It’s business as usual for NH colleges in the wake of Affirmative Action ruling

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When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June that using Affirmative Action in college admissions was unconstitutional, the national media warned of dire consequences.

The “Supreme Court’s affirmative action ban is a catastrophic blow to the American dream,” proclaimed a Los Angeles Times editorial.

“Affirmative action ruling triggers frenzy” exclaimed The Hill in its Morning Report assessment.

And, the New York Times took to its then-known-as Twitter account to warn that the ruling “all but ensure(s) that elite institutions (will) become whiter and more Asian and less Black and Latino.”

But in New Hampshire, many in higher education reacted to the ruling with a collective shrug. In their views, nothing in the ruling will significantly alter the ways they attract minority students.

That’s because the state had already banned its public colleges and universities from using affirmative action policies back in 2012. And even officials from many private institutions in the state affected by the ruling say they either didn’t use affirmative action or that it only played a small role in their admissions practices.

“The Supreme Court’s decision has not and will not impact Franklin Pierce’s admissions process,” wrote Pierre Morton, the Rindge-based private university’s chief diversity officer in an email.

At Henniker’s New England College, the admissions staff focuses on the quantifiable attributes of prospective students, and not race, according to Brad Poznanski, its executive director of undergraduate admission.

“Unlike institutions with competitive or selective admission profiles, NEC admits all students who we deem as academically prepared to succeed in our curriculum,” Poznanski said. “Our focus is on students’ high school GPAs, curriculum and courses. The race or ethnicity of applicants is never a factor that is considered.”

Artwork representing solidarity was created by students after a series of racial incidents in spring 2017. The art was later vandalized, and a student was charged for criminal mischief as a result. Courtesy of Facebook - All Eyes On UNH
Manchester’s St. Anselm College says it takes a similar, race-blind approach.

“Race is not factored into the [admissions] decision,” said Paul Pronovost, the school’s chief communications and marketing officer. “To admit students, really our main driving factor is academic qualification.”

One private New Hampshire institution that is changing its admissions procedures – albeit slightly – in the wake of the ruling is Dartmouth College.

“Our admissions team has been preparing for and discussing on how to best adapt our longstanding holistic admissions process to this new legal landscape,” said Jana Barnello, a Dartmouth spokesperson.

The highly selective Ivy League school in Hanover is adapting to that “new legal landscape” by encouraging students to highlight their life experience – which could include details about their race or ethnicity – via their application essay.

“This year we added two new admissions questions to Dartmouth’s application supplement that invite students to reflect on their lived experience, in whatever way that might manifest itself, and admissions staff will be trained about how to evaluate an application under the new legal guidelines,” Barnello said.

In the wake of the ruling, Lee Coffin, Dartmouth’s vice president and dean of admissions and financial aid, detailed the two new questions and what Dartmouth hopes to accomplish by asking them in his “Admissions Beat” podcast.

“We have a question with two options,” Coffin said at the time. “And it says, ‘Required of all applicants, please respond to one of the following in 250 words or less.’ And the first option is, ‘There is a Quaker saying, Let your life speak. Describe the environment in which you were raised and the impact it has had on the person you are today.’ And the second option is, ‘Be yourself. Oscar Wilde advised, Everyone else is taken. Introduce yourself.
“And in that question A or B, are interchangeable, it’s an invitation to any student anywhere in the world to share their story with us as we’re building our class,” Coffin continued. “And to me, the wordsmithing of each of those questions was very open-ended. A student from any background can answer that question, and show how a lived experience as a Black person in America, as a Chinese immigrant in San Francisco, as a trans student in Alabama. I mean, you can keep going in all sorts of really interesting ways we live our lives. Those two questions are the opportunity in our supplement for someone to talk about the value of their identity, the impact it has on themselves.”

Dartmouth's approach to not explicitly considering the race of an applicant – and yet still encouraging a student to discuss how race has impacted their lives – mirror's guidance the Biden administration issued in August designed to give universities and colleges ways to “work to lawfully pursue efforts to achieve a student body that is diverse across a range of factors, including race and ethnicity.”

“Although this decision changes the landscape for admissions in higher education, it should not be used as an excuse to turn away from long-standing efforts to make those institutions more inclusive,” U.S. Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta said at a news conference announcing the guidance. “Race can be relevant to a person's life or a lived experience, and may impact one's development motivations, academic interests or personal or professional aspirations. That impact can still be considered.”

For example, the Biden administration’s guidance said that “a university could consider an applicant's explanation about what it means to him to be the first Black violinist in his city's youth orchestra or an applicant's account of overcoming prejudice when she transferred to a rural high school where she was the only student of South Asian descent.”

“We know what has happened at colleges when individual states have banned affirmative action in the past,” U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona told reporters. “Fewer students of color applied, and fewer students of color were admitted. We cannot afford that kind of backpedaling on a national scale.”

While the numbers of minorities accepted to top schools in California and Michigan reportedly declined after those two states banned affirmative action in their public schools, the results in New Hampshire since its 2012 ban have been less clear cut.

As previously detailed in a Granite State News Collaborative series examining the diversity of student bodies in the Granite State, New Hampshire’s universities and colleges have long struggled to increase the number of minorities in their campuses, due in large part to the state’s own lack of diversity.

But some progress has been made.

UNH's Durham campus saw its percentage of students of color increase from only 7.7 percent in 2013 – the year after the state's affirmative action ban went into effect – to 9.9 percent in the fall of 2022, the most recently available data. Plymouth State's percentage of students of color increased from 8.7 to 10.8 percent during that time, while Keene State saw a larger boost of minority students, going from 7.5 percent in 2014 (the first year of the school's publicly available data) to 12 percent in 2022.
While those modest gains are commendable, they largely occurred during a time in which New Hampshire's population was becoming incrementally more diverse.

According to a report published by UNH Carsey School of Public Policy researcher Kenneth Johnson that relied on U.S. Census data, New Hampshire's minority population grew from 7.5 percent of its population in 2010, to 12.8 percent in 2020.

So while the number of minority students in New Hampshire's public schools did in fact go up after the state banned affirmative action – potentially refuting Secretary Cardoza – the number of minorities living in New Hampshire went up as well. That makes it difficult to tell if the state's public schools would have enrolled even more minority students if it hadn't banned affirmative action in 2012.

While much of the discussion since the Supreme Court's ruling has focused on how admissions staff can and cannot evaluate applications, especially those from minority students, some say the rule impact will be in the applications they don't get as a result of the new rules.

“I think the peril here is people taking themselves out of the college admission sequence because they misinterpret what the ruling means,” Coffin told his podcast audience. “Stay present. That was true before the court ruling, and it remains true today. The Supreme Court established limits for how we can consider race in our admission decisions. But remember, each [student] is indelibly more complex than just one factor.”

“We need to find ways to encourage students from underrepresented groups to apply who might feel they could be excluded in our admission process,” said New England College's Pozanski.