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The Color Line: The Enduring Challenge in Higher Education

Writing at the dawn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. DuBois (1903) meditated on its meaning for African Americans. Predicting that the new century would bring significant challenges of race to America and the world, he wrote: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Some nine decades later, Clark Kerr surveyed the challenges facing higher education at the close of the century and wrote: “If I had to pick a single theme most likely to be dominant in the 1990s, it would be ‘the racial crisis’ in its several forms” (Kerr, 1994).

Race has been an abiding and troubling issue throughout all of American history, and, as we face the dawn of another millenium, it is apparent that the color line continues as a daunting challenge. This is particularly true in the academy, the one institution where expectations for change have been highest. In some cases universities have met the challenge, but in many other instances the disappointments have been bitter because of the high expectations.

The phenomenon of race in American higher education has been almost as diverse in its manifestation as the range of colleges and universities. One Southern institution (Berea College, Kentucky) was founded to be an interracial college with an equal number of blacks and whites. Other colleges and universities welcomed African American students, although they faced blatant discrimination in housing and other accommodations (Perkins, 1997). Still others were like the society in general and prevented enrollment of African Americans as a matter of policy.

It was the establishment of independent black colleges, followed by state-supported black institutions, that provided the overwhelming bulk of education to African Americans, permitting them to make social advances. In either case, American college students were educated in environments that were overwhelmingly homogeneous. Major efforts to create racially diverse student bodies have existed for little more than a generation.

In spite of the welcome given to African Americans by some institutions, higher education in the twentieth century has a variegated record on the issue of race. DuBois’ prediction about the color line and Kerr’s observation about troubling issues reflect a complex pattern of success and failure. Thus we approach the end of an extraordinary century for higher education, with race a potent factor in college and university life.

The enrollment changes initiated in mid-century have provided access and opportunity to many more people of color. Aggressive recruiting as well as affirmative action policies led to higher levels of enrollment and graduation for African Americans. At one point some observers felt that disparities of race would be erased before

the end of the century. Good intentions and sincere efforts, however, were not sufficient to eliminate the disparities. Clark Kerr believes that the Carnegie Council greatly underestimated the time it would take to overcome the consequences of past racial discrimination.

Race remains a major factor in higher education because it is such a profound and intrinsic part of American life in general. Within the broader community, race is a proxy for structured inequality, resulting in disparities that limit preparation for higher education. These inequalities include poor housing, higher unemployment, lower income, and the social patterns that accompany such conditions, including lack of access to quality education at all levels. One result is that African Americans often approach the academy with less preparation and greater need than most other students.

Within the academy the attitudes and actions of well-meaning as well as some ill-spirited people may racialize situations. There are many instances where faculties seek to help students but then reveal stereotypical attitudes that can elicit hostile reactions. We have also seen many situations in which students are targeted or categorized because of their physical appearance, and the ever-present color line continues as a barrier to access, opportunity, and success.

Heightened sensitivities on the part of faculty and administrators combine with heightened fears and sensitivities on the part of African American students to create volatile situations that can destroy creative learning opportunities. Frequently possibilities that have great potential are unfulfilled because of a profound lack of insight and understanding by administrators and faculty. In an effort to treat everyone the same and demonstrate equity, they fail to perceive the unique qualities of each individual and to build bridges across chasms of misunderstanding. These are complex and difficult situations compounded by the vagaries of the color line.

Several years ago we surveyed faculty in a number of institutions about their attitudes and practices toward minority students. We received numerous reports of well-meaning faculty who had created difficult situations by assigning readings with offensive racial characteristics, as in automatically assuming, for example, that black students were educationally handicapped.

On the other hand, sincere efforts by faculty and administrators to reach out to students and support them are often rebuffed by youth who are insecure, intimidated, and fearful that they will not achieve. We have found out that, lacking an understanding and appreciation of the way higher education works, students may engage in self-defeating actions that result in poor performance or failure in the face of opportunity. They often do so out of a fear that those in leadership and control do not want them to succeed and will not support them in their efforts. In the past we have referred to this pattern as the "expectation of ultimate doom" (Blake and Saufley, 1973).

The Challenge of the New Millenium

The recent attacks on affirmative action policies in colleges and universities have had a chilling effect on special programs designed to enroll and advance minorities. The initial assaults came in the two states with a significant proportion of black and Latino citizens, California and Texas, raising again the spectre of the color line and race as a barrier to access and opportunity. As the opposition to affirmative action policies spreads to other states, it becomes clearer that the prediction of DuBois and the fears of Kerr will continue into the new millenium.

However, the participation of African American and Latino leaders in these attacks on affirmative action and minority enrollment shows a new feature of the color line in higher education. It is no longer as rigid and impermeable as it was earlier in the century. Class has compounded race—the proxy for disadvantage in America—so that the color line has become a much more complex phenomenon. Resolving its challenges requires even greater sensitivity and awareness.

Effective Strategies

Promising efforts toward overcoming the limits of race are found in a number of noteworthy situations. The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has developed an outstanding program that promotes high levels of academic achievement in the sciences for African Americans and other minorities. Building on the efforts of Uri Treisman at the University of Texas—and taking them further—Freeman Hrabowski has established a model program in which African American students, along with faculty and staff, have created a community of academic excellence among themselves, with most impressive results. Students from broken and low-income families join others in meeting the challenge of higher education (Hrabowski, et al., 1998). There are similar programs in other universities that are giving new hope to those who seek to transcend the color line in higher education.

A study of students at the University of California, Berkeley—where the number of minority undergraduates has surpassed whites—reveals some interesting patterns of dealing with the color line. An extensive series of interviews of students in homogeneous and heterogeneous racial/ethnic groups shows that they seek to maintain their unique characteristics while simultaneously interacting with each other and building on the interaction. They report that the cross-cultural interaction can be mutually enhancing because they see one another as resources, recognizing different and complementary competencies. Coming together under such circumstances produces an experience that is transcendent, greater than the sum of its parts (Duster, et al., 1991).

This level of interaction, Berkeley students report, happens when they participate in common activities where ethnicity, racial harmony and exchange are “side effects” of the event. In such settings, something else occupies primary attention and the students find themselves in cooperative activities and communicating across racial and ethnic lines.

We have seen similar outcomes with faculty and students in our own work. Together our experiences as faculty and administrators span the entire range of four-year institutions in the United States. When students and faculty from different racial and ethnic groups work together on academic projects, mutual respect and interracial harmony are much more likely to result as by-products of the interaction. The academic projects create a positive setting in which all participants have an academic goal that is apart from race or ethnicity. As a result they have a foundation for communication and interaction on an ongoing basis that permits them to establish meaningful and harmonious relations. The color line is penetrated in the process.

The most impressive and long-term outcomes result from undergraduate student participation in the research of a faculty member, research that at times has led to co-authored publications. In the process, the students bond with each other across racial lines, while also bonding with the faculty member. Students are motivated to study more diligently to overcome any academic deficits they may have brought to the academy. The most promising and productive consequence occurs when the students develop an

academic and scholarly identity in addition to their racial and ethnic identity. Not only is the color line transcended, they are catapulted into academic excellence (Steele, 1997).

A Hopeful Conclusion

There can be little doubt that, as long as inequality persists in America, and people of color are victims of that inequality, the color line will persist as an enduring challenge to higher education as well as to the nation. Yet we would assert the line is not as rigid or impermeable as it was when W.E.B. DuBois made his eloquent prediction at the dawn of the century. Clark Kerr, writing a century later and looking at the future of higher education, expressed hope rather than despair:

Along the way, I have been impressed with the importance of looking at all individuals in a multidimensional way—not at any one characteristic alone, particularly if that characteristic is not of the individual's personal choosing.

What is most central is the ability to overcome handicaps, however imposed; to show talent and effort within the context of surrounding circumstances; to demonstrate merit in rising above disadvantages.

Across the century that separates them, we find the hope of Kerr echoes the hope expressed by DuBois at the end of his treatise:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurances of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.

Suggested Readings

Blake, J. Herman, and Saufley, Ronald W., "The Struggles of Minority Students at Predominantly White Institutions," in *Teaching Minority Students*, ed. J. F. Noonan (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973).

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Hrabowski III, Freeman A., et al., *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Kerr, Clark, *Troubled Times for American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

Perkins, Linda M., "The African American Female Elite: The Early History of African American Women in the Seven Sister Colleges, 1880-1960," *Harvard Educational Review* 67 (Winter 1997): 718-756.

Steele, Claude M., "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance," *American Psychologist* 52 (June 1997): 613-629.