A discussion about The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn led students to examine their racial identities. One student’s description of her background included “black, white, native American, and Puerto Rican.” Two white students exchanged a wry look. The entire class shouted a single word in reply: “Scholarship!”

Harristites have been wondering if race will come to be the qualifying factor that makes or breaks their college acceptances after all their accomplishments have been taken into consideration. Affirmative action is one of the causes of these worries.

What Affirmative Action Is

Affirmative action is a policy designed to correct discrimination, especially in relation to employment or education. According to the American Affirmative Action Association position paper, “The AAAA believes affirmative action continues to be an effective force to help all Americans rise as far as their talents and determination can take them. The Association supports the use of affirmative action to ensure inclusion in employment, educational admissions and the development of business opportunities. Affirmative action programs, properly designed and implemented, strengthen the national community, promote its economic well being, and maximize the benefits of our great diversity.”

President Lyndon Johnson established this policy in 1965 in order to rectify the discrimination in employment, education, and business despite the civil rights laws, which made such discrimination illegal.

Supporters of affirmative action say that it takes race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation or national origin into consideration in order to benefit an underrepresented group and counter the effects of past discrimination.

Affirmative action does not require employers or colleges to hire or accept a certain percentage of minorities; affirmative action programs determine whether the minorities mentioned above are well represented in an establishment. According to the AAAA, a goal of affirmative action is “Liason with federal, state and local agencies involved with equal opportunity compliance in employment and education.”

Students Voice their Opinions and Concerns

This policy has been a topic of controversy among the students of Townsend Harris in recent months. Jason MILLS, junior, a supporter of affirmative action, said, “It’s not unfair because minorities who get into the colleges of their choice get in because they are qualified to begin with. Their race just helps.”

Carl Deleon, junior, said, “Whether I’m applying to scholarship programs or writing an essay about myself, stating your heritage and culture is definitely a factor in how you come across to others. Hopefully, this can work to my advantage.”

“I feel that gives me a huge advantage due to my Hispanic heritage,” Melany Balaguera, senior, said. “I am Puerto Rican and a lower middle class citizen, he received more opportunities.”

Even though the main reason for that achievement is his great grades, the fact that he is Dominican meant that a large amount of affirmative action programs could continue.

Marybeth Babu, sophomore, said, “I believe that I am at an incredible disadvantage because I’m Indian, which I suppose classifies under Asian and since there are so many Indians/Asians that are smart, the chances of us getting our preferences are very low.”

“I am a Korean American and sadly I’m not a minority,” said Jae Pak, senior. “I have friends that are minorities and their grades don’t match up to mine, but they don’t feel as stressed about their acceptance into their colleges/universities due to their ethnicities. She commented that “Students shouldn’t rely on their race to be that extra push to getting in their dream college.”

Juliet Monclova, junior, said, “Many of my classmates who would not benefit from it (since they’re white) think that it’s a simple ticket to an Ivy, and that you don’t need to work hard at all in school, which isn’t true.”

Stephanie Mejia, freshman, expressed the same sentiment. She said, “When my brother was applying to colleges and getting his acceptances people joked around saying the only reason he got into those high schools was because he is Dominican, even though he’s really smart.”

She added, “One of my brother’s friends got into NYU with a full scholarship… Even though the main reason for that achievement is his great grades, the fact that he is Dominican and a lower middle class citizen, he received more opportunities.”

“I have an 87 GPA, I am the captain of the tennis team, and have been in SSR for three years,” said Catherine. “I’m not a candidate for Yale, but let’s just say that there was a fire in the admissions building and there was only 150 white applications left, one of which is mine. They’d have to take me, because they would have to work their racial numbers.”

Some students are indifferent to affirmative action. Giancarlo Frank, junior, said, “A genius is a genius, and a fool a fool, no matter their ethnic background.”

Some more optimistic students took their achievements into consideration and deemed that affirmative action wouldn’t have a great effect on them. Arianna Stergiou, freshman, said, “I don’t want to sound like I’m bragging now, but I am a good, hard-working, typical Townsend Harris student, so I feel that I am not at a complete disadvantage. I am a Caucasian from a middle class family and I would be disappointed if I lost my seat in a college to someone who was a minority, especially since I work so hard to achieve my goals. A student should be judged based on the grades they’ve achieved and the hard work they have done, not the way they were born. You cannot change the way you were born.”

This policy also forces people to choose how they want colleges to view them, in a way that puts them in the best light possible. Juliet Monclova stated, “I am Puerto Rican, White, and Black. I was notified that I am 1/16 Native American and I will try to put that as my nationality in order to increase my chances in getting into a good college, although I don’t label myself as Native American.”

Minority groups are always changing, however. The Census Bureau calculates that by 2042, 20% of Americans who identify themselves as Hispanic, black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander will together outnumber non-Hispanic whites.

Christina Lee concluded, “I choose to believe that in the end, people end up where they belong.”