

Minorities and the Egalitarian

—Meritocratic Values Conflict in American Higher Education:
New Answers for an Old Problem

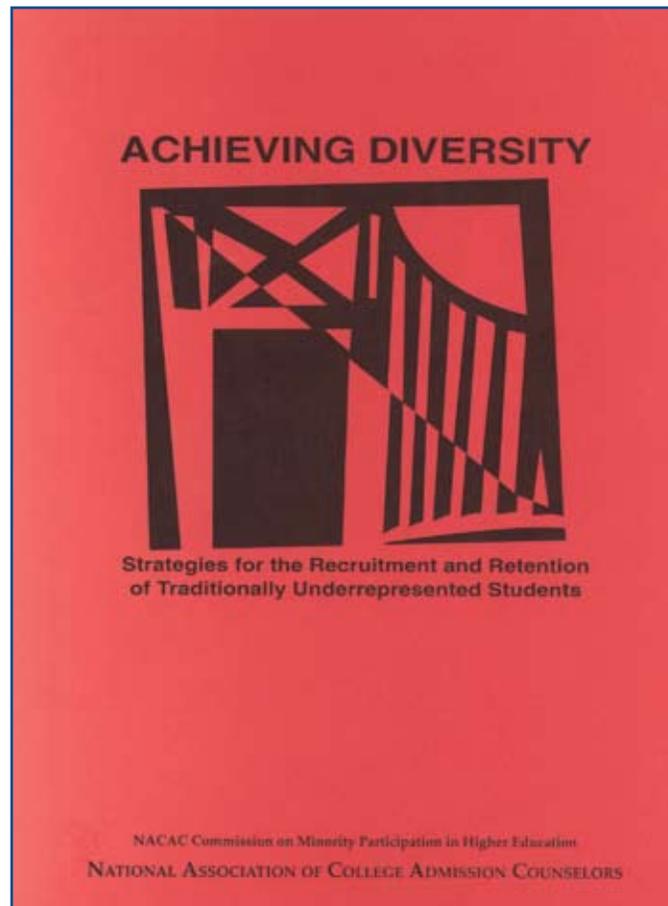
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An Unrecognized Problem

As Americans approach the year 2000, we can look upon the many significant accomplishments of the 20th Century

with a sense of pride. We have literally reached the heavens in our national explorations. We can also look at the 20th Century with a profound sense of confusion. Alas, we continue to suffer from a national sense of philosophical confusion in addressing inequities and conflicts which threaten the very core of our nation's social fabric.

This article is from Achieving Diversity: Strategies for the Recruitment and Retention of Traditionally Underrepresented Students, which in its entirety, won the 1993 Muir Award.



Because American colleges and universities tend to reflect our national culture, they too find themselves facing many of these confusing philosophical issues. In his book, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (1987), Ernest Boyer categorizes these philosophical conflicts into eight areas

of "tension." Many of these tensions center on issues with which higher educators are all too familiar; such as careerism vs. liberal arts, teaching vs. research and publishing.

Boyer's analysis, however, largely ignores one of the most intransigent of these tensions. These are the difficult issues of: (a) enhancing higher educational access for populations which have been historically underserved ("egalitarianism"), and (b) insuring that graduates are academically and vocationally competent to serve as leaders in our nation's economic and societal arenas ("meritocratic": a term popularized by sociologist Michael Young (1958), inferring allocation of rewards based upon performance).

BE REALISTIC:

Higher educational leaders have, with some justification, pleaded that the colleges and universities of our nation should not be held solely accountable for achieving the economic and social equity to which all Americans aspire.

This philosophical question has particularly significant educational implications for our nation's minority groups. In fact, the lack of this issue's resolution underlies most of the problems surrounding minority access to, and success in, higher education.

Virtually all institutions of higher education support both concepts of egalitarianism and meritocracy, but few institutions have developed operational practices which effectively reconcile them. Is such reconciliation possible? Can the American higher educational enterprise simultaneously accommodate both egalitarianism and meritocracy? Can higher educational institutions provide greater access and success for minority populations and still insure that their graduates will be prepared to compete for our society's economic and social rewards?

Equal Access: Equal Opportunity

Higher educational leaders have historically maintained that the "industry" accommodates the ideals of egalitarianism as well as meritocracy through the vast array of higher-educational institutions which exist in the United States. College administrators and boards of directors often emphasize that some type of postsecondary educational institution exists for anyone and everyone who seeks to avail themselves of this opportunity. So do these numerous and diverse higher educational institutions offer students, and particularly minority students, equal educational opportunities?

Alexander Astin (1985) postulates that a well recognized, informal, hierarchy of higher educational institutions exists in our nation. In most instances this hierarchy is fostered through a commonly held American belief system. In fact, this hierarchy actually exists in several states by formal legislative decree. Astin divides this hierarchy into nine levels of selectivity based upon mean SAT scores for entering freshman. At the top of this informal structure are private universities and private, four-year colleges. The middle selectivity levels of his hierarchy include more than two-thirds of the public universities. The public colleges rank at the bottom level (Astin, 1985).

How are minority students distributed among institutions within this hierarchy? Astin finds that blacks, Hispanics and Native-Americans, are disproportionately over-represented in two-year colleges and underrepresented in both public and private universities (1982). This over-representation of these minorities in institutions located on the lower levels of the hierarchy seems to be the result of the method by which students are selected for collegiate admission.

Two measures have been almost exclusively employed in this selection process: (a) high school grades and (b) standardized college entrance test scores. When standardized college entrance test scores are examined from a meritocratic point of

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view, large percentages of blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans appear to be less well-prepared than Anglos to enter the "competitive" colleges and universities at the upper levels of Astin's higher educational hierarchy. (In other words, Anglos appear to be more meritorious). In 1987 the average SAT scores for black high school seniors were: 351 Verbal and 377 Math. The average SAT scores for Mexican-American high school seniors were: 379 Verbal and 424 Math. In the same year the average SAT scores for Anglo high school seniors were 447 Verbal and 489 Math (The College Board, 1987).

As we enter the last decade of this century, America finds itself absorbing a great number of Latino immigrants, many of whom are highly motivated to be educated. Yet, American higher educational institutions, while purporting to embrace principles of egalitarianism have not adequately accommodated these immigrants by coming to grips with the difficult issue of integrating

It would, thus, seem that the attraction of minorities to the community colleges of this nation has tended to provide them greater educational access, but alas, this attraction has not provided equity in achieving the baccalaureate degree at any institution, and particularly the prestigious, most meritorious, institutions.

Seventy-four percent of full-time students, including minorities, who enter two-year colleges indicate they plan to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree (Bensimon and Riley, 1984). It must be noted, however, that nationally, fewer than five percent of full and part-time community college students actually transfer with junior status to four-year institutions (Cohen and Brawer, 1982). In the two decades since their proliferation, two-year institutions have been transformed from institutions primarily offering college-parallel, liberal arts programs to institutions emphasizing terminal vocational programs. With this mounting emphasis upon vocational education, community colleges have increasingly been cut off from the mainstream of higher education. In fact, Alexander Astin states that attendance at a two-year institution has a negative independent effect on the likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree, (1985).

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egalitarian principles into their historically-based meritocratic value system. The effective product of this discontinuity is; students increasingly being sorted into different strata of higher educational institutions, with members of three minority groups consistently finding themselves in the lower levels. *American higher educational enrollment patterns have produced a type of "de facto" tracking system.*

The Two-Year College

It is no coincidence that during the 1960s as opportunities (including higher educational opportunities) for minority Americans expanded as a result of the civil rights movement, the number and size of community colleges grew by exponential proportions. These institutions were envisioned as low cost "colleges of the people," located where the people lived, and emphasizing teaching and remediation for members of our society who sought the benefits of higher education, but were academically underprepared to participate. Community colleges were hailed as "the answer" for providing minorities with access to American four-year colleges.

Minority students enthusiastically responded, (and continue to respond) to the educational opportunities offered by these open admission institutions. While, nationally, only 27 percent of Anglos who attend college on a full-time basis enroll in community colleges, 37 percent of black and 45 percent of Hispanic full-time college students attend these institutions (Warren, 1985). Are these institutions in fact, the answer to higher education's accommodating both egalitarian and meritocratic principles?

State legislatures also demonstrate considerable confusion concerning the mission of their urban institutions. Many urban universities' enrollments are growing while enrollments in portions of the state systems of which they are a part, are declining. Political leaders are often tempted to limit the development of new programs in expanding urban colleges, but feel they must continue to support established programs at other institutions which may be experiencing stable or declining enrollments.

tions. Yet, professional and managerial positions (of social and economic power) in our society are increasingly held by possessors of baccalaureate degrees (Astin, 1982).

If community colleges have not fulfilled the hopes of educational leaders who envisioned them as the leading edge of an open and egalitarian system, how can our nation's colleges attain this crucial objective while still maintaining their meritocratic standards? How can the seemingly conflicting values of equity of opportunity and reward for meritorious performance be accommodated? Are there answers to this philosophical dilemma which so significantly affects minorities?

There are answers. American colleges and universities can look to the ascendancy of the "urban university" as holding great promise for reconciling this apparent conflict.

The Urban University

Minorities in the United States are typically urban dwellers. The inner-city is the home of 54.2 percent of all black children in America (Feistritzer, 1985). Eighty-seven percent of all Hispanics reside in metropolitan areas, and 60 percent live within metropolitan areas of more than one million people (National Council of La Raza, 1986).

Urban universities have made significant progress in meeting the special academic and social-personal needs of urban, minority students. In spite of this progress minorities often view urban universities as being largely committed to the constituent populations. In fact, Rudnick (1983) states that many urban university presidents believe that they cannot truly be a "university" and concurrently attack the problems of urban minorities. The implication is that this concentration tends to make urban, public universities appear to be "lesser" entities than suburban and extra-suburban institutions.

This confusion concerning direction and purpose is not limited to the chief executive officers of these institutions. The faculty of these schools are often graduates of the nation's most prestigious universities with academic backgrounds stressing traditional scholarly pursuits. These individuals, thus, are often at odds with the priorities of technical and professional programs, and the emphasis upon undergraduate teaching and academic support which are so necessary in urban institutions.

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institutions which may be experiencing stable or declining enrollments. Urban universities may also be placed at a disadvantage by state funding formulas that fail to give adequate attention to the relatively high costs of these institutions' academic support, additional student services, and numerous technical and professional programs.

The single greatest problem articulated by the leaders of urban universities is the need of their students for help with basic skills (Cafferty and Spangenberg, 1983). Yet, in many states these institutions are experiencing pressure to raise admission requirements and to reduce the amount of academic support they offer (Southern Regional Education Board, 1983). In the face of convincing evidence that

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many minority students in our nation's urban centers are not academically prepared to perform baccalaureate level work, who will support them in developing academic competencies to achieve the baccalaureate degree? This document has addressed the fact that community colleges have not adequately satisfied this need. Research-oriented, residential, universities still do not enroll and support large numbers of minority, urban students.

If for no other reason (and there are better reasons) than default: American urban universities must fulfill the critical need of educating urban minorities. It is the urban university that can provide increased access for underrepresented minorities while supporting these individuals to allow them a real opportunity for academic success leading to graduation. In other words, these institutions can embrace egalitarian principles to a greater extent than most residential institutions. At the same time, urban universities have the capability (and the obligation) of insuring that all of their graduates have met rigorous academic standards.

Recommendations

How can American educators insure that new directions in college admission requirements produce matriculants who eventually graduate, and how can institutions best serve minority and educationally-disadvantaged students once they are admitted? To accomplish these Herculean tasks all higher educational institutions must establish the following priorities:

1. In the face of demands for raising standards and greater selectivity, colleges must remain available to the great diversity of students (including minority and underprepared students) who seek admission in ever greater numbers. This is not a plea to enroll students who hold little chance of succeeding. Through employing nontraditional admission screening devices students can be effectively evaluated in reference to their potential for collegiate persistence and success.
2. Higher educators must resist the substantive movement for the elimination of remediation in four-year, baccalaureate degree granting institutions. The need for academic support cannot be ignored. Will this remediation be somewhat redundant and

will it even compete with programs offered in community colleges? Yes, but the critical fact remains that our nation has little other choice. If students can only receive remediation in two-year colleges, and if less than five percent of community college students transfer after two years to four-year institutions, it is obvious that most students needing remediation cannot currently aspire to a baccalaureate degree.

3. Universities must recruit and train faculty and administrators who are sensitive and skilled in meeting the unique educational needs of urban minorities. These must be individuals who have a dedication to teaching and serving the nontraditional student, and who are well recognized and remunerated for their efforts. All academic faculty must be prepared to teach the underprepared. Academic support should not be the sole responsibility of teaching assistants, special services, minority affairs, or other student affairs departments. This function must be integrated into all aspects of universities' academic programs.
4. Many minority students are "first-generation" college attendees and consequently, may not have adequate familial and

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peer group support. Thus, they often drop out of college not because of academic problems, but because of the absence of a supportive environment (Astin, 1982). Extensive personal-social support programs must be an accepted feature of all universities.

5. The disturbing trend of student financial aid packages being primarily comprised of loans must be reversed. Many minority individuals tend to be poorer than Anglo-Americans (Richardson, 1985). The prospect of heavily indebting themselves to enroll in higher educational institutions tends to make college attendance an unattractive option.

Summary

A final question remains: can colleges and universities concurrently satisfy the objectives of increased access (egalitarian considerations), and emphasis upon academic standards, (meritocratic consideration) and thus enhance higher educational access, as well as quality of educational experience for minorities and the underserved? Yes, all higher educational institutions can concentrate on these worthy goals. However, urban institutions are in the unique position of satisfying these groups' higher educational needs to a much greater extent than has previously been recognized. To be sure, many urban, higher educational institutions tend to be less competitive and less prestigious than their suburban and extra-suburban counterparts. These urban universities are, however, generally more prestigious and more competitive than most two-year institutions.

Thus, by increasing the numbers of minority students enrolled in all higher educational institutions and particularly in urban universities, large numbers of minorities will effectively move up the educational hierarchy. These students will thereby increase their opportunity for access to social power while still being insured that upon graduation, they will possess the necessary knowledge, and competencies to bring credit to their institutions and themselves. Will these enrollments move minorities up the hierarchy far enough? Probably not, but this is the first step in the right direction. In future generations larger numbers will, hopefully, move to higher levels.

Higher educational leaders have, with some justification, pleaded that the colleges and universities of our nation should not be held solely accountable for achieving the economic and social equity to which all Americans aspire. The social problems which lie beyond the immediate influence of colleges and universities cannot, however, be used as a rationale for avoiding institutional action. The belief that all residents of our land can be socially and economically enhanced through education remains a strong national value. A strident cry for "maintaining standards" cannot excuse avoidance of this responsibility. The time has come for a rededication of all universities to the unfinished business of

promoting equal educational opportunity for minorities and the educationally disadvantaged. All higher educational institutions, and especially urban institutions, must share the responsibility for serving urban, minority populations. This responsibility will likely require readjustments for the more competitive universities, but the need is critical. All institutions must prepare in filling the void. This equity can be promoted without compromising our nation's long held meritocratic beliefs. Through realigned priorities and increased dedication we can embrace both of these important philosophical values and more nearly realize the ideas of a true democracy.

I am quite sure that all college counselors regard themselves as teachers and educators, but they are something else as well. They are links between the location of childhood and the larger, more risky terrain of first adulthood.

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