

# BRIDGING THE DIVERSITY

A Necessary Challenge for Higher



"Fishing Boats," Marsden Hartley. The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ

A chasm exists between the racial and ethnic composition of the participants—students, faculty, and administration—in American higher education and the reality of who makes up our society in the early 21st century. Diversity holds a key to positive change in higher education, but just how to embrace diversity and make it a fundamental part of our mission is a vexing question. Johnnetta Cole, president emerita of Spelman College, discusses the diversity divide and the impact that bridging it may have on the life force of higher education.

# DIVIDE

## Education in the 21st Century

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For most of its nearly 400-year history, American higher education has been seen primarily as the purview of the elite. It wasn't until 1869 that Charles Eliot, then president of Harvard, created the paradigm for much of what we now know as the American university. His vision shifted American higher education from a pedagogy steeped in recitation and classical Greek and Latin works to the elective system of courses that still prevails today. The 1800s also marked the emergence of women's colleges, altering the view that collegiate education was only for white men. Furthermore, African-Americans were provided educational opportunities at universities founded in the mid-1800s, such as Ashmun Institute and Wilberforce University, which challenged the presumption that only whites should be educated.

Although the Morrill Land Grant Act introduced a more utilitarian model of higher education, some scholars argue that, contrary to conventional views, the land grant universities did not appreciably democratize higher education. Rather, the 1920s have been identified as the period when higher education was truly democratized, as access to colleges and universities began to spill across socioeconomic lines, signaling a shift from elite to mass public higher education.

The three decades following World War II brought a flood of new students to campus, and with them, particularly in the 1960s, a breakdown of the invisible borders that had traditionally separated higher education and everyday political issues. It was during this period that socially concerned students and faculty challenged higher education to broaden its original mission stressing research and teaching to include addressing America's complex social problems—especially those that centered around race and minority status issues.

### THE DIVERSITY DIVIDE

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement posed no fundamental threat to higher education. The demand for access was merely a request for a seat at the table or a chair in the classroom. For the most part, despite numerous racial clashes on campuses and the development of Black Studies programs in the 1970s, over the ensuing 20 years, higher education did not address the deeper implications of race on campus.

In the 1980s, race became a major issue in higher education—for intergroup relations, for the curriculum, for the professoriate, and for the allocation of resources—despite increased antipathy toward affirmative action policies, traceable to the Supreme Court's somewhat muddled decision on the 1978 *Bakke* case. Regardless of the heightened visibility of racial issues, many white students, faculty, and administrators continue to view such issues as individual matters or crises rather than as part of a larger nexus of concerns that deserve careful thought and analyses.

Such attitudes reflect a *diversity divide*: a disjuncture between a rhetoric of inclusion and actual practice. It is safe to say that there is a growing disconnect between higher education (and, by extension, a key segment of American society) and the reality of diversity in everyday life. This breach is the result of a rapidly shifting landscape in which ethnicity, race, and gender are continuously transforming American communities in profound and powerful ways. Yet a "cultural lag" exists in which radical changes in the American environment have not been accompanied by similarly radical cultural changes on campus. Indeed, cultural change can occur at such a slow pace as to be almost indiscernible. In recent years, the demise of affirmative action has worsened this disconnect and positioned higher education in the deepest crevices of the diversity divide.

## DIVERSITY CAPACITY

Higher education has little choice but to position itself to enter into a new social contract with American society. We must seek a new approach that adequately captures the complexities of our global, diverse world, one that is equipped to train our future citizens, workers, and leaders. This approach must put us on the path of educating world leaders whose understanding of issues transcends nationality, borders, race, ethnicity, religion, and local politics. The new global leader must be able to recognize that we exist in a *world*—not a nation, but a world—of mutual vulnerability.

In short, to borrow again from the science and technology analogy, higher education must develop its *diversity capacity*. Furthermore, we must move beyond an exclusionary notion of diversity as simply a black and white issue. Given the current demographics of our society, such a paradigm is anachronistic. Hispanics, for example, currently comprise about 12 percent of the U.S. population, and that number is expected to reach 25 percent by mid-century. Another challenge the growing presence of a diverse population presents is how to respect the sense of unity a particular racial or ethnic group might have while at the same time avoiding homogenization of important differences within that community of people.

Other groups that higher education must take into consideration include students with disabilities, students whose orientation is not heterosexual, and adult learners, who by some estimates now comprise up to 50 percent of higher education enrollment.

In the midst of these demographic shifts, tremendous confusion about what diversity means, enormous concern over how to achieve it on campus, and acrimonious debates about its intrinsic value to the task of higher education still prevail. We are confronted with the reality that fear and inaction characterize how many educators react to the challenge of diversity in American higher education.

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## HOW DO WE PROCEED?

Shirley Kenny, president of the State University of New York at Stony Brook and chair of the commission that published the report “Reinventing Undergraduate Education,” reminds us that, “Diversity is not an end in itself. It is a means toward a much bigger and longer-range goal—a prosperous and harmonious society.” The question, then, is how do we proceed? How do we engage higher education and diversity in ways that are meaningful and that move us toward developing citizens of the world who are interested in constructing and participating in a harmonious global society?

I suggest a holistic approach that begins to reshape our philosophy of education in ways that embrace diversity:

1. We must acknowledge and then seriously deal with the historic racial inequalities that have been part and parcel of American higher education. Economist William Darity, Jr., admonishes us that eliminating racial categories will not *de facto* eliminate racism: “Rather than end the use of race to end racism, an end to racism and its consequences is required to justify even consideration of an end to the concept of the use of race.”

2. We must attend to diversity on all fronts: administrative, curricular, community, and faculty. Art Levine, president of Columbia Teachers College, believes that the greatest resistance to dealing with diversity is found among administrators and faculty. His remedy is accountability and greater racial and ethnic diversity among faculty.

3. We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that diversity is somehow antithetical to quality. We can adopt a cultural relativist stance, one that recognizes that “quality” is not a human universal, but rather is culturally determined and defined. We must create new models of quality that are inclusive rather than exclusive.

4. We must embrace multiculturalism as a curricular issue, affording equal value to different cultures. Although it is impossible to incorporate information about every culture into courses, students should be exposed to the cultures with which they are in closest proximity. Every student should be reflected positively in the curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

Higher education has a moral and social responsibility to understand and attempt to ameliorate the divide between an old, largely homogeneous academic environment and a new societal reality characterized by diversity. If higher education—where some of our greatest and most creative minds reside—cannot create the means and tools to contend with this vexing issue, then who can?

I am optimistic that higher education is up to this challenge. We can achieve a critical mass of positive change that will move us closer to a solution offering a vision of education and society that is global and inclusive. Our future as a nation and as citizens of the world depends on our success in accomplishing this goal.

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