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Selected aspects of educational access for African-Americans: A historical and conceptual overview

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Selected aspects of educational access for African-Americans: A historical and conceptual overview

Abstract

Beginning in the post Civil War era, it seemed that African-Americans would be integrated into the social, political, and economic systems of the nation. The institution of slavery, however, had systematically denied a majority of these American citizens access to all but the most rudimentary forms of education (Boylan & White, 1987). In fact, many argue that the after effects of slavery continue to this day. African-American involvement in higher education was an arduous process requiring comprehensive legislative action. Blacks and Whites, dependent on each other mainly through the economic system, required an encompassing system so African-Americans would be educated and would aspire to become a part of society that would accommodate the two races (Bullock, 1967).

Selected Aspects of Educational Access for
African-Americans:
A Historical and Conceptual Overview

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

By
Terence Morehead

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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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Beginning in the post Civil War era, it seemed that African-Americans would be integrated into the social, political, and economic systems of the nation. The institution of slavery, however, had systematically denied a majority of these American citizens access to all but the most rudimentary forms of education (Boylan & White, 1987). In fact, many argue that the after effects of slavery continue to this day.

African-American involvement in higher education was an arduous process requiring comprehensive legislative action. Blacks and Whites, dependent on each other mainly through the economic system, required an encompassing system so African-Americans would be educated and would aspire to become a part of society that would accommodate the two races (Bullock, 1967).

This paper will examine selected aspects of educational access of African-Americans at predominately white institutions of higher education, illustrating the problem of access to higher education by African-Americans and recommend improvements. First, a historical review of the matriculation of African-Americans to colleges and universities will be discussed. Second, an examination of standardized testing with respect to African-Americans will be

reviewed. Third, implications of current admissions policies for higher education will be addressed.

History of the Matriculation of African-Americans to Higher Education

In the United States during the nineteenth century, comprehensive plans were being implemented addressing the educational system. These plans were developed in order to broaden and diversify the goals of higher education. However, the opportunities for Black participation in the system were quite limited. In fact, in the early nineteenth century, it was illegal in Southern States to teach slaves how to read and write (Katz, 1973 as cited in Jones & Richards-Smith 1987).

The growth of public colleges for African-Americans was stimulated by the Second Morrill Act of 1890 (Brubacher & Rudy, as cited in Jones & Richards-Smith 1987). The Morrill Act specifically prohibited payment of federal funds to states which discriminated against negroes in admissions to their tax supported colleges or refused to provide "separate but equal" facilities (Jones, 1969 as cited in Jones & Richards-Smith 1987).

Since most colleges were funded through tuition and fees, the major admissions requirement of the time

was the ability to pay for education. If you could pay the price of admission, you were automatically "college material." The situation was further complicated by the fact that no universal system of secondary education existed at the time (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976 as cited in Boylan 1988).

Former slaves, having been denied the opportunity to read, write, or participate in any formal schooling were largely illiterate or semi-literate. Under these circumstances, historically Black colleges and universities admitted and provided a curriculum responsive to their needs (McGrath, 1965 as cited in Jones & Richards-Smith 1987). These African-Americans who went on to college to receive an education, earned money by helping build the educational facilities with manual labor, vocational experiences, and maintenance on these colleges and universities.

Disenfranchised in the United States for nearly one hundred fifty years, African-Americans free from bondage sought to live as free people. Legislation to improve the status of African-Americans was passed that suggested to the descendants of slaves that change was imminent. Education was seen as a means of integrating African-Americans rightfully into American society.

Standardized Testing and Cultural Bias

According to Astin, Ayala, and Jacobi (1987)

While the assessment of student outcomes has many advocates, experience has shown that such assessment often fail to live up to initial expectations about their usefulness. This gap between promise and performance is sometimes the consequence of methodological (including measurement) shortcomings but more often occurs because of unclear or conflicting expectations about the goals and purposes of research. (p. 3)

Flaugher as cited in Kelley (1982) first said that much of what is felt by the bitterness, emotional discomforts, and surrounding arguments inherent in the issue of test bias is manifested because people fail to clarify in their analysis between aptitude tests and achievement tests. The reason people often fail to make the distinction between innate and ability tests is that we really do not have such a thing as pure aptitude tests. The two tests contrast each other in content, because it is surmised that current aptitude cannot be measured in isolation from past endeavors.

In Tumin's analysis it is contended:

The debate about admissions testing and it's larger applications must be understood as a reflection of a much larger debate that is occurring in virtually all societies that are called western democracies. All of these societies, including our own, actively seek to optimize three core values in which they are all committed. These are first, freedom, as specified by political democracy; second, fairness, as measured by equality of treatment before the law; and third, as measured individually by standards

of living and for the system, by some such indicator as the gross national product per capita. (Tumin, 1980, p. 21)

Since many colleges and universities had differing levels of financial stability and since access to secondary schools varied from region to region, a substantial inequity was evident among postsecondary institutions in their admissions policies. Nearer to the end of the nineteenth century, this difference in admission practices led to the establishment of the College Entrance Examination Board, as a means of standardizing admissions standards and practices across the country (Boylan, 1988). Notwithstanding, seventeen years later a significant number of applicants, even Ivy league institutions; still did not meet the basic admission standards for their colleges and universities. While the installation of the College Examination Board intended to standardize the admission process, elevate programs, and eliminate the need for college preparatory programs, it failed to accomplish these objectives.

This plan of action suitable for the latter part of the nineteenth century, would have persisted were it not for the junior college movement of the 20th century. In providing an alternative to college preparatory programs, the junior colleges accommodated

four year institutions by offering the equivalent of the first two years of college courses combined with a large menu of preparatory and remedial courses.

Richardson, Martens, and Fisk, (1981) as cited in Boylan (1988) acknowledge that during the interim, America's colleges and universities were becoming financially solvent. At the same time the standardized tests of the College Entrance Examination Board were beginning to have an impact on the college admission process.

Formative theories pertaining to standardized tests have ramifications that are extensive and are subject to constructs that challenge their utility. In the subsequent studies considering the application of such tests, the authors cited have varying viewpoints addressing their purpose.

Standardized tests usually are not impartial to minorities. All tests to a specified or unspecified extent are culture bound. The content of these tests is often familiar to students from upper and middle class families. It is possible to construct a test that will result in higher scores for Blacks than for Whites, but such a test may not reflect what is considered intelligent by Whites (Lynam, 1986). Any test that is worthwhile must discriminate. After all,

this just another way of saying it will reveal "individual differences." But the intended discrimination should be on the basis of the skill(s) being measured, not on the basis of racial or ethnic background (Lynam, 1986).

According to Cunningham (1986) one considered remedy for cultural bias was to contrive a culturally impartial test. What was desired was a test that is equally fair for all cultural groups. At one time considered of great importance attempts to construct such a test have dissipated. Because these attempts to develop such a test were not successful, those promoting the idea lost interest. The significance of such tests in their utility that is binding is the part that deals with academic aptitude which can be related to culture. In actuality, existing inequities in ethnic origin, culture, speech, family structure, and socio-economic status can result in lower scores. In turn these test scores can be interpreted as lower academic aptitude; but this is not necessarily the case.

To think instruction would be efficacious were it not for tests to judge and guide instruction, is a misconception that seems to underlie a particular assumption. In disputing for the implementation of

exams for higher degrees of thinking for example, Nickerson (1989) as cited in Alexander and Parsons (1991) stated "That such tests are needed: (a) to determine if higher level thinking is being taught effectively, and (b) to guarantee that instructional emphasis is placed on this objective." If educational tests and school assessment have any role in schooling is not the issue. Rather, the issue is whether they deserve the position of prominence they have been granted in recent years. More remotely is the question, have the existence of such tests contributed to a better educational system for students and teachers alike?

Anatasi (1988) as cited in Alexander and Parsons (1991) recognized the furious growth of testing in this country and cautioned that "growth has been accompanied by some unrealistic expectations, some misuses, and some skepticism" (p. 3). Apple (1986), Giroux (1985) and others (e.g., Fleming, 1990), Hilliard (1990) as cited in Parsons and Alexander (1991), acknowledged their positions and have denounced the uses of standardized tests, as not including those who are not of mainstream culture from participation in schooling. Defenders of achievement tests contend that the tests are unbiased and do not contribute to exclusion. It is

the improper construing in a particular way and effect of such tests that are a problem. To decide about what to test, when to test, should be considered apolitical and not necessarily at the expense of minorities nor should it take place in culturally homogeneous societies. Alexander and Parsons claim the misconception about testing and assessment are deeply rooted in the fabric of American society and in the knowledge structure of education policy makers and practitioners. The misconceptions also serve important purposes in preserving the educational status quo and in validating obsolete decisions and actions of those in control.

Although originally intending to be an instrument of measurement to help standardize the admission process in higher education, the use of standardize tests is not always an accurate predictor of academic success. It's plausibility has been subject to misconception. In particular cases endemic to minorities, in this circumstance African-American students, it generally serves to prove only that socio-economic status can be attributed to test scores not success in educational endeavors.

In the dilemma of African-American access to higher education, it is known in general, that higher

education institutions admissions policies and standards differ. Their level of selectivity is a factor in determining this. In recent studies, it has been found there were no significant predictors of academic performance, once admissions criteria is isolated.

Nettles (1988) asserts education has always been the most measured yet elusive earthly commodity for blacks in the United States. Throughout African-American history, education has been tantamount to freedom and equality in American society. Education for African-Americans has been the typical route to upward social, cultural, and economic mobility. The history of education for African-Americans is remarkable for it's transitions through lengthy periods of legal prohibition up to the Emancipation Proclamation, then nearly one hundred fifty years of separation and subordination up through the mid-fifties and now more recently three and a half decades toward assimilation and equality. For the past three and a half decades progress of African-Americans has been in the area of gaining greater access and opportunity to attend a broader range of colleges and universities. Although the challenges to equality continue to include greater access and opportunity, equally important

challenges to equality pertain to qualitative performance, progress, and achievement.

Justiz and Wilson (1988) state:

the American higher education system is not solely to blame for the situation of minorities in the nation's colleges and universities, nor can it eliminate by it's own efforts the barriers that prohibit minorities from participating fully in education, the professions, the sciences and so on. There must be coordinated action taken uniformly at every stage of the education system, from early childhood programs to graduate. At the same time colleges and universities must respond with improvements in policies, programs, and practices with a significant movement from good intentions to actions. (p. 14)

The key to minority participation in higher education Justiz and Wilson (1988) elaborate is not a mystery. Reasons are known for minority attrition, limited financing, hostile campus environment, racism, lack of relevance of curriculum and academic difficulties. In the past we have created recruitment and retention programs and seen impressive gains. What has been lacking in the past decade is commitment from higher education's leadership and faculties to sustain the gains of the early 1970's. This commitment must be expressed in the priority we give to programs on our campuses, in the seriousness with which we set goals and use timetables to monitor progress and in funding levels.

Conclusion

After epochs of higher educational history, legislation with assistance from the populace and government action, African-American access still remains quite limited. Because of America's vacillating responses to the plight of African-American in this case access to higher education, the circumstance of the darker hued American is tedious. This difference in skin color seems to imply that either you cannot be or are not entitled to the aspirations, goals, and livelihood of parity. This inequity needs to be changed. Minorities are at a point of being expendable in an educational system that screens out the element of diversity to foreshadow upward mobility. This can happen in higher education and is precipitated by cultural bias in tests, limited finances in socio-economic levels, lack of relevant curriculum, prejudice and academic difficulties. If education is to be a factor for upward mobility then also should the knowledge gained from this enterprise. Ignoring the value of other cultures sagacity, will in the long run be detrimental to higher education and the nation. The nurturing of those of ability cannot be abandoned by administrators, teachers, and student support practitioners. At the same time higher

education institutions must show reaction to immediately, to courses of conduct based on principle, plans of procedure, and engage in a manner with real meaning, done purposely to improve access to higher education.

Although the African-American was always open to the notion of a nation to educating all of her people, regardless of race, creed, or nationality, society was and still remains to a large degree segregated. In brief, the African-American has historically been discriminated against in a social, political, and economic climate of racism. As a result of this cultural bias, access to higher education has diminished.

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