Colleges are bracing for a court decision on affirmative action. Here’s what Princeton’s president is doing to prepare.

“We are going to continue to pursue within the limit of the law the diversity that is essential to the mission of this university,” said Princeton president Christopher L. Eisgruber.

By Susan Snyder

T he U.S. Supreme Court this spring is expected to issue a ruling that could ban or alter how local universities consider race when deciding whether to admit students.

Previous cases have ended with colleges all allowed to factor in a student’s race when making admissions decisions. But now to go directly to your question … We have used race as one factor among others in a holistic admissions process because we have found that essential to the impact that we have in the world, because we live in a multicultural world … we need students who have been educated in that type of environment and can go out and have an impact on it.

We’re still in a society where race makes a difference when you’re talking about health care, … when you’re talking about the job market, … when you’re talking about education,” he said. “And therefore, it makes a difference when you’re thinking about whom to admit to a university.”

Princeton, too, has faced scrutiny when it comes to admissions: After a complaint was filed that it was discriminating against Asian American applicants, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights investigated, and in 2015 the department found insufficient evidence to support the claim.

Here are excerpts from our conversation with Eisgruber, edited for space and clarity.

If you were to lose the ability to consider race in admissions, what would that mean to Princeton?

Let’s start by talking about the why. We think it’s important to the education we provide because people from different backgrounds can bring different perspectives to the study of history or biology or a wide range of other subjects. And we think it’s essential to the impact that we have in the world, because we live in a multicultural world … we need students who have been educated in that type of environment and can go out and have an impact on it.

How do you use race? Is it given a percentage worth?

No, it doesn’t factor into any numerical formula. We look at how does this person contribute to the educational community that we want to have and how do we understand more fully … what they’ve overcome as they’ve grown up.

Given that there’s no numerical formula, how can they really stop you from considering race? In a sense it’s a subjective process. Princeton has said it rejects more than 80% of valedictorians who apply and more than 50% of applicants with perfect SAT scores.

I think [Supreme Court justices] Amy Coney Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh at oral arguments were wrestling with the question that you just asked … I don’t know the answer.

If you ask a question on the application and the applicant answers by talking about their identity, how do you not consider that?

I don’t know. I’m not aware of any instance where someone gives you an honest answer to a question that is relevant to your selection procedure that you then have to ignore. We will do our best to comply, but I sure hope the Supreme Court doesn’t ask us to, in the name of equality, single out this one characteristic that is so important to most of our experiences and say ‘Hey, you’re going to have to pretend that doesn’t exist.’

You’ve stopped requiring students to submit standardized test scores during the pandemic and just expanded that policy for three years through fall 2023. Has that helped to diversify your pool?

Yes. … One of the most obvious advantages of being test optional is to get people into the pool who might not otherwise allow themselves to be considered … [by] a very selective place like this.

So why not just get rid of it?

We want to see how it affects the class of students as they come into the university. We want to make sure we are continuing to accurately assess their ability to do the real demanding work that gets done here at Princeton.

Some have suggested that colleges should stop giving preferences to children of alumni, so-called legacies, to boost diversity. What do you think?

We do take legacy into account (12.5% of students are children of alumni). We think it’s an important part of who we are as an institution that creates a community that persists long after somebody graduates. Legacy works in our admissions process as a literal tie breaker.

Our applicant pool is increasingly diverse, so we have diversity in our alumni. And if you change the legacy preference, it’s not going to affect whether students from well-represented groups get in. It’s not going to be the difference maker when it comes to racial diversity.

What about taking students from certain zip codes as a way to ensure more diversity?

There are people who suggest that one could use more fine-grained zip codes as a kind of proxy for race. We just don’t know what the Supreme Court is going to permit.

Personally, I would find it a weird kind of constitutional doctrine that would say we’re very concerned about the use of race but it’s OK if you use these other proxies which you are using precisely for the purpose of producing the kind of racial diversity that we actually know is important but we’re not going to do it directly.

We are going to continue to pursue within the limit of the law the diversity that is essential to the mission of this university and the aspirations of this country … if we have to do that through legally permissible proxies than more direct means, we will.