts institution. Then we look for diversity of experiences, of which race is one factor.

In short, we want to know who our applicants are, where they come from and what they will bring to our community. This is the same reason we ask for essays from applicants and letters of recommendation from teachers and college counselors — so we can consider the whole person and not just a set of statistics. No two students are exactly alike; each student brings something unique to our college.

Diversity is deeply embedded in our mission and values at Connecticut College. In fact, our college was founded in 1911 to provide access to education for women who had no options for attending a four-year liberal arts college in the state. Connecticut College has extended that founding

philosophy to the present by ensuring access to students from underrepresented groups.

We have strong evidence from our campus and national studies of the educational benefits of a diverse student body. Having students from diverse backgrounds broadens the scope of learning. It puts all students in situations where they have to think differently or challenge their preconceived notions. It gives them experience interacting with people not like themselves, an extremely useful skill in today's global economy.

Debo Adegbile is a Connecticut College graduate and trustee who, as acting president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, led the team that argued the Fisher case at the appellate level and filed an amicus brief in the Supreme Court case. When I discussed this case with him, he talked frankly about his experience as a student of color in the 1990s. He told me that he was sometimes put in uncomfortable situations, but over time, through multiple interactions — inside and outside the classroom — he and his fellow students developed a better understanding of and respect for each other.

That, in a nutshell, is the value of diversity on a college campus.

Our commitment to diversity — and the commitment of other local colleges and universities — benefits Connecticut and the region. People from all different backgrounds work at Connecticut College, for example, and live and contribute to the surrounding area; students of all different backgrounds graduate from Connecticut College and contribute to our local economy.

For all of these reasons, I signed an amicus brief in support of the University of Texas at Austin, in partnership with the presidents of 36 other highly selective private colleges, including Trinity and Wesleyan.

Diversity is integral to a quality education and central to Connecticut College's educational mission. Race in America matters. I sincerely hope the Supreme Court justices recognize its value in higher education. If they do, they will uphold existing decisions that support using race as part of a holistic admission practice.

*Leo I. Higdon Jr. is president of Connecticut College.*

