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ASHE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

# Linking Diversity with the Educational and Civic Missions of Higher Education

*Sylvia Hurtado*

“The greatest challenge facing Americans is to accept and take pride in defining ourselves as a multiracial democracy.”—President Bill Clinton’s Initiative on Race, 1998

In this address, I will lay out the practical, theoretical, and empirical rationale for linking diversity with the central educational and civic mission of higher education. While these links may be obvious to some, oftentimes diversity and race issues are conspicuously absent from discussions about learning and civic education. In fact, the diversity initiatives and civic initiatives inhabit distinct physical, social, and administrative spaces. Much of the empirical work that links diversity and learning and democratic outcomes emerged from the developing area of research, now termed “the educational benefits of diversity” because of its role in the University of Michigan affirmative action cases. I address the aims of this research and critics who have claimed we have abandoned research on inequality or social justice issues for the sake of legal arguments. Transcending the affirmative action debate,

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the central thesis is that this emerging work on the educational benefits of diversity is part of a long-term effort to transform undergraduate education, which will prepare the next generation of citizens for a multicultural society. Scholarship on inequality can play a similar role in helping to shape the agenda for change.

### PRACTICAL RATIONALE

The practical rationale for advancing research and practice that will link diversity with the central educational and civic mission in higher education emerges from the needs of a society where economic, racial, and religious differences are prevalent and inevitable. It is time to renew the promise of American higher education in advancing social progress, end America's discomfort with race and social difference, and deal directly with many of the issues of inequality present in everyday life. The U.S. Census (2005) projects that by mid-century, half of the population will be racial/ethnic minorities, nearly one quarter of them Latino. Many states and cities are already facing these population shifts. The disaster of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 literally washed away social infrastructure, making racial and economic inequalities starkly evident. The same marginal existence of low-income, racial/ethnic minorities exists in many American cities. In the face of such challenges, today's leaders appear more attuned to protecting their self-interests than in taking action that will close the widening social gaps.

According to Howard Bowen (1977), it is higher education's responsibility to advance social progress. Such advancement occurs not only through new scientific discoveries that improve the health and well-being of society, but also through the education of citizens and the next generation of "office holders" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 181) who will become the architects of new solutions to lingering social problems. It therefore follows that a key impetus for linking diversity with central educational and civic goals is to better position the next generation of leaders for the project of advancing social progress. Addressing inequality in American society, however, has been elusive in higher education and absent from the nation's agenda. I will return to this point later because I believe we can, as a collective, have greater impact as scholars in shaping the national conversation.

A second impetus for linking diversity with the learning and civic mission in higher education is to achieve greater coherence in undergraduate preparation. Although it may seem obvious to some, these areas of activity are often unconnected. It appears that the diversity and the civic engagement "movements" have proceeded on parallel tracks, emerging not only from distinct histories but also differing in how much broad-based acceptance they receive on campus. These movements and their curricular initiatives can be viewed as two approaches that advance students' awareness of the

origins of complex social problems and employ new forms of pedagogy involving dialogue, experiential learning, reflection, social critique, and commitment to change.

Many campuses already possess a substantial array of initiatives that address diversity and civic engagement; yet while we may find similarities, not all may achieve the same goals for reasons we have yet to probe. Institutions have begun to recruit senior-level diversity officers, public service and civic outreach administrators, and general education czars, adding yet another layer of bureaucracy (Clark, 1983) in the hopes of better coordinating specific activities to meet objectives of diversity, civic engagement, and undergraduate education. Although this approach may achieve better coordination within these areas of responsibility, it is not clear that better coordination *across* these areas will be the result. In many cases, limited institutional resources will require greater coordination in the future. External funding agencies that support undergraduate initiatives look for greater coordination across broad campus units, with a clear guiding rationale that will lead to the institutionalization of innovative approaches. Moreover, greater integration across these units and program coherence is necessary to explicitly address goals for undergraduate preparation for participation in a diverse democracy.

The emerging research on the educational benefits of diversity is beginning to establish the theoretical and empirical links in determining the optimal conditions under which these benefits operate and how they may work differently for particular types of students. We learned a great deal from the intensive, collaborative work among scholars for the University of Michigan affirmative action cases. There was a palpable sense of urgency and a deadline by which the evidence had to become part of the record. This intensive work resulted in the development of theory, new links across areas of research through syntheses of the existing scholarship, new collaborations of scholars across the country, research on multiple types of diversity in relation to multiple outcomes, and replication across diverse student samples at the national, institutional, and classroom level (Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Milem & Hakuta, 2000; Orfield, 2001). It is important to now extend this research evidence to improve institutional practice and provide colleges with a strong rationale for the initiatives they undertake, given that we are likely to see further attacks on targeted efforts to improve access and success for students of color.

The University of Michigan affirmative action cases prominently featured college impact research, policy research on alternative admissions criteria, and research on the continuing legacy of discrimination that minorities face given the climate at institutions. Research on this legacy was presented in behalf of the student and alumni intervenors (Allen & Solórzano, 2001). These strands of research received distinct receptions. For example, the

plaintiff's lawyers initially did not contest research supporting the diversity rationale, perhaps because they did not think there was sufficient evidence for Justice Powell's diversity rationale in *Bakke*—and there were few existing databases at the time to which we could turn to examine these results. (For issues raised by individuals supporting plaintiffs in the media and how the university addressed these criticisms, see Gurin, Lehman, Lewis, et al., 2004.) But more likely, plaintiff's attorneys did not believe that the Court decision would hinge on the diversity rationale but rather on how institutions achieve diversity in the student body. (To be honest, when we began the task of assembling evidence, we were not clear how the research would be received by court judges and the U.S. Supreme Court justices).

The opponents of race-sensitive admissions were correct, in part: The Court supported the "whole student" review process used in law school admissions and rejected the point system that assigned a value to race in undergraduate admissions. In a victory for higher education research, the evidence about the need for racial diversity in education was cited as compelling evidence by both the appellate court judge in the undergraduate case and by the Supreme Court, with Sandra Day O'Connor writing the opinion for the majority in *Grutter et al. v. Bollinger et al.*, 2003; hereafter cited as *Grutter*). It is interesting to note, however, that in his dissenting opinion, Justice Clarence Thomas cited the work of higher education scholars (Allen, 1992; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999) to contest the benefits of learning with diverse peers for African Americans, suggesting that these students would be better served attending historically Black institutions. Thus, research intended to improve educational environments for diverse students was used to argue that "such heterogeneity [at predominantly White institutions] actually impairs learning among Black students" (Thomas quoted in *Grutter*, 2003, p. 17).

While HBCUs have institutional normative structures that support the advancement of African American people, it is incorrect to uniformly conclude that education in predominantly White institutions is harmful to Black students. The research assessing the impact on informal interaction with diverse peers has shown similar positive patterns for Black, Latino, White, and Asian students, despite their different perceptions of the climate (Gurin, Dey, et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2003). Programmatic initiatives differ in impact, but all students benefit from substantial encounters with diversity. Suffice it to say, the controversies regarding diversity continue to raise questions about what we know and have yet to learn about educating diverse students. It is important to also address the benefits that some students can accrue from "same-race" peers and environments, including social integration and comfort in addition to learning and democratic skills. More research is needed to understand the conditions under which historically underrepresented

students fare best, including a careful assessment of the climate as a mediating process in the achievement of desired outcomes for students.

Finally, a major impetus for finding practical ways to integrate diversity into the central functions of an institution is that, in the wake of the 2003 Supreme Court decision, diversity initiatives that remain on the margin are most vulnerable. While the Court case has allowed institutions to better articulate how diversity can ideally work in an educational setting, it is important for campuses to consider how diversity initiatives are central to their key mission in practice. The institutions that take the least transformative approach to educating diverse students risk criticism and attack when diversity initiatives are considered “add ons” or marginal to the institutional functioning.

### ***Theoretical Rationale***

The advancement of theory can play a key role in bringing diversity from the margin to the center. Several theoretical developments support the link between diversity in college (defined as structural representation, interactions with diverse peers, and diversity initiatives—both extracurricular programs and curricular initiatives) and students’ learning and democratic skills. The theory of diversity and learning was developed during the affirmative action case. Building on the theory and research of developmental and cognitive psychologists, we hypothesized that diversity in the student body provides the kind of experience base and discontinuity needed to evince more active thinking processes among students, moving them from their own embedded worldviews to consider those of another (or those of their diverse peers) (detailed in Gurin, Dey, et al., 2002; Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003). This is the goal of liberal education—to move students from their provincial worldviews.

The theory of how diversity works in education, however, suggests that most of us are cognitively inclined to rely on familiar ways of thinking that include habits, routine, and even stereotypes that dominate our world view (Bargh, 1997; Gurin, Lehman, et al., 2002; Langer, 1978). This phenomenon suggests that the norm, for most of us, is to be comfortable cognitive misers. The assumption then is that educators must overcome incredible inertia in students’ thinking habits. Most students are not inclined to be active thinkers. In fact, we learned in surveys at public universities that about 15% of second-year students reported being *frequently* asleep in class!

However, when encountering unfamiliar and novel situations, people, and experiences, it becomes difficult to rely on these familiar ways of thinking and acting. Moreover, most developmental theories posit that social interaction is necessary to elicit the cognitive disequilibria that spurs growth and development in students at this stage of their lives (Chickering & Reisser, 1991; Muss, 1988; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1975). To learn or grow cognitively,

individuals need to recognize cognitive conflicts or contradictions, situations that psychologist Diane Ruble (1994) suggests lead to a state of uncertainty, instability, and possibly anxiety. Thus, with the right amount of support and challenge, these moments of instability can lead to many dimensions of growth.

More than 30 years of research on college peers indicate that peer interactions during college affect various dimensions of student growth that include cognitive skills (Perry, 1970), content knowledge, vocabulary and academic skills, altruism (Kuh, 1993), values (Astin, 1993), and attitudes (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991), so it stands to reason that interactions with diverse peers also elicit development in more ways than one. However, it is clear that enhancing the structural diversity of a student body is a necessary but not sufficient condition to produce these outcomes. Substantial and meaningful interaction (both informal and campus-facilitated) is central to the notion of how diversity affects learning and the development of democratic sensibilities.

Defining the dimensions of citizenship we can foster is key if we wish to bring some coherence to approaches in undergraduate education. Here, the developing theory of citizenship provides the rationale for emphasis on a new set of outcomes for undergraduate education (or reframing old ones we have monitored) that define what constitutes democratic skills and sensibilities. There are multiple constructions of citizenship in education, but absent from most operational definitions is the notion of what it means to be a citizen in a multicultural society. A group of scholars is delineating the broad outlines of citizenship in a multicultural society, interweaving diversity as an inherent component (Banks, 1997; Gutmann, 1987; Ong, 1999; Rosaldo, 1999). They state that citizens in democratic multicultural societies endorse the overarching ideals of justice and equality, are committed to these ideals, and are willing to take action to support and defend them when faced with practices that violate these ideals.

The notion of a "differentiated citizenship" underscores the belief that, in order to construct a democracy based on equal representation, differences must be recognized, valued, and considered in the context of democratic decision-making (Young, 2002). James Banks (2004) has stated that an important goal of citizenship education, then, is "to help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to make reflective decisions and to take actions to make their nation-states more democratic and just" (p. 4). Gutmann (2004) posits that multicultural, democratic societies are characterized by attention to civic equality (that individuals should be treated and treat one another as equal citizens) and that the goal of citizenship education in such societies is to teach tolerance, recognition of cultural difference, deliberation, and modes of civil discourse.

How do these concepts translate into goals for undergraduate education? It means we must focus on a set of democratic outcomes that recognizes difference as a constructive part of a democracy, promotes students' ability to work with diverse people and viewpoints, and builds student self-efficacy for change. It also involves encouraging moral development—encouraging students to develop a sense of social justice and to become responsible citizens. We also begin to intentionally structure opportunities for students to move from self-interest to adopting broader notions of the public good.

### EMPIRICAL RATIONALE

We undertook an empirical test of these theories and outcomes when we studied undergraduates and examined the empirical links between campus diversity experiences and democratic outcomes. About five years ago, I launched a project involving 10 public universities to monitor change in undergraduates and examine existing campus practices that enhanced student outcomes in the first two years of college. The project was titled "Preparing College Students for a Diverse Democracy." What makes the project distinctive is that we introduced a new set of outcomes for institutions, extended the research on cross-racial interactions by examining not only frequency but also quality, context, and variety of interactions with diverse peers, and studied the impact of campus-facilitated programming and curricula focused on diversity and civic engagement. It is important to note that our statistical analyses controlled for student predispositions at college entry on each of the outcomes we monitored. We were interested in those activities and experiences that contributed to the value-added change on an array of cognitive, socio-cognitive, and democratic outcomes.

We found that students who reported positive, informal interactions with diverse peers had higher scores on measures of more complex thinking about people and their behavior, cultural and social awareness, and perspective-taking skills (i.e. the ability to see the world from someone else's perspective). Significant changes were also associated with increases in students' democratic sensibilities including their pluralistic orientation, interest in poverty issues, and concern for the public good. The quality of diverse student interactions was associated with 17 of 24 of the outcomes in the study. In contrast, students who had negative interactions with diverse peers (conflict or hostility) were not only least skilled in intergroup relations but also demonstrated lower scores on the outcomes, indicating that they were also least likely to develop the habits of mind to function in a diverse and global world. Students are likely to revert to familiar and solidified positions when encountering conflict in intergroup relations, suggesting that educators need to assist students in understanding and developing constructive paths from intergroup conflict.



Campus practices that facilitate student interaction with diversity promote a broad-based set of complex thinking and socio-cognitive, and democratic skills. Specifically, students who enrolled in diversity courses showed higher scores on 19 of 24 outcomes, while those who participated in diversity-related extracurricular programming scored consistently higher on 17 of the 24 educational outcomes in the study. These outcomes included such democratic sensibilities as interest in poverty issues, concern for the public good, beliefs in social equality, and the belief that making a civic contribution was important. Taking a diversity course in the first two years of college is also associated with the likelihood of voting in a federal or state election, while participation in diversity extracurricular activities is associated with voting in a student election and increases in leadership skills.

Interestingly, service learning courses do not have the same broad-based impact on these outcomes, although they do have an expected effect that is significant and unique on a targeted set of outcomes, including increases in students' concern for the public good, the importance of making a civic contribution, and leadership skills. Service learning, however, did not have a direct effect on the quality of interactions students had with diverse peers. It may well be that those students who participate in service learning in the early years of college already have a high facility with intergroup relations (Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2006).

Student participation in intergroup dialogue (opportunities for facilitated, extended discussions about diversity) is associated with increases in students' perspective-taking skills, the development of a pluralistic orientation, interest in poverty issues, and a belief that conflict enhances a democracy rather than detracting from democratic ideals. Moreover, intergroup dialogue is associated with reports of positive interactions with diverse peers (Saenz, 2005). This pedagogical technique provides the tools for engaging in civil discourse about difficult social issues (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). These findings from the project suggest that specific campus practices can help students integrate their learning, merge experience with knowledge, and increase intergroup relations skills. Most significantly, these findings demonstrate that we are able to observe and document the educational result on a broad range of outcomes that are essential to good citizenship. The findings on undergraduate outcomes support the concept that campus diversity initiatives are central to the teaching/learning and public service mission of institutions. When all students learn about diversity, we are producing citizens who can negotiate difference, act, and make ethical decisions in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

However, simply producing bright students capable of critical thinking is not enough, as the classroom component of the study reveals that the most academically self-confident students could score well on the test of critical thinking but were not more likely than others to see the world

from someone else's perspective or to adopt a societal perspective regarding people's behaviors (Hurtado, 2006). They may be missing some of the skills for citizenship in a pluralistic democracy.

### CONCLUSION

All of this research provides additional evidence for the educational benefits of diversity, extending links with learning outcomes, and significantly extending the research defining citizenship in a multicultural society. I see this research as part of a long-term effort to transform undergraduate education to achieve a vision of a more equal, diverse democracy. However, critics state that we have been painted into a corner, forcing ourselves into a referendum of sorts on whether diversity is beneficial as the only argument that will support diversity initiatives in higher education (A. Hurtado, 2004). The main issue in the criticism is whether we have shifted the attention away from inequality by virtue of what was acceptable in terms of the legal arguments. The affirmative action cases devoted attention to scholarship that documented inequality. The University of Michigan provided social science expert reports on the evidence of historic national and regional discrimination against African Americans and Latinos, as well as alternative admissions projections that show disparate impact on racial groups; and scholars (in behalf of the interveners) provided evidence on the continuing legacy of discrimination on campus.

It is true that these arguments, unfortunately, did not gain significant traction; but the research on the educational benefits of diversity is not interested on solely settling the arguments of the day. Many of the data collected in the past (and in the future) were devised to inform educational practices, not merely for use in a lawsuit. The goal of this emerging body of work is the production of citizens for a multicultural society that can result in leadership with greater social awareness and the complex thinking skills to alleviate social problems related to the complexities of inequality. The end goal is the improvement of education for students from different racial, economic, and religious communities who must work together to achieve a vision of the pluralistic democracy we aspire to become.

The concern about the current status of research on inequality, its audience, and use of the research as leverage for change are compelling issues. Though the research on the declining rate of low-income students is getting some attention in terms of institutional concern and action (Association of Governing Boards, 2005), there appears to be no sense of alarm or urgency about the inequalities we have witnessed with regard to race. I am proposing a task force or working group on inequality to address some of these concerns in the scholarly work of ASHE members. While Gary Rhoades (former ASHE president) and members of the board have been focused on

the larger issues that the Katrina disaster raised, my own interest is in new directions for consolidating research efforts on inequality and its effects. Incoming President Estela Bensimon's work on equity indicators for institutional change and the many excellent studies by new scholars suggest that now is a good time to focus some effort on this body of work.

The purpose of the task force or working group would be to (a) consolidate efforts across the scholarship on inequality to determine what we know, (b) work as a collective to bring emphasis to this work and its multiple facets, and (c) brainstorm about the work's reception and how we can proactively shape national conversations about these issues. We would not only become more informed about each other's work in this area but also better positioned to address both the questions and solutions that merit attention from the standpoint of institutional practice and policy. Finally, by delineating the issues that highlight the increasing complexity of inequality in higher education and potential solutions, as a collective we can help higher education achieve its responsibility for advancing social progress. Scholarship can shape this agenda for change. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." We must do the research that we believe will advance the role of higher education in promoting social progress, and we must teach these values to our students.

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