

50 Years of Affirmative Action: What Went Right, and What It Got Wrong

By [Anemona Hartocollis](#) March 30, 2019

The commencement for the Class of 1973 at Columbia University. The number of black students admitted to Columbia rose sharply in 1969. About half of those who enrolled graduated four years later. University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York



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On cold mornings, Les Goodson shows up early outside the University Club, on a wealthy stretch of Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, and races two panhandlers he has nicknamed Catman and Pimp-the-Baby for a warm spot in front of a steam vent. He launches into "Take Five" on his saxophone, leaving his case open for bills and coins.

In a good week, it's a living — enough to pay the rent on his railroad flat in Harlem and put food on the table. A few times, he has seen a former classmate, Gregory Peterson, bound into the social club without so much as a nod.

Mr. Goodson, 67, and his classmate were among a record number of black students admitted to Columbia University in 1969. Columbia and other competitive colleges had already begun changing the racial makeup of their campuses as the civil rights movement gained ground, but the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and the resulting student strikes and urban uprisings, prompted them to redouble their efforts.

They acted partly out of a moral imperative, but also out of fear that the fabric of society was being torn apart by racial conflict. They took chances on promising black students from poor neighborhoods they had long ignored, in addition to black students groomed by boarding schools.

A look back through the decades shows what went right in the early years of affirmative action in college admissions, but also what can go wrong even with the best of intentions.

Those who were able, through luck or experience or hard work, to adapt to the culture of institutions that had long been pillars of the white establishment succeeded by most conventional measures. Others could not break through because of personal trauma, family troubles, financial issues, culture shock — the kind of problems felt by many white students as well, but compounded by being in such a tiny minority. And universities

at the time, they said, did not have the will or the knowledge to help.

“I think it’s a fair question to ask: Did we really understand or know what we were doing, or could we have predicted what the issues would be?” said Robert L. Kirkpatrick Jr., who at the time was dean of admissions at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., which was part of these early efforts. “The answer is no. I think we were instinctively trying to do the right thing.”

Columbia — an Ivy League campus right next to Harlem — was a particularly revelatory setting. Perhaps nowhere else were the divisions more striking between the privilege inside university gates and the troubles and demands of black people outside them.

The New York Times tracked down many of the nearly 50 black students in Columbia’s Class of 1973, who arrived on campus as freshmen in 1969. Some of them have remained close friends and helped locate others from directories and photographs.

The number of black students admitted to Columbia more than doubled in 1969 from the year before. About half of those who enrolled received their degrees four years later.

Many, like Mr. Peterson, went on to comfortable lives and professional success. His classmate, Eric H. Holder Jr., rose from a strivers’ neighborhood in Queens to become the first black attorney general of the United States. There were future doctors in the class, future executives and lawyers. Others, like Mr. Goodson, strayed from prescribed paths.

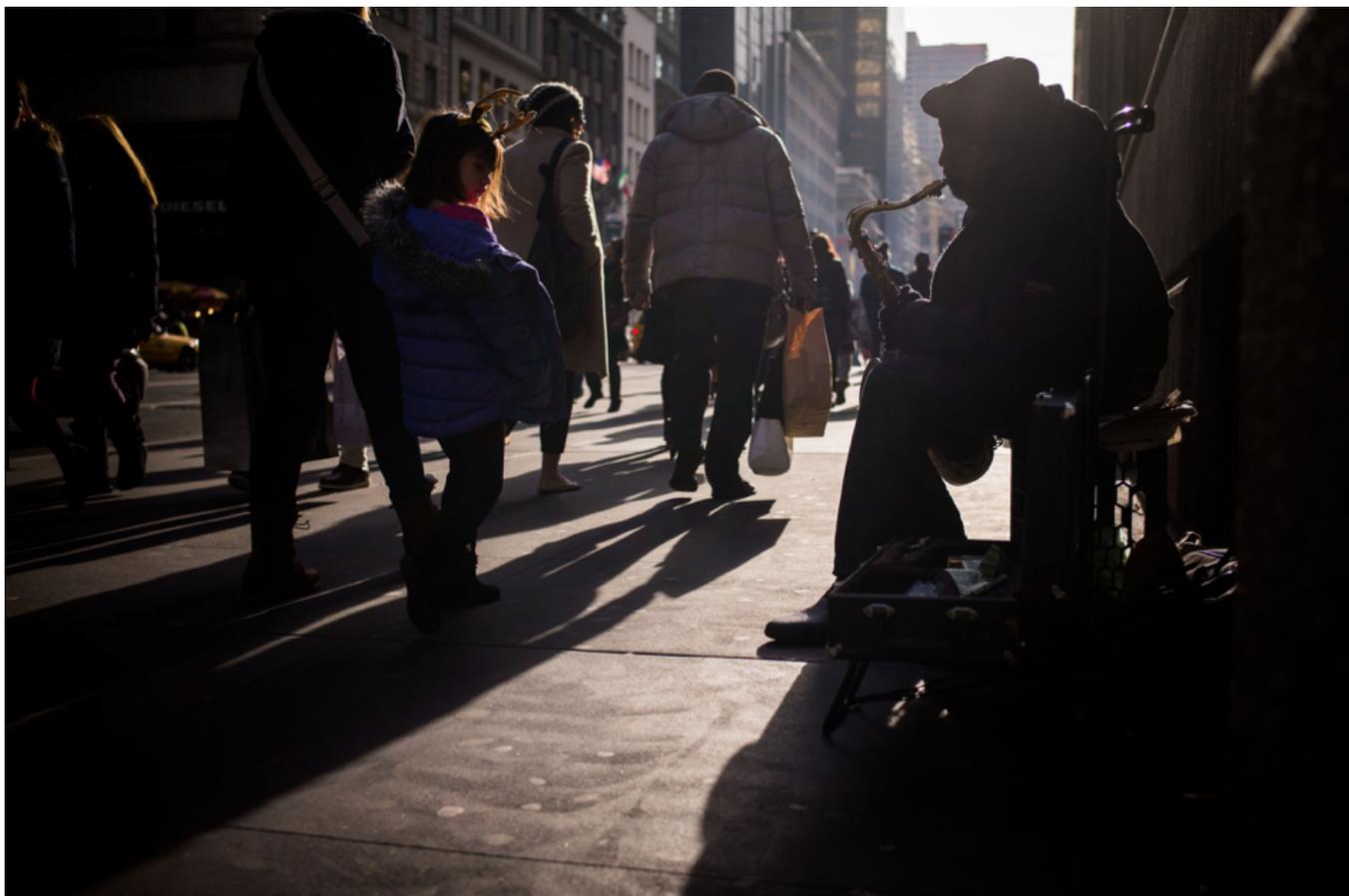
The debate over race in college admissions only intensified. By the late 1970s, colleges began emphasizing the value of diversity on campus over the case for racial reparations.

Today, Harvard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are facing legal challenges to race-conscious admissions that could reach the Supreme Court. The Trump administration is investigating allegations of discrimination against Asian-American applicants at Harvard and Yale. University officials who lived through the history fear that the gains of the last 50 years could be rolled back.

One of them is Lee Bollinger, the current president of Columbia, who first arrived on campus as a law student in 1968.

"In that time, there was a sense, pure and simple, that universities had to do their part to help integrate higher education," Mr. Bollinger said. "We are still on that mission, but the sense of purpose and urgency and connection to the past have dissipated."

Les Goodson, one of about 50 black freshmen who enrolled at Columbia in 1969, played the saxophone on Fifth Avenue in 2013. Damon Winter/The New York Times



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Mr. Goodson sits on a plastic milk crate covered by a clean, brightly colored cushion. He is wrapped in layers of flannel shirts, sweatshirts, a canvas jacket, and wears stylish suede shoes. A watch cap and a graying goatee hide his face.

He resents it when people assume he is homeless and plop down bags of food next to him without even asking. He is more forgiving of the police officers who routinely ask him if he would like to go to a shelter. He jokes: No thanks, he has a place at Trump Tower, across the street. (His apartment is a short subway ride away, not far from the jazz club where he plays a weekly gig.)

Mr. Goodson grew up in a housing project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and in those days he was known as Ervin. His mother was a housekeeper for a wealthy family on Park Avenue; his father was a tailor and owned a dry-

cleaning shop for a time. He took an early liking to music, learning to play the viola from Cora Roth, his fifth-grade teacher at Public School 46 in Brooklyn, now a painter in Los Angeles who still remembers him as “a pure soul.”

A number of programs sprang up at the time to find talented students from tough neighborhoods. In junior high school, Mr. Goodson was chosen to spend three summers in enrichment classes at Hotchkiss, a Connecticut boarding school, where he read incessantly. He was accepted to New York’s Stuyvesant High School, which at the time was mostly white. Now Stuyvesant is mostly Asian-American, and under attack for its test-based admissions. This year, [seven black students were offered admission](#) out of 895 slots.

When a racially fueled teachers’ strike broke out during Mr. Goodson’s senior year, his parents managed to transfer him to the Wooster School, another boarding school in Connecticut. He had been a middling student at Stuyvesant, but vaulted to the top of his class in private school.

An English teacher drove him to Columbia for the admission interview, and he remembers feeling “a little bit phony” as he answered questions. He was also accepted at Dartmouth, but chose Columbia because it was closer to home.

Mr. Goodson at his apartment in 2019. Gabriella Angotti-Jones for The New York Times

A selection of Mr. Goodson’s photos, including one of him as a freshman at Columbia with his girlfriend at the time, now mother of his daughter, center. Gabriella Angotti-Jones for The New York Times

In college, Mr. Goodson realized that he could reinvent himself, and began going by Les, his middle name, instead of Ervin. He wanted to be a photographer, and took pictures of B.B. King, Amiri Baraka and the band Sha Na Na with his Miranda camera. He made some rash decisions, once spending \$600 of a \$1,500 student loan on a Karmann Ghia sports car.

Not much in the course catalog spoke to him.

"If you go back and look at that blue book, all the courses — I would say 95 percent — were Eurocentric," he said. "I remember they had a few black courses, and all the black students would take them because they were known as cushy courses, because they were easy to pass."

The only black professor he can remember was Charles Hamilton, a political scientist who collaborated with Stokely Carmichael, the civil rights leader, to write about the Black Power movement, which Mr. Goodson said influenced him. Columbia's first black department chair, Elliott Skinner, in anthropology, would not be named until 1972 — the year Mr. Goodson dropped out.

After his freshman year, Mr. Goodson was asked to take a leave for bad grades. He lived surreptitiously on campus, crashing in friends' dorm rooms. He got a student at Barnard, Columbia's sister college, pregnant, and his daughter was born in August 1971. After three years, he left Columbia for good.

"Nothing stopped me from finishing," Mr. Goodson said. "I just did something else."

'I Didn't Notice Being Black'

Student protests at Columbia in April 1968. Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

Student protests at Columbia in April 1968. Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

While civil rights leaders pressed colleges to admit more black students, the big push came after the assassination of Dr. King on April 4, 1968, followed by uprisings in more than 100 cities and student strikes.

"I don't see how you can understand it apart from the upheavals on

campus, racial upheavals in the larger society, the general upheavals around the world," said Jerome Karabel, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and [a historian of college admissions](#).

Later that month, students occupied several buildings in protest of what they saw as Columbia's complicity in the Vietnam War and a plan to build a gym in a Harlem park. The standoff ended with a violent clash with the police.

The radical politics of 1968 came too late to affect the admissions decisions that fall, as acceptance notices had already gone out. But in 1969, the number of black students recruited and admitted to Ivy League universities and their sister schools rose sharply from the year before, in many cases by more than 100 percent, according to statistics published in The Times in April 1969.

From 1968 to 1969, according to archival data provided by Columbia this year, the number of students recorded as black who applied rose to 220 from 121, the number who were admitted rose to 130 from 58, and the number who registered rose to 48 from 31 out of a total class of about 700. (All of them were men; Columbia College did not begin admitting women until the 1980s.)

Some black students in that class resisted being cast as emissaries of racial understanding.

Gregory Peterson, the classmate Mr. Goodson has seen going into the University Club, did not see himself in any racial framework. "I shied away from anything that was like a 'black' group," he said, "because I didn't grow up that way."

Gregory Peterson, in the student directory for the Class of 1973. University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York

Mr. Peterson today at his apartment in New York. Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

He and his twin brother, Maurice, were in advanced classes in predominantly white schools, although they were part of the black middle class in East Elmhurst, Queens. Their father owned a barbershop; their mother was a teacher.

When Mr. Peterson was in high school, the mother of a white friend took him to a cocktail party where he met a white intellectual who had gone to Exeter and Harvard. He became a mentor, encouraging Mr. Peterson's ambitions to apply to Ivy League universities.

At Columbia, Mr. Peterson was an English major, and mixed with white students. He discovered his gay identity, though he remained closeted.

He did experience racial discrimination in college. A Southern white Barnard student apologized to him for not being able to invite him to a party back home. An older man at a reception once assumed he was on the basketball team.

But race took a back seat to his sexuality. "I was so busy having problems being gay that I didn't notice being black," he said.

After graduating in 1973, Mr. Peterson spent a few years in the arts before "the rational side took over," and he went to Columbia Law School. He went on to become a corporate lawyer. His brother, who also graduated from Columbia, owns a spa.

Mr. Peterson and his husband now live on a high floor of a prewar building at 72nd Street and Riverside Drive, a prime Manhattan location. The light-filled apartment is crammed with his art collection. A portrait by Paul Hodgson of Mr. Peterson in a formal suit, looking cerebral and commanding, hangs on one wall.

A while back, as Mr. Peterson got out of a cab on his way to the University Club, he was greeted by a street musician.

"Hey, Gregory, it's Lester — from Columbia," the musician said.

The sounds of a saxophone had often filtered into the club gymnasium through the steam vents, but Mr. Peterson had never known who was playing it. He had not stopped before because he had not recognized his classmate.

"I tell you, I just totally flipped out," Mr. Peterson said.

He did not know enough about Mr. Goodson's life to judge him, he said. But the encounter made him conscious of his own good fortune.

The Fugitive

In July 1972, Eldridge McKinney, a black sophomore at Columbia, [shot the dean of students](#) several times with a .38-caliber handgun. Mr. McKinney had been suspended for bad grades, and was angry that he was not reinstated, the police said. By one news account, he shouted "racist bastard" at the dean, who was white, before opening fire.

The dean, Henry S. Coleman, was badly wounded but returned to work. (Mr. Coleman had been caught up in campus turmoil before, when students occupied Hamilton Hall and took him hostage in 1968.)

Henry S. Coleman, a Columbia dean who was taken hostage when students occupied a campus building in 1968. Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

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Mr. McKinney's fall from grace was steep. He arrived at Columbia in the fall of 1970, a year behind Mr. Goodson and Mr. Peterson, as an overachiever: a Boy Scout leader; the valedictorian of his high school on the South Side of Chicago; a member of the band, school newspaper,

yearbook, and the math, chess and Spanish clubs, according to The Chicago Tribune at the time. But at Columbia, something changed.

After the shooting, Mr. McKinney's mother and Roy Innis, the civil rights leader, publicly pleaded with him to turn himself in. Charged with attempted murder, he disappeared. Classmates remember the jarring sight of his face on wanted posters at the post office. His friends believe that he has been living under an assumed name and identity for nearly 47 years.

Mr. McKinney, nicknamed E, became something of a legend. Some black students quietly cheered him on, understanding his rage. "E was sort of like a semi-hero at the time, because apparently he got away with it," Mr. Goodson said. "And every once in a while, I'll ask somebody, 'Yo man, you ever hear from E?'"

Darryl T. Downing, a black classmate of Mr. McKinney's, stepped forward to defend him in 1972. He told The Times [back then](#) that Mr. McKinney wanted to be a lawyer, but found Columbia to be a hard adjustment.

"Columbia is not the situation we're used to," Mr. Downing, who went to a neighborhood public school in New York City, said then. "But we felt we were lucky to be here, so we got together to adjust."

Mr. Downing now lives in a high-rise project in Harlem, where he answers the door warily; for many years, he said, the police or the F.B.I. would knock on his door asking if he had heard anything from Mr. McKinney.

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Mr. Downing said he had been constantly looked on with suspicion at Columbia, as if he did not belong. Security guards would demand to see his identification every time he walked in, even though they knew who he was and did not demand the same of white students.

Soon after the dean was shot, when the campus was “on high alert,” Mr. Downing said he was brought up on disciplinary charges for fighting with a white student who barged into his dorm room uninvited. He said that Dr. Skinner, the black anthropology professor, interceded on his behalf.

“Instead of just going to school and just having an experience, the experience was survival,” said Mr. Downing, who is now an events promoter. In his last semester, he “just walked away.”

Black and Hispanic alumni from those days recall forming tight bonds because they were so few. They studied together. They went to their own parties and listened to different music. Mr. Downing recalled that his black friends preferred rhythm and blues, while his white classmates listened to Jimi Hendrix.

“We had massive — massive — study groups, where everybody would pile into a black lounge,” Mr. Downing said. Many black students felt pulled in two directions — assimilation or resistance.

“I think that’s still an open question in some people’s minds: Are you expected to stay with your ghetto identity and the world has to adapt to you?” said Julius Gonzalez, the son of Cuban factory workers in West Harlem, and a member of the Class of 1973. “Or do you make a few adjustments and adapt more to the outside world?”

‘You Had to Prove Them Wrong’

Despite how hard it could be to adapt, there were many success stories among the black students in the Class of 1973.

Mr. Gonzalez, whose factory-worker parents had grade-school educations, got an M.B.A. from Harvard and became a financial officer in energy ventures abroad. He is now retired and living in Florida.

Gary Friday, son of a beer distributor in Philadelphia, became a neurologist. Eric Coleman, whose widowed mother straightened and curled hair in her kitchen and took in laundry, is a state judge in Connecticut.

Eric Coleman, part of the Class of 1973, is a state judge in Connecticut. George Etheredge for The New York Times

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But many names disappeared from the class directory between freshman and senior years. "Sometimes I look through a list of people who actually graduated," Dr. Friday said. "A lot of people are missing."

About half the students recorded as black in the class — 25 of the 48 — received diplomas in 1973, according to the data provided by Columbia. Seven more got their degrees later, and one, a student from Tanzania, graduated early.

The common perception that professors made allowances for minority students was false, Mr. Gonzalez said. If anything, being black invited tougher scrutiny. "Some of these guys smirked and looked at you and said, 'What are you doing here? You misspelled a term,'" he said. "You had to prove them wrong."

Within a few years, universities stopped taking as many gambles. The early press coverage was celebratory: "Colleges That Recruit in Ghetto Find Effort Benefits All Concerned" read a headline in The Wall Street Journal in 1968. But it soon became more skeptical.

Julius Gonzalez, the son of Cuban factory workers, worked in the energy business and retired in

Florida.Rose Marie Cromwell for The New York Times

After graduating from Columbia, Mr. Gonzalez went on to get an M.B.A. from Harvard.Rose Marie Cromwell for The New York Times

Thomas Sowell, a black professor of economics at the University of California, Los Angeles, [wrote in The Times](#) in 1970 that white college administrators, out of misguided "romanticism," were admitting unqualified "'authentic' ghetto types" and setting them up to fail, while overlooking "intellectually oriented black students."

A 1973 [New York Times Magazine article](#) by Martin Kilson, a black Harvard professor of government, caused a furor by arguing that students had imported a culture of black separatism that was dysfunctional in academia.

It was the dawn of a series of bitter battles in the Supreme Court over allegations of "reverse racism" against white students, beginning with Marco DeFunis, a white student rejected by the University of Washington Law School in 1971. The high court found the DeFunis case moot in 1974 because the plaintiff was graduating.

David L. Evans, associate dean of admissions at Harvard, acidly complained that because of the DeFunis case, alumni believed that "semiliterate blacks are being accepted at the expense of white geniuses," according to The Harvard Crimson in 1975.

Since then, the Supreme Court has consistently upheld the right of colleges to use race as one factor in admissions. Now Harvard is fighting a claim that it is manipulating the admissions process to exclude Asian-Americans.

But what happened 50 years ago changed admissions forever. In some ways, affirmative action has become more sophisticated over time, as diversity has become an established principle, and schools — barred by law from using racial quotas — have sought an ideal mix of students that

is more reflective of society.

Colleges often turn to private schools to find even poor black and Hispanic students, because "they have the cultural and social capital to succeed on campus," said [Anthony Abraham Jack](#), a professor of education at Harvard and author of "The Privileged Poor."

Mr. Gonzalez said he saw the difference among the younger generation of black and Hispanic students at reunions: "They act like, 'Yeah, I belong here.'"

Mr. Goodson's fifth-floor apartment in Harlem is decorated with art that he made himself. Gabriella Angotti-Jones for The New York Times

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After dropping out, Mr. Goodson worked a variety of jobs, from junk hauler to taxi driver to furniture refinisher.

In a late-life bid for middle-class stability, he returned to college with renewed zeal for learning, and received a bachelor's degree in history from Lehman College in 2003, then completed most of a master's degree. He lasted only briefly as a high school social studies teacher, unable to abide students who addressed him as "Dawg" and freely used racial slurs among themselves.

His daughter, Dara, graduated from Morgan State University, a historically black college in Baltimore. She and her husband, both teachers, have three children.

A few years ago, Mr. Goodson was rejected from a Columbia Ph.D. program. The blow was softened by the interest that one professor, Eric Foner, an expert in the Reconstruction era, took in his proposal to study the 13th Amendment's exception clause and its connection to black

incarceration. ("When he proposed to study this subject, it was a very original project," Professor Foner wrote in an email.)

Mr. Goodson has not strayed far from the Columbia orbit. Every Wednesday night, his four-piece band, the Les Goodson Intergalactic Soul Jazz Band, performs at Paris Blues, an old-fashioned dive bar just a 15-minute walk from campus.

What he whimsically calls his "penthouse," a fifth-floor walk-up in central Harlem, is a few blocks farther.

The apartment is a revelation. It is narrow, stylishly appointed. He has decorated the walls with art and photographs that he made himself. One painting is splattered like a Jackson Pollock. A homage to Miró features a big blue flying saucer; floating window bars were inspired by Chagall.

He has stacked sheet music on the floor under a well-buffed antique wooden table that is a testament to his refinishing skills. A violin hangs on the wall. Scattered about are dismembered bits of saxophone, an instrument he first picked up some 50 years ago, in a classmate's dorm room.

"Columbia," he said, "it changed my whole life."

Doris Burke and Alain Delaqu erie contributed research.

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