

Foreword

The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education reads to me, in its totality, like the famous passage from the Book of Daniel. In case you have forgotten: "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting." This volume does not go so far, however, as does the Book of Daniel, and also say: "Thy kingdom [is] finished." The central message is that higher education, in its policies toward minorities and its treatment of them, has been found wanting, and that there have been, and will be even more, serious consequences.

The injunction is that the greatest single imperative before American higher education currently is to improve its performance in this crucial area. I agree that this is one of the great imperatives now before higher education but would suggest that there are others, including but not limited to: (1) responding to the demands of our society for higher education to make greater contributions to our national economic competitiveness and (2) renewing our faculties and facilities in a short period of time to replace those recruited and built in the 1960s and early 1970s. The first of these two poses a great contradiction—it places a very heavy emphasis on merit alone while the treatment of minorities includes an emphasis on compensatory opportunities. The second, however, is a complementary force since it will open up many new faculty positions for possible appointments of minorities.

I have spoken of this volume "in its totality" and will comment further upon it also "in its totality" but this, I fully realize, is somewhat misleading for there are altogether fifteen essays involving nineteen authors. Each essay has, of course, its own themes and emphases. However, they do add up to one overall and consistent impression that: all is not well! This theme is quickly stated by the two editors, Philip G. Altbach and Kofi Lomotey—both at State University of New York at Buffalo—in the first chapter and in the conclusion. Lomotey writes of different racial cultures "living separately, with little knowledge of, or respect for, each other"; and Altbach of how racial issues in American higher education have been and are at "flashpoints of crisis."

A few of the major themes that run through these essays are:

- Racism is a problem of all of American society, not of higher education alone; yet higher education is now on the front lines of the conflicts as were once the buses, the lunch counters, the city streets, the factory employment offices. Too much of a burden, however, is now being placed on higher education to find solutions which it, by itself, cannot possibly find.
- The numbers are better than they once were, as in the early 1960s, but still not adequate either in admissions or in completion rates, except for Asian-Americans. The special case of Asian-Americans splits the minorities among themselves. Their interests and their favored policies are not only not the same but actually opposed to those of other minorities.
- Nothing works as well as it should—not student aid, not affirmative action. The results, consequently, are not commensurate with the efforts. And, additionally, numbers alone are not enough.
- While the numbers are better, the relations are worse. Some minorities get more but they then come to expect more—their own residence halls, their own requested courses, for example, in their own enclaves. Simultaneously, what is called in one essay the “arrogant majority” is becoming more resentful of what it views as special privileges given to minorities. “Hostile stereotypes” of each other are intensifying. The number of racial incidents on campuses is increasing. Both the lash and the backlash are stronger.
- The most preferred new solution is required courses to improve racial understanding. Yet there can always be problems with compulsory courses in a student body intent on individual choices, and the courses may turn out to be counterproductive.
- The central persons in all of these growing conflicts are the college and university presidents, and next, the faculties at large. Neither is as yet taking the intensifying problems with sufficient seriousness.
- Overall, we have been moving from “separate but equal” (de jure) to “equal but separate” (de facto), and separation and some antagonism are still the harsh facts of American life, including life on campus. There is a new situation in the United States: the old ethnic minorities wanted to be included in the mainstream of national life, but some members of the new minorities reject the mainstream culture.

I agree with all of the above. And this volume pulls it together as I have never seen it done before. The episodes I have known about separately are joined together into a more complete and even overwhelming general view. I have taken the situation very seriously for many years but even more so now that I have read these essays. Higher education may well be even closer to “flashpoints” that might ignite a larger flame than I had previously believed to be the situation.

There are also some other and more favorable developments than the ones this volume emphasizes:

- More and more blacks and Hispanics are entering middle-class status—and some of the problems have been of class as well as of race.
- Education, including higher education, has been the chief line of advancement for disadvantaged minorities, and they know this.
- The labor market is now favorable to the advancement of disadvantaged minorities and will continue to be so for demographic reasons, including the demographics of higher education, for at least another decade (a major depression aside).
- Public opinion polls show that there exists among the general public, both majority and minority, a rising mutual understanding and tolerance.
- In handling conflicts, we seem to have learned from the 1960s. The activists and the police both seem to have concluded (so far at least) that the introduction of violence can be counterproductive. Witness the contrast between the generally peaceful handling of anti-apartheid demonstrations in the 1980s as compared with many violent episodes in the 1960s when both sides were more intent on confrontation.

These considerations, if also taken into account, lead to a less alarming view of the developing situation, but still to grave concern. I recognize however that the writers of these essays are generally closer to the front lines than I now am and I did leave this book with even more concern than when I started to read its pages.

Having said this, let me quickly add that some very fundamental philosophical issues are involved here:

- How much to emphasize merit versus how much to emphasize compensatory opportunities? And how much to emphasize opportunity as against comparative results?
- How much to emphasize free speech and free actions associated with free speech versus how much to emphasize and protect the sensitivities of individuals?

These are inherently more difficult issues than ending discriminatory laws or ending the war in Vietnam; it will take much more time to work out solutions that obtain general consent. And experience to date shows how much easier it is to change public policies than private behavior.

These essays place a great deal of responsibility on the leadership of the college and university president in developing policies and in handling crisis situations. They do not demonstrate, however, it seems to me, sufficient understanding of the difficult position of the president. The president can influence many things but can control almost nothing: not the faculty, not the activist students, not the reacting students (including the fraternities), not the external police, not the board of trustees, not the media, not those vagaries of fate that have so often intervened in crisis situations. In a crisis so much can go wrong, and yet everything must go right to get a universally satisfactory

result, and it seldom does. I can see a casualty rate ahead higher among presidents than in any other element involved. One way to read the four excellent case studies is from the point of view of the president involved, as I did with great attention to the detail.

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The 1990s will not be the 1960s nor the 1980s nor any past decade. A new world is being born. One set of statistics—minority percent of total United States population:

- 1950 - 12 percent
- 1980 - 15 percent
- 2000 - 30 percent (census estimate)
- 2150 - 45 percent (census estimate)

The frequently unhappy 17 percent of college students today (the minorities) may become a frequently unhappy 45 percent within the foreseeable future.

The history of the decades ahead will be written by the actions of many people, by the inputs of many forces—both unfavorable and favorable—and by the vagaries of fate. *The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education* alerts us, once again, to how much is at stake for the nation and for higher education; to how complex are the factors at work, the attitudes, and the philosophical issues; and to how elusive are the solutions. May it be true, as William James once said, that “great emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed.”