When voters in Michigan went to the polls last fall, they approved—by a margin of 16 percent—a measure banning affirmative action in state government. The Michigan vote echoed voter decisions in California in 1996 and, in 1998, in Oregon. Buoyed by the outcome in Michigan, opponents of affirmative action in other states are gearing up to add the question to the 2008 ballot.

Just as their colleagues in other states have done, university administrators in Michigan today are working to digest the meaning of the November election. In the short term, that translates into changes like amending the names of certain campus offices and scrutinizing policies excising references to race. What happens in the longer term is unclear. No one doubts the effects will be more significant than repainting the sign on an office door.

Interestingly, the challenges to affirmative action come at a time when a broader campus conversation about inclusion and access has gained traction. While campuses continue to discuss ways to ensure racial equality, the conversation now embraces a broader set of issues—including, for example, the ways in which poverty and adversity are barriers to a pluralistic society.

That’s not to suggest a cause and effect. The conversation didn’t suddenly shift because affirmative action came under assault. But it does acknowledge that colleges and universities are exploring creative, thoughtful ways that advance a next generation of work in pursuit of a more inclusive society—work that in some respects builds on some of the lessons and gains of affirmative action. From new thinking about admissions to a renewed focus on outreach programs, from a more inclusive definition of diversity itself to broader thinking about the educational pipeline from pre-K through workforce development, a range of new ideas has infused all of academe.

For universities, Roper says, “the effort is related to a deep understanding of the value that diversity will bring to the educational experience and to the life of a campus.” But Roper is quick to define the basis for diversity as much more than just race. Educational outcomes, he suggests, can best be achieved “in an environment that is characterized by intellectual diversity, cultural diversity, religious and spiritual diversity, economic diversity, life situation diversity.” It’s unfortunate, Roper says, “that we have come to think about diversity as only having a racial or ethnic dimension.”

“What institutions have begun to think about, and have had to figure out, is that affirmative action is really a multivariate concept,” Roper says. “While we have historically thought about women and people of color as having been historically underrepresented, we also know that folks from lower economic backgrounds and folks with disabilities are underrepresented.” Appropriately, he suggests, colleges and universities are broadening the criteria for admissions in order to best recruit students “who will add power and
substance to our educational mission.”

Roper is part of the AASCU/National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges diversity task force that developed the 2006 report Now is the Time: Meeting the Challenge for a Diverse Academy. Citing a growing body of scholarship that demonstrates “the direct connections between diversity, civic engagement and cognitive development,” the report argues that try to stimulate conversations so that each campus will come up with its own unique response, because the response has to be rooted in the institution’s own context.” Roper knows of several institutions that are using the report to guide thorough exercises of self-reflection, and said that others planned to start down that path.

“Colleges and universities face a lot of unique challenges, but striving for diversity is one that we cannot afford to fail,” says Mary Evans Sias, president of Kentucky State University. “It is as important today—or more important, perhaps—than it ever has been, given the current demographic of today’s society, and what colleges and universities are going to see in the future in terms of the makeup of their student population.”

Sias believes outreach in college admissions can help a school achieve diversity, even in an era when affirmative action is under challenge. “I think what’s going to happen is that we’re all going to start looking at the kinds of things we might include in addition to, or as a substitute for, race,” Sias says. “Certainly class is an issue that comes up. But you can’t just look at how much money a family makes. You are going to have to look at what types of schools students come from. How much money did those schools have? Did they have the types of programs that would expose you to what it is you need to do well on standardized tests?”

Sias is quick to add, though, that “standardized test scores are not the most important indicators of whether a student will do well once they get to college. They are just one indicator, but not the most important.” Similarly, Daniel Little, chancellor of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, believes that so-called “measures of merit” like the SAT and ACT “are only approximate predictors of academic success.”

Sias suggests that public college admissions officers might follow the lead of their colleagues in private institutions and “pay closer attention to things like leadership capabilities and qualities, what kind of extracurricular activities students are involved in, their community service…and find some better ways to measure them” on student applications. “We need a more holistic look at who the student is,” Sias believes.

Noncognitive Assessment

Taking a more holistic look at prospective students also comes up in conversation with Larry Roper. He cites the work of University of Maryland professor William Sedlacek, author of Beyond the Big Test: Noncognitive Assessment in Higher Education, who has pioneered a new approach to assess the backgrounds of nontraditional students. Sedlacek’s approach looks beyond traditional cognitive variables, such as grade point average and test scores, to measure noncognitive variables—such as having leadership experiences, identifying with and having a connection to a strong community, or having a positive self-concept.

Roper’s school created its own approach to student selection, largely based on Sedlacek’s ideas. The heart of the program is what OSU calls the

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Mary Sias
“It’s unfortunate, that we have come to think about diversity as only having a racial or ethnic dimension.”

Larry Roper

Colleges have long known—but are perhaps now starting to pay more attention to—the reality that advances

inclusion and access start long before a would-be student reaches for that college application. Accordingly, higher education is expanding and building on an already rich tradition that includes Saturday academies, bridge programs, summer schools, magnet programs, local teacher training, and other variations on outreach to K-12. Many colleges across the country support programs in this vein.

“Part of the problem is that we wait too long to try to make a difference in the lives of students,” says Mary Sias. That’s one reason why Kentucky State University (KSU) has adopted a local elementary school, with an emphasis on helping students increase their test scores in reading and mathematics. The university collaborates with teachers in the school to design summer programs that bring students to the campus. Overall, Sias says, the goal is to help ensure that “students are prepared to move on.” KSU also is part of a state effort called Regional Stewardship, in which colleges take responsibility by helping the communities around them. At KSU, that translates into professional development programming for local teachers and efforts to help students understand how college can help them achieve their goals.

At University of Michigan (UM)-Dearborn, chancellor Daniel Little also works to draw qualified students to campus in greater numbers. “Sociologically,” he says, “one major piece of the underrepresentation picture is that there are lots of well-prepared students who would do well [in college] who are discouraged from attending.”

Outreach to schools, Little believes, “allows the resources of the university to enhance the educational outcomes for students in schools that are basically not doing a particularly great job.” Such programs “enhance the student’s ability” while raising the student’s comfort level about going to college.

Little believes that if he can ensure that students “have a great and confirming educational experience,” they’ll take a message back to their friends and family—that “this is a place where you are going to thrive.” Part of the key, he says, is to “make sure that academic support services are there so that the student has every good possibility of succeeding and graduating.” If the student succeeds, Little believes, they’ll recommend the university as “a place where they really do care about your success.”

Promoting Pluralism

Campus culture is another important dimension in the ongoing drive toward inclusion and access. Little believes that institutions need to go out of their way to “make sure that each campus is doing as good a job [as possible] at creating a genuinely multicultural and respectful environment.” Under his leadership, UM-Dearborn has engaged in deliberate
“Right now we’re feeling our way,” said Eric Gilbertson, president of Michigan’s Saginaw Valley State University, talking about the effects of the decision by Michigan voters to accept Proposition 2, which bans affirmative action in state government. His institution has modified some financial aid programs where race or ethnicity was a factor. Gilbertson and his staff are working with legal counsel to review and, as necessary, recast hiring guidelines to discern which hiring and admissions factors are now permissible and impermissible.

“The voters have told us that race, gender, and ethnicity should not be a factor in making judgments about individuals,” Gilbertson said. “That generally comes down to two questions here—who is admitted, and who is hired. So we have to make more discerning judgments on an individualized basis.” Within that framework, Gilbertson says, “we make individualized holistic judgments about the personal and professional qualities of people, their character and motivation, how they might contribute to the richness and vitality of our communities—those can’t be code words for race, or gender, or ethnicity, but they give us tools to work with in diversifying and reaching out.”

Gilbertson also sees room within the new framework to continue his institution’s outreach in service to the less fortunate in the communities Saginaw Valley State serves. “Nothing about [Proposition 2] prevents us or lessens our obligation to reach out to the schools that serve primarily underserved and underrepresented people,” he said.

Near Detroit, another Michigan president wrestles with similar questions. Because the admissions process at the University of Michigan-Dearborn does not formally consider race or gender, it wasn’t affected by Proposition 2, chancellor Daniel Little reports. But the school had to review its financial aid programs, and, as necessary, reformulated them in ways that “clearly signaled that these are programs that are open to all,” Little said.

After the November election, Little wrote to faculty and staff to express, he said, “what I believe are the central values of the UM-Dearborn campus—that we vigorously express our concern for racial equality, that we vigorously express our concern for making educational opportunities as fully and widely available as possible, and that we vigorously state that in our country and our society those opportunities are not racially neutral.”

While Little obviously is committed to upholding the new law in Michigan, that doesn’t mean that he agrees with the voter’s decision on Proposition 2. “I feel quite passionately that we cannot give up the struggle for affirmative action,” he said. Calling affirmative action “a morally and socially justified tool,” Little said that “it is one that we really need to be able to retain... for addressing racial inequality that exists in our country.”

Little also has his eye on the future, and the big picture. “As the legal climate turns against affirmative action, I’m very concerned to be able to defend the other pieces of enhancement of diversity and enhancement of climate for underrepresented groups on campus,” he says. “In other words, I think this is a very long struggle that we’re going to be involved in and we should not give an inch of ground that we’re not forced to give.”

—Stephen Pelletier
efforts to create a campus environment that embraces diversity. Each year, the university offers a series of conversations on “Race for the Next Generation,” discussions that Little reports are well-attended by students. Another campus initiative, “Dearborn Legacy, Dearborn Promise: New Learning Across Race, Religion, Culture and Ethnicity,” is funded by the Ford Foundation through its “Difficult Dialogues Initiative,” a program designed to promote pluralism and academic freedom on campus. At Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, president Frank Pogue also has campus culture in mind. He has been working to help imbue the school with characteristics that support diversity naturally, in ways that also generate opportunities for learning. Admissions outreach helped the university double enrollment of persons of color over a ten-year span. At the same time, Pogue has insisted that Edinboro actively, even ardently, cultivate a strongly student-centered campus culture.

“We see students as first,” Pogue says, “and the reason we exist.” That learner focus, he says, supports the school’s intent to “create an environment—not just numbers—that is receptive to diversity.” At Edinboro, a rising tide lifts all boats: the focus is on respect for one another. As one of the university’s core values, civility is actively highlighted in campus conversations and celebrated in campus programs. The civility principle is purposefully woven into the annual theme that the campus identifies to help guide its work for a given year.

“We have created some 30 to 35 programs designed specifically to bring this community together in different ways, so that we learn from each other and we learn from the diversity that we have created here,” Pogue says. “We have to go beyond saying how many numbers we have to how effective we have been as an institution to benefit educationally from the diversity we have created.”

For Pogue, “affirmative action simply means that people regardless of color, gender, disability, orientation, or any other kind of difference have equal access to educational opportunities.” As one of the university’s core values, civility is actively highlighted in campus conversations and celebrated in campus programs. The civility principle is purposefully woven into the annual theme that the campus identifies to help guide its work for a given year.

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For Pogue, “affirmative action simply means that people regardless of color, gender, disability, orientation, or any other kind of difference have equal access to educational opportunities. It means that students regardless of where they live have equal access to educational opportunities that will prepare them for the college experience...access to quality educational programs, access to different majors and fields, access to quality faculty who are prepared to teach and make you a success, access to online courses, libraries, technologies, facilities.”

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Frank Pogue

Dreaming bigger dreams

Across academe as a whole, there is deep interest in ensuring that the pipeline to academic positions continues to produce, as Mary Sias says, “teachers who look like the students in the classroom.” Part of the motivation is opening students’ eyes to their individual potential. “I can’t stress [enough] the importance of minority students seeing people that they believe are role models doing the job that they would like to do,” Sias says. “It makes it possible for them to dream the bigger dreams. That’s critically important, even more so than it has been in the past.”

“I found it very eloquent,” Daniel Little says, “that corporations like General Motors, but also former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, filed amicus briefs in support of the affirmative action case for the University
of Michigan on the grounds that, in their industries, they need to have a pipeline of well-educated, talented, and smart minority leaders. That's true in the military, its true in the corporate world, and it's certainly true in academic life. It's absolutely true that to have more underrepresented groups in the teaching faculty is all by itself a strong magnet to bring more underrepresented people to the university.”

Similarly, there is deep interest in making sure that academe draws from a wide variety of candidates as it nurtures a next generation of college leaders. Frank Pogue chairs AASCU’s Millennium Leadership Initiative (MLI), a successful program that helps prepare individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups for positions as campus leaders. The program targets African Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Asians, and Pacific Islanders and anyone else, Pogue says, adding that “our numbers have included a sizeable number of white women and men—it doesn’t make any difference.” The point of MLI, he says, is that because “AASCU institutions are access institutions, it seems only logical to want to increase opportunities for access to the primary leadership role at institutions.”

**Important part of the mix**

Public higher education has, of course, always held access as a core value. As Little says, “AASCU institutions are a very important part of the mix in which American higher education can offer real equality of opportunity to underrepresented groups.” But as Sias suggests, that role cannot be taken for granted. “From the presidential perspective, as administrators we're going to have to constantly reaffirm and reinforce the notion of access and opportunity as part of our mission,” she says. “People forget that, and you have to remind them. It's not just that the community forgets it—our faculty and our staff forget it.”

“It's not enough to just talk the rhetoric,” Sias says. “We have to aggressively finds ways to reach out and make it happen.”

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Stephen Pelletier is a writer and communications consultant based in Rockville, Maryland.

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Daniel Little