

## Diversities and Higher Education

### *Racial, Economic, and Political*

**EACH FALL THE FORUM FOR THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION** culminates its research agenda during its Annual Symposium at the Aspen Institute. The Ford Policy Forum, which we chair, is an integral part of the Forum's activities. Its goal is to bring the insight of economists and related scholars to bear both on broad issues of educational policy and on specific topics related to institutional management and governance.

We have selected a wide range of topics over the years: the practicality of placing educational issues higher on the economic research agenda; how colleges and universities can better plan for the inevitable downside of the business cycle; what U.S. higher education can learn from the many innovative experiments being undertaken in other countries; the challenges and perils of universal higher education; aligning college athletics with academic values; and this year's topic, diversities and higher education.

It isn't hard to see how economic principles and tools could inform even that set of seemingly disparate topics. But our intention has never been to limit these discussions to issues that focus exclusively on economics. Rather, our view is that to fully understand any real-world subject, one must seek the insights of many disciplines. The topic of diversity in American higher education encompasses economic, sociological, political, and philosophical issues, and while it would be unrealistic in the time allotted to grapple with them all, this year's Ford Policy Forum is as interdisciplinary as ever.

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## Broadening the Diversity Discussion

Racial diversity has been a major topic of public discussion for many years. The changing legal environment has prompted the adoption of a variety of alternatives to the race-sensitive admissions policies that have been widespread throughout public and private higher education. A number of observers have written convincingly about the desirability of educating students in an environment reflective of the racial diversity of the nation. *The Shape of the River*, by William Bowen and Derek Bok, is a particularly compelling analysis of the benefits of race-sensitive admissions for individuals, institutions, and the nation. As it becomes more and more challenging to devise an admissions scheme that promotes that aim, it is ever more important to understand the reality of the current situation.

The unwelcome message is this: educational opportunity in the United States is spectacularly unequal from the earliest days of children's experience in schooling. As shown in McPherson and Schapiro (2005; unless otherwise noted, all the data below are included in tables and figures in that paper), high school dropout rates vary dramatically by race, especially when comparing Hispanics to whites. Even for blacks, who experienced an encouraging downward trend in dropout rates between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s, there has been little or no progress since then, either in absolute terms or relative to whites. Among those who graduate from high school, the decline in college enrollment rates for blacks and Hispanics was reversed in the mid-1980s, but college enrollment for whites is still 10 to 15 percentage points higher than for blacks and Hispanics. Moreover, progress in college enrollment rates seems to have peaked in the late 1990s, with stagnation or decline since.

The bottom line is that racial differences in high school dropout rates, college enrollment rates, and college completion rates (which also differ markedly by race) all add up to explain differences in educational attainment. In 2002, 93 percent of whites aged 25 to 29 had completed high school and 35 percent had completed at least four years of college. Comparable percentages for blacks were 88 percent and 18 percent, while Hispanics lagged far behind with percentages of only 62 percent and 9 percent.

A second aspect of diversity involves economic opportunity and success. Economic diversity has also long been on the policy agenda, and the findings discussed

above in terms of race are paralleled in terms of income—students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to enroll in college if they complete high school, and less likely to complete a bachelor's degree if they enroll in college. But a recent series of studies has focused our attention on another aspect of economic diversity—the underrepresentation of students from low-income backgrounds at our nation's best-known colleges and universities. As they did for racial diversity, William Bowen and his colleagues in *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* have increased our awareness and knowledge of this key component of educational diversity as well.

Our own work over the years, while for the most part concentrating on broad questions of higher education access and affordability, has also examined the presence (or lack thereof) of low-income students at selective institutions. The differences by income are striking—more than half of college-going students raised in families with incomes at the top end of the American income distribution attend one of the 150 or so schools that are moderately or highly selective (a small fraction of the 3,700 or so public and not-for-profit colleges and universities in the country). In contrast, only 15 percent of college-going students from families at the bottom end of the income distribution attend one of those 150 “national” colleges and universities.

A series of articles by Catharine Hill, Gordon Winston, and Stephanie Boyd (discussed at the Forum's 2005 Symposium by Hill and Winston) center on economic diversity at those 31 select institutions that are members of the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE). Given the well-documented relationship between family income and test scores, quality of K–12 education, and other indicators of academic preparation, it is perhaps not surprising that Hill and her colleagues discovered that only 27 percent of all COFHE students come from families in the bottom 80 percent of the American income distribution, with the bottom 40 percent accounting for just one out of 10 students.

Finally, there is the question of political diversity. While the conservative media seem to be obsessed with the notion that higher education has become an island of extreme liberalism, isolated from mainstream society, the discussion generally doesn't go much beyond counting registered



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Democrats versus Republicans. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons. If it is generally agreed within academe that we need students from low-income backgrounds and from a variety of racial and ethnic groups to truly educate all our students, why isn't the same the case for political ideologies? Whether driven by a lack of conservative role models for our students to emulate, the threat of indoctrination from a professoriate far to the left of the students, or the absence of substantial numbers of conservative thinkers to push back against liberal ideas, it seems worthwhile to ask how colleges and universities can enrich the spectrum of political perspectives among their faculty and students without compromising their institutional goals and principles.

Even if the reasons enumerated above aren't persuasive, it can't be a good thing if our institutions are thought of as being out of touch with the rest of the nation. The marginalization of the academy has all sorts of costs—from the loss of political influence to reductions in state and federal appropriations to the threat of government intrusion affecting the four fundamental freedoms of the academy, namely, what we teach, how we teach, who teaches it, and to whom it is taught. Thus, if there are good reasons why greater political diversity is not attainable, it is important to understand and to articulate why that is so.

### **Addressing Diversity's Challenges**

What are the challenges and opportunities presented by racial, economic, and political diversity in U.S. higher education? These issues will be addressed by three individuals, as described below. As always, the key to the success of the Ford Policy Forum is the quality of the people we enlist to write and present papers.

#### ***Racial Diversity***

Marta Tienda is a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton. A noted demographer and policy analyst, she focuses in her paper on the experience of the state of Texas in promoting racial diversity at its colleges and universities. After the Fifth Circuit Court declared in 1996 that the use of race-sensitive criteria in admissions decisions was illegal, the Texas legislature adopted the so-called Texas Top 10 Percent Law, which guarantees admission to state public higher education institutions to any high school senior who graduates in the top 10 percent of his or her high school class. Tienda's data show that relying on class rank to the exclusion of standardized test scores qualifies a broader range of students for college. The University of Texas, therefore, has been able to restore its pre-1996

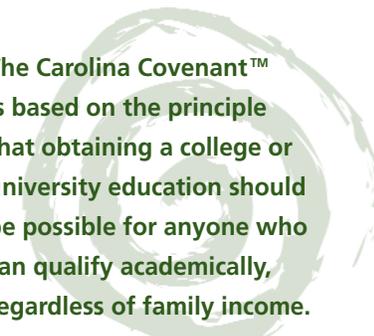
degree of racial diversity, although Texas A&M, with its more rural location, has not. Tienda discusses lessons from this experience for other states.

Tienda also notes that if current growth trends in Texas continue, by 2020 blacks and Hispanics will comprise over half of Texas's total workforce. The fact that both groups, especially Hispanics, are highly underrepresented in the state's higher education institutions bodes ill for the state's future economic prospects. Trends at the national level are on a similar trajectory: by 2030, 40 percent of the U.S. population is expected to be minority, with about one-third of the total either black or Hispanic. The extent to which this growing minority population will contribute to our nation's economic productivity and civic life will in many ways depend upon our ability to broaden access to higher education.

#### ***Economic Diversity***

Shirley Ort, one of the nation's leading voices on student aid, is associate provost and director of financial aid at the University of North Carolina. She evaluates the success of the Carolina Covenant, North Carolina's ambitious effort to enroll talented low-income students. The Covenant, in promising that success in primary and secondary education will lead to an affordable opportunity to enroll at the Chapel Hill campus, one of our nation's "Public Ivies," seeks to raise the educational aspirations of low-income students. The Covenant is based on the principle that obtaining a college or university education should be possible for anyone who can qualify academically, regardless of family income.

A major advantage of this program is the simplicity of its message: if you succeed in high school, you will be able to attend and graduate from the university debt-free. This promise addresses one of the primary barriers to college enrollment for low-income students; that is, the fear of accumulating debt. Ort reports that the number of low-income students has risen since the Covenant was implemented. In Fall 2005, 350 entering dependent students—including 9 percent of the first-year class—had family incomes of 200 percent or less of the federal poverty guidelines and were designated as "Covenant Scholars." Their average high school GPA is 4.25, and their average SAT score is 1223. Sixty percent are students of color. The university has not set



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a limit on the number of Covenant Scholars, and expects to enroll ever larger numbers of talented low-income students over time. As is true of the paper on racial diversity, our hope for this presentation is that we will all learn something about, in this case, how to increase economic diversity at our nation's most selective institutions.

### *Political Diversity*

Edwin Feulner is the president of the Heritage Foundation, a highly visible conservative think tank. Higher education conferences are always proud to list the accomplishments of their distinguished speakers, but we don't recall any other speaker having been awarded a medal by President Reagan for leadership of the conservative movement. Feulner laments the preeminence of leftist political viewpoints in the academy.

Our free, self-governing society, he says, requires the open exchange of ideas, which in turn requires a certain level of civility rooted in mutual respect. He calls for a broader acceptance of diverse ideas on campus, and believes that the leftist dominance of the academy has delegitimized

higher education in the eyes of the American public. Indeed, Feulner argues that the polarization of the academy is so off-putting to Americans that it can be seen as the root of anti-intellectualism in our country.

### **Conclusion**

These three commentators themselves represent a bit of the diversity in our industry—a professor at a private research university, an administrator at a public university, and the head of a prominent think tank focused on social and political issues. Issues of diversity—racial, economic, and political—in higher education are certain to loom even larger in the decades ahead given demographic changes in the American population, the increasing disparity in U.S. income distribution, and the continuing increase in political polarization across the country. Our aim is to stimulate the development of thoughtful and well-informed policies in light of these changes.

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