

By Dr. Carol Elam and Dr. Gilbert Brown

# The Inclusive University:

Helping Minority Students Choose a College and Identify Institutions that Value Diversity



In the early 1960's, with the exception of students who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities, relatively few students of color pursued a higher education in the United States. Today, however, about one in five U.S. college students is a minority (ACE and AAUP, 2000). Colleges and universities are grappling with issues related to the changing needs and demands of an increasingly diverse society, and the resulting changing demographic constellation of their student bodies. Many traditionally white institutions are working to be viewed and to function as "inclusive universities." The inclusive university provides equal access and opportunity, as well as an accommodating environment, for all members of the academic community, regardless of racial, ethnic, social, or economic backgrounds (CPRJ, 1993). Institutions of higher education seeking to become more inclusive are considering how to attract more underrepresented students of color to their campuses. While they recognize that traditional pre-college recruitment—that incorporates such activities as high school mentoring and tutorial programs, articulation agreements with selected institutions, need-based financial aid awards, and race-sensitive admission policies are important—they know that they must do more for students of color once they matriculate to help them feel comfortable on campus and to ensure their success (ACE and AAUP, 2000). To that end, administrators are considering other factors important to students: curriculum, opportunities for faculty and peer interaction, support services, social activities on campus and in the community, and living arrangements. Institutional leaders also recognize that, in some circumstances, they must overcome past perceptions of discrimination.

High school guidance counselors and college admission officers can work together as partners to support minority students in their pursuit of a higher education. While assisting students in determining factors important in their college choice, high school counselors can also help students devise lists of questions to ask admission officers at high school college nights, in correspondence, or during campus visits to determine if that campus values diversity and will be welcoming to them. College admission officers can be prepared to answer these questions, and can alert university officials to issues and concerns of minority applicants.

We address four purposes in this article. First, we explain why ethnic and racial diversity is important on college campuses. Second, we offer a list of questions that high school guidance counselors can present to prospective minority applicants to guide their examination of colleges and universities to which they plan to apply and visit. Third, we offer suggestions to college admission officers as to how to address topics of concern to minority applicants to their institutions. Fourth, we offer ideas on how colleges and universities can enhance their environments to support diversity.

### 1. The Importance of Diversity on College and University Campuses

In the United States today, as in the world, there is no single culture into which to assimilate (CPRJ, 1993). All students who enter institutions of higher education must be prepared to excel in a diverse, global and interdependent society. They must understand, appreciate, and value contributions of different peoples from divergent backgrounds. To that end, college students should be encouraged to study other cultures, in context, to learn about the perspectives of others who live outside their experience (CPRJ, 1993). Colleges and universities should be equipped to provide such multicultural educational opportunities, and bring students of diverse backgrounds together for discourse and interaction. Beyond giving shape and life to the concept of culture, learning experiences among students of diverse backgrounds have positive educational benefits pertaining to cognitive and personal development. Learning experiences that incorporate multiculturalism and diversity challenge stereotypes, broaden perspectives, and sharpen critical thinking and communication skills (Coleman, 2000). Curricula that bring students from diverse backgrounds together to grapple with current social issues can promote constructive interactions that increase understanding, decrease prejudicial attitudes, and foster development of attitudes regarding social justice (Smith, 1997).

Change in the demographic make-up of society is driving much of higher education's efforts in creating inclusive universities. In promoting diversity on their campuses, administrative leaders must address diversity

using a variety of interventions across all levels. Colleges and universities must find ways to facilitate access to education for all students, including those who have been underrepresented in the past. They must develop an environment that is welcoming to all students and they must provide an educational setting that fosters discussion of many viewpoints. The college experience greatly influences the ways that students understand, experience and interpret the world. As the demographics of the United States become more diverse, and as social, economic and political questions are considered and resolved in a global context, it is important for students to confront issues related to diversity on the university campus as a precursor to taking on roles as citizens in their local and world community (Smith, 1997).

### 2. Choosing the Right College: The Role of the High School Guidance Counselor

Hossler and Gallagher (1984) have reported that a student's decision to attend college is influenced by individual factors such as his or her ability, socioeconomic status, and the attitudes of parents and peers. They also reported that a student's choice of a particular college is influenced by communications from the college and offers of aid, as well as preferences and perceptions of the student regarding the quality of the institution. As with majority students, students of color will vary both within and across minority groups according to ability, socioeconomic status, and attitudes of parents and peers toward education. That said, however, some minority students may have their college selection process confounded by the following issues: they may have received little encouragement to pursue a higher education and feel alienated; they may be the first member of their family to go to college and have little insight or experience with the process; and they may not know factors to consider in selecting a suitable college (Freeman, 1999; Herring, 1998; Valentine, 2001; Weicheng, 2003).

High school counselors need to encourage the college aspirations of minority students while they help them articulate their own hopes and concerns related to the qualities of the college or university that they hope to attend. Robbins (1995) suggests that students generate a list of factors that are important to them, and then work to judge each college or university according to that criteria. Table 1 provides a listing of college choice considerations that can be used to supplement the "hopes and concerns" that a minority student articulates. To download Table 1, go to [www.nacac.com/news\\_journal\\_inthisissue.html](http://www.nacac.com/news_journal_inthisissue.html).

When most students compare and consider higher education institutions, they look at such issues as financial aid, curriculum, student activities, student services, personal support and living arrangements in the community in which the institution resides. Many publications are available that



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Minority students looking at particular college campuses may inquire about vestiges of discrimination or racism. Students and their family members may be aware of previous exclusionary admission policies, hate crimes or racially-motivated incidents, low retention and graduation rates for minority students, and exclusion of content related to minority history, culture, and accomplishments from the college curriculum.

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detail criteria that are important to consider in college choice (ISI, 1998; Robbins, 1995; Shields, 1995). In addition, researchers have described factors that are important for achieving success in college from the perspective of particular groups of minority students (Fries-Britt, 2002; Higgins et al., 1993; Steward, Germain and Jackson, 1992; Weicheng, 2003). Such publications provide valuable information to prospective minority college applicants.

### **3. Responding to Campus Questions and Concerns: The Role of the Admission Officer**

College admission officers are usually the first campus contacts that minority students speak with when exploring their college options. As such, the admission officer should be prepared to address a variety of issues and questions, some negative in nature, some positive, and some simply informational. In responding to student queries, the college admission officer will soon recognize the important role of institutional image in college consideration and choice. An institutional image reflects the beliefs, thoughts, perceptions, recollections, and conclusions that individuals have of your institution. The image is influenced by people including students, faculty, administrators, staff, and alumni, as well as by activities and events including academics and curriculum, facilities and environment, and historical events and current activities (Topor, 1986). For minority students, their image of the institution is important, but perhaps just as influential is the image that parents, grandparents, other family members, friends, and neighbors hold of the institution. Perceptions held by family and significant others can inform the student's image of an institution.

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admission officers should be aware of current actions as well as historical occurrences on campus that may have led to the student's concerns about racism at the institution. If this issue arises, the admission officer should address the student's questions openly and honestly.

College admission officers need to be prepared to provide responses for the questions posed in Table 1 regarding curriculum, majors, graduation rates, and job prospects; financial aid; student activities, student services, and personal support; and living arrangements, transportation, and safety and security. They should offer students written information that addresses such questions, and provide Web sites where students can obtain additional information (including names of contact personnel). College admission officers should invite students to their institutions for campus visits, and offer to arrange for the student to meet with faculty or staff who manage programs or services that are of interest to them. If possible and requested, college admission officers should also arrange for the minority applicant to meet with current minority college students during their campus visit.

Once the minority student decides to enroll and matriculate at a particular campus, it is important for the services and outreach to them to continue.

### **4. Improving the Campus Climate**

In their mission statements, many colleges and universities articulate values that support diversity. University goals for student education may include personal development and growth, learning new perspectives from people of diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures, and commitment to community and society. A lack of diversity within the university community limits the educational opportunities and challenges available for students, and compromises the ability of the institution to fulfill its mission related to diversity (ACE and AAUP, 2000).

In attracting students of color to their campuses, institutional leaders must devise and implement comprehensive and energetic efforts to identify and recruit students from diverse backgrounds to their institutions (CPRJ, 1993). Networks of community contacts can help identify young students of promise who may be first-generation college attendees. Such networks include guidance counselors as well as minority group leaders in churches, Greek organizations, and community action councils. Legacy students can be identified through regular contacts with alumni who have positive experiences as undergraduates. It is also important to track and maintain ongoing contact with junior high and high school students who participate in current university outreach programs by working cooperatively across campus offices and academic departments. Other interventions that help in recruiting students include offering summer programs that provide the academic and social support necessary to prepare students to bridge the transition from high school to college student, and providing information on financial aid resources to help cover college expenses.

While recruiting may be necessary to bring students to campus, it is just as important to ensure that minority students feel welcomed, supported, and included once they matriculate (Hurtado, 1994; Suarez-Balcazar, Dam-

acela-Orellana, and Portillo, 2003). Campus leaders should be aware that minority students often have difficulty (or have no interest) in assimilating into the majority culture, and may feel frustrated and isolated on campus (Fries-Britt, 2002; Steward, Germain and Jackson, 1992; Weicheng, 2003). Through informal feedback and formal program evaluation, it is possible to determine what programs and services are working for minority students, and what minority students perceive to be their additional needs.

Creating a welcoming campus climate involves a complex interaction among many elements, both academic and social in nature, where personal interactions will demonstrate the attitudes of students, faculty and staff. In her study on students' perspectives regarding diversity in higher education, Bresciani (2003) lists six interventions to improve the campus climate for diversity on campus. Her suggestions demonstrate the need to link the university mission with admission, academic and curricular, social, and personal dimensions to contribute to the overall campus environment.

1. Communicate clearly the institution's expectations for behavior with regard to diversity issues to the entire campus community, and include the importance of diversity in university mission statements.
2. Carefully review the faculty and administration's make-up. Seek diversity.
3. Add an admission requirement that emphasizes knowledge of diversity issues and ability to understand diverse populations into selection considerations.
4. Incorporate diversity information and cultural studies into the curriculum.
5. To foster inclusion, organize social and professional gatherings for minority students that cut across departments and school lines.
6. Develop and implement diversity training programs for administration, faculty, students, and staff.

Colleges and universities are educating an increasingly diverse student body and are preparing them for living in and contributing to a global society. Many institutions of higher education are striving to be considered inclusive by all students by demonstrating their commitment to diversity on their campuses. Counselors in high schools, working in conjunction with college admission officers, can help minority students move through the college choice process and select institutions of higher education that value diversity. It is up to university leaders to make sure that the campus environment is as welcoming to minority students of color once they matriculate as it appeared to be at the time of admission.

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