True Diversity Doesn't Come From Abroad

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“.....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 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.

The Privileged Status of Most International Students

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 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.”

**JoAnn Moody’s Recommendations for Other Reading:**

The G.I. Bill was unfairly administered so to include only European-American male veterans and exclude everyone else. After WWII, the G.I. Bill with its housing and education benefits built the middle class—but only the European-American middle class. All others were relegated to the bottom. See Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property” in *Harvard Law Review*, 1993 and especially Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 2005. Awarding a head start to only certain veterans gave them and also their baby-boom offspring a boost in wealth generation and middle-class status. But the disfavored were shackled and their wealth-generation blocked (see Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, 1997).

The federal government’s and American campuses’ rationales for who exactly is minority are sloppy, undocumented, unexamined, and undebated. In 1956 (!) President Eisenhower’s Committee on Government Contracts asked employers to designate the ethnic/racial background of their employees as “White,” “Negro” or “Other Minority” (which was defined as “Spanish-Americans, Orientals, Indians, Jews, Puerto Ricans, etc.”). A short time later Jews were removed but no other changes were made. This 1956 parenthetical designation of who are “official minorities” has stuck: in implementing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Immigration Act of 1965, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and other federal and state agencies relied on the earlier designation and included Asians, South Americans, Cubans, and other new immigrants as eligible for affirmative action programs in employment and education. Including recent immigrants was in fact a mistake because they had not been treated as the lowest caste in the U.S.—whereas several domestic minority groups had been so, for centuries. See John Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 2002; David Hollinger “The One Drop Rule and the One Hate Rule” in *Daedalus*, Winter 2005; and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2010 and 2012.

The European-American dominant group is granting certain immigrant groups the favored status of “Honorary Whites.” These groups include recent Asian-Americans particularly East Asians as well as Latin American immigrants “who have fair features, material wealth, and high social status.” These favored groups currently “find themselves functioning as whites in the U.S., at least as measured by professional integration, residential patterns, and intermarriage rates with European Americans” (Ian Lopez, “Colorblind to the Reality of Race in America,” *Chronicle of Higher Education Review*, 2006; also Lopez, *White By Law*, 2006).