

“Blacks in Higher Education: An Endangered Species?”

Over the past two decades, a central theme in American higher education has been “diversity.” Most universities and colleges have made genuine efforts to diversify their courses, faculty, and administrative personnel. Despite the obvious political attacks against affirmative action scholarships, symbolized by California’s Proposition 209, most colleges have continued efforts to foster outreach to racial minorities and women.

The good news is that many of these reforms are finally producing results, especially in regard to gender diversity. In recent weeks, for example, there was intense media coverage about black public intellectual Cornel West’s decision to leave Harvard University for a new appointment at Princeton. One factor in West’s decision may have been the extraordinary steps Princeton has taken recently to make its leadership more diverse. As the New York Times recently reported, Princeton recently named Shirley M. Tilghman its president, the first woman to hold this position. Women also hold positions as Princeton’s provost, dean of the prestigious Woodrow Wilson School, and dean of the Engineering and Applied Science School. In the eight Ivy League universities, three of the president’s are women, including Brown’s Ruth Simmons, an African American. About 22 percent of the more than 2,000 college and university presidents in the U.S. are women, up from 9.5 percent in 1986, and only 5 percent in 1975. Women have made less progress, however, in efforts to diversify the ranks of the senior faculty. Today, the percentage of women with full-time, tenured appointments are 52 percent of all female faculty,

compared to 70 percent among male faculty. Only about 20 percent of all full professors, the highest academic rank for university teachers, are women. However, about 56 percent of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges are women.

These positive statistics about greater access for women unfortunately don't seem to carry over for African Americans. Last month I delivered a keynote address at a conference, "Marginalization in the Academy?" organized by Dr. William Harvey and sponsored by the American Council on Education, that examined the status of blacks in higher education. The conference's findings were both enlightening—and disturbing.

The most optimistic findings show that the numbers of blacks attending graduate schools have consistently increased. As reported recently in [The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education](#), as of 2002 there were 139,000 African Americans attending graduate programs, representing over a 100 percent increase since 1984. As of 2000, over 9,300 African Americans were attending law schools, which was 50 percent more than the number of blacks enrolled in 1990. In academic year 1999-2000, blacks received approximately 5,300 professional school degrees, a number comprising 6.7% of professional degrees awarded that year. Between 1989 and 2002, the number of African Americans who annually receive professional degrees has gone up about 70 percent. The number of black Ph.D.s produced in 2000, 1,656 doctorates, is over twice the number of blacks earning Ph.D. degrees in the late 1980s.

If the sojourn of black scholars in white academe ended there, it would appear to many to represent a remarkable multicultural transformation of white higher education. Unfortunately, the story doesn't hardly end here. Most other recent trends actually undermine access and

opportunity for most African Americans in higher education. For example, the overall percentages of African Americans employed in faculty, administrative, and professional managerial positions remain miniscule. In 2001, the total number of African-American faculty at all institutions was 61,183, a figure representing only 6.1 percent of all U.S. faculty. The overwhelming majority of black teaching faculty are located in historically black colleges and universities, in two-year community colleges, and at largely underfunded public universities where teaching demands are high and resources for research, laboratories, travel to academic and professional conferences and libraries are modest.

The higher up the academic hierarchy one goes, the whiter the institution or scholarly society becomes. A 2001 survey of the twenty-seven highest ranked research universities in the United States indicates that 3.6 percent of all faculty are black. African-American educators remain underrepresented in the upper levels of academic administration. To really obtain a true picture of how “white” higher education is, one must disaggregate from what is frequently defined as “faculty” those who are actually adjunct professors, administrators who are counted as instructors, and faculty working on limited, term contracts.

At the highest levels of America’s educational hierarchy, African Americans virtually disappear. The American Academy of Arts and Letters (AAAS) is perhaps the nation’s most prestigious academic society. Of the AAAS’s more than 3,700 members, only 160 are African-American intellectuals, approximately only 1.6 percent of the Academy’s membership. There is on the list only one prominent African-American historian, John Hope Franklin; three prominent black sociologists—William Julius Wilson, Kenneth B. Clark, and Orlando Patterson; in anthropology, there is just Johnnetta Cole; in philosophy, only K. Anthony Appiah and Cornel

West. With these and other similar exceptions, when one considers the hundreds of outstanding African-American scholars who are today redefining the contours of academic disciplines throughout the humanities and social sciences, their lack of representation in the American Academy of Arts and Letters is indefensible and outrageous.

There is also within the changing politics of American higher education what can be called the reconfigured reality of race: the deteriorating white support for affirmative action and race-based scholarships, a retreat from a needs-blind admissions, and the implicit “writing-off” or elimination of most low-income and urban poor students from having access to elite schools.

In higher education, therefore, the real issue isn’t “diversity”—it’s “empowerment,” or rather, the lack of it. Blacks still remain underrepresented at every level of the educational hierarchy. There’s an urgent need to revive Dr. Ronald Walter’s brilliant concept of a national congress of black faculty, to lobby for real change at predominantly white institutions. We need to place greater external political pressure especially on research universities to increase scholarship and mentorship programs to expand the academic pool of potential black faculty and administrators. Major universities should establish partnerships with historically black colleges, to channel resources and to enhance black faculty development. Knowledge is always power, and we need a more effective strategy for black empowerment with these all-too-white institutions.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Political Science, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York. “Along the Color Line” is distributed free of charge to over 350 publications throughout the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Marable’s column is also available on the Internet at www.manningmarable.net.