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Student Distribution In American Colleges

26 **By Lorenzo Morris**

In the old days, a century ago to be precise, children were conditioned to pursue the same type of work as their parents. Thus, if they were white, they were frequently farmers or manual laborers. If they were Black, they were sharecroppers and domestic laborers.

Twenty five years ago, the children asked their parents what would they be, and the answer was effectively that they could be whatever they chose—assuming of course they were white and upper or middle class. If they were Black, there was still a pervasive optimism that at least the “young, gifted and Black” would overcome education and employment discrimination.

Today, no group of young people assumes that they must imitate their parents, and very few follow the paths of mobility their parents recommend. Educated Blacks, less than whites, select education and career paths modeled by their parents. Blacks, who pursue higher education or any other stable career, are overwhelmingly dependent on the school environment for the guidance which determines their initial career commitments.

As America moves into the second decade of affirmative action in higher education, education and career options open to Blacks increasingly resemble those traditionally reserved for whites. In recent years, the mass media and academic media brought the rise of the new Black middle class to public attention and have lauded the emergence of equal opportunity. That opportunities are still not interracially equal is generally lost in the praise. The surest and most statistically impressive road to progress for Blacks, one hears, is through individual educational achievement.

The civil rights movement, for example, reached its fullest expression through its focus on education. This focus brought substantial progress in Black higher education enrollment and rewards in employment, but it did not bring structural change.

The proportion of Black college students has been approaching parity with white enrollment, and the number of Black faculty has at least increased. But both Black students and faculty are largely confined to the fields of study in which their less advantaged predecessors were engaged. Yet, technology has altered employers' expectations, and what it alone has not dictated has been reinforced by a widespread devotion to the goals and credentials of technological achievement. As a consequence, Black progress in higher education has been significant but narrow in scope; the employment opportunities which normally influence educational choice are often as remote as they ever were.

There are several reasons why the market value of higher education has declined in the last decade. To the extent that the college degree is less marketable, the hopes of Blacks for upward mobility through higher education have been correspondingly diminishing. Because the expansion of Blacks with college and graduate degrees coincides with a period of technological change, it is virtually impossible to determine what improved higher education access would have meant for Blacks in a period of economic and technological stability. Conversely, it is impossible to demonstrate racial inequality in employment among those with advanced degrees, since this may be primarily attributed to a technological lag in the specializations selected by Blacks.

The acceptability of any higher education degree to an employer is, at some point, dependent on what the educational system produces. Thus, questions relating to racial differences in the job qualifications of graduates must ultimately be examined as a function of race and student distribution within higher education.

What happens to students inside educational institutions that relate to racial differences when they emerge is a two-sided story. On one side, Black students

are more susceptible to institutional cues and more dependent on the guidance of educators. On the other side, the larger society and employers specifically respond to institutionally-determined standards of educational achievement and competence. How much and in what way institutions contribute to this unequal distribution are important questions.

Equality of Opportunity

Intellectual merit, hard work, responsibility and dedication to purpose are among the primary characteristics which higher education institutions attribute to their most successful students. What binds these and other characteristics to the distinctive self-concept of American higher education is their all-encompassing emphasis on the individual.

In the pervasive preoccupation with students as detached individuals, the institutions and the educators' relationship to society—race, sex and social class—have been ignored or minimized. At the same time, the undeniable history of racial discrimination in education has been treated as an affliction of the student and a social imposition on the normal practice of educational institutions.

Affirmative action, as treated by Justice Lewis Powell in the *Bakke* decision, should not change the institution's approach to the individual. Claims by those who fear reverse discrimination as a result of affirmative action programs in admissions are nothing more than their inability to deal, first, with the implacable social group character of every student and, second, with the relativism of standards which recognize student-faculty-institution interaction as an everpresent variable.

The general failure to recognize both the interaction and social group aspect of higher education has meant that affirmative action and related programs have limited their scope to admissions and overlooked distribution. More concretely, they have underestimated the degree to which seemingly individualized behavior

by minority students is both socially and institutionally determined. To the same degree, discrimination in higher education may have escaped attention under the guise of individual merit and personal preference.

Nevertheless, principles of liberal education which influence most institutions today encourage individual creativity and diversity. The advancement of equal opportunity cannot, and probably should not, transgress those principles. Along with individual diversity, cultural and ideological diversity may produce racially particularistic distributions across fields of study. Allowance should be made for such possibilities in a culturally plural society. At the same time, cultural freedom should not be assumed to justify choices made by victims of discrimination under conditions of historical and persistent inequality.

Ideological Conflict

Surveys of students show that Black students are much more likely than white students to have depended on their teachers and counselors in making decisions about their educational programs. This same racial difference, no doubt, continues, though less importantly, through college. Helen Astin and Patricia Cross, in a 1977 report, noted that Black high school students were about twice as likely as white students to base their choice of a particular college on their teachers' advice. This relative pattern would seem to carry over to post-graduate training.

When freshmen or sophomores are introduced to a department, they are exposed to innumerable signals from the faculty about the personal and social values of a professional. Inevitably, these signals involve the political and ideological characteristics of students and faculty. Political ideologies are, of course, less relevant in fields such as engineering. Yet, precisely because they are not specifically relevant in the sciences, ideologies are often uncontrolled and less often weighed by faculty. Students may sense them particularly when their ideologies directly conflict with those of the faculty. The students, particularly Blacks in white institutions, may subsequently conclude that they do not belong in the class or the department.

Black students today are largely "non-traditional" students whose enrollment in college is a long range result of the liberal surge of the 1960s. They, like their families, fall overwhelmingly on the liberal corner of the American ideological spectrum. In the heyday of civil rights

and anti-war activism, it may have seemed that colleges and faculty were centers of radicalism, but, if that was the case, their radicalism was largely limited to a few popular issues.

Short of radicalism, analysts of the ideological character of high education, including Seymour Lipset and Everett Ladd, point out that it has a distinctively conservative character.

Although a visible cadre (of faculty) has played significant roles in leading and supporting protest movements of both the left and the right at different times in history, most have accepted the status quo. Universities remain primarily educational institutions, which implies that they are part of the social apparatus designed to transmit the existing culture, including the beliefs that help to legitimate the authority system of the society. . . . They are not knowledge creating centers. The school requires the faculty to be primarily involved in the transmission of useful skills and the indoctrination of accepted values. . . . In essence, therefore, the "school" components of higher education are conservative aspects. (Ladd and Lipset, pp. 13-14, 1975)

Here, of course, the ideological issues concern higher education but the pattern of their effect on white faculty/Black student interaction is frequently the same. More important, differences in ideological conflict most clearly emerge between departments. There may well be a kind of intra-departmental socialization affecting faculty attitudes, but a large part of the departmental differences is traceable to the professional socialization of graduate students. In particular, the fear that the standards of discipline are being violated by affirmative action efforts to adopt teaching methods of non-traditional students translates into a regressive and generalized traditionalism.

Policy Issues

Even for the sake of equalizing educational opportunity, faculty academic freedom should not be violated. In a free society, the result of academic freedom would theoretically be ideological and political diversity among faculty. Given the relative exclusion of Blacks from white institutions before the 1960s, and given the fact that most faculty members today were educated in a segregated context, attitudes tend to be narrow and conservative. The presence of more Black faculty, now about 3 percent of the faculty at white institutions, would probably help to diversify the ideological and political spectrum.

Yet, more Black faculty is only an uncertain part of the policy solution. The primary solution involves providing assurance that political/ideological differences between faculty and students do not have an exceptionally adverse effect on Blacks. There has been little or no effort to provide such assurances.

On the other hand, available data indicate some adverse impact. Specifically, Black students are much less likely to be chosen as research and teaching assistants than white students. This imbalance should be subject to the public interest to the extent that public funds are used to sustain such assistantships. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine in specific cases whether ideology is a factor. Among other things, simple racial ethnocentrism may be involved.

In any case, an ideological problem exists. To paraphrase a cliché, students, if given a chance, can study under and work with a "good teacher" whatever the students' ideological or racial differences may be. The problem for Black students is that such differences often prevent them from getting beyond the introduction to faculty.

A study by James Mingle provides some specific evidence of the ways in which ideological/political and, especially, "professional" faculty attitudes intervene in their relationships with Black students. The apparent result of their attitudes is negative behavior toward Black students. It results less often in hostility than in faculty remoteness and expressions of discomfort with Black students.

The difference is among departments which he finds especially important here. Mingle surveys a range of white faculty attitudes toward Black students, generally, and affirmative action, in particular. The rank order of departments in terms of support for affirmative action in Black student admissions clearly corresponds to the prevailing major field distribution of Black students.

Parenthetically, the data also show evidence of the value and importance of Black institutions and Black studies programs in sustaining Black students in school. To the extent that departments vary, Black students need a "supportive" milieu to which they can turn. If the attitudes of faculty in other departments can not be changed, then Black students who can not develop in those conditions can get psychological support from Black studies programs or they can turn to predominantly Black institutions. In any case, faculty attitudes generally toward Black students should be positively af-

ected by a respected Black studies department.

Faculty members who recognized a need for gearing education to the kind of student served, according to Mingle, were also those most supportive of Black students. While faculty members who emphasized educational "universalism" and "professional neutrality" usually meant by that emphasis that they only found Black students equal when they came to college with the same preparation and nearly the same characteristics as traditional white students.

28 *An active supporter held particularistic values about the application of admissions and performance criteria, viewed the long-term impact of blacks on higher education in positive terms, preferred a separate institutional structure for black programs, and held liberal (or activist) views about the role of colleges in solving problems of racial injustice*

When faculty believe that black students should meet the same "standards" as whites this tends to be translated into an unwillingness to alter traditional teaching styles or support institutional changes. (Mingle, pp. 211-213, 1978)

Even if Black students overcome the occasional ideological differences which interfere with faculty rapport and make special efforts to communicate, they may run into disappointments. The faculty member may turn out to be, even with good intentions, ill at ease and relatively unresponsive.

In this case as before, the presence of Black faculty can be crucial in supporting a more equitable distribution of Black students. Black faculty in all departments, as well as in Black studies programs can provide the interracial communication and positive environment that would help the white faculty to become more responsive.

More important still, the behavior of all faculty in providing special and informal access to students should be considered an affirmative action domain. In the distribution of research and assistantship, faculty members traditionally function according to personal preference and rapport with students. While reliance of faculty preference need not, and probably should not, be treated, resulting selection practices should be carefully surveyed. Without some kind of accountability, an essential avenue for Black student redistribution will remain foreclosed.

The value of such accountability can be particularly important for Black gradu-

ate student mobility to faculty positions. References and recommendations from individual faculty to other faculty are also personal in nature, but the process is systematic. Professors promote the students they know best and have worked with the most. Unfortunately, Black graduate students are overwhelmingly excluded from these close contacts.

Conclusion

Higher education involves a process of professionalization in which largely non-professional values serve to legitimize professional ones and to socialize students into the educational system. Black students' prior socialization makes them particularly vulnerable to faculty norms.

The faculty, on the other hand, are not sufficiently sensitive to their vulnerability. Their insensitivity across departments largely corresponds to their departments' or disciplines' remoteness from the historical interest of Blacks generally. As a result, Black student distribution among major fields of study has scarcely changed in spite of a decade of major upheavals in higher education. The most critical result is that the number of Black college students nearly tripled in the 1970s. But the career options available to them are only slightly more diverse and more equitable than those available to Black college graduates of the last generation. □

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THE ARTS

Essay

Reflections on Traditional African Cosmology

By Sulayman S. Nyang

Africa was, and still is, rich in cosmological ideas. Though the diversity of Africa's religious and cosmological heritage has been little known outside of the continent, the intensive researchers of Africanists around the world, and the growing global interest in the African world have combined to draw attention to what could be Africa's spiritual gift to humanity. This gift is less understood by many Africans, even much less by the greater majority of non-Africans.

Africa's traditional cosmology is diverse, but behind this diversity lies the core of shared beliefs which spread across the continent.¹ This essay does not plan to bring out the differences; rather, it seeks to construct a framework of analysis out of the body of ideas that researchers in the field have agreed upon as the common elements in the various cosmological systems among Africa's numerous ethnic groups.

I. The Traditional African Conception of Man

In the cosmological world of traditional African man, certain ideas have always held sway over men's minds. The ideas of a diety who rules over creation was accepted by many, if not most African peoples. In fact, African pioneers in the field of traditional African religion, including Professor John Mbiti, have noted that this African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, prayers, names, stories, myths and religious ceremonies.²

Mbiti believes that a careful examination of these sources of African religious beliefs would bring out the unity in diversity which characterizes the traditional African world of religion. He