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## Converging Perils to College Access for Racial Minorities

Examples of Responses that Work from Washington State and New Jersey

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In the decades after World War II, thanks to an unprecedented confluence of supportive circumstances, the number and diversity of Americans attending college grew dramatically. Popular attitudes favored higher education, and economic trends rewarded it. Sweeping social changes reduced the barriers for men and women whose college attendance had previously been discouraged, and government at every level contributed to expanding opportunities for them to enroll. The outcomes of this relatively recent explosion of access to higher education were wide and deep and highly favorable—for the individuals who went to college, for their families and communities, and for the well-being of the nation. Other countries around the world emulated the experience of the United States, with predictably positive results.

Few observers would forecast, much less encourage, a return to the state of affairs before World War II, when the great majority of college and university students were affluent white males. The demands of the

economy and the dreams of millions of individuals, to name just two factors, will not permit the clock to be turned back to the 1930s or 1940s. But the truth is, we live in a perilous time for higher education access and opportunity. The availability and the reputation of higher education attendance are at greater risk today than they have been for decades, and the situation is particularly hazardous for ethnic and racial minorities.

### The Postwar Path toward Higher Education Becomes Undermined

The circumstances that converged to expand higher education enrollment following World War II were unprecedented. From the federal government came the GI bill and successor measures of financial assistance for middle-class and low-income students who could not otherwise have afforded to attend college. Beginning in the late 1940s and especially in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, these students did so in far greater numbers than ever before, because they correctly perceived higher education as a pathway to economic and social advancement. The states, too, created new programs of need-based financial aid for students, while, at the same time, they greatly enlarged the enrollment capacity of their colleges and universities, both in traditional four-year institutions and in newly established two-year institutions, commonly called community colleges. By the 1960s, social and political movements, especially for the civil rights of African Americans and the rights of women, encouraged college attendance by vastly greater numbers from within those previously underrepresented groups.

In sheer quantitative terms, the outcomes of these entwined trends were dramatic. During the quarter-century from 1950 to the mid-1970s, overall higher education enrollment increased by approximately 500 percent, to nearly 12 million students; college attendance by women grew equal to that of men (and soon would surpass it), while the enrollment of African Americans and Hispanic Americans doubled and doubled again. Inevitably, the pace of change declined following several decades of remarkable, indeed world-historic, growth, but the basic characteristics of college enrollment, in its numbers and its diversity, were firmly established by the trends that emerged after World War II.<sup>1</sup> Particularly noteworthy is that minority participation in higher education continued to grow. From 1995 to 2009, African American enrollment increased by 73 percent and Hispanic American enrollment rose by 107 percent (compared to white enrollment growth of 15 percent).<sup>2</sup>

In the face of the facts just cited and at the risk of seeming alarmist, I want to call attention to some current and converging trends that may seriously endanger the continuation of higher education enrollment growth, especially for racial and ethnic minorities and perhaps most especially for African Americans. Some of the threats to college attendance have been in the making for decades, while others have quite recent origins. Some of the perils potentially affect all students (with the possible exception of a small elite composed of the wealthiest and best prepared young men and women), while others mainly endanger minority students. I then want to suggest possible responses to some of these perils and to cite, in particular, successful programs that were developed at two universities where I worked, the University of Washington and Rutgers University.

Among the factors threatening college attendance today, the most pervasive is the decline of government support for higher education and the resulting increases in both tuition and student debt. Beginning in the early 1990s, virtually all the American states began reducing their support for public colleges and universities, and the trend continues to the present day.<sup>3</sup> In response, the institutions steadily raised tuition and fees. A quarter century ago, a typical in-state student attending a public college or university probably paid about a third of the cost of his or her education, while state appropriations covered the rest; today the proportions are reversed, and such students are expected to pay most of the cost of their own education.<sup>4</sup> Across the same decades, federal financial aid increasingly came in the form of loans rather than grants. Together these developments deterred some students from attending college altogether and increased the burden of debt borne by many who did enroll. Behind these shifts in financing for higher education lay a fateful transformation in the way Americans looked at college. Formerly regarded as a “public good” deserving of taxpayer support because the whole society benefited when more people became educated, college enrollment is now increasingly perceived as an individual asset that boosts the career prospects and earning power of those who receive the education. The implication is clear: the people who obtain the benefits should bear the cost.

More recently, several emerging trends are further discouraging college attendance, at least in its traditional forms. The great recession of 2008 and its long lasting residue of unemployment and underemployment have emboldened the critics of higher education who assert that college is not worth what it costs, meaning that a postsecondary degree provides no guarantee of a well-paying job. Sadly that is literally true.

Fast receding in public consciousness is the sense that a college education is valuable in its own right because it prepares men and women for lifetimes of productive activity in forms that cannot possibly be foreseen at the moment of graduation. Another emerging trend, namely the maturation of online learning, is also serving to discourage attendance in college classrooms. Why pay to sit there when everything you want to know is available wherever you can find a computer terminal? These doubts about the value of college only deepen the erosion of government support for higher education.

Each of the enrollment-dampening developments I have cited to this point potentially affects all prospective college students, but the impacts of these trends are scarcely shared evenly among them. Those harmed the most are economically disadvantaged students who cannot afford the rising costs of college and who are reluctant to take on large debts to pay for an asset of questionable economic value. Every racial and ethnic group includes people in poverty, but not in the same proportions, and the high cost of attending college deters relatively more minority students than whites. Besides the financial barriers, moreover, there are other discouraging factors that particularly impair the chances for higher education among racial and ethnic minorities. Perhaps the most important among these is the continuing inferiority of the education that is provided within America's big urban school systems, the very districts that largely serve African American and Hispanic students. Despite decades of hand-wringing and of political wrangling over pupil testing, teacher tenure, charter schools, and the achievement gap, boys and girls in our big city schools remain overwhelmingly less well prepared for college than their suburban counterparts, most of whom are white. The schools, of course, do not bear the blame alone; poverty, crime, and social dysfunction provide the tragic setting in which poor educational outcomes become highly likely. The situation is particularly desperate for African American men, who are more likely to spend time in prison during their lifetime than to graduate from college.<sup>5</sup> Most students trapped in big city schools would not be ready for higher education, even if it was ready and affordable for them.

Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Stohl of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce have recently brought forth striking evidence of the disadvantages and inequalities faced by racial and ethnic minorities in higher education.<sup>6</sup> Although as noted above, college attendance by African Americans and Hispanics has continued to grow, Carnevale and Stohl show that minority students are “disproportionately

tracked into crowded and underfunded two-year colleges and open-access four-year colleges,” rather than into the wealthier and more selective institutions where white students continue to occupy far more than their share of the seats. Higher education, they say, thus “mimics and magnifies” the inequalities “it inherits from the K–12 system.” At the more selective colleges, resources per student, completion rates, graduate school attendance, and prospects for high-income employment are all far greater than at the “inexpensive, resource starved” colleges attended by most minority students. The subtitle of their study expresses its authors’ depressing conclusion: “How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege.” Long acclaimed as pathways of upward mobility, our colleges and universities may actually be contributing to racial and ethnic inequality rather than reducing it.

All the perils to higher education access and opportunity for minority students will be intensified if affirmative action—that is, the use of race as a plus factor in college admissions decisions—is deemed by the courts to be unconstitutional, which it may be at some point in the years ahead. Originally developed as a means of advancing social justice and remedying the historic effects of racial discrimination, the case for affirmative action now rests upon the educational benefits that diversity confers upon students. Widely advanced by educators and accepted, at least for now, by the Supreme Court, is the argument that all students receive a better education and all will become more fully prepared for life and work in a multicultural society if they study and learn with members of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. affirmed that rationale in his 1978 opinion in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, as did Justice Sandra Day O’Connor in her 2003 opinion in *Grutter v. Bollinger*.<sup>7</sup> More recently, in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, the Court recognized the educational argument for affirmative action but declared that universities wishing to employ race as a factor in admissions decisions must show that they could not assemble a diverse student body through race-neutral means.

Some observers of the Court and many college educators fear that affirmative action will be entirely struck down before long. In eight states, it already has been struck down—not by the courts but by voter referendum, executive order, or legislative action—and admissions officers everywhere are going back to the drawing boards to try to figure out how they could preserve and even increase the racial diversity of their institutions without the benefit of affirmative action.<sup>8</sup> They know that

goal will be difficult to achieve, not only because the law will not be on their side anymore, but also because *so many* trends in America today are discouraging minority enrollment in colleges and universities.

### Restoring Equality and Social Justice to Higher Education

Before leaving aside the law of affirmative action and turning to practical methods for boosting student diversity, it is worth remembering that for many educators, and especially for many college and university presidents, the challenge is not only about increasing the numbers of minority students, although the numbers certainly do matter. Even more important, however, is positioning our institutions to do what is right, to take whatever actions they legitimately can take to promote equality in a world of inequality, and to advance social justice. Some thoughtful educators regret the Supreme Court's jettisoning of the original arguments for affirmative action, arguments based on the heritage of racial injustice and past discrimination—in other words on the very ideals that inspired *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Columbia University president Lee Bollinger, for one, sees in the trajectory from *Brown* to *Bakke* to *Grutter* to *Fisher* evidence of “a long, slow drift from racial justice” and laments “the failure to renew a conversation about racial justice as the civil-rights era recedes further and further into the past.”<sup>9</sup> Rutgers–Newark chancellor Nancy Cantor observes that “Race still matters, every day, in so many ways, large and small, and significantly in the map of educational opportunity.”<sup>10</sup> Bollinger and Cantor are uncommonly eloquent and passionate, but they are not alone. Many university presidents seek every available opportunity to affirm that, whatever the courts may say, there are *two* indispensable arguments for affirmative action and for racial inclusion more generally: social justice *and* educational quality. Supreme Court justices may doubt that universities are capable of attempting to remedy centuries of racial discrimination—and it is surely true that their capabilities and their powers to do so are limited—but they must try to do what they can.<sup>11</sup>

That is exactly the spirit in which many selective colleges and universities have been approaching the goal of maintaining and increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of their student bodies. At the heart of the challenge is searching aggressively for minority students who can succeed in college, preparing them to gain admission, and providing the resources they need to graduate. These are not easy undertakings. They

demand time and labor, they must be carefully devised to meet local circumstances, and they are expensive. But highly ranked institutions around the country have not been deterred by these difficulties, and some common themes are discernable in their efforts: outreach to communities where minority students live, collaboration with K–12 schools, creation of programs to prepare students for college, holistic reviews of applicants for admission, and provision of financial aid for needy students. Endeavors like these are enabling many selective institutions to enroll and graduate far more African American, Hispanic, and Native American students than they otherwise would—in defiance of the trends now imperiling higher education for minorities. At their best, these efforts can succeed *whether or not* race is used as a plus factor in the admissions process. The recent experiences of the University of Washington and Rutgers University illustrate the point.

### *The University of Washington*

Like many of its peers around the country, the University of Washington (UW) became actively engaged in recruiting and educating an ethnically and racially diverse student body in the late 1960s. Citing both educational quality and social justice as reasons for advancing the diversity of their institution, UW leaders established the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) to recruit and admit low-income and minority students and to provide them with the support they needed once they enrolled at the university. Until 1997, EOP operated its own separate admissions track using race and ethnicity, among other factors, in that process. That year, EOP was merged with regular admissions, but the UW continued to employ affirmative action in its decisions. The university community showed a broad and deep commitment to racial diversity. Thanks to decades of effort, and to affirmative action, the representation of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans within the UW student body was not far from their proportions in the state's population.<sup>12</sup>

In 1998, several years into my presidency of the UW, the voters of Washington were asked to consider Initiative 200, which would prohibit government entities, including public universities, from giving preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin. I spoke out against the initiative, at least to the extent the university's lawyers would let me, by pointing with pride to the UW's multicultural student body and to the educational benefits of diversity for everyone who studied there. Looking southward to the experience of California, whose

voters had adopted a nearly identical referendum two years earlier, we knew that passage of Initiative 200 would significantly reduce minority enrollment at the UW. The voters of the state overwhelmingly approved it, however, and just as we had anticipated, the results for student diversity were bad. If you had entered the UW as a first-year student in the fall of 1998, immediately prior to passage of Initiative 200, approximately one in eleven of your classmates would have been African American, Hispanic, or Native American. By the very next year, that ratio had dropped to only one in eighteen.

Forced to abandon the consideration of race in admissions decisions, the university mustered an aggressive, multi-pronged strategy for restoring and, if possible, enhancing the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body. Key constituencies within the UW community—including the Board of Regents, the university administration, faculty leaders, and student leaders—came together to design a wide range of measures for promoting student diversity and a plan for ensuring their success. First, the admissions process was revised to give applicants an opportunity to describe their personal experiences with diversity and adversity (experiences that people of any color can have). The application offered students several options for doing that, including answering the following question: “The University of Washington seeks to create a community of students richly diverse in cultural backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints. How would you contribute to this community?” During the succeeding years, the holistic admissions review process was closely watched and amended, consistent with the new law, to enable applicants to demonstrate their multicultural awareness.

Next, the UW massively expanded its existing programs of outreach and targeted recruitment. Faculty, students, and alumni fanned out across the state to talk with students in community colleges, high schools, and middle schools where minority students were concentrated. We invited many of them to campus, often for overnight visits, and showed them the exciting educational opportunities they would have if they enrolled at the UW. Financial aid officers explained to the visiting students how they could obtain the resources they would need to attend college. In collaboration with high schools in several of the state’s cities, especially Seattle and Tacoma, the university placed counselors there who worked with students, advised them on taking the college preparatory courses that would qualify them for admission, and, when the time came, assisted them in applying for both admission and financial aid. As president, I

sent letters to high-achieving minority students throughout the western United States and encouraged them to consider the UW. Among the most important participants in these outreach programs were UW students themselves. With funding from my office, they established the student ambassador program and travelled around the state meeting with minority high school students and, through the example of their own experiences at the UW, encouraging the younger students to believe a college education was possible for them.

The last element of the university's response to Initiative 200 was obtaining money from private sources for scholarships that would be targeted for underrepresented minority students. Carefully crafted by lawyers, financial aid officers, and fund raisers, the Diversity Scholars Program raised more than seven million dollars in private funds in its first two years and awarded them to needy minority students who had demonstrated significant academic potential.

Together these efforts were successful. Within five years after the post-Initiative 200 nadir of minority enrollment, the racial and ethnic diversity of the UW's first-year class had returned to its pre-1999 levels. In subsequent years, by dint of hard work on the part of many university constituencies (I was now gone as UW president), the enrollment of underrepresented minorities, especially Hispanics and Native Americans but less so African Americans, continued to rise. Notably, too, the economic diversity of the UW's undergraduate student body also increased—as indicated by the university's growing numbers of federal Pell grant recipients.<sup>13</sup> All this occurred within the bounds of an admissions process that no longer awarded “plus factors” for race but which admittedly relied upon racially minded surrogates, such as carefully drafted admissions questions, targeted outreach and recruitment, and directed fundraising for minority scholarships. Whether and to what extent the new system would have succeeded in restoring racial and ethnic diversity to its pre-Initiative 200 levels without these surrogates is unknown.<sup>14</sup>

### *Rutgers University*

Like the University of Washington, Rutgers University, whose president I became in 2002, began significant efforts to enroll and educate minority students in the late 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Owing to the racial and ethnic heterogeneity of New Jersey's population, to decades of strenuous outreach and recruitment, and to affirmative action, Rutgers achieved a high ranking among top-tier state universities for the large numbers of African Americans and

Hispanics within its student body and an enviable reputation as a welcoming place for minority students. Indeed, diversity became a signature value for Rutgers, inseparable from its academic character. Countless campus conversations, as well as surveys of faculty, students, and alumni, reveal how highly people at Rutgers prize the racial and ethnic diversity of the university community and how strongly they feel that everyone gets a better education in a diverse environment.<sup>16</sup>

For all that, however, Rutgers's diversity is mostly suburban. The towns of Edison, West Windsor, and Cherry Hill send many students of color to the university, but the cities of Newark, New Brunswick, Camden, Paterson, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Trenton, and Atlantic City send far fewer compared to their populations. This point was driven home when the Reverend M. William Howard Jr., a member of the Rutgers Board of Governors and pastor of the Bethany Baptist Church in Newark, observed that he could foresee the day when not a single child who was educated in the public schools of Newark would even be qualified to attend Rutgers. He was reflecting, of course, upon the quality of the schools and of life in Newark, but he could have made the same observation with almost equal accuracy about the other two older industrial cities where Rutgers is located, New Brunswick and Camden. His remarks got the board's attention and helped inspire creation of the Rutgers Future Scholars Program in 2008.

Working closely with the four school districts where Rutgers is located (the three cities plus suburban Piscataway), the university's admissions officers identified approximately fifty rising eighth graders from each community who would comprise the first class of Future Scholars. All of the boys and girls were academically promising and had been recommended by their teachers, but most came from backgrounds that were challenged by poverty and social disorder. Hardly any of them had a parent who had gone to college, and almost all of the scholars from Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden were African Americans or Hispanics. Race was not used as a factor in selecting the members of the program, but it did not have to be used because three of the four communities, the three cities, have largely minority populations. Since 2008, Rutgers has identified and recruited similar classes of Future Scholars every year.

Bringing them on board, we issued a challenge and a promise to the students. The challenge was to prepare themselves for college, hopefully Rutgers. And the promise was this: the university would provide tutoring and mentoring as they continued their education in grades eight through

twelve and would guide them in selecting their courses and monitor their progress so they stayed on track for college; we would bring them to programs on a Rutgers campus, probably the campus nearest where they lived, during the academic year and also every summer for a college preparatory experience; and—the big promise—if as high school seniors they were admitted to Rutgers and chose to attend, they would pay nothing in tuition and fees.

The program is succeeding just as we hoped it would. In the spring of 2013, 170 out of the 183 members of the first class of Rutgers Future Scholars graduated from their high schools in Newark, New Brunswick, Piscataway, and Camden. Their graduation rate was far above the predicted levels based on the students' social and economic backgrounds. Even more gratifying is that 163 of them were admitted to college, including 99 who enrolled at Rutgers and 64 who entered other four-year institutions or community colleges. As promised, the Rutgers students are paying no tuition or fees. In spite of these successes and the enormous needs that are being met through this program, it will be challenging to keep it up, much less to expand it. Although most of these scholars are eligible for financial aid from the federal and state governments, the undocumented among them are not, and the full cost of their education will have to be borne by Rutgers or whatever college they attend. The most expensive part of the program, however, is not their college education, but rather all the nurturing support they received during their high school years to get them ready for college. That is the biggest miracle of the Rutgers Future Scholars Program—and it will be worth whatever it takes to maintain it.

## Conclusion

Although each institution had spent decades boosting the enrollment of minority students, the UW and Rutgers, each in its own way, recognized threats to the realization of that objective and responded aggressively and seemingly successfully. The UW took action to undo the effects of a voter referendum abolishing affirmative action, while Rutgers established a program to support college readiness and enrollment for young men and women in the older cities where its campuses are located. Both universities knew they could not wait for the K–12 schools to fix themselves but had to reach out and, in partnership with the schools, identify students whom they could nurture and prepare for higher education. The

programs undertaken by the UW and Rutgers did not rely on affirmative action as it is typically understood—that is, on using race as a plus factor in admissions decisions. But both universities employed proxies for race, most notably, geographically targeted outreach and recruitment. Such approaches may or may not stand the test of time.

These are just two stories out of many that could be told about how the nation's selective colleges and universities are trying to promote the enrollment and education of underrepresented minorities. Many institutions are experimenting with new and hopeful methods for expanding minority access, including affirmative action for economically disadvantaged students of all races. But the current and converging perils to minority enrollment are acute, and much more will have to be done to combat them. Whatever measures colleges and universities may take to promote access to higher education, their leaders must convince a wavering nation that everyone should have educational opportunity because they deserve it and because we cannot afford to waste the talents of anyone.