California Bans Affirmative Action

Programs to boost the number of women and minority scientists have been part of the science education landscape for years, but in the wake of election results from California, educators nationwide are soberly pondering the future of their efforts. Last week, California voters passed an anti–affirmative action initiative, Proposition 209, that outlaws race or gender preferences in state employment, education, and contracting.

The law kills state-funded minority graduate fellowships, forces rapid changes in undergraduate admissions at the University of California (UC), and raises questions about the continued success of model programs that bring young minorities and women into science. It is seen by many as a bellwether of what may come in other states, or even at the federal level. "This will lead to more efforts to get [similar laws] on the ballot, or to get cases taken before the courts," says Shirley McBay, president of the Quality Education for Minorities Network in Washington, D.C.

Some groups have filed lawsuits challenging 209, but state universities must prepare to comply immediately. That means "significant declines" in the number of minority students at the most competitive UC campuses, warns Tom Lifka, assistant vice chancellor at UC Los Angeles (UCLA). And although the law doesn't specifically target science, shrinking the already small minority pipeline will reduce the numbers of those who choose science and engineering, says physicist Stan Prussin, director of the minority-targeted Professional Development Program at UC Berkeley. "It has been a very hard fight" to increase ethnic diversity in science programs, he says, "and I have great fear of what they are going to look like in the next year."

The chilly climate for affirmative action began in California even before the elections, when the UC regents last year ordered the removal of race and gender from admissions and hiring criteria (*Science*, 9 February, p. 752). The rules on undergraduate admissions were to be postponed until 1998—but Proposition 209 forces them to take effect immediately, erasing any hope for a reversal of the regents' decision. The greatest impact will be at top UC campuses that accept only a small fraction of applicants and have relied on affirmative action to boost the numbers of minority students. At UCLA and Berkeley, the percentage of black, Hispanic, and American Indian students in future freshman classes is expected to be halved (see table of estimates).

Also likely to suffer are minority outreach programs that target primary- and secondary-school students, such as the statewide Mathematics, Engineering, and Science Achievement (MESA) program, which has been lauded nationwide as one of a handful of programs that really work (*Science*, 13 November 1992, p. 1190). MESA focuses on minority students who are already "doing OK" in school, says program director Mike Aldaco, and offers extra preparation to help them succeed in the competitive UC atmosphere. Aldaco can't say yet just how Proposition 209 will change MESA. "I'm hoping that we will not end up with a policy that looks solely at socioeconomic status as the measure of disadvantage," he says. If so, many of MESA's best prospects—minority children from blue-collar working families—will be missed.

Indeed, says UCLA's Lifka, 209 will force programs to include students regardless of race—and as a result they will reach fewer minorities. "To capture every one of the [minority] students we were serving previously, you are probably talking about a 10-fold increase in budget," he says. "And you're not going to get that."

Meanwhile, minority graduate students will lose special state-funded fellowships; UCLA alone will have to stop awarding $4 million to $5 million in such fellowships, says Lifka. Federal fellowships that mandate minority preference will be exempt from 209, but may be up for change themselves. Recent court decisions have restricted affirmative action, and last year the National Science Foundation compiled a list of 24 programs—with a total annual budget of roughly $100 million—that target by race or gender and so may be at risk. But officials note that a 1980 law orders NSF to try to boost diversity in the scientific work force, which may protect those programs from legal challenge.

For now, no one can fully predict whether the rest of the country will follow California's lead. But science educators nationwide will be watching anxiously as Proposition 209 takes effect.

–Marcia Barinaga

CHANGING FACES ON CAMPUS

Ethnic Group	Percentage of UC Berkeley Entering Class Pre-209	Post-209	Estimated % increase (% decline)
Black	6.5%	2.5%–3.5%	(46%–61%)
Hispanic	15.6%	6.0%–8.4%	(46%–61%)
American Indian	1.8%	0.6%–0.8%	(55%–66%)
White	29.9%	32.8%–34.2%	9.6%–14%
Asian American	37.2%	44.5%–46.4%	19%–25%

SOURCE: UC BERKELEY

with the Science Committee.

Meanwhile, Representative Joe Knollenberg (R–MI), whose R&D track record is thin, is in the running to lead the appropriations panel that oversees Department of Energy (DOE) funding after the retirement of Representative John Myers (R–IN). In the Senate, John McCain (R–AZ) likely will take over as chair of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee following the defeat of Senator Larry Pressler (R–SD). McCain has opposed some technology funding and has been a critic of the Energy and Commerce departments. Senator Pete Domenici (R–NM), however, remains in a strong position to defend DOE and the two DOE labs in his state as chair of the Budget Committee and of the energy spending panel. Senator Dan Coats (R–IN), another relative unknown in science circles, hopes to chair the Labor and Human Resources Committee, which oversees NIH, after the retirement of Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R–KS).

The first challenge to R&D supporters will be to ensure that the House and Senate Budget Committees divide up the spending pie without sacrificing large chunks of science and technology spending. And Brown, despite his antipathy toward Walker, says that Walker's absence from the House budget panel will create a power vacuum that could allow panel members from both parties to wield their fiscal axes on science and technology. That, in turn, could set the tone for appropriators.

Ultimately, the bipartisan desire to end the federal deficit may prove an overwhelming force. "We shouldn't have any illusions—the push for a balanced budget will have an effect on R&D," says Erich Bloch, a former NSF director and now a distinguished fellow at the Council on Competitiveness. And a little streamlining might do more good than harm, he adds. But R&D advocates are hoping that the example of Sensenbrenner and Brown's quiet dinner—for which the future chair graciously paid—is a sign that legislators will have the appetite to fight together for continued support of science.

–Andrew Lawler

With additional reporting by Jeffrey Mervis.