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Commentary: An Interview with Dr. Clarence Williams, Special Assistant to the President of Minority Affairs, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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An Interview with Dr. Clarence G. Williams, Special Assistant to the President for Minority Affairs, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

by Harold W. Horton

Harold W. Horton: Dr. Williams, sincere thanks for granting the *Trotter Review* an opportunity to dialogue with you about race and affirmative action in higher education in America. Let's begin by having you share with our readers some general biographical information about yourself.

Clarence G. Williams: It is with pleasure, as well as with a sense of urgency, that I dialogue with you on the critical issue of race and affirmative action in higher education in America. I was born and reared in Goldsboro, North Carolina and in 1961 received a Bachelor of Arts degree from North Carolina Central University. In 1967 I completed a Master of Arts degree at Hampton University (Institute).

In 1972 I was the recipient of a Ph.D. degree in Higher Education Administration and Counseling Psychology from the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut. During that same year, I was appointed Assistant Dean of the Graduate School at MIT. In 1974, I was promoted to Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Minority Affairs. Currently I am also an adjunct professor of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT. I am also completing another book.

HWH: With regard to recruiting, retaining and graduating Black students, how would you compare what traditionally, and predominantly white institutions of higher education are doing to those efforts of historically black colleges and universities?

CGW: I have been an administrator and teacher in higher education for 33 years, and for most of that time I have been fortunate enough to be at one of the most prestigious historically white institutions (HWIs) in the world, hence I have observed this matter very closely. Since 1968—after the riots in the cities and the assassination of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.—most HWIs have recruited and

maintained the presence of a small number of Black students on their campuses over the years to the present. On the other hand, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) did so long before 1968 and continue to lead the nation in awarding African-Americans baccalaureate degrees each year.

The latest statistics in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, in the July 9, 1998 edition, verify my point. Thank God for the Herculean job of the HBCUs! So, in some ways even though, historically, HBCUs have carried the bulk of the share of productivity related to Black degree holders, the fact is that a steady stream of young Blacks continue to be educated in HWIs as well as HBCUs.

HWH: It appears that some states, as well as some institutions of higher education, are retreating from the policies and practices of affirmative action and are declaring the playing field in equal opportunities in employment and education to be leveled off. Do you have concerns regarding this matter?

CGW: My fear is that if we in higher education retreat from affirmative action not only will meritorious Black candidates, but other under-represented minorities will be denied the opportunity to acquire an education at HWIs. This would create an additional burden on HBCUs to carry out the insurmountable task of teaching Black students with far less financial support than HWIs, causing a return to the familiar "separate and equal" theme. Clearly, we must not allow this to transpire; yet, it is in the hands of HWIs to prevent these types of anti-affirmative action propositions and the digression of our progressive strategies in higher education. For me what is most disturbing is a lack of penetration of Black professionals in the mainstream positions on the faculty and the administration of HWIs. Despite the dialogue about recruitment and need for more Black faculty members, there has been a truly insincere commitment and dismal outcome to bring Black faculty members on most college campuses. Over a period of thirty years—1968 to 1998—there has been no marked change in the percentage of Black faculty at colleges and universities in this country.

HWH: To what extent do you believe that people in higher education (e.g., board of trustee members and executive administrators) are seriously committed to inclusion or employing people of color in executive administrative positions? And what is your attitude toward the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation update of the Kerner Report?

CGW: If trustee members and executive administrators were really sincere, they have had enough time since 1968 to produce Black scholars to halt this totally deceptive claim that "we can't find any qualified Black or Hispanic candidates" for faculty positions. It is shameful and outrageous. Moreover the lack of Black professionals moving into mainstream senior positions, especially line

positions, on college campuses is nearly non-existent except in student affairs, athletics, and specialized social and racially related positions. Vice President for Administration, Vice President for Development, Vice President for Business Administration, Vice President or Director of Alumni Affairs, the General Counsel, and President of the university or college are ranks that still remain, for the most part, forbidden to Blacks in higher education today. It is racial in fact that these two-faced and hypocritical overtures continue to be displayed by the white establishment in higher education.

This is displayed by, on the one hand, verbalizing that they really believe in Black inclusion but, on the other hand, contriving in every imaginable way to not make changes when there are opportunities to do so. For example, we have heard very little in the media about the March 1998 report by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation and the Corporation for What Works, entitled "The Millennium National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders." It states that, "With attacks on affirmative action, wage discrimination against African-Americans increased. Studies show that many employers still base hiring decisions on racial stereotypes, preferring white hires over African-American or Hispanic applicants, Hispanics over African-Americans, African-American women over African-American men, and young African-American men least of all." With this in mind, it is also a reality that only white women on faculties and in administrations in higher education have benefitted substantially from affirmative action over the past thirty years.

HWH: You have spoken of racism in higher education. Do you think that pervasive denial has strongly impacted our ability in the academy to think straight about the causes and remedies associated with—this overused word—"racism" in higher education?

CGW: I am totally convinced that we in higher education have backtracked in our efforts to deal effectively with racism, especially as it pertains to Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians. Part of the problem is associated with the fact that many of the members of these groups—students, faculty members, and administrators—are blind to the ill effects of racism and continue to play on their mental and general welfare. In other words, many of them in the academy refuse to associate themselves with the less fortunate individuals in their own culture by denying that such racial conditions exist—including denial of their own somewhat less painfully prejudiced environment in higher education. These less fortunate individuals suffer enormous pain from racist acts in our society.

HWH: Are you suggesting that some Black people and other minority groups are somewhat responsible for the inability of institutions of higher learning to deal with these racial inequalities?

CGW: Yes. A prime example is that at MIT some Black

and Asian students feel that they have been accepted among their white peers but sooner or later become distressed when they are faced with more direct racial attacks. Moreover, it is simply that Black and other under-represented minorities are not taken seriously anymore. Perhaps what Alexis de Toqueville said applies here, "Evils which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable become intolerable when once the idea of escape from them is suggested." Unfortunately, progress appears to be made too often after there are considerable disruptions such as the riots in 1965 (Watts), 1967, 1968, and 1992. The demands that were made by Black students in the late 1960s and 1970s received attention and results. This is precisely how many of our previous Black faculty members and administrators were recruited to these HWIs, the few beneficiaries of that effort.

HWH: There are a few people who advocate that in America we have moved beyond racism. However, the Kerner Report (1968), Andrew Hacker (in the 1990s) and others strongly contend that there are at least "two nations" in America, one white and one Black. President Clinton's national dialogues on race have been referred to as unnecessary because of the "progress" that has been made in America, economically and politically to resolve that race problem. What do you think, and if progress and change is yet on the racial agenda, what can be done to make this happen?

CGW: It will take a similar kind of struggle—not necessarily the same but equal in magnitude—to change the direction of this downhill slope of the presence of tenure-track Black faculty and mainstream professionals in HWIs. You see, only Blacks and other ill-treated people in higher education—and certainly in our society—can guide us through this maze of racist attitudes, and behaviors. What is extremely difficult for most whites, including my close white colleagues and friends, is that they do not have a clue—although some come closer than others—about the energy that Blacks and perhaps other dark-skinned people of color go through to maintain the equilibrium to compete in the academy. It is incomprehensible how they maintain composure without actually physically striking out at the racial insults identified and processed in their minds each day God allows them to breathe. As Andrew Hacker, in his book *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal*, so directly points out, the sense of white superiority still captivates our nation. He contends that it is like a chronic disease, or "almost like a cancer," when he concludes: "there remains an unarticulated suspicion: might there be something about the Black race that suited them for slavery?" This is not to say anyone argues that human bondage was justified. Still the facts that slavery existed for so long and was so taken for granted cannot be erased from American minds. Only Black folks—or those non-Blacks tutored by Blacks—can give meaning to the causes of racism. Remedies can be accomplished only in the unity of all people.

HWH: As you well know, Professor Derrick Bell stated in his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, that racism was a permanent fixture ingrained in American society. In your last comments you expressed a similar thought. Do you believe that it is possible for us in America to honestly face up to racism and cope with it?

CGW: As strongly as my previous words have painted the landscape of higher education, I believe just as strongly that we do have the capacity and the knowledge to demonstrate to our nation how to deal with racism—especially as it affects dark-skinned people in our society. What I am not sure about is the “will power.” It is so painful once we get to the fire that we run so fast away once we see the reality of what we have to face. Let me share with you some additional facts in Eisenhower report:

1. Inner cities have become America’s poorhouses, and millions of African-Americans and Hispanics, as well as a good number of American Indians and Asian Americans, are today almost locked in them, with little hope of escape. Living in such concentrated poverty can have a devastating effect.

2. America’s neighborhoods and schools are resegregating. Two-thirds of African-American students and three-fourths of Hispanic students now attend predominantly minority schools—one third of each group is in intensely segregated schools.

3. States now spend more per year on prisons than on higher education, while 10 years ago spending priorities were just the opposite.

4. In the early 1990s, 1 of 4 young African-American men was in prison on probation or on parole. By the late 1990s, 1 of 3 young African-American men was in prison, on probation or on parole. In a prestigious study of the impact of prison-building, a panel of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that “by itself the criminal justice response to violence could accomplish no more than running in place.”

HWH: Professor Cornell West contends that “race matters.” The Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., in his book said, “keep hope alive.” Where do you stand? Deep down in your heart, have you given up on hoping, praying for the best as related to inequality in higher education and in American society?

CGW: No, I have not. Not yet. Many Black and other dark-skinned people have given up on our ability to see and act on an equal basis. I, for one, feel very strongly that we must work extremely hard to demonstrate at home—in the HWIs and our nation—how a nation can strive with a diverse population. This is especially true as we go globally to other countries to teach and preach to them on what we have not done here. I believe that faculty members and key administrators will have to begin developing new strategies to embrace Black and other people of color in leadership roles in the HWIs. If we in higher education are going to be the leaders of tomorrow here and abroad, we will have to begin honest dialogue and actions. I, personally, look forward to working to make this a reality at HWIs.

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