

Racial and ethnic diversity enriches campus experience



ALBERT SIMONE

GUEST
ESSAYIST

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its much-awaited decision on admission policies at the University of Michigan Law School and undergraduate College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

The Court, in reaffirming the 1978 Bakke decision, stated that:

- Achieving racial and ethnic diversity is a compelling state interest.

- The "narrowly tailored" use of race in admission decisions is permitted in order to achieve campus diversity.

- Universities may have flexibility with regard to consideration of race in adopting admission policies consistent with their varying missions.

- Quotas, including those "disguised" through utilization of a point system as in the undergraduate case, are illegal, and applicants should be considered as individuals and not as members of a group.

This decision, as in the Bakke case, is a split 5-to-4 ruling with regard to the use of race as one of several factors in making admission decisions. The Sixth Circuit Court, in arriving at the law school decision leading up to the Supreme Court decision, was also split 5 to 4.

Some national polls narrowly favor affirmative action and some narrowly oppose it. A student referendum at the University of Michigan split 50-50 in support of its university's affirmative action policy. The issue remains sensitive and controversial, in the courts and across the population as a whole.

I do not expect the very active legal actions and referenda of the past decade opposing affirmative action, at both the state and federal levels, to subside over the next decade.

For today, however, we do have some direction. I strongly favor the decision of the Supreme Court, for five reasons.

Specifically, the decision:

- Supports Rochester Institute of Technology's mission of preparing students for successful careers. Graduates will be working and partnering with in-



University of Michigan students discuss President Bush's decision last January to intervene in the affirmative action case. Today's essayist says diversity is integral to the college experience, and helps boost student success.

dividuals and organizations from around the world that are of different cultures, races and ethnicities. Understanding and being comfortable with them will support our students' success. This understanding does not occur through on-the-job training or by reading a book or taking a course. It comes through living, learning and playing with individuals of different cultures over the four or five years of college life.

- Enriches the college experience and increases the quality and relevance of education.

- Improves the quality of life of our grandchildren. In the year 2050, the majority of Americans will be people of color. If people of color are not prepared to replace today's professional and skilled white work force, America cannot be competitive in the global marketplace.

- Supports our democratic system of government. If in subsequent decades the gap between rich and poor in this country widens and the gap is defined along racial lines, serious civil strife could readily evolve.

- Exemplifies the American values of opportunity and access for everyone who wants to work hard and has talent.

RIT has a race-blind admission policy. While we vigorously recruit nationally for talented minority students, all of our 14,000 applicants are screened on academic credentials independent of race.

Those students — minority or majority — who are deemed admissible are pursued. This past year, 10 percent of our freshman class comprised African-American, Latino American and Native American students. All of these students met our academic admission criteria (thousands of applicants did not).

These students moved from the freshman to the sophomore class at a rate of more than 90 percent, higher than that for the campus as a whole.

For our academically admissible students, race is one factor considered in admission decisions. Other factors, such as whether another candidate is a son or daughter of an RIT alumnus, an athlete, an artist, or a resident of an underrepresented state are also considered. The end result is a quality, diverse student body, race being one of the important considerations. □

Simone is president of Rochester Institute of Technology.