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Race and Excellence in American Higher Education

by
James Jennings

W.E.B. DuBois' assessment of American higher education's posture toward black students in 1926 — "The attitude of the northern institution toward the Negro student is one which varies from tolerance to active hostility"¹ — could have been written today based on several investigations. The American Council on Education reported recently that "the higher education community must continue to address the issues of losses in participation at all levels for blacks; the segregation of Hispanics; the retention and graduation of minority students, both undergraduate and graduate; the lack of growth for minorities in faculty and staff ranks."² The College Board reports that "although many of the legal barriers to educational opportunity have been removed, education — to a large extent — remains separate and unequal in the United States."³ The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights reports a significant drop in the number of minorities receiving bachelor's degrees, from 14,209 in 1975 to 6,792 in 1983.⁴ There are many other indices showing deterioration of a black (and Latino) presence in American higher education.

Statements by leading educators suggest that a black presence in predominantly white institutions of higher education is merely tolerated, not actively pursued or maintained. Yet, the authors of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* argue emphatically that excellence and equity represent a symbiotic relationship: "Twin goals of equity and high quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice."⁵ Despite this strong statement the report did not list one recommendation for achieving or pursuing equity, access, and diversity in American education. This kind of "lip service" characterizes many of this country's educational leaders.

The recent national reports focusing on higher education have pointed to the importance of revitalizing and strengthening colleges and universities in America in order to meet the technological and economic challenges of the twenty-first century. Generally, these reports have emphasized the idea of



"excellence" as critical for the survival of institutions of higher education. These same well-publicized reports, however, have overlooked or deemphasized the significance of access and racial diversity as basic requirements for that excellence:

The separation of quality or "excellence" from equity has been almost total. A number of the reports have indeed considered the issues of equity; in the main, however, the reports seem to assume that the push for educational equality which began in the 50s somehow led to the problem of the 80s.⁶

Generally, these reports have not reflected the importance of access and diversity in the demographic, economic, and political contexts of higher education. Some of the reports have suggested that these ideas may be competitive with, even contradictory to, each other.

The view that access is an important goal and that educational institutions should prioritize such a goal was undermined in the national report issued by the Association of American Colleges:

As laudable as it may be as an ideal, the widening of access also has contributed to the confusions that have beset the baccalaureate experience. The tension between democratic values and the effort to maintain standards for an undergraduate education can be creative but too often numbers and political considerations have prevailed over quality and rational-

ity in shaping the undergraduate course of study.⁷

A recent front-page heading in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reads, "Evidence is accumulating around the world that greatly increased access to higher education is coming at a tremendous price: a severe and pervasive decline in academic quality."⁸ There is a belief among many educators that access and racial diversity cannot be pursued without compromising quality or excellence. The various national study commissions did not, on the whole, seek to challenge this kind of thinking; their reports did not give serious attention to the importance — and urgency — of racial diversity on the American campus, nor did they consider how racial diversity in higher education could be integrated conceptually with the growing call for excellence. In fact, these reports imply that the pursuit of excellence as an abstract notion is much more important than issues of access or racial diversity.

Black educators have been specific in identifying the problems associated with racism and ethnocentrism on the American campus. The "Commission on the Higher Education of Minorities" conducted a survey of 311 minority educators around the country, and as a result they identified four major problems facing black academic officials:⁹

- Lack of institutional commitment to a minority presence other than on a "token" basis;
- Difficulty in gaining acceptance and respect of white colleagues;
- Institutional ethnocentrism reflected in disregard for or arrogance about cultures of minorities; and
- Continual categorization of black academic faculty and officials as "minority experts."

There is also a problem with white faculty who do not take a serious look at their course outlines and ask themselves what messages these outlines give.

One investigator researching public policies focusing on equality said: "There is today an assault on the policies and programs, including those in education, that have been designed to help blacks, other minorities, and the poor. There is also an assault on the meaning of equality and justice as those concepts relate to blacks, other minorities, the poor and women."¹⁰ And as we can see from the number of incidents on campuses across the country recently, the pendulum for black students in higher education has moved from mere tolerance to active hostility and even violence.

The National Institute of Prejudice and Violence in Baltimore reported that "an increasing number of colleges and universities are reporting incidents of cross burnings and other acts of blatant bigotry or racial violence."¹¹ In 1986 the media reported numerous instances of racial harassment and vio-

lence at places like the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, the Citadel in Charlestown, South Carolina, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Rhode Island at Kingston, Harvard University's Business School, the University of Texas at Austin, Swarthmore College and Lock Haven College, both in Pennsylvania, Dartmouth College, Brown University, and many other prestigious institutions. Despite the expressions of shock that these incidents elicit from leaders of American higher education, it must be pointed out that racial violence and harassment are but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to racism and racial insensitivity on the American campus. Many forms of racism are either actively supported or ignored by the very leaders who express shock at incidents of harassment and violence on the college campus.

Up until 15 or 20 years ago, even the suggestion of racial tolerance was resisted fiercely by American educators and their institutions. As Meyer Weinberg has written, higher education "since its earliest beginnings . . . has been deeply committed to the maintenance of racial and ethnic barriers."¹² He describes how white educators used their institutions not only to keep blacks away, but also to prevent their ideas and work from being acknowledged. There is the case of W.E.B. DuBois, whose doctoral dissertation at Harvard University was the first volume of the Harvard Historical Series, whose numerous books and articles established him as one of America's most internationally recognized intellectuals; yet, "fair Harvard" never invited him "to deliver even a single lecture."

Before and after the Civil War America's most prestigious northern institutions practiced or condoned exclusionary practices toward blacks and other people of color. In 1900 Amherst College in Massachusetts encouraged black applicants not to attend and urged instead that they go to the southern black colleges. DuBois received a letter from an official at Vassar College around this time, explaining that colored girls should be discouraged from attending the institution because they might offend white parents. Princeton University excluded blacks as a matter of policy until after World War II. In the 1940s blacks at the State University of Iowa were not allowed to participate in intramural basketball or wrestling for fear of physical contact with whites. Up until the 1960s Northwestern University respected the wishes of white women students or their parents not to be housed in dormitories with black female students.

It appears that in the 1980s most of the perpetrators of racial violence and harassment have been white students, but institutional posture and practices toward black students and other minorities may be the more serious problem. The kind of bigotry reflected in the painting of swastikas or cross burnings is not the major problem with which edu-

cators must grapple. The more serious problem is that these recent and recurring instances of racial harassment and violence are perceived as isolated events.¹³ As Martin Luther King, Jr., reflected, America fantasizes racial harmony; caught up in such a fantasy, racial incidents can be safely set aside as aberrations.¹⁴ Many American educators believe that and behave as if we do indeed live in a “post-civil rights” era, as if racism and bigotry have become but graffiti, to paraphrase one writer, on a solid wall of equality and justice.¹⁵

In the last several years the U.S. Department of Justice has aggressively undermined those federal initiatives which had started to produce some progress in racially and ethnically diversifying the white campus. The federal government has openly attacked affirmative action and other constitutionally-based statutory and regulatory approaches developed to ensure that blacks have access to the nation’s educational system. As Herman Schwartz writes:

The Reagan administration vigorously supported tax exemption for schools that discriminate against blacks. . . . It has approved previously rejected proposals by Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina regarding compliance with Federal Court orders to rid their higher education systems of racial discrimination; has held up as a model a school desegregation plan it negotiated in Bakersfield, California, which the *New York Times* called a “blueprint for evasion and for continuing the administration’s lax approach to school desegregation”; and has intervened against black plaintiffs in school desegregation cases, with Mr. Reynolds in a South Carolina case instructing his trial attorneys to make “those bastards . . . jump through every hoop.”¹⁶

Another way racial diversity and access is undermined by the United States Government is through the elimination of those financial aid initiatives that have been responsible, in large part, for what black presence there is in American higher education. The availability of financial aid is one of the most important factors in the recruitment and retention of minority students. To illustrate this briefly, note that in 1981 48% of black college-bound seniors lived in families with annual incomes under \$12,000; the figure for white college-bound seniors was 10%.¹⁷ Efforts to curtail financial aid in higher education hurt all students; they particularly hurt black and Latino students.

The practices of the federal government during the Reagan administration have been effective. The black presence in higher education is declining rapidly. In 1976 blacks comprised 9.4% of enrollment in all institutions of higher education, but by 1984 this figure dropped to 8.8%. In the last few years the

college attendance and completion rates for black students have declined; in 1976 the figure was 34% but by 1985 it dropped to 26%. Black participation rates in postgraduate education have declined since the early 70s; in 1984, only 4.8% of all students in graduate schools were black.¹⁸ According to the American Council on Education, only 2.2% of the total faculty at predominantly white colleges were black in 1984.¹⁹ And black administrators composed but 2.5% of the staff in these same institutions. Between 1976 and 1981 the percentage of masters degrees awarded to blacks declined by 16%; for whites the decline was only 4%. In 1985, 744 doctorate degrees were awarded in physics; only four of these degrees went to blacks.²⁰ Another report found that “minority groups are increasingly underrepresented at each higher level of degree attainment: high school completion, baccalaureate attainment, and advanced degree attainment.”²¹

Concerned educators and students must begin to acknowledge and understand that this means American higher education is headed towards a system-wide crisis. The decrease in the presence of black and Latino students and faculty on predominantly white campuses is occurring during a period of demographic development marked by substantial increases in the black and Latino population. There will be serious social, economic, and political implications if American higher education fails to develop academic policies and practices that can integrate the goal of excellence with the goal of access and racial diversity. How these issues are approached and resolved has major implications for the quality of education at colleges and universities. Racial diversity at both a student and faculty level is inseparable from quality and excellence in American education.

Although the idea of excellence is difficult to define specifically, we do have general notions of what components should be included in its definitions. Excellence goes beyond basic reading and writing, of course; and it is much more than training for a job or meeting standards of academic performance. Excellence suggests that students will be prepared to think critically and logically; that they will understand how society is organized and is developing. Excellence suggests that students will have some understanding of the interdependency of the world, and how technology has changed and continues to change that world. An education that reflects excellence prepares students for the demographic, cultural, political, and economic challenges facing society. If a quality education is to teach citizenship and expand the cultural horizons of the individual, then, as Dan W. Dodson has argued, such quality education is simply not possible in segregated or racially provincial settings.²²

In 1973 the Carnegie Commission issued a report describing essential components of a quality liberal

arts program.²³ The components included:

- Acquiring a general understanding of society and of the place of the individual within it;
- Making a choice among diverse intellectual environments so that the student has a better chance of finding one that matches his or her interests and talents;
- Developing a critical mind, in the sense of the capacity to test and challenge;
- Training that will aid in obtaining suitable employment;
- Surveying and intensifying cultural and creative interests;
- Studying ethical issues and forming values and life goals; and
- Meeting with and working with diverse types of people and thus learning to get along with them.

This represents a timely and significant definition of quality in higher education. These goals cannot be achieved in higher education today, however, without an institutional appreciation of the importance of racially-diverse learning. Can we really say that an individual has received a quality education if he or she has not been exposed to, and prepared to deal with and appreciate, multicultural and multiracial settings? If a quality education includes the components listed above, then we cannot possibly talk of quality liberal arts education without emphasizing access and racial diversity:

We cannot assume uncritically that present criteria of merit and procedures for their application have yielded the excellence intended; to the extent that the use of certain standards has resulted in the exclusion of women and minorities from professional positions in higher education, or their inclusion only in token proportions to their availability, the academy has denied itself access to the critical mass of intellectual vitality represented by these groups. We believe that such criteria must thus be considered deficient on the very grounds of excellence itself.²⁴

Due to the nation's demography and related socioeconomic developments, it is critical that higher education foster multicultural environments of learning for America's youth. But multicultural contexts for learning cannot be achieved without strong institutional commitment to the goals of access and racial diversity. Learning cannot take place effectively outside a context of racial diversity in America; effective learning can only take place in environments that allow for a total human experience. As Israel Scheffler writes:

Learning takes place not just by computing solutions to problems, nor even just by exchanging words, but by emulation, observation,

identification, wonder, supposition, dreams, initiation, doubt, action, conflict, ambition, participation, and regret. It is a matter of insight and perception, invention and self-knowledge, intimation and feeling, as much as of question and answer.²⁵

Quality education must include interaction which allows people to see each other from their own cultural vantage points and allows them to experience within a multicultural context the qualities listed by Scheffler. It is only in interactive settings which challenge the given economic, cultural, and political hierarchies of society that both whites and blacks can appreciate what Israel Scheffler refers to as "the relativity of potential." Interaction with other life styles, viewpoints, approaches to life situations allows one to see the potential in people, including one's own group, and minimizes the "denial of potential" in educational settings:

Such denials function to absolve the policy maker from accomplishing what is alleged to be impossible. If a child does *not have* the potential to become a skilled worker, or a professional, or a musician, or a writer, society surely cannot be charged with the obligation to realize such potential. When the matter is left in this state, the issue is made to hinge simply on some feature of the child itself; the child is stigmatized as having a deficiency that stands in the way of a desirable outcome.²⁶

Learning that reflects excellence must introduce students to the kinds of people and situations they will be experiencing professionally and culturally in our society. It is no longer possible to define quality or excellence in higher education separate from the need to prepare students for the complex economic, social, educational, and cultural issues they will face in the world of work, family, and community.

But even as the pursuit of excellence becomes more critical, it seems, as pointed out earlier, that various forms of racism are re-emerging on college campuses. The idea that the American campus must be a place where racial and ethnic tolerance is practiced *and* where the historical and cultural contributions of blacks, Latinos and other people of color can be both appreciated and seized as opportunity is being undermined by public policy and by certain voices within the academy itself. This is the case despite the fact that there are few educators who would disagree that racial and ethnic tolerance should be a characteristic of the American campus. A problem which is now with us, however, is the resistance on the part of American higher education to moving from racial tolerance to an active appreciation of the cultural contributions of blacks, the resistance to seizing diversity on the campus as an important opportunity for institutional growth and development — and for the pursuit of excellence.

This resistance is unfortunate, given that by the year 2000 one-third of America's population will be persons of color; about 40 million Americans will be black, another 40 million or so will be Latino, and about 10 million more will be Asian-American. Furthermore, within this period, one-third of America's work force will be composed of racial and ethnic minorities. The leadership of American higher education does not show many signs of serious and systematic attention to what our work force will look like in 10 years, or what our cities will look like, or what the world will look like. These are some of the social and economic issues that higher education needs to address, and they would do well to begin by paying attention to what their own campuses look like.

In a recent paper sponsored by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) the frequently cited demographer Harold Hodgkinson noted that there are about 7 to 10 years left in which to respond to three major developments:

1. The rapid increase in the percentage of minority youth in most states, leading to "minority majorities" among youth in about ten states by 1995.
2. The increased dependency of older white middle class on the young minorities who will enter the work force in the next decade.
3. The increasingly vague connection between the amount of education a person possesses and that person's occupation, and the disillusionment felt by many minorities who will not be able to back their increased educational attainments with stimulating and well-paying work.²⁷

In addition to these demographic imperatives there is also an intellectual imperative that higher education pay attention to the importance of racial diversity and access. The black experience in America, as it is reflected in the books and textbooks college teachers use and in the way courses are taught, is all but invisible, and it looms perhaps all the more largely, and more ominously, in this default.

Every aspect of [American] history — whether of laborer, or farmer, of student or intellectual, of the women's movement or the peace movement, whether diplomatic history or legal history or economic or political or social or ideological, whether of church or press, or cooperatives or science — everything, absolutely everything . . . that has ever appeared or ever occurred in the U.S. of America must be understood in terms of the relationship thereto of the Black people in the U.S.²⁸

On an intellectual level it can be argued that very few topics — at least in the social sciences and humanities — can be taught on our campuses without reference to an understanding of the Afro-American experience in this country. Courses in the humanities and social sciences that do not reflect the intellectual, social, and political contributions and concerns of people of color in this society represent an injustice and an educational disservice.

The expansion of access and racial diversity will allow American higher education to grow and realize a healthy evolution. Successful struggles for accessibility have allowed teachers to become better teachers. Professor Marilyn Frankenstein of the University of Massachusetts at Boston has pointed out, for example, that the teaching of "basic skills" — a by-product of greater accessibility to the university — "forced college teachers to examine issues of pedagogy, learning styles and their role in academia; this improved teaching in general."²⁹ Andrew J. Rudnick of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges has written that the challenges emanating from greater access will provide an opportunity for a new conceptualization:

Leaders of urban higher education today face a unique challenge in dealing with the profound changes taking place within this nation's urban public universities. The challenge is to develop a basic conceptualization they now lack. Such a conceptualization is needed for these leaders to make decisions that will enable their universities to become truly urban, yet remain fundamentally academic. It will expand their capacity to deal more effectively with both internal and external constituencies and the conflicting demands often made by these groups. By articulating this conceptualization, urban public university leaders will have a better understanding of the environment in which their institutions operate and be better equipped to respond, evolve and move forward.³⁰

As American educators accede to demands of access the results will represent major and long-lasting achievements for all of society.

American higher education is again at a crossroads. In 1971 the Assembly on University Goals and Governance, sponsored by the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, reported that a major question for educators was how higher education might accommodate both quantity and quality.³¹ Almost two decades later the higher education community still faces this question but with more specificity and more serious implications: How can higher education accommodate quality and excellence with the provision of access and opportunities to growing numbers of American citizens of color?

Somehow the leadership and faculty of higher education must bring into its corridors — in meaningful ways — blacks, Latinos, and Asians. More than ever American higher education and its leadership has the responsibility to say to those citizens of color — who in just a few years will number close to 90 to 95 million or more — that this country will practice what it preaches. Enlightened leadership and faculty must welcome not only the idea but the widespread practice of access and diversity in higher education. Only by accepting in meaningful ways a black and minority presence on campus can faculty ensure excellence in these unfolding stages of development for higher education in American society.

Educators have a responsibility to guarantee to white college youth that by the time they leave institutions of higher education they will have an appreciation of black, Latino, and Asian culture. Educators have a responsibility to tell black, Latino, and Asian students that they belong in American colleges and universities, that their thoughts and concerns are important in keeping those colleges and universities vibrant and healthy. Once this is done, the education we give to our students, drawing as it then will upon the full range of this nation's qualities and resources, will realize at last the excellence those students desire and deserve.

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