

Affirmative Action

In the midst of our confusion about the DeFunis case, it is pleasant to discover that there are some *clear* and effective programs in affirmative action, a phrase which has somehow gotten a bad name.

There is one, for example, that is being conducted in the San Francisco area by the various professional associations in the architectural and engineering fields.

There is a shortage of trained people in these fields. The current estimate is that some 45 to 60 thousand *more* engineers will be needed in the next 10 years than are currently scheduled to be trained. The hottest college graduate right now is the engineering graduate. Starting salaries are 20 percent higher than the average for other graduates. There are simply more jobs than there are people to fill them.

Racial discrimination in this field—in the San Francisco area, at least—has virtually disappeared. Qualified blacks in the engineering and architectural field are snapped up as fast as they present themselves. But not many qualified blacks have presented themselves. Blacks comprise about one percent of the professionals employed by 18 architectural and engineering firms in San Francisco. And the three major engineering schools in this area have graduated only 40 blacks in the last five years.



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There is a reason, of course, which bears some relation to Jewish vocational experience. Black Americans were always deliberately excluded from these fields. So they naturally had no expectation that they could get jobs in the field. Therefore, they naturally did not prepare themselves for such jobs. And if excluded minorities begin to get professional educations, they begin to get them in fields in which they can become immediately self-employed, such as law and medicine. So, Jews tended to become doctors and lawyers, rather than to become engineers, and face engineering company bias. The same dynamic is now working for blacks.

This is a classic situation for "affirmative action." The idea is to take special steps to get blacks into the normal channels for these kinds of jobs and professions. The various professional associations banded together a couple of years ago, with the help of the city's Human Rights Commission, to establish such an affirmative action program. They established a 42-week training program for engineering and architectural draftsmen and technicians. It is on-the-job training, and the trainees are paid while they are learning. Almost 150 draftsmen, all racial minority, have now been trained by this program, and are working.

There are other parts of the program, including an intensive recruitment program to try to get young blacks to go to engineering school. This is best done by other blacks who are going to engineering school, or are already in the field. This special recruiting program is going on this year in 27 high schools and nine Junior Colleges in the Bay Area.

Now, *that's* affirmative action. So is apprenticeship training program in the construction trades, where racial minorities had also been excluded in the past. Since the development of an affirmative action program on that score, over half (this year so far, 55 percent) of the apprentices in city construction contracts have been from those minority groups. Such special-training and special-recruitment efforts are the clearest aspects of any affirmative action program. That is one reason why the DeFunis case has thrown the Jewish community into such confusion. DeFunis, of course, the the young man who sued the University of Washington law school because it initially denied him admission, while admitting some minority applicants who had lower scores on certain admissions tests. But law school, after all, is a kind of *training* situation. Maybe that's why about half of the national Jewish organizations ended up on one side of this court case; and about half on the other side.