

True Diversity Doesn't Come From Abroad

By RICHARD A. TAPIA

For more than four decades, universities have used affirmative-action policies to increase the participation of U.S.-born women and members of minority groups in higher education, where traditionally they have been underrepresented. Yet those policies, often applied in decisions about which students to admit and which faculty members to hire, have been controversial, particularly where minority groups are concerned. The policies have faced repeated legal challenges, and the courts have set and then changed the rules for their use, making the legitimate space carved out for racial affirmative action as small as possible. One result is that universities have changed their focus from improving domestic-minority representation to attaining broad cultural diversity on their campuses.

In the 1978 landmark case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, while ruling against racial admissions quotas, the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that there was a compelling interest to have diversity in the student body and upheld affirmative-action programs that did not involve fixed quotas. But in *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit questioned the continued vitality of *Bakke* and struck down race-conscious admissions in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. In *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), however, the Supreme Court reaffirmed *Bakke* and upheld the race-conscious admissions policies of the University of Michigan's law school, ruling that race can be one of many factors considered by institutions when selecting their students because it furthers "a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body."

Over all, the rulings on affirmative action in higher education have said that diversity is a legitimate goal of universities, based on the reasoning that the institutions' educational missions can best be carried out with diverse student bodies. On the surface, then, it seems as if representation is in safe hands. However, if universities (and the courts, for that matter) assume that encouraging diversity will encourage representation, they are mistaken.

The term "diversity" has virtually replaced "affirmative action" and "representation" in discussions of minority issues in academe, following the language of the courts. That shift was more than semantic. It was accompanied by a shift in direction.

Whereas affirmative-action policies aimed to solve the problems faced by large segments of the U.S. population in gaining access to higher education, the new emphasis on diversity led to a focus on the representation of many types of people, defined by religion, language, and other cultural attributes. As required by the courts, diversity was interpreted very broadly.

Over time, more and more groups were included under the diversity umbrella. Most notably, diversity took on an international flavor, and diversity programs and activities typically began to emphasize an understanding of the world's many ethnic groups. While the shift away from

affirmative action's focus on American diversity and domestic-minority groups may not have been intentional, new efforts toward inclusion are.

In addition, the shift toward broad inclusiveness has played to an established strength of academe: bringing many types of people together in a common endeavor of work and study. It encouraged universities to continue doing what they already were doing rather well.

No one could object to promoting an appreciation of other cultures, especially in the academy. But the new emphasis on world cultures obscures the domestic problems that gave rise to affirmative action. Representation is both a tougher goal to meet than diversity, and a very different one. It involves getting to the root of problems still deeply embedded in our own culture, and dealing with their consequences in higher education.

Nearly 30 percent of U.S. citizens are black or Hispanic. The broad approach to diversity does not focus on those Americans. In fact, it has led to confusion about who belongs to a minority group.

For instance, when I express concern to colleagues about the extremely low representation on our campus of minority graduate students and faculty members, the answers I usually get run along the lines of: "But we have a woman from Buenos Aires in the department" or "I have three Chinese students and a Russian" or "I have a postdoc from Nigeria."

My colleagues believe they are working toward diversity, and in a literal sense, they are. When I point out that domestic underrepresentation is the critical problem, they reply, "Well, when considering diversity, we simply have to go with the best, and the best is the foreign minority." But comparing international and domestic students, majority or minority, is not as straightforward as it might seem.

Many international students were admitted to graduate school in the United States because they were highly competitive and the best students of their nations. Often the products of early academic tracking, they have had strong educational foundations and intense, specialized study in their fields. They are stronger candidates for admission than all but the very best American undergraduates. In the sciences, math, and engineering — which tend to attract the largest numbers of international students — Americans are particularly at a disadvantage. In those disciplines, American minority students are not competing chiefly with other Americans, as their peers in the humanities are, but with the best that the world has to offer. Frequently, their weaker academic backgrounds mean they are not admitted, and when they are, they are often left to fend for themselves.

International students and scholars contribute significantly to the high quality of American colleges and universities, and to the nation's economy. We should continue to welcome the best talent from around the world.

But those foreign students and faculty members have not experienced anything like the hardships that members of domestic-minority groups have faced year after year. They were not viewed as racially or ethnically different in their countries of origin and, from their formative years on,

made to feel that they were second-class citizens who did not belong in higher education or in leadership positions. People from places like Africa, Spain, or Latin America cannot be effective role models or mentors for African-Americans and Latinos who grew up in the United States. In fact, it is not unusual for those foreigners to view their domestic-minority counterparts negatively and to strongly resist being identified with them.

Correcting the underrepresentation of minority groups, then, has little to do with international programs. The presence of foreign scholars — even those who are black, brown, or Spanish-speaking — does little to solve the problem of our universities' lack of success with Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and black youth from across the United States. Foreigners should not count when we are talking about underrepresentation of American groups.

Diversity initiatives began in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way to solve broad, deep, race-based problems in American society. But with its shift in meaning, diversity today is a sort of red herring. We can deceive ourselves that we are taking the right steps to increase diversity when in fact we are ignoring what is still one of this country's most troubling issues: educating our minority youth.

I believe that many administrators were well intentioned as they guided the design of their universities' diversity policies and statements, thinking that diversity would translate into representation. However, they built in few checks or accountability. Thus, universities continue to recruit the best students and faculty members from around the world, but now they do so in the name of diversity.

What does diversity do for minorities? Unfortunately, not very much.

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