



Firms: Affirmative Action Helps Recruits

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By ANNE GEARAN, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON - Dozens of big companies are backing the University of Michigan and its affirmative action policy before the Supreme Court, saying such programs help produce better workers of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

The University of Michigan case is the most significant affirmative action case to reach the court in decades. At issue is whether racial preference programs unconstitutionally discriminate against white students. Microsoft, Intel, American Airlines, Proctor & Gamble, Eastman Kodak and PepsiCo are among more than 40 Fortune 500 companies siding with the University of Michigan. "If you're going to be a global company and you're going to attract and retain the best people, then the mirror you have to present is that you're a very diverse company," said James Hackett, CEO of Steelcase Corp., the top-selling office furniture company in the world. Other corporations say racially and ethnically mixed workers help sell products at home and abroad, and that whites entering a diverse working world benefit from time spent in the classroom with students of other races and backgrounds.

"It makes all the business sense in the world. We sell vehicles in every corner of the globe," and want employees who look like and understand other cultures, said Edd Snyder, spokesman for General Motors. "Where do you get that employee base? From universities and colleges." The companies' position is at odds with President Bush (news - web sites) and many Republican and conservative lawyers and activists. "His leadership is outstanding, but I disagree with him," Hackett said. "The notion of linking the issue of affirmative action to colleges having the right to admissions discretion Ñ I don't think that's a link that needs to be made."

The companies' Supreme Court brief supporting the university is due later this month. Numerous labor, civil rights and liberal legal groups also are expected to file briefs supporting the school. The Supreme Court is using plans devised by Michigan's premier public university to revisit an opaque 1978 ruling that eliminated racial quotas in university admissions but left room for race to be considered alongside other factors. This time, the court may make any use of race off-limits when government-supported colleges pick their students, or it could rewrite the rules from when race may play a limited role in the admissions process. Without some way to boost the admissions rate for minorities, top colleges and universities would quickly become

mostly white, Michigan administrators and supporters claim.

The Bush administration filed its own friend-of-the-court brief in the case last month, arguing that admissions systems at the undergraduate school and law school are unconstitutional. However, the administration disappointed some conservatives when it stopped short of challenging any use of race in university selection or in other government decisions. Many of the corporate affirmative action supporters quietly acknowledge it is awkward for big business to line up with the generally socially liberal supporters of affirmative action, but say the corporate position is born of practicality, not ideology. "We're not lining up against the administration, we're lining up on the issue itself," said Intel spokesman Chuck Mulloy

. "Is a diverse work force something we feel we need to work for? We do." Intel and many of the other companies also filed friend of the court briefs when the Michigan plans were before a lower federal appeals court. The cases are Grutter v. Bollinger, 02-241 and Gratz v. Bollinger, 02-516.

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