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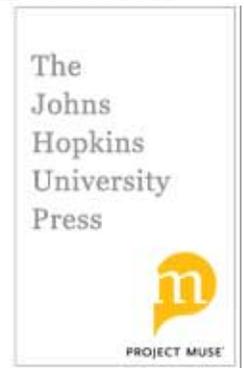
Culture and Institutional Climate: Influences on Diversity in Higher Education

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REVIEW ESSAY

Culture and Institutional Climate: Influences on Diversity in Higher Education

Wynetta Y. Lee

Kassie Freeman, ed. *African American Culture and Heritage in Higher Education Research and Practice*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. 237 pp.

M. Christopher Brown II. *The Quest to Define Collegiate Desegregation: Black Colleges, Title VI Compliance, and Post-Adams Litigation*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999. 166 pp.

Lenoar Foster, Janet A. Guyden, and Andrea L. Miller, eds. *Affirmed Action: Essays on the Academic and Social Lives of White Faculty Members at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. 203 pp.

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Marilyn J. Ross. *Success Factors of Young African-American Males at a Historically Black College*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1998. 144 pp.

American higher education originally served a mission of educating the sons of socially elite White families who were destined to continue family businesses. Early manifestations of diversity were economic in form—when the sons of poor families, who were planning careers as clergy, entered this community of economically elite White males (Rudolph, 1990). The transition from a homogenous educational community to a diverse one has been a long process filled with passionate debate. The concept of “diversity” in higher education has expanded tremendously, and the once homogenous community is now a heterogeneous population that includes race, gender, class, and many other identifiers.

Reflections of culture and institutional climate are a natural progression of thought in discussions regarding diversity in higher education. Diverse peoples have identifiable cultures that influence expected behaviors of members of that culture (Lee, 1998), and diverse cultures influence the general climate of the institution. The relationship between culture and climate is an important one because it sets the stage for future progress toward diversity in higher education.

Four recent books contribute to the body of knowledge about African American culture and the institutional climate at historically Black colleges and universities. These works offer important insights that could foster diversity in higher education for many years to come. Kassie Freeman’s (1998) book, *African American Culture and Heritage in Higher Education Research and Practice*, presents an overview of African American culture in research and practice in the higher education arena, thus providing a broad context for discussions regarding culture and institutional climate. M. Christopher Brown II’s (1999) book, *The Quest to Define Collegiate Desegregation: Black Colleges, Title VI Compliance, and Post-Adams Litigation*, discusses major legislative and judicial policies that influence African American participation in higher education, including the influence of policy on the existence of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The third work, *Affirmed Action: Essays on the Academic and Social Lives of White Faculty Members at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, by Lenoar Foster, Janet A. Guyden, and Andrea L. Miller (1999), addresses institutional climate from the perspective of Whites who are minorities in HBCUs. The final work, Marilyn Ross’s (1998) *Success Factors of Young African-American Males at a Historically Black College*, brings the discussion of culture and institutional climate full circle when she addresses the cultural realities and the influence of institutional climate on African American males, an underrepresented group in the diversification of higher education.

CONVERGENCE OF CULTURE AND RESEARCH

Ogbu (1988) defines culture as a “way of life shared by members of a population. It is the social, technoeconomic and psychological adaptation worked out in the course of a people’s history” (p. 11). A convincing argument for the importance of research that uses a cultural perspective appears in Kassie Freeman’s edited volume, presenting the wisdom and scholarly reflections of senior and junior African American researchers in higher education. A central theme of this book is encouraging research that is conducted within an appropriate cultural context, thus permitting it to be accurately understood and correctly applied. Authors of individual essays point to the importance of African Americans’ involvement in research, particularly on topics pertaining to African Americans in higher education. For example, Freeman argues:

Researchers have tended to focus on increasing the motivation and aspiration of African American students in higher education, excluding cultural considerations. The prescription for attracting and retaining African American students, faculty, and administrators has been based on models that have paid little, if any, attention to the heritage and culture of African Americans. Moreover, through their policies and practices, policy makers and educators alike have tended to attach the “at-risk” label to non-Asian minority students due to perceived personal family factors defined by traditional models. Few studies, however, have examined models that could influence African American students’ academic achievement and movement through the educational pipeline based on their cultural characteristics. (p. 3)

This is not to say that only African Americans can study African Americans and accurately interpret research within an African American cultural perspective. However, it is critically important in contributing to diversity in higher education that researchers have an adequate command of appropriate cultural perspectives.

Another important factor in understanding the concept of diversity in higher education is institutional climate. Institutional climate provides a foundation for the comfort level of those who work to fulfill the institution’s mission. Although culture is a strong influence on institutional climate, public policy also contributes to the climate of colleges and universities by influencing the creation of colleges and those who exist within the institutions’ walls.

INFLUENCES OF PUBLIC POLICY

The evolution of HBCUs has been strongly influenced from two directions: (a) the negative impact of public policy—meaning, how the exclusion of African Americans from the nation’s universities led to the creation

of private HBCUs, and (b) the quasi-positive influence of public policy—meaning the creation of separate public HBCUs. Many of these public HBCUs are located in the South and are land-grant institutions with service missions similar to those of predominantly White institutions (PWIs). M. Christopher Brown II's (1999) *The Quest to Define Collegiate Desegregation* is an excellent historical analysis of HBCUs and salient public policies that enhanced or deterred their development. In it, he points out the effect of imprecise policies on HBCU development. For example, the second Morrill Act (1890) established a public policy that fostered the development of public HBCUs. Brown (1999) reports:

State-level inequality was bolstered by the loose wording of the Morrill Act of 1890 (Ch. 841, 26 Stat. 417). The act specifically prohibited payments of federal funds to states that discriminated against Blacks in the admission to tax-supported colleges or who refused to provide "separate but equal" facilities for the two races. It was this latter clause that led to the immediate establishment of dual public land-grant institutions in seventeen of the nineteen southern states. (p. 3)

"Separate" education was less an issue for African Americans than "equal" education. Equal education was a fiscal resource equity issue, but many of the intended remedies over the years clouded or lost that point. However, education (like other social, political, and economic systems) was beyond African Americans' control. Typically they were excluded from the decision-making process, especially decisions about fiscal allocations. Time passes quickly, and change comes slowly when resource equity is at stake. Two well-known public actions to address equal education along all points of the education pipeline were desegregation and affirmative action. These actions generated conflict over diversity in education that has continued to the present, decades after the inception and implementation of these policies.

Public policy in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of federal government has had a tremendous impact on diversity in American higher education. For example, the Morrill Act was a congressional initiative to diversify higher education by creating a dual, separate, but equal system of education that turned out to be definitely separate and most definitely unequal. Desegregation in higher education was a court action intended to rectify many of the inequalities of the dual system. Unfortunately, there is no commonly accepted definition of desegregation in higher education "nor is there any discourse on how laws and legislation affect the spirit of democracy, fairness and equality" (Brown, 1999, p. 90).

Brown (1999) reports that desegregation sometimes required the dismantling of state policies that differentiated and discriminated based on race. At other times, the term suggested the ideal of multiracial (i.e. Black-

White) classrooms. In other words, desegregation could mean either the cessation of racial discrimination or racial integration, two different concepts. Both concepts have had a tremendous impact on African American educational entities, especially public HBCUs. The first concept affects the human composition of these institutions, including student enrollments. The second concept carries the question of institutional survival when integration is the objective. Often the integration process results in the closing or threat of closure for HBCUs, either by mandate or by declining enrollments.

Desegregation, a continuing saga spanning more than five decades, has developed educational strategies that are eclectic at best. Brown (1999) outlines the campaign to reverse social, political, and educational inequality that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched around 1930. Public policy on desegregation, however, did not take shape for two decades—not until the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 resulted in the desegregation of primary and secondary educational institutions. Two years later, the effects of this ruling reached higher education when it was applied in the *Florida ex rel. Hawkins v. Board of Control* case (Brown, 1999). Court involvement in educational parity is extensive, involving several cases in different states, each setting a precedent on educational equity.

Ironically, however, desegregation has had a disheartening effect on African American institutions. Brown (1999) urges that public policy should move away from “equality” (with its implications of sameness) and should embrace the ideal of “equity” (which strives for fairness in distributing resources sufficient to address the issue under consideration). This reconceptualization of desegregation, Brown argues, would expand the operational focus of desegregation beyond the “archaic procedure of balancing student enrollments based on race” (p. 95) and would move toward parity in resources as originally intended.

Affirmative action is the subject of passionate debate in many arenas, including higher education. This debate often takes the form of concentrating on the short-term goal of access to college. However, the issue of affirmative action has much higher stakes than college access since college is the gateway to economic prosperity (Freeman, 1998; Nettles & Perna, 1997; C. Thompson, 1998). Rather, the goal of affirmative action is the opportunity to earn higher wages and salaries in the future that comes from access to higher education—particularly at the undergraduate level. Voluntary compliance with affirmative action ended in 1961 with President John F. Kennedy’s Executive Order 10925 (Nettles, Perna, & Edelin, 1998; Rebore, 1998). Rebore (1998) describes affirmative action programs as

detailed, result-oriented programs, which, when carried out in good faith, result in compliance with the equal opportunity clauses found in most legislation and executive orders. Affirmative action therefore is not a law within itself but rather an objective reached by following a set of guidelines that insure compliance with legislation and executive orders. Thus, an organization does not “violate” affirmative action; it violates the law. (p. 39)

Therefore, arguments that we no longer need affirmative action are, in effect, denying the need for laws that mandate equal opportunity.

Policies to promote equal opportunity are only a step along the pathway to attaining diversity in higher education. It is difficult to mandate institutional climates that will affect the quality of life of people who work and study in the nations’ colleges and universities in a healthy way. Considerable research has been devoted to studying African Americans in predominantly White institutions. However, this population is only part of the diversity picture in higher education. To complete the picture, the presence of Whites at HBCUs and the influence of culture and institutional climate on their quality of life should be considered.

FACULTY DIVERSITY

The presence of African Americans in a predominantly White institutional environment is a frequent theme in discussions regarding diversity in higher education. However, desegregation and affirmative action were also political realities in HBCUs, producing a discernible White presence on these campuses. Race is a constant with African Americans because it is a visible physical characteristic that prompts behavior in society (Banks & McGee Banks, 1997). Race is inescapable, a daily reality regardless of which racial presence dominates. Foster, Guyden, and Miller (1999) creatively present this reality in *Affirmed Action*, a work that gives voice to White faculty with experience in being the minority race among African Americans in higher education. Their perspectives are insightful, demonstrating that being a racial minority produces some common realities of vulnerability and providing evidence that all people have something valuable to contribute to higher education.

A contributor to this volume, Henzy (1999), a White professor at a public HBCU, stresses the inescapable awareness of difference that a minority person feels:

As I walked into my first classes that September, for the first time in my life I really felt White. I had always thought of myself generically as just a person. Now I was conscious of myself specifically as a White person. (Of course I was simply experiencing an awareness that many of my students have had to deal with their whole lives, of being in others’ eyes specifically persons of a certain race). (p. 17)

Redinger (1999), writing in the same volume, supported this revelation by reporting on the moment when he suddenly realized “what it was like to be the ‘other’” (p. 30). Redinger also points out that, although he was “the minority” for the first time in his life, it was a temporary condition because he could become part of the majority by simply returning to the comfort and familiarity of suburban life. Escape is not an option for African Americans—a fact which, in some real ways, makes the “minority” experience different for Whites than it is for African Americans.

Most of these White authors reported relatively quick adjustments to their HBCUs, generally indicating that the adjustment process was positive. However, some authors reported some uncomfortable racial interactions that left them feeling vulnerable, isolated from the group (Frank, 1999; Redinger, 1999; Rozman, 1999). Occasionally, faculty were asked to leave events because of their race, were openly held responsible for the historical problems of African Americans, and were clearly relegated to their “place” in the African American community. Still, these incidents were infrequent and did not prompt White faculty to leave the HBCU.

Although the institutional climate had a mixed effect on White faculty, the HBCUs have a successful record in fostering the academic success of African American students. Degree attainment for African Americans has increased, with HBCUs awarding most of the degrees earned by this group (Nettles & Perna, 1997). Yet despite the progress in educational attainment among African Americans as a group, African American males continue to be underrepresented in baccalaureate degree attainment.

STUDENT DIVERSITY

There has been some progress in African American student presence in higher education and in degree attainment. Nonetheless, there is room for improvement. Nettles and Perna (1997) report that between 1976 and 1994, African American enrollment in higher education “grew at a faster rate than White students (40.2% versus 14.8%)” (p. 54). However, this good news about closing the gap between aspiration and participation in higher education for African Americans is clouded by the declining enrollment of African American male students. Their matriculation as undergraduates declined from 4.6% in 1976 to 4.1% in 1994 (Nettles & Perna, 1997). In short, as a group they are fewer in number and improvements in their rates of college participation is slower compared to other groups.

Ross’s (1998) book, *Success Factors of Young African-American Males at a Historically Black College*, identifies factors that enhance these young men’s chances of success in higher education. Using qualitative research strategies to study a group of successful African American male students at Florida Memorial College, she found that “family” was a major influence on their

success. Significantly, the concept of “family” included but exceeded the traditional biological and legal definitions of family. These students identified lifelong relationships with a strong mother, an involved father, concerned siblings, and supportive grandmothers as influences on their success. The extended family also played a part in their success as did athletic coaches, academic mentors, church leaders, and family friends.

Ross further found that spirituality, demonstrated in religious practices, enhanced the success of these students. When times were difficult, these young men turned to their faith for strength to persist in the pursuit of their educational goals. And third, Ross found that these young men had an internal drive for academic success that gave them the patience and tenacity they needed in college. The study did not clearly address any institutional role in fostering the success of African American males, thus leaving the impression that their academic success was purely self-motivated. Unfortunately, she also failed to give practical strategies for identifying self-motivated students so that more successful African American male students could be recruited.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Diversity in higher education is critically important in achieving an educated, self-sustaining populace that contributes to society. Culture and institutional climate have interrelated affects on attaining diversity in higher education. Public policies can mandate inputs measured by an equal opportunity to pursue higher education; however, by itself it does not sway human behaviors that ultimately influence institutional performance as measured by professional advancement of faculty and degree attainment of diverse populations. Frank (1999), a former department head at Georgia State University, illustrates this point well:

At Georgia State University . . . two decades of affirmative action had produced a trifling twenty-nine Black faculty members in tenure lines out of eight hundred lines at the university. Yet the White faculty expressed continued frustration with the oppressive nature of affirmative action as though affirmative action was actually working. (p. 145; capitalization standardized)

How can we enhance efforts to attain diversity in higher education in the future? The messages presented by these authors indicate that cultural realities and institutional climate are important in promoting diversity in higher education. It is important to understand that “different” and “inferior” are not the same (M. Thompson, 1999). Both majority and minority race participants in higher education must recognize the power of culture on the institution’s climate, and the extent to which culture and climate

either promote or deter equal opportunity for the professional and educational success of diverse peoples.

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