

94. Bonds Weakened by Politics of Difference

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While strolling across the campus of a distinguished research university several months ago, I was struck, once again, by just how much students have changed since I began teaching in the early 1950s. As I passed undergraduates from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds - and many older students, too - I was reassured by the rich mosaic of students.

Yet, before I had a chance to feel too satisfied about the way educational opportunities have expanded, the president of the institution, who was accompanying me, made a troubling observation. "On the surface," he said, "we seem to have made great progress in expanding diversity, and in a way we have. But just below the surface, this campus is disturbingly divided. And I predict that, in the coming decade, I'll be working with three or four separate student bodies, as undergraduates continue to organize themselves along racial and ethnic lines."

Conflicts over diversity are quickly becoming one of the most pressing problems United States colleges and universities face. There are disturbing signals that deeply-rooted prejudices persist and another university president described the problem this way: "We have growing racial tensions at our place. White, black and Asian students are organizing themselves into separate worlds. The 1990s will be a time of confrontation."

Following the Second World War, America moved from "elite" to "mass" higher education. Colleges from coast to coast worked aggressively to enroll historically bypassed students, and it was widely assumed - innocently, perhaps - that as undergraduates of different backgrounds came together on the campus, they would learn to know and respect each other.

But it isn't working out that way. In a recent Carnegie Foundation survey, one in four of all college and university presidents reported that racial tensions are a problem on campus. And at large universities, more than two-thirds of the presidents said "racial tensions and hostilities" are a problem. When asked their views for improving campus life, the presidents said "greater racial understanding" was a top priority.

At many of the nation's higher learning institutions, black, Hispanic, Jewish, Polish, Italian, Muslim, Arab, Vietnamese, and Haitian students are organizing their own groups - and on at least one campus a white student union has been formed. Black student organizations seem to create the most misunderstanding. And yet, those criticizing blacks for being "separatist" are themselves often grouped together in less obvious ways, and black students feel they are held to a double standard.

At a small liberal arts college in the East, a white student suggested that the mere existence of a separate black organization "polarized the students." A black student at an elite private university agreed with this position. He told a Carnegie researcher; "I get a lot of flack because I don't belong to the black student union. I think it's stupid to have a Drama Association and a Black Drama Association on this campus." But an officer of the student union responded aggressively to the charge that blacks were "separatists." If black students were inclined toward separation," he insisted, "they never would have come to this predominantly white institution in the first place. The problem is that blacks, once they come to this campus, discover that they need support from fellow blacks to emotionally survive."

It's understandable that students, especially those who feel vulnerable, want to meet together. Indeed, self-generated activity by student groups can bring vitality to the campus and frequently, they create, for students, a sense of belonging and support. But it's also true that tensions increase and prejudices often are reinforced as subgroups organize themselves into separate political and social units. Clearly, striking a

balance between special groups and the larger community is one of the most difficult challenges university administrators confront.

This conflict over diversity on America's campuses viewed more broadly, is a reflection of society at large. At one level, the struggle is part of the nation's effort to resolve the tension between the individual and society. At a second level, it reflects a growing lack of consensus over the very nature of our community. As the nation continues to evolve through immigration - especially from Asia and Latin America - and as long-established minority groups gain a larger voice, old images of the structure and values of American society are being questioned, and often amended.

This is nothing new. Our ethnic diversity, as well as the flow of immigrants, ensure that America is continuously evolving, continually redefining itself. What distinguishes this era is the more vocal questioning of a shared identity. Increasingly, the nation is being fragmented into competing communities - whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, among many others - each eager to stress the distinctiveness of its group. Today, we are confronting what Professor Shelby Steele has called "the politics of difference." The result is not shared understanding, but further division as common bonds are weakened.

And yet, the richness of our varied cultures and uniqueness of each individual are realities to be cherished, not deplored. To recognize that this nation is not one culture but many; to defend the rights of minorities; to preserve the freedom to dissent, are essentials of a democratic people. And to the extent that our colleges and universities have expanded their enrollments, broadened their curricula, and responded to the diversity of students the enroll, they, and the nation can be justly proud.

At the same time, a nation must be inspired by unifying themes. It must be made up of people who believe that they are working toward common - not competing - goals. And even while affirming diversity, the claims of the larger society need to be acknowledged. In the end, balance must be maintained between individualism and broader community concerns. In education, as in life itself, one aspect of our being must not be allowed to eclipse the other.

Dr. Lewis Thomas, former chancellor of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, speaking at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, observed: "If this century does not slip forever through our fingers, it will be because learning will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness and will have helped us focus on our common goals." This, in my view, is the challenge now confronting both American higher education, and the nation.