



CAN WE REBUILD CIVIC LIFE WITHOUT A MULTIRACIAL UNIVERSITY?

BY ESTELA MARA BENSIMON AND MARTA SOTO



The call for the renewal of civic life seems to get louder as it becomes obvious that our campuses and society look less and less like they did 30 years ago. With the emergence, for example, of multilingual automatic teller machines that ask us whether we prefer to conduct our business in English, Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese; and books with titles like *The Disuniting of America* or *LA: Capital of the Third World*; and headlines that say "What will the U.S. Be Like When Whites Are No Longer the Majority?" or "The Deadly Virus of Tribalism," we sense a rising anxiety about people from different cultures.

While it is difficult to quarrel with the yearning for community and a repaired civic life, it is also difficult to imagine how it will be possible to develop new social capital at the same time that the bases for a more inclusive community are being dismantled. It is ironic that instead of resolving to bridge the economic, educational, and social gaps that are at the heart of the breakdown in community, some states and institutions are enacting policies that are likely to cut off minority groups from the most important pathway to equality and opportunity—the higher education system. If recent developments in higher education in California portend a trend for all of academe, colleges and universities may have the political will but not the political power to educate for democracy.

REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES

On July 20, 1995, after 12 hours of heated and passionate

Estela Mara Bensimon is Professor of Education Policy and Administration and Associate Dean of Faculty in the School of Education at the University of Southern California. Marta Soto is a PhD candidate in Higher Education Policy and Organization at USC.

debate, the regents of the University of California voted to eliminate affirmative action in admissions, hiring, and contractual agreements. Supporters of the proposal justified it on grounds that affirmative action leads to racial divisiveness. The regents argued that if underrepresented minorities fall short in meeting academic standards they should not be given preference for admission for the sole purpose of improving diversity.

But the regents' stance against affirmative action—now reinforced by passage in November of Proposition 209 banning preferential treatment for any person or group in public employment, education, or contracting—is antithetical to rebuilding civic life. Our purpose here is not to single out our sister institution but rather to call attention to the way decisions made by governing boards can affect higher education's capacity to enact its role in a democracy. As the Commission on Governance and Affirmative Action of the American Association of University Professors states, "To the extent that democracy is an active and inclusive process requiring an educated and critical citizenry, affirmative action in the university has been an important training ground. In the absence of sustained and careful consideration of the educational impact both of affirmative action and of the decision to end it, the regents' action—though technically legal—was ill advised."

Before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, higher education in this country was largely segregated. In 1960, for example, 94 percent of college students were white. The University of California system was not much different. In 1962, UCLA had a student population of over 23,000—fewer than 100 were blacks or Latinos. Over the last three decades, the institutions in the University of California system have become much more diverse. For example, by 1980, Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos made up 9.6 percent of the undergraduate student body and 7.6 percent of the graduate stu-



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dents. By 1993, these proportions had increased to 17.6 percent for undergraduates and 11.2 percent for graduate students.

The impact that the absence of affirmative action will have on the composition of the student body within the University of California system will be dramatic. At UCLA and Berkeley, the system's two most diverse and elite campuses, analysts calculate that underrepresented minorities could drop by 50 to 70 percent. If the policy to eliminate affirmative action had been in effect for the freshman class entering UCLA in Fall 1996, the number of African Americans would have declined from the current 250 to between 75 and 115. Latinos would have decreased from 761 to between 240 and 365, Native Americans from 38 to between 15 and 20. The impact on whites and Asian Americans would have been the opposite: 1,236 entering white freshmen would have grown to between 1,470 and 1,565, and 1,422 Asian Americans to between 1,705 and 1,765.

The elimination of affirmative action will have a disproportionately negative impact on underrepresented minorities because only 5 percent of black and 4 percent of Latino high school graduates are among the top 12.5 percent of the overall California high school graduates who are eligible for admission to the university system. In contrast, 13 percent of whites and 32 percent of the state's Asian Americans meet the minimum academic requirements. The difference between blacks and Latinos, on the one hand, and whites and Asians on the other, can be traced largely to economic differences between the groups. Family income is closely related to access to good schools, college preparatory classes, and educational enrichment activities.

BUILDING A MULTIRACIAL UNIVERSITY

We are moved to ask, Is it possible to rebuild civic life if we renege on our commitment to democratic ideals of equality

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and social justice? Is it possible to be a multiracial democracy if historically marginalized populations are denied membership in the community? We do not think so.

What if we resolved to resist efforts to dismantle affirmative action and other equal opportunity policies in higher education? Our colleges and universities, while far from achieving equity, have 30 years of experience with the complexities of promoting equality and opportunity and are ideally positioned to prepare the next generation for leadership in a multiracial democracy, as well as to serve as models of a multiracial community.

Many of our colleges and universities, especially in urban areas of the West and Southwest, are microcosms of multiculturalism. The experience of institutions that have taken diversity seriously—small private colleges such as Bloomfield College in New Jersey and Occidental College in California, as well as large public institutions like City College in New York and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor—demonstrate how hard we must work to be a multiracial nation. Conflicts that have erupted on some of these campuses have taught us that we can succeed in having diversity but fail in building a multiracial democracy.

A multiracial community requires citizens who 1) understand that their views of reality may not be identical to the reality of others and 2) possess cultural competence.

Understand the Realities of Those Who Are Different From Ourselves. Study upon study shows that whites have a very different perception of how people of color construe their experiences in institutions or in situations where they are a visible minority. Thus while only 6 percent of white males and 23 percent of white females believe that minorities are at a disadvantage in the tenure process, 58 percent of blacks believe this. Within the larger society, polls show that only 43 percent of whites, compared with 84 percent of blacks, believe that the legal system treats whites better than blacks.

The perceptual gap between whites and blacks should not be surprising. Robert Blauner, the Berkeley sociologist who for decades has studied race relations in the United States, writes that “For twenty years European-Americans have tended to feel that systematic racial inequities marked an earlier era, not our own. Whites and blacks see racial issues through different lenses and use different scales to weigh and assess injustice.”

Whites and blacks do not have to think alike and they do not have to reach consensus. But they must have opportunities to confront their differences, whether in a law class or a literature course, and to understand the experiences that give rise to such differences. As the performance artist Anna Deavere Smith shows in her reenactment of black/Jewish conflict in Crown Heights and of black/Latino/Korean/white confrontation in South Central Los Angeles, we must find ways to learn about those who are different from ourselves through *their*

frames of reference, not ours. Obviously this cannot happen in segregated classrooms.

Those who have experienced the dynamics of a diverse classroom know that the quality of education is enhanced for everyone when it is a place where interacting and debating with others unlike ourselves is safe. It is imperative, for example, that a white student understand the reasons why color-blindness does not signify the absence of discrimination to a black student. It is important for a Latina feminist to understand why a white feminist finds traditional family values oppressive.

Cultural Competence. Troy Duster, a sociologist affiliated with Berkeley’s Institute for the Study of Social Change, points out that

Competence in the context of actual pluralism will mean being able to participate effectively in a multicultural world. It will mean being “bicultural” as well as bilingual. It will mean knowing how to operate as a competent actor in more than one cultural world; knowing what’s appropriate and what’s inappropriate, what’s acceptable and unacceptable in behavior and speech in cultures that differ quite radically from one’s own. Competence in a pluralist world will mean being able to function effectively in contexts people had previously only read about, or seen on television. It will mean knowing how to be “different” and feeling comfortable about it; being able to be the “insider” in one situation and the “outsider” in another.

Historically, the need for cultural competence has been a necessity only for the “outsiders within,” who learned such competence to avoid marginality. But demographic changes throughout the nation mean that cultural competence will not be optional for anyone. Professors will find that the approaches and assumptions that worked in the past will have to be replaced with approaches and assumptions that derive from the experiences, expectations, and knowledge that the “new majority” brings into the classroom. Curricular transformation projects that have until now appealed to the already converted will become a necessity as most faculty members realize the need to learn more about their students’ cultures.

Cultural competence requires what the philosopher Patrick Hill calls “conversations of respect,” in which participants expect to learn from each other and to be changed by the experience. It also involves learning how to participate cooperatively in a diverse group. The foundation of democracy, according to John Dewey, is “faith in the power of pooled and co-operative experience.” This is a sturdy prescription for rebuilding civic life, as apt today as when it was written. Colleges and universities have the opportunity to make it a reality. But to accomplish this project, higher education needs the legal and moral power of affirmative action. You can’t have democracy’s “conversations of respect” if the necessary conversants are kept from the table. □