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Factors influencing minority access and participation in American higher education

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Factors influencing minority access and participation in American higher education

Abstract

Minority participation in higher education has been an issue of major concern and controversy over the last forty years. President Harry Truman, in 1946, established the first federal commission designed to study the societal functions of higher education. The President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) was also instructed to delineate the responsibility of the federal government as it applied to postsecondary educational opportunities. The Commission recommended that 50 percent of all high school graduates obtain a two-year college education. This recommendation has been expanded to provide universal access to all students who might seek, or benefit from, postsecondary education. The purpose of this study was to review the literature relevant to the factors influencing minority access to, and full participation in, the American higher educational system. This review of literature will begin with an historical overview of the federal government's role in higher education as it relates to equal educational opportunity. The discussion of minority enrollment trends will provide evidence that individuals from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented in postsecondary institutions. This review will then conclude with an examination of the academic, social, and cultural issues that directly affect the minority student's access to, and full participation in, American higher education.

FACTORS INFLUENCING MINORITY ACCESS AND
PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Research Paper
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Kathy Jean Meyers
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has been approved as meeting the research paper
requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in
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Minority participation in higher education has been an issue of major concern and controversy over the last forty years. President Harry Truman, in 1946, established the first federal commission designed to study the societal functions of higher education. The President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) was also instructed to delineate the responsibility of the federal government as it applied to postsecondary educational opportunities. The Commission recommended that 50 percent of all high school graduates obtain a two-year college education. This recommendation has been expanded to provide universal access to all students who might seek, or benefit from, postsecondary education.

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institutions. This review will then conclude with an examination of the academic, social, and cultural issues that directly affect the minority student's access to, and full participation in, American higher education.

Historical Overview

The decade of the 1950s provided several new challenges as the federal government continued to explore its role in higher education. While Congress and academic communities offered some resistance, specific litigation and legislation enhanced the opportunity for an equal educational system. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) lessened the legal barriers that prevented minority access to higher education by ruling that publicly supported institutions could not deny admission on the basis of race (Preer, 1981). The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was later legislated as a consequence of the technological advances in Russia. This legislation provided funding for programs that were vital to national defense and clearly established the federal government's role in higher education.

The following administration confirmed the nation's commitment to educational, social, and

economic growth through the formation of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society Programs. Specifically targeted toward disadvantaged youths, the Upward Bound and College Work-Study programs were the offspring of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. While Upward Bound was developed to assist the disadvantaged in gaining entry into postsecondary institutions, the College Work-Study program provided the opportunity for financially needy students to obtain on-campus employment.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed to eliminate discriminatory practices in federally funded programs. Another step toward establishing equal educational opportunity was the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which set aside federal funds for undergraduate scholarships and the expansion of already existing programs. In 1968, the Higher Education Act of 1965 was amended to provide for programs that would address the academic, cultural, and social barriers encountered by students who were traditionally underrepresented in higher education. These programs were known collectively as Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds and were commonly referred to as the TRIO programs.

During the 1970s, the federal government was forced to evaluate its commitment toward minority access when the Adams v. Richardson case continued to question the issue of segregation. Seven years later, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare released state desegregation plans designed to correct the inequitable racial distribution of students attending White and Black colleges.

One decade has since passed, and our society is in the midst of another complex crisis. While education has been identified as one of the primary means utilized to achieve social justice and economic opportunity, educational leaders and federal and state governments are still searching for the missing link: How do we establish an egalitarian approach to providing access to, and participation in American higher education?

Minority Enrollment Trends

The underrepresentation of minority students on college campuses is a serious concern that must be examined. Hodgkinson (1985) reported that the Black high school graduation rate increased by 29 percent between 1975 and 1982, but Black enrollment in college dropped by 11 percent. During the same period, the

high school graduation rate for Hispanics increased 38 percent while their college enrollment declined 16 percent. This decline, if it should continue, will pose a greater threat to the postsecondary enrollment rate due to the future growth rate of minority groups in the United States. Current projections estimate that individuals from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds will represent approximately 40 percent of the U.S. college-age population by the year 2025 (Mingle, 1987).

According to the Fifth Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education, minorities made up 21.3 percent of the total U.S. population in 1985. Seventeen percent of the minority population were enrolled in institutions of higher learning (American Council on Education [ACE], 1986). Although the ACE report indicated that minority enrollments have shown a 5.8 percent increase between 1980 and 1984, the impact has not been the same for all ethnic groups. The 12.1 and 33.6 percent increases in Hispanic and Asian enrollment, respectively, are in sharp contrast to the 3.3 percent decrease in Black students attending college. American Indians have also experienced a 1.2 percent decrease in college enrollment during this same period.

The Fifth Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education evaluated the breakdown of minority enrollment according to institutional differences. Hispanic enrollments increased 13 percent at two-year institutions and 11.1 percent at four-year colleges. Asian or Pacific Islander student enrollments in two-year and four-year institutions grew by 33.1 percent and 33.9 percent, respectively. American Indians experienced a 4.2 percent enrollment decline in two-year institutions, while their enrollment at four-year colleges remained relatively stable. Black enrollments experienced a decline in both institutional settings, 3.2 percent in two-year institutions and 3.3 percent in four-year colleges (ACE, 1986).

An analysis of undergraduate and graduate enrollments by ethnic background reveals a similar pattern. Black undergraduate enrollments declined by 3.8 percent while all other racial/ethnic groups experienced an increase. Graduate schools have enjoyed increased enrollments of 0.4 percent, yet graduate school enrollment has fallen for the White, Black, and American Indian populations. The statistics for professional school enrollments show an increase by most students from various ethnic/racial

backgrounds. Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian enrollments increased by 50.9 percent, 21.1 percent, and 21.7 percent, respectively. While Black enrollments in professional school also experienced a 3.3 percent gain, these increases do not offset the lack of representation on our college campuses by Hispanic, American Indian, and Black students.

A critical question begins to emerge as these statistics are analyzed: Why are the minority enrollment rates in higher education experiencing a significant decline when the minority high school completion rates are climbing to record levels? The next section will address some of the cultural, social, and academic issues that directly influence minority access to, and full participation in, higher education.

Issues and Implications

The literature thus far would indicate that minorities have made some progress in gaining access to postsecondary institutions. However, this is only the first step in achieving full participation in higher education (Mingle, 1987). Institutions must be prepared to accept the responsibilities associated with meeting the needs of a culturally diverse student

population. Next to be considered are the factors influencing the participation of minority students on our college campuses.

Mingle (1987) reported that two of the most significant factors affecting a student's decision to enroll in college are the level of education attained by parents and family income. Since the literature has suggested that a vast number of minorities tend to be economically disadvantaged and/or first-generation college students, it is apparent that this student population must overcome major obstacles prior to and during their enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates, 1986).

According to a study by Paul Franklin (1985), disadvantaged individuals tend to experience many difficulties apart from financial barriers. It was his contention that necessary support systems are lacking, because counselors overlook or may be unavailable to meet the needs of these individuals. As a result, Franklin also reported that disadvantaged students are unaware of career options, financial aid assistance, and academic requirements.

Studies of the first generation college student identify new sources of conflict relative to the

campus environment. Billson and Terry (1982) found that students whose parents have had significant experience in the university or college setting differed in comparison to first generation students.

Since first generation students are less likely to live on campus, be involved in campus organizations, meet or pursue their most important friendships on campus, or work on campus, they suffer from a lower level of structural integration. And because they are far more likely than second generations to work long hours, their chances of increasing structural integration are concomitantly lowered (p. 74).

The threat to structural integration increases when we acknowledge social and academic experiences of minority students. Tinto (1987) stated that minorities "tend to face greater problems both in meeting the academic demands of college work and in finding a suitable niche in the social and intellectual life of the college than does the typical majority student" (p. 72). Difficulties with incongruence and isolation, two of the primary reasons most students withdraw from the campus environment, tend to be more severe for minorities than for White students (Tinto, 1987).

Fleming (1984) offered another perspective of social alienation:

Because black students came to college expecting less prejudice and more social integration than they found, their consequent anger and despair contribute to a desire for separation and withdrawal from whites. The lack of trust in whites led many to turn to other black students for social life and mutual validation. Where the absolute numbers of blacks are small, students suffer from social isolation, from a limited range of accessible personalities, from inadequate dating opportunities, and from the confining and oppressive nature of relationships that develop in such intense social situations (p. 18).

The academic difficulties experienced by minority college students is the final issue to be addressed. According to Noel, et al. (1985), academically underprepared students possess specific characteristics that may tend to place them at a disadvantage in comparison to the academically prepared population, i.e., "erratic academic performance both in high school and as college freshmen, unimpressive

standardized test scores, low socioeconomic background, race, gender, and rate of persistence, and withdrawal from college" (p. 96).

Tinto (1987) felt that disadvantaged and minority students experienced more problems with the lack of college preparation, because they were more likely to have attended a lower quality public school than their peers. Another study yielded similar results. Loo and Rolison (1986) surveyed minority students relative to factors contributing to academic unpreparedness. Some students believed their lack of high school preparation had directly affected their ability to meet the academic demands in college. Other students felt that differences in socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds had interfered with their academic progress, because they were spending less time tending to coursework and expending more energy in adjusting to the campus environment (Loo and Rolison, 1986). While the literature offers different explanations for the academic difficulties experienced by minority students, there seems to be a consensus that academic preparedness (or lack thereof) directly influenced minority students' ability to gain admission to, and to complete successfully, the collegiate experience.

Summary and Conclusions

This review of literature supports the contention that the federal government's role in education has had a significant impact on the development of equal educational opportunities. At the same time, issues in higher education have influenced the legislative and judicial branches of government to take a more proactive stance in the establishment of equal rights for all persons.

During the 1950s and 1960s, legislation was enacted to create programs to offset both the financial and nonfinancial barriers associated with postsecondary enrollment. While these federal programs have attempted to alleviate the problems experienced by minority students, various social, cultural, and academic barriers continue to exist. Incongruence, isolation and academic unpreparedness are emphasized as the primary factors directly affecting the minority student's ability to gain access to, and participate fully in, higher education.

While the representation of minority groups in the American higher educational system has continued to increase, two critical issues require further attention. The first concern is the decline in the

total number of minority students seeking postsecondary educational opportunities. The final implication is that our future minority college-age population may be grossly underrepresented in higher education.

It is the opinion of this writer that effective intervention strategies need to be implemented in order to meet the needs of our culturally diverse student population. This must begin with a strong commitment, shared equally, by federal and state governments, local communities, educational leaders, institutional staff, high school personnel, and students. Once this priority has been clearly established, specific efforts must be designed to ensure full participation of minority groups in society and higher education.

This writer also believes that additional human and financial resources must be allocated for the development of new programs geared toward meeting the needs of each minority group. Local and regional boards could be formed to examine the characteristics unique to each institution and geographical area. Postsecondary officials could cooperate more closely with intermediate and high school personnel to assist students in making realistic career decisions.

Other alternatives would include scholarship opportunities to provide monetary awards for students who complete a specific high school curriculum and/or pursue a career path that has been traditionally underrepresented by minorities. Mentoring programs could be organized through community volunteers and various educational institutions.

While it is apparent that the ideas and innovations for increasing minority representation on college campuses are numerous, we must fully acknowledge our responsibility to these individuals. In this writer's opinion, we will always contend with barriers relative to language, culture, color, and race, but it is left in the hands of the educational institutions to initiate change. To ensure that all students are provided with an opportunity to maintain high educational standards "The task will be not to lower the standards but to increase the effort" (Hodgkinson, 1985, p. 18).

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