Reviewer's report

Title: Diversification of U.S. Medical Schools via Affirmative Action Implementation

Authors:
Shaheen E Lakhan (slakhan@fas.harvard.edu)

Version: 1 Date: 5 Jun 2003
Reviewer: Stephen A Magnus
Level of interest: not specified
Advice on publication: Other (see below)

Although I am generally in agreement with the points made by the author, I cannot recommend this manuscript for publication. The main problems with the article are sloppy writing, the inclusion of many unsupported statements, and a lack of cohesive organization. There is no clearly delineated line of argumentation. For example, there is no outline or "roadmap" near the beginning of the article to guide the reader about what topics will follow. Instead, the author jumps from topic to topic in a disconnected and at times seemingly random manner. The headings and subheadings offer little help. For example, the discussion section comes very early on for an article of this type. The article needs to be reorganized so that an argument builds from the beginning to the end, and culminates in a logical conclusion that is based on evidence and not just conjecture or rhetoric. The author starts with an opinion and then reiterates it, again and again, at times relying on emotional language rather than facts, figures, and coherent reasoning.

This is an important topic deserving of a thoughtful, carefully argued, and well written essay. Unfortunately, the submitted manuscript does not do justice to the topic or meet the basic criteria for a publishable work.

What follows in this review is a page-by-page critique, in which I point out line editing problems and clarifications that are needed to transform this manuscript into a publishable article:

p. 2: Background: Why does the author capitalize "Affirmative Action" here and in the early part of the paper. Later on in the article, "affirmative action" is not capitalized. (Likewise, there is inconsistency as to whether "health care" is written as one word or two words. It is important for the author to be consistent in such basic stylistic matters.)

Discussion: There is a lack of subject-verb agreement here. In the first sentence of this paragraph, substitute "does it" for "do they." The noun in question is "selection," which is singular, not plural. The second sentence does not make a persuasive argument. Especially weak if the assertion that race-conscious admissions would further biomedical research.

Summary: The word "action" is apparently missing after "affirmative" in this sentence. Also, the conclusion that affirmative action and diversity in medicine would "provide better healthcare for the American people" does not clearly follow. A case needs to be made for why diversity in medicine would result in better health care - the author simply assumes and asserts that this is the case.

p. 3: First sentence: What does the author mean by "exclusive"? This seems to imply exclusively
catering to more well-to-do patients. Also, the sentence should be rephrased to read "practice of medicine solely by white men," rather than "by solely white men." In the second sentence, the word "classed" should be replaced by "class," so the sentence reads "lower socioeconomic class individuals." I don't think "classed" is grammatically correct. In the third sentence, the words "Only" and "in" run together. This type of problem is common throughout the document. Proofreading would catch these mistakes. There may be a printing problem within Adobe Acrobat.

As a point of fact, I don't believe the author is completely correct in the assertions made on this page. Prior to the Flexnerian reforms in the early part of the twentieth century, minority and lower-income individuals were able to earn medical degrees. The author should read the history of medical education to learn that Flexner's famous report marked a turning point in access to medical education. The phrase "Parallel to the success of Affirmative Action" is unsupported. The implication is that affirmative action has come under attack as a direct result of its success. Such a claim requires data to back it up. I don't believe the author has clearly established the success of affirmative action, much less the idea that attacks against it have resulted from its success.

Further, from what I have read, there has been a broad-based "attack" on affirmative action, not one targeted at medical education, as the author implies. In the final sentence of the first paragraph, "consequences on" should be replaced by "consequences of." Also, the word "progression" is a bit vague.

In the second paragraph on this page, there are some problems with the second sentence. First, as above, words are run together to read "minority occupies, sustains ain." The same sentence ends with a lack of parallel structure. It reads "the inhibition of discrimination and promotion for tolerance..." There is a need for a verb to begin this clause, to follow the structure established earlier in this sentence. Also, "promotion for tolerance" is awkward and should be replaced by "promotion of tolerance."

p. 4: Is it premature to have a discussion section here, so early on in the manuscript? The author has not outlined what topics he or she plans to cover in the paper - instead, we are thrown into a sequence of topics that are not logically linked and for which we are not prepared by the background section. The sections of the article need to be organized and to flow logically from one another.

The proper grammatical construction in the first paragraph of this section is "not only... but also." Hence, a semi-colon or period should follow "Not only... emergency medicine." Then, the new clause or sentence should read "there is also [word added] the need..." Finally, the end of this first paragraph contains a very awkward phrase: "serves its duty to achieve these goals." A better phrase might be: "has a duty to help advance these goals," or something similar.

Second paragraph: I'm not clear why the presence of foreign medical graduates (now normally referred to as "international medical graduates") is so summarily dismissed. What does the author mean by "innumerous presence"? This is a very unclear phrase. Later in the same paragraph, we have the same kinds of problems as before, with words running together ("thetraditional"), no period after the sentence "create 'culturally competent medical doctors," and "race - conscious" rather than "race-conscious" (i.e., extra space around the hyphen). There may be a printing problem where words are not separated, or hyphens have unnecessary spaces around them. Such basic typographical matters need to be fixed before manuscripts are submitted for review.

p. 5: First full paragraph: It is probably more precise to write: "selected solely" rather than "solely selected." Later in the paragraph, the word "are" appears to be missing after "GPA and MCAT scores." It should read: "GPA and MCAT scores are not great predictors..." The sentence immediately after that is extremely awkwardly phrased. It reads: "There is no evidence to attribute high GPAs or MCAT scores as an assurance to exceptional academic performance..." This needs to be rewritten.
In the bottom paragraph of this page, there is a host of problems. First, I don't follow the author's point that race-conscious programs are an extension of the personal statement of medical school applicants. I see race-conscious admissions policies as a societal or group-based intervention, whereas personal statements are at the level of the individual applicant, and hence completely different. Also, there is a problem with subject-verb agreement. Substitute "they represent" for "it represents," since we are talking about programs (a plural noun). The next sentence contains an awkward phrase: "sways the "playing field." I have seen discussion of "leveling" the playing field, but never "swaying" the playing field. In the next and final sentence on this page, "fulfill underserved populations" is rather vague. A better phrase might be "meet the needs of underserved populations." The rest of the sentence then is very awkward and exhibits a lack of logical flow and parallel structure, beginning with the phrase "more represents...." A better phrase might be "to be more representative of increasing multiculturalism....," or something similar.

In the first full sentence on this page, "effect" should be replaced by "affect," in the phrase "affect society as a whole." "Affect" is the correct form of the verb. Also, the next sentence says that by implementing affirmative action, racial disparities will decrease. The authors might more effectively write that by continuing with a program of affirmative action, which is already being implemented (and may simply need more time to bear all of its fruits), disparities will decrease. In other words, implementing race-conscious affirmative action is not new. What may be needed is to give affirmative action a longer trial and a fair chance.

In the next paragraph, under "Race-Blind Admissions Policy Proposal and Inherent Flaws," the word "ideology" in the second sentence is a poorly chosen word. A better word would be "policy," so the sentence would read "race-blind policy." The author next refers to a study by Cohen. It is unclear what is meant "119... medical school admissions data." Does this refer to a sample of 119 non-minority medical school applicants or enrolling students? The subsequently referred to algorithm, used on law-school admissions, needs explanation. What is the nature of this algorithm? Why is the algorithm used and accepted?

In the final paragraph on this page, "minority student themselves" should be replaced by "minority students [plural] themselves," since themselves implies a plural noun. In the next sentence, the writing once again needs improvement. The phrase "as a measure of a well accepted algorithm" should be replaced by "as measured by GPA and SAT scores." In the next and final sentence, we once again have a problem with words running together and misaligned: "disparitybetween" is one word, and "non-minority" has unnecessary spaces before the hyphen.

p. 6: The inclusion of "emotional" language only detracts from the author's arguments. At the top of the page, the word "sadly" is used, in the middle of the page the word "frightening," and at the bottom, "Despondently." All such words should be deleted so that the author's arguments rest on logic rather than on rhetoric.

In the first full sentence on this page, "effect" should be replaced by "affect," in the phrase "affect society as a whole." "Affect" is the correct form of the verb. Also, the next sentence says that by implementing affirmative action, racial disparities will decrease. The authors might more effectively write that by continuing with a program of affirmative action, which is already being implemented (and may simply need more time to bear all of its fruits), disparities will decrease. In other words, implementing race-conscious affirmative action is not new. What may be needed is to give affirmative action a longer trial and a fair chance.

In the next paragraph, under "Race-Blind Admissions Policy Proposal and Inherent Flaws," the word "ideology" in the second sentence is a poorly chosen word. A better word would be "policy," so the sentence would read "race-blind policy." The author next refers to a study by Cohen. It is unclear what is meant "119... medical school admissions data." Does this refer to a sample of 119 non-minority medical school applicants or enrolling students? The subsequently referred to algorithm, used on law-school admissions, needs explanation. What is the nature of this algorithm? Why is the algorithm used and accepted?

In the final paragraph on this page, "minority student themselves" should be replaced by "minority students [plural] themselves," since themselves implies a plural noun. In the next sentence, the writing once again needs improvement. The phrase "as a measure of a well accepted algorithm" should be replaced by "as measured by GPA and SAT scores." In the next and final sentence, we once again have a problem with words running together and misaligned: "disparitybetween" is one word, and "non-minority" has unnecessary spaces before the hyphen.

p. 7: A printing or alignment problem is evident in the top line of this page: "immense" is written with the "e" superimposed on the "n."

The next paragraph and section have the heading "Non-Race Criteria Policy to Improve Diversity" - which, like many headings and subheadings in this paper, is clumsily phrased. In the first sentence of this paragraph, the awkward phrase "as a measure of a well accepted algorithm" is repeated. It would be better to write: "as indicated by a well accepted algorithm." Later in the paragraph, we have the now-familiar printing problem, with the words "Thoughsuch" running together. Also, the author asserts that such expectations are "unjustifiable," but does not explain exactly why they are unjustifiable. This assertion needs to be backed up by evidence. The subsequent phrase "urged proposals" is awkward. Expectations do not "urge proposals," as only people can urge proposals; a better phrase might be "led to proposals." Later in the paragraph, the phrase "disadvantage family conditions" appears." A more correct phrase would be "disadvantaged family conditions." The
appropriate form of the adjective is "disadvantaged," with the final "d" at the end of the word. Finally, what does the author mean by "subtle forms of ... affirmative action"? My understanding is that these are alternatives to race-based affirmative action. They are perhaps oblique and indirect means to achieve the same objective of racial diversity, but they are not subtle methods.

p. 8: First full paragraph, "In respect to medical school admissions" should be replaced by "With respect..." At the end of the paragraph, the phrasing is incomplete. The authors write: "same grounds against affirmative action." A better phrasing would be "the same grounds as those used against affirmative action."

In the next paragraph, which bears the heading "Class-Based Criterion," the word "of" is apparently missing after the word "goals." The sentence should include the clause "the goals of race-conscious affirmative action..." Later in the paragraph, improved phrasing would be "greater academic disadvantage as measured by GPA and SAT scores" (rather than "as a measure of GPA and SAT scores").

p. 9: First full sentence cites a "congressionally conditioned report." Does the author mean a "congressionally commissioned report"? Later, the author writes "diversity in medical practitioners." I think better phrasing would be "diversity among" rather than "diversity in." In the next sentence, the author appears to have left out the word "to." The sentence should read: "Minority physicians are more likely to enter primary care specialties..."

I find the next section, with the heading "Biomedical Research," to be the least persuasive component of the author's argument. I would like to see some citations or facts and figures to support the statement that the "NIH has... recognized that the momentum of ... scientific progress... depends upon diverse biomedical investigators." The subsequent statement that the "American research agenda is primarily promoted and investigated by individuals who feel and see the problems they wish to solve" is completely unsupported and hence inappropriate, unless it is raised in the form of a hypothesis. It's also a rather vague statement.

There is also a need for some minor improvements in wording in the preceding paragraph. It would be better to say "programs aimed at" rather than "programs aimed towards." Also, in the phrase "increase minority researchers to the field of biomedical sciences," replace "to" with "in" (i.e., "minority researchers in the field").

Note: Because I have encountered so many sentences, phrases, and sections in which the writing is awkward, I have started to wonder whether the author is a native English speaker.

p. 10: The phrase "language and cultural relationships" is awkward, because the word "relationships" is inappropriate. A better word would be "barriers" or "obstacles" or "problems." Later on in the paragraph, the phrase "minorities medical doctors" is incorrect. It should be: "minority medical doctors." "Minority" is the adjective form to modify "medical doctors." In the next sentence, the phrasing would be improved by writing that cultural competency should be promoted "among" (rather than "of") all physicians.

In the last paragraph of this page, more explanation is needed to convey the context in which students "expressed" a belief in the benefits of diversity. Was a survey of students taken? A brief summary of the research or survey from which these students' opinions were culled would be helpful. The phrase "ever-growing multicultural public" is awkward and needs to be replaced by something like "an increasingly multicultural society and patient body." The next sentence says that "exposure to diversity contributes to greater tolerance and less discrimination." Is there any hard evidence to support this assertion? Otherwise, it should be stated as a hypothesis.

p. 11: The historical summary starting on this page, and continuing on the next page, is interesting. It
would benefit from having the years of each amendment, executive order, and legislative act specified in the text, rather than just in the reference section. For example, state the years of executive orders 10,925 and 11,246 in the text. Also, I think the correct form of the verb for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would be the past tense: "broadened" rather than "broadens," to be consistent with the past tense used elsewhere in this section.

p. 12: I think the word "was" is missing before "unconstitutional," in the discussion of the U of California v. Bakke case. The phrase "closely divided" is a bit awkward. Later in the paragraph, the statement is made that the appeal to the Supreme Court was the "unique" time that the Court considered affirmative action in higher education. Since the Supreme Court is once again considering the issue, I would recommend substituting the word "first" for "unique." The final sentence in this paragraph concludes with a very awkward phrase: "only when race could be a factor in admissions, but only one of many (unlike quota systems), used to seek diversity." Please rephrase to achieve greater clarity and logical flow.

In the final paragraph on this page, we again have the problem of text alignment, as "friendof" runs together the words "friend" and "of."

p. 13: The statement in the middle of the paragraph that affirmative action implementation is "the positive force" is a little strong. A better phrase might be "a positive force." Also, the phrase "promoting our entire medical system closer to diversity" is awkward. A better phrase would be something like "moving our entire medical system closer to diversity."

At the end of this paragraph, the author writes that: "Affirmative action is merely a vehicle in America's collection to achieve societal goals..." The word "collection" is very awkward.

In the "Summary" section, I am again concerned that the argument about the progression of biomedical advancements is a weak point. In the next sentence, better phrasing is once again needed. Rephrase as follows: "a result of diversification would be to bridge the language and cultural gaps...." Also, I believe the word "American" needs to be replaced with "America."

p. 14: "Compelling Interests" - Does the author mean "Competing or Conflicting Interests?"

p. 15 ff.: I'm puzzled by the frequent citation "(Editor ed.^eds.)" Are these references incomplete?

Throughout my critique, I have focused on a variety of finer points related to phrasing, sentence structure, choice of wording, etc. However, the larger problem with the piece is simply a lack of logical flow and no clearly articulated line of argumentation. The piece does not make a contribution to the debate on this subject because the author appears uncertain as to the argument he or she wishes to make. Emotional language and rhetoric - rather than facts and figures and logical extrapolations from existing evidence - are needed to craft an essay worthy of publication. Again, my critique is not based on any difference in my personal views with respect to those of the authors. I basically agree; I just think the case needs to be made much tighter and written much better.

**Competing interests:**

None declared.