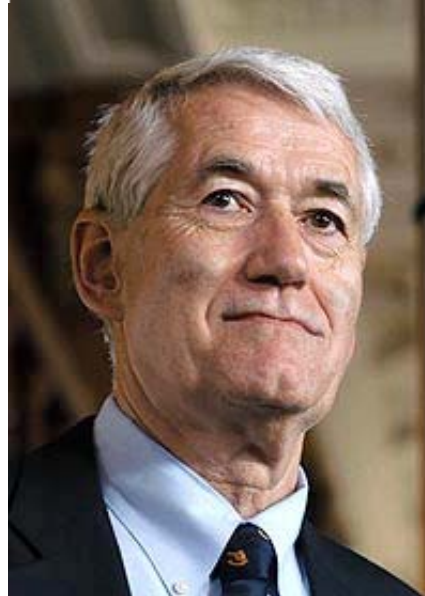


'The system is broken': Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau discusses Proposition 209 and its consequences at UC Berkeley

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Chancellor Birgeneau has said that, upon his appointment as Berkeley's ninth chancellor last September, he expected to find some surprises waiting, both positive and negative. One "surprising and, indeed, shocking negative discovery," he says, has been the absence of "good relationships across cultural lines within the student body." This situation is most evident among the Latino, African American, and Native American students on campus, he says, and is "caused in large part, I believe, by the dramatic drop in their numbers."

His growing concern about this problem inspired him to write an opinion piece, which was published Sunday, March 27, by the Los Angeles Times and [reprinted on the UC Berkeley NewsCenter \(/news/media/releases/2005/03/29_oped.shtml\)](/news/media/releases/2005/03/29_oped.shtml). Birgeneau's commentary is accompanied by an interview on diversity and inclusion that he recently gave to Marie Felde of the campus Public Affairs office. Excerpts appear below.



Chancellor Robert Birgeneau (Peg Skorpinski photo)

Q. Is it your opinion that Proposition 209 was a mistake?

Birgeneau: At the time that 209 was passed, it would have been impossible to determine whether or not it was a good thing or a bad thing. I think that people who supported it at the time — 65 percent of the voters — believed that it would lead to fairer treatment of the entire population. But in my view that has not turned out to be the case. I am an experimental scientist, and in my view the experiment with 209 has been done — and my conclusion is that it has done serious damage

Q. Are you suggesting that those who voted for 209 may not have known what they were getting into or what the consequences of its passage would be?

A. I think people who voted for 209 idealistically and generally thought it would produce a fairer system. My conclusion, and the conclusion of many people around me, is that because it has resulted in a dramatic diminution in numbers of particular classes of California citizens it has in fact created a system that is quite unfair.

Q. Proposition 209 said that college admissions, including admission to Berkeley, could not consider race, ethnicity or gender as a factor. What is the problem with that?

A. The practical consequence is that we have ended up eliminating many qualified African American students, so that in a typical classroom there may well just be one or even zero such students. That ends up creating a very difficult environment for those individual students.

Q. What do you suggest we do? Are you suggesting that we set aside 209? Can Berkeley on its own set aside the law?

Berkeley absolutely on its own cannot set aside 209. As long as 209 is the law we must obey the law and, of course, we are absolutely committed to obeying the law. I would like to understand more completely what the law allows us to do and what the law does not allow us to do. It may be that we could have more flexibility than we are taking advantage of at the current time.

Ward Connerly and others would say Proposition 209 is very clear: You can't use race, ethnicity, or gender as a factor in making decisions, either about admissions or hiring. Why do you think this is not clear?

That is where we get into the intersection of a person's race and the circumstances under which they grow up. A person may grow up in circumstances that are strongly disadvantageous, and I think we need to understand those better.

Q. Berkeley's admissions policy, called comprehensive review, is supposed to take that into account. Are you suggesting there is a need for a change to the admissions policy?

This issue goes far beyond Berkeley. Take African Americans again as a specific group. The number of students that we find we are actually able to attract and admit here at Berkeley through our comprehensive review policy falls far short of the number of African American students whom we know, through past experience, could do well here. Let's look even more specifically at African American males. Our freshman class has fewer than 40 African American males out of a student body of more than 30,000. Clearly, something is fundamentally wrong; the system is broken. An extreme example of this is that there is not a single African American in applied science and engineering in this year's freshman class. Now, Berkeley was recently ranked by the Times Higher Education Supplement in the U.K. as having the top engineering faculty in the world — not just in California, not just in the United States, but in the world. Now we have a situation where not a single member of the African American community in California is able to profit from being taught by the world's best faculty in engineering. They deserve it and it's not happening.

Q. Asian American students are well-represented in the Berkeley student body, and many of them face disadvantages as well.

A. All the people of California take great pride in the achievements of our Asian American students; we are very happy that the Asian community is so well represented here. Unfortunately, the African American and Chicano/Latino and Native American communities are grossly underrepresented. My concern is not only the low numbers of underrepresented students relative to the population of California now, but with what we'll see if we project forward — especially with regard to the Chicano/Latino community — just 20 years. The students we are educating now, and who we hope will provide leadership in the future, are an even smaller percentage of what that population will be 20 years from now. My view is that as a public university we are not meeting our responsibilities in terms of the public good.

Q. What will Berkeley be doing on your watch to meet what you believe to be our public responsibility?

A. First of all, because we are a university and we do research, it is our intention to create new research programs to help us to understand the state of California in a post-209 environment, to understand the importance of multiculturalism, to understand the importance of diversity and its impact on our society as a whole.

Q. What do you expect to come out of that?

A. One of the fascinating aspects of living in a state like California is that we have brought so many different cultures together. This is a relatively new phenomenon, full of consequences that have not yet been understood. So it is very important to study the political, sociological, and cultural aspects of multiculturalism, and all the different ways they make a difference.

Q. You said in your [Los Angeles Times opinion piece](#) ([/news/media/releases/2005/03/29_oped.shtml](#)) that you see on the Berkeley campus a climate that includes "alienation, mistrust and division" for underrepresented minority students. That sounds very troubling. What does it mean?

A. Overall, the spirit on this campus is outstanding, but for one or two percent of our African American students it is not outstanding. They feel totally isolated, as if they are being told they don't belong at Berkeley. Now, I'm a physicist, not a psychologist or a sociologist, so I can't explain all the

origins of the unhappiness and unhappiness that I see among the underrepresented minority students — but there is no doubt that a critical part of it is their very small numbers and the isolation of individuals.

Q. We are in the point in the admissions process where high school students will get an offer of admission to Berkeley and they will have a month to decide whether to accept. If I'm an African American or Chicano/Latino high school senior and I get an offer of admission to Berkeley what are you going to tell me so I come to campus?

A. I'm going to tell you that this is an issue we really care about. That's what I'm doing now. We are empowering our students to tell you that this is a supportive environment. In fact, this issue is viewed with sufficient importance in the community outside of Berkeley that we now even have Bay Area business people putting up funds in order to bring African American students on to our campus to see that, in fact, Berkeley is a great place to go to school.

More info

"[Anti-bias law has backfired at Berkeley \(/news/media/releases/2005/03/29_oped.shtml\)](/news/media/releases/2005/03/29_oped.shtml) ," Chancellor Birgeneau's commentary from the Sunday, March 27, Los Angeles Times.