

DIVERSITY AND EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A NEW PARADIGM FOR INSTITUTIONAL EXCELLENCE

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Introduction

American higher education is unarguably the best in the world. With more than 3600 institutions (public and private, two-year and four-year) and 14 million students, it is a \$250 billion enterprise. In spite of its recognized and respected excellence and the enormous contributions it has made not only to this nation but also to the world, the overall quality and performance of America's network of higher education institutions can only be described as uneven. This unevenness is reflected in many ways. It can be seen not only in the wide variation in academic quality that can be found from institution to institution but also in the different ways in which various racial, ethnic and cultural groups may be valued and educated.

Above all, it must be recognized that American higher education is a microcosm of American society. It possesses all the strengths and possibilities as well as all the weaknesses and pathologies of our nation. Just as America continues to be a "work in progress", higher education is evolving as well. It is this evolution that must be guided and nurtured by those who understand the essential role that our colleges and universities play in improving our society. Racism, sexism, homophobia and discrimination against the physically impaired and the nontraditional student—overt or unintentional—exist in our colleges and universities. Concerted efforts toward the eradication of these maladies on our campuses will enhance our ability to ultimately eliminate them in the larger society. These are issues

concerning the diversity of faces, voices and ideas on our campuses and the nature, extent and quality of their inclusion in the life of the institutions. An increasingly important question relates to the means available to our colleges and universities, such as affirmative action and other race-, gender-, and culture-sensitive admissions and employment practices, to achieve meaningful levels of diversity and pluralism.

Today, I propose to discuss diversity on our college and university campuses and explain why I think it is important to higher education and to the nation. I will attempt to point out that the presence of diversity can sometimes be mistaken for the existence of inclusiveness and equal opportunity and, furthermore, that diversity in the absence of equity is meaningless or, at best, of questionable value. I will also argue that diversity among the student population, while necessary, is not sufficient to conclude that the institution is diverse and inclusive. True diversity requires going beyond the composition of the students enrolled. It requires diversity at all levels: students, faculty, staff, administrators, governing board and, ultimately, alumni. Furthermore, diversity should not be seen as the goal; it should be seen as the means to achieving equity and pluralism. As a goal, given the resources and intellectual capacity at our disposal, it falls short of what we are capable of achieving. Finally, I will discuss what I believe to be the single-most important ingredient needed to move beyond mere diversity to the creation and sustenance of a learning community that possesses both

excellence and equity. And that element is the presence of a diverse, student-focused faculty (and administrative staff) whose contributions to teaching, learning, and scholarly inquiry are honored and respected throughout the institution.

Diversity in Higher Education

Before World War II most of America's colleges and universities (not just those in the South where legalized segregation held sway) had few, if any, students of color. African American students attended institutions that comprised the network of the nation's historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Virtually all African Americans who were college and university faculty members taught at those same institutions, as well. After the war, with the support of the GI Bill, large numbers of students, many of them racial minorities, enrolled and studied at institutions across the country. A decade later, with the U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the civil rights movement as stimuli, many predominantly white colleges and universities began to drop the barriers to access that had prevented larger numbers of racial minorities from attendance.

The period from 1945 to the mid-1970s was a time of explosive growth in higher education. In order to accommodate the accelerating demand and, in some cases, rectify past practices of exclusion and discrimination, many

colleges and universities, particularly those in the southeastern United States, opened their doors to students of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities; many selective eastern universities dropped restrictive quotas that had limited the enrollment of Jews and racial minorities. The easing of discrimination in enrollment and hiring of racial and ethnic minorities in higher education, both de jure and de facto, was the result of a long and bitter battle. Progress was not easily achieved. Many adults can remember when Autherine Lucy at the University of Alabama, Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes at the University of Georgia and James Merideth at the University of Mississippi were the first black undergraduates at those southern institutions. For none of these four—nor for many more at similarly disposed institutions—was their entry unchallenged, legally or otherwise. Even in some northern and western cities and towns, local housing codes and a variety of restrictive covenants made it difficult for persons of color and many non-Christians to experience full acceptance as students or faculty members in a collegial community well into the 1970s and beyond.

In response to executive orders from the administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, most colleges and universities adopted some form of affirmative action with respect to admissions policies. But it was not until 1978, when the Supreme Court decided the case, *University of California Regents v. Bakke*, that the matter of racial and ethnic diversity in higher education came to the forefront and became instilled in the nation's

consciousness. The court ruled that the quota system used by the university was unconstitutional but Justice Lewis Powell, the swing vote on the case, postulated that “*obtaining the educational benefits of an ethnically diverse student body*” justified taking race and ethnicity into consideration for college admissions. This was, perhaps, the most significant public statement about the educational benefits of diversity that had been made up until that time.

The Bakke decision served as the foundation for college and university admissions policies until the mid-1990s when the University of California Regents rescinded the practice of taking race into account in admissions and employment. A short time later, California voters approved Proposition 209, banning affirmative action, and the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, in *Hopwood v. Texas*, judged that any consideration of race and ethnicity in the admissions process was unconstitutional. The University of Michigan cases that were acted upon by the Supreme Court in 2003 represented the first time that the Court had agreed to consider any of these challenges to the decision on Bakke.

Today, overt discrimination has all but disappeared but more subtle remnants of racial, gender, and ethnic/cultural bias remain and continue to prevent our campuses from being the models of pluralism America needs. A glimpse of the future tells us that we must work to rid academe of these

barriers to success because the next tidal wave of students will look quite different than the one that arrived in the 1960s.

Drawing upon U.S. Census Bureau projections, it is projected that the presence of white undergraduate students on college campuses will decline from a level of 70.6% in 2000 to 62.8% in 2015. Eighty percent of the growth from 13.4 million to 16 million undergraduates will be African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students. While the increase in African American students is expected to be minimal, Latino/Hispanic students will become the predominant minority group and the presence of Asian/Pacific Islander students will grow by 86% during this period.

These figures indicate clearly that racial diversity on most college and university campuses in America is unavoidable. But much more needs to be done to eliminate the gaps that still exist in college attendance and degree attainment for African Americans and Latinos as compared to white and Asian/Pacific Islander students. One reason for these disparities is the generally poorer level of academic preparation possessed by many black and Latino students, groups more likely to be from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds and the products of inferior elementary and secondary schools. But a major factor for the lower retention and graduation rates for these students is the failure of the institutions to recognize the educational and socialization needs of these different populations. With more aggressive

outreach programs directed at those high schools with large enrollments of minority students and more active efforts to improve the climate on campuses for the changing profile of incoming students, higher educational institutions can eliminate many of the obstacles that impede entry and the pursuit of a successful college experience.

Even with the changing demographics that foretell larger numbers of minorities within the college-age cohort, there is no guarantee that many of our colleges and universities will reflect the presence of these students in their student populations. There are three principal reasons for this prediction. The first is that the high price of attendance and correspondingly low levels of financial aid will discourage many, particularly those first-generation college-goers from low-income families. (It has been estimated that a \$1000 shift from grant to loan has as much as a 17% negative impact on retention for minority students.) Second, selective colleges and universities, in an effort to gain prestige, are admitting a significantly smaller percentage of students today than they were 20 years ago. This trend is expected to continue. The losers are likely to be those minority students who meet the requisite entrance requirements but may not fare well in a highly competitive, SAT- and GPA-driven admissions environment. And, third, the absence of federal government guidance about acceptable and legal policies and practices for affirmative action in the wake of the Supreme Court Grutter and Gratz decisions, removes important incentives for admissions officers to

produce diverse entering classes each fall. Thus, in spite of a more diverse group of college-eligible high school graduates in the future, it is highly probable that some institutions may even be less diverse, at least racially, than they are today. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that we could return to a condition such as the one that existed in 1962 when Harvard had only nine black students in its freshman class.

Defining Diversity and Pluralism

What is diversity? Why is diversity important to higher education?

Answering these questions is not a simple matter. Part of the reason is that the word, *diversity*, has become overworked and misused in higher education. It is most often used to denote the extent of the presence of various racial and ethnic groups within the population of students on college and university campuses. But that is not all that it should mean. It is my thesis that *diversity* should mean much more than numbers and percentages, that it should not be limited to matters of race and ethnicity and that, importantly, the presence of diversity should not be construed to mean that there exists the presence of equity. By constraining the definition of diversity to apply only to the mix of students in an institution—even if issues of sexual orientation, gender, disability, religion, national origin and economic class are taken into consideration--overlooks many other important considerations such as the range of ideas and intellectual concepts subject to study and inquiry.

Diversity is often used synonymously with pluralism. The two concepts are different. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines diversity to be “*The fact or quality of being diverse (distinct in kind, disparate, unlike), having variety in form, diversified, multiform.*” Pluralism, on the other hand, is defined to be “*The condition of being plural (of or composed of more than one member, set, or kind).*” It is further described as “*a condition in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups coexist within one nation.*” It is the idea of coexistence within one nation, or community, that distinguishes pluralism from mere diversity, the idea of moving from what one writer described as “a passive coexistence to a dynamic atmosphere of collaboration.”

Today, a casual perusal of any issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or some other publication that announces impending conferences and meetings on higher education will reveal a plethora of sessions with the word “diversity” somewhere in the title. This has been true for most of the last decade and especially so since Proposition 209 and Hopwood.. Those of us who believe that diversity is an essential ingredient for what is the best in American higher education rejoice when we recognize that the issue is high on the agenda of those writing and speaking about the state and the future of our nation’s colleges and universities. But I am becoming increasingly suspicious of the notion that diversity should continue to be the topic that

occupies so much of our attention. It has, I contend, mesmerized us to the extent that it has masked from our view what we really should be discussing in such sessions. That is, how do we transform our higher education institutions into pluralistic learning communities characterized by equity and excellence?

In the field of mathematics, one encounters the concepts of *necessity* and *sufficiency*. Mathematicians deal with propositions that are required or necessary in order for a truth to be upheld but that are in and of themselves not sufficient for a theory or postulate to be declared true. Some other proposition or fact must be present in order to declare the existence of truth or proof. Such is the case, I argue, with diversity.

If we accept as our goal the creation and sustenance of culturally pluralistic and inclusive institutions that affirm the presence of difference throughout and that value excellence at all levels of the institution—in its students, faculty, staff, administration, governing board, curriculum, student services, social organizations and mission—then we need to do more than achieve and celebrate diversity. To be certain, an institution cannot achieve what I have just described without the presence of diversity. Diversity is necessary but it is not sufficient, by itself, to produce the desired result. In other words, the mere presence of diversity does not assure the presence of equality of opportunity. Something else has to be present besides mere

diversity in order to reach that goal. Something within the institution has to be in place.

That something, in my opinion, consists of two things. One, the institution must have the will and the capacity to change in order to address fully the educational and socialization needs of its increasingly more diverse population. Two, there must be an unwavering commitment to excellence. Not the ersatz, narrow view of excellence found in most of those publications that have anointed themselves to be the judges of America's best colleges and universities but the kind of excellence that can best be measured in the quality of outcomes. The favorite argument of those who fear diversity is that it represents a diminution of an emphasis on quality and the pursuit of excellence as a consequence of its focus on equality and the presence of equity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Excellence cannot be narrowly defined, measured and compared by the use of SATs and GREs no matter how hard we try.

One of the principal impediments that we must overcome is the mindset on most college and university campuses that diversity refers only to the composition and characteristics of the student body. Ask an administrator or faculty member at most institutions to comment on the diversity at his or her institution and you will most likely receive a reply with percentages that pertain to the latest incoming class of students. If you respond to this answer

with a question about faculty diversity you are most likely to receive a response that is significantly different, one that demonstrates that little attention has been given to this matter. A true commitment to diversity requires more than concern for the diversity of the students who come to be educated. It requires a similar commitment to the diversity of those responsible for providing the education—faculty, administrators, staff, and trustees—and to the diversity of academic and support services provided to those students. Only then, can a meaningful assessment of the institution's commitment to a pluralistic, inclusive and multicultural learning environment be made. Only then, does a commitment to diversity make itself evident.

Transforming Our Institutions for Diversity

Today, higher education is confronted with the reality that the presence of African American, Latino and American Indian students, faculty and administrators falls well below the proportion of those groups in our society. Given the extraordinary demographic changes occurring throughout much of the country, this is a situation, if unheeded, portends serious and, even, dire consequences for the nation.

In order to rectify this situation there is a crying need for a transformation in education in this country. That transformation must begin in pre-school where successful interventions have already been shown to be

possible. It must continue through all levels of education up to and including graduate school. Our colleges and universities must embark on a new era of teaching and learning in which excellence is not so narrowly defined as it is today. It will require that we eliminate, to the extent possible, privilege from our definition of merit. (It is true, as Barry Switzer, former Oklahoma Sooners and, later, Dallas Cowboys coach once said, “Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking that they just hit a triple.”) True measures of quality must be adopted that are based upon a much deeper engagement with students—all students—than is occurring on the campuses of many colleges and universities of our nation. It will require that we show a greater commitment to the formulation and implementation of policies that will make higher education more affordable, accessible and equitable for all. We must have the courage to make higher education an inclusive rather than an exclusive industry where quality is no longer measured by the percentage of students who are declined admittance. We need to focus more of our attention on outcomes rather than primarily on input measures such as standardized admission test scores whose importance in predicting success in college is vastly overrated.

Creating Inclusive and Pluralistic Communities

It is becoming increasingly imperative for those of us in higher education to see the demographic changes that are taking place in society and, increasingly, on our campuses as an opportunity rather than a problem.

We need to see them as an opportunity for us to educate ourselves and, ultimately, America, on how to develop and sustain inclusive and pluralistic communities—ones with shared values and goals, common purposes and dreams. To be sure, diverse, equitable and multicultural communities are difficult to create and sustain. Witness the bloodshed in Eastern Europe or in the Middle East or in parts of Africa as an example. In this country, many of the hopes that were fostered in the post-civil rights era of the 1960s for building such communities have been dashed by the backlashes of the '80s and '90s, the reactions against affirmative action and increasing de facto residential segregation. I contend that such communities will be needed if America will ever fulfill its promise and, furthermore, that our colleges and universities must show the way. But to do so requires that we move far beyond the goals of achieving and celebrating the diversity of our students to the higher, common ground of inclusiveness and equality of opportunity throughout our institutions.

Most of all we need to concentrate on building educational communities of the type that the late Ernest L. Boyer wrote about in his foreword to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1990 report, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*. These are communities that are “purposeful, open, disciplined, just, caring and celebrative.” Boyer wrote, “And, I’m convinced that the challenge of building community reaches far beyond the campus as well. Higher education has an important obligation not only to

celebrate diversity but also to define larger, more inspired goals and in so doing serve as a model for the nation and the world.”

In this era during which previously disenfranchised and newly emergent groups are demanding recognition and rights of participation, a sense of community, of belonging and identity on the part of all individuals is essential. Without these measures of security no common ground can be found, no shared vision is possible, no mutually conceived and collaboratively pursued goals can exist, and no harmony can be achieved.

To be left out of the community, to be denied the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from community membership, to be considered a part of the “other” is tantamount to failure in our rapidly changing society. This is no less true in the cloistered realm of higher education. Far too long, some groups have not had full access to all the opportunities and benefits that our colleges and universities provide. Because they generally are not considered to be representatives of “the best and the brightest,” many, particularly members of racial minority groups in America, find themselves on the outside looking in. They experience a sense of isolation and alienation that often leads to poorer performance and higher dropout rates than those whom the institutions consider within the mainstream and more traditional.

Throughout my career in higher education I have heard alumni from the 40s and 50s decry the loss of community on their college campuses that are now increasingly populated with faces that were not present when they, themselves, were students. To be sure, the homogeneity that existed then does not exist today nor will it ever again. What is required, therefore, is that a new definition of community be fashioned that encompasses differences rather than similarities. That is the challenge for higher education and, ultimately, for the nation and the world.

In his monograph, *“Building Community,”* John Gardner pointed out the necessity of moving beyond the idea of the traditional community with its antiquated concepts of history and continuity. He suggests that although we may value the memory of the traditional community, we need to move into new forms of shared values and social interdependencies appropriate to more contemporary social organizations. Gardner calls for a pluralistic community with a high degree of coherence, what he calls *“wholeness incorporating diversity.”* This is, in his opinion, *“the transcendent goal of our time, the task for our generation—close to home and worldwide.”* He goes on to say, *“The play of conflicting interests in a framework of shared purposes is the drama of a free society. It is a robust exercise and a noisy one, not for the faint-hearted or the tidy-minded. Diversity is not simply “good” in that it implies breadth of tolerance and sympathy. A community of diverse elements has greater capacity to adapt and renew itself in a swiftly changing world.”* No better

argument can be made for creating inclusive learning communities at our colleges and universities—communities that are characterized by wholeness incorporating diversity.

The Essential Role of A Diverse Faculty

It is instructive to realize that it wasn't until 1948 that the first African American received tenure as a faculty member at a major, predominantly white American university, the University of Chicago. For many years, silence was the best word to describe the level of discussion concerning faculty diversity in America's colleges and universities. With rare exceptions, the only persons who dared speak on the subject were the tenured, secure faculty persons of color who attempted to arouse academe to recognize and rectify what they considered to be discriminatory hiring, retention and promotion practices. While some positive results occurred as a consequence of these calls for action, the overall level of faculty diversity in American higher education, and, in particular, in our nation's research and graduate institutions remains unconscionably low. The most encouraging sign today is that more and more people are writing and publicly discussing faculty diversity and why it is essential for the betterment, not only of education, but also of American society.

The most common response that one hears to the question of low minority representation on higher education faculties is that there is a dearth

of qualified minority Ph.D.s, and that those who do exist are highly sought by other colleges and universities. In other words, there is a “*pipeline*” problem. This argument has become the standard excuse given by administrators and faculty leaders when challenged to explain the relative absence of diversity among the instructors and researchers on their campuses. In their book, *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success*, Caroline Turner and Samuel L. Myers, Jr. argue that the problem of the pipeline can be traced to the invidious presence of racial, gender and ethnic bias in the academy. Its presence not only discourages the pursuit of faculty positions on the part of minorities and often, women, it creates an unwelcome and non-supportive atmosphere for those who do enter the profession. They are made to feel, according to the authors, as “guests in someone else’s house.” To be successful, faculty of color must overcome the effects of many myths that collectively suggest that minorities are likely to be unqualified, unavailable or unsuitable for hiring as members of the professorate. As a result, among the nation’s research and graduate level institutions minorities account for less than 5% of the total number of faculty. Sadly, this statistic shows no sign of improving. A telling example is that not one of the top 50 chemistry departments in America hired an African American as an assistant professor between 1991 and 2001 although more than 350 graduated with Ph.D.s in chemistry during that period.

Today, African Americans constitute 5% of America's full-time faculty members, 2.4% are Hispanics/Latinos, 5.1% are Asian/Pacific Americans, and less than 0.5% are American Indians. One-half of all black faculty are at HBCUs; the proportion at predominantly white universities, 2.3%, is virtually the same as it was 20 years ago. Most Latino faculty are at two-year colleges, while Asian Americans remain grossly underrepresented in administrative positions.

The poor record of success in producing diverse faculties in our nation's colleges and universities is due to many factors. They include the inadequate K-12 preparation received by racial minorities and the economically disadvantaged who are concentrated in many of our poorest and lowest achieving urban schools. There is a higher dropout rate for many of these same students and lower levels of entrance and progression in college and graduate school. Those who go on to pursue graduate and professional studies are more likely to encounter stereotypes and obstacles that serve to discourage them in their quest for full membership in the community of academic scholars. Subtle discrimination, ranging from the difficulty of finding dissertation advisers and mentors to the devaluing of their research areas, prevents many minority graduate students from completing their doctoral studies, the entry to the academic profession. Those who do obtain their doctorates are still faced with the high probability of encountering discrimination in employment due to long-held attitudes and practices in

colleges and universities. The failure of accreditation bodies (and those who presume to rank the performance of colleges and universities) to value the relevance of faculty and staff diversity to educational quality is one reason so little has happened in this area. Institutions focused solely on the goals of increased prestige and greater recognition in the “meritocracy” of American higher education feel no incentive and receive no reward for diversifying their faculties. In fact, institutions that do commit to increasing faculty and staff diversity risk being criticized for “pursuing equity at the expense of excellence.” This fact, alone, accounts for much of the apathy shown by colleges and universities toward improving faculty diversity despite their awareness of the benefits to educational quality that would accrue.

Daryl Smith, a professor at the Claremont Graduate University and a respected scholar argues that, *“The emphasis on a diverse faculty and staff is indeed critical but for more reasons than are often articulated.”* She describes five reasons.

- *There is a need to diversify faculty and staff in order to provide support for the benefit of students from particular groups.*
- *Diversification is an important symbol to students from these groups about their own futures and about the institution’s commitment to them.*
- *Diversification of the campus community creates a more comfortable environment for students as well as for faculty and staff.*

- *Diversification of the faculty and staff is likely to contribute to what is taught, how it is taught, and what is important to learn, contributions that are vital to the institution.*
- *A diverse faculty and staff reflect one measure of institutional success for an educational institution in a pluralistic society.*

Time does not allow me to discuss each of Smith's points but I will say a few words about the last one.

The final point in her list of reasons for improving faculty diversity is that success in this endeavor is one important measure of an institution's commitment to a pluralistic society. Success may not be easy to come by given that the supply of potential minority faculty members is smaller than desirable, especially in the fields of science and engineering. But the overworked excuse that qualified candidates do not exist is untenable. Institutions committed to faculty diversity can and do find prospective minority faculty members. These institutions act affirmatively and aggressively in seeking and recruiting minorities (and women of all races), making them feel welcomed and appreciated, and providing them with a sense of comfort and respect for the contributions they make to the intellectual and social life of their academic communities. It is this commitment, from the top to the bottom of the institution that is the difference-maker. Without true commitment to this cause, American colleges and universities will continue to have token representation of faculty members of color and other historically

underrepresented groups; the colleges and universities will be the poorer for it. By demonstrating this commitment, higher educational institutions can create the communities described by Gardner and Boyer, to which I referred earlier. The creation of a pluralistic learning community characterized by *“wholeness incorporating diversity”* allows an institution to serve as a beacon for the improvement of American society. There can be no *“larger, more inspired”* goal than this for any college or university at the beginning of the 21st century.

Conclusion

I have attempted, in this address, to show that the creation of an inclusive campus environment reflecting institutional commitment to the synergistic goals of excellence and equity must be the overarching purpose for higher education in the 21st century. Success requires that the institution’s commitment be genuine; that it not only talks the talk but also consistently walks the walk. This commitment must be evident in the institution’s mission statement, its catalog of course offerings, its admissions and hiring policies, its student life programs, and its community and public relations efforts. It must be seen and sensed at all levels of the institution for it to be deemed true. And it must be done with the same sense of urgency reflected in the message on the “No Trespassing” sign in the Indiana countryside that says, “If you want to cross this field you had better do it in 9.9 seconds, the bull can do it in 10 flat.” Only if an institution does each of these things will it be seen

as a college or university that provides all of its students with a total educational experience of the highest quality; one that prepares them for life in a world that has become increasingly complex, pluralistic and interdependent.