Camille A. Clay

Creating an Affirming Campus Climate

Increasing incidents of ethnoviolence and decreasing enrollment and graduation rates for students of color are reflective of a national step backwards in race relations. American higher education is uniquely positioned to influence the quality of life in a diverse society by producing potential leaders who are mentally healthy and multiculturally educated. By establishing environments that affirm the personhood of its socially diverse constituents, the university can significantly improve the racial climate and minority graduation rates. This article explores the needs of both majority and minority students in predominately white settings and offers institutional strategies to meet those needs.

On this campus when it comes to matters of race, I feel trapped and confused. . . . To improve the environment I would get the administration and faculty to treat individuals like humans not digits or alphabets.

22-year-old black student

Just because I am Oriental, I am no different than another student. I am not supersmart nor do I pretend to be. I want people to see me the person before they see the color of my skin.

20-year-old student of Asian descent

I'm tired of hearing black this, black that. With all this crying and complaining going on in the black community, the white race is becoming a minority.

18-year-old white student

I feel the only minority the university is helping is the blacks—there is an African American culture display and group. But I don't see any Asian American display. Blacks are considered a minority but why aren't Asians considered a minority too?

19-year-old student of Asian descent

One of the thorniest dilemmas confronting colleges and universities is how to create learning environments that affirm the dignity, value, and individuality of students representing such diverse views as those quoted above. On today's campuses minority students often feel isolated, alienated, and diminished by mainstream policies, practices, and people. White students feel that their rights and entitlements are being denied by special programs geared to minority groups. Now, too, we are

witnessing rivalries developing between and among minority groups. It is indeed a challenge for institutions of higher education to accommodate the academic, cultural, and social needs of the diverse constituencies they serve.

Dimensions of the Problem

Across the nation, reports of increasing racial tension on predominately white campuses, declining black and Hispanic enrollments, and highly disparate minority and majority graduation rates come at a time when national exigencies call for just the opposite. An annual survey conducted by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Campus Violence at Towson State University found that 95 institutions reported 174 incidents of racial violence in the 1987–88 school year. Reports of campus harassment have increased as much as 400 percent since 1985, according to the National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence which also reports that one in five minority students attending predominately white institutions have been victims of bias-related violence. One-fourth of those have experienced more than one ethnoviolent act. Ethnoviolent acts range from blatant physical attacks and property damage to more subtle classroom and dormitory harassment, name calling, and insults. While some of the physical or psychological assaults have been perpetrated by faculty, staff, or administrators, most have been committed by other students. Even as startling as these data may seem, Howard Erlich of NIAPV estimates that as much as 80 percent of the bias-related violence on campuses goes unreported.

Although half of the new jobs over the next ten years will require post-secondary education, the collegeenrollment rate for black and His-panic students declined in the ten-year period between 1975 and 1985. For black and Hispanic students who do enroll, the graduation rate is about half that for white students. A recent study of college completion rates found that only 25 to 30 percent of black and Hispanic students at four-year institutions graduated in six years or less. The graduation rates for white and Asian-Americans were above 50 percent.

By the year 2010, minorities will constitute one-third of the population, and by 2020, 39 percent of the higher-education pool. As stated so cogently in *Minorities on Campus,* edited by Madeline F. Green, "The future of our nation is inextricably tied to an educated population that can contribute to the labor force and the economy as well as to our national well-being." Clearly, the statistics on campus ethnoviolence and college attendance and graduation by minorities do not bode well for the prosperity of the nation.

Another View

The students quoted at the beginning of this article responded to surveys designed to assess the racial environment at Towson State University, a

public comprehensive liberal arts institution. Similar surveys conducted by other public and private institutions, including the University of Maryland Baltimore County and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and by the National Collegiate Athletic Association attest to the generalizability of these results. A significant proportion of minority students feel themselves to be in uncomfortable, if not, hostile environments. Many minority students associate primarily with members of their own ethnic group—perhaps to gain strength or to take refuge from the constant assaults on their personhood. As one black student at a prestigious, private institution explained, "We have become family for each other."

At the same time, white students appear unaware of minority concerns. Moreover, white students resent what they consider to be special attention given to minority issues. Last year at the University of Michigan, flyers announcing "White Pride Month" were distributed. At Temple University, a white student union was organized. At Towson State University recently, a flyer was circulated

A significant proportion of minority students feel themselves to be in uncomfortable, if not hostile environments.

inviting white students to join a white awareness group in which they could "promote white and European culture, sponsor activities for whites, and . . . promote white fellowship throughout the campus." These kinds of reactions on the part of white students not only represent their lack of sensitivity to their counterparts of color but also demonstrate their lack of awareness that the curriculum is Eurocentric in emphasis or that extracurricular activities are for the most part geared to the interests of the majority.

Results of the aforementioned surveys suggest that a significant segment of the white student body knew or cared little about minority issues. Only half knew that blacks did not comprise 40 to 50 percent of the population at the time when black enrollment was about ten percent. Sixty percent felt there were too many special programs for black students, and most said they did not know black history or culture. The majority of white students had never taken a course with a black professor. And while over 80 percent of the African-American students in the survey knew what it was like to be the only member of their race in a class, and 50 percent felt their ethnic/cultural heritage was inadequately represented in the curriculum, very few white students (10 and 20 percent respectively) could relate to those experiences.

A survey of students of Asian heritage at Towson State revealed that only 10 percent saw an adequate representation in the curriculum of the scholarship and contributions of people of Asian descent. While 68 percent thought faculty should be culturally aware and sensitive, only 33 percent felt their professors actually were. Sixty-one percent of the respondents felt there was a need for an Asian student group, and 47 percent said they

would participate in such an organization. At least 25 percent of Asian-heritage students experienced racial discrimination on the campus; 80 percent of black students and 45 percent of white students perceived evidence of racism or racial insensitivity at the institution. It is the disparity in perceptions of the racial environment that often leads to conflict.

A particular act of violence, harassment, or insensitivity can become for minority students the "last straw" after a series of unanswered indignities. They then mount protests and demand changes in the broader context of the racial environment. Such a pattern occurred in recent months at Brandeis University, when black students accused bookstore managers of suspecting them of shoplifting and scrutinizing their every move in the store. The students boycotted and gained concessions on the part of the company that owns the bookstore. Although pleased with their results, boycott organizers said the incident was only a symptom of campus-wide racism which they would continue to protest. They have since asked the university to establish a stronger policy against racial harassment; to recruit more black faculty and students; to include in the curriculum more extensive study of African, Asian, Latin American, and Indian cultures; and to expand an intercultural library into an intercultural center.

Minority students are increasingly demanding that institutions provide for full minority participation and involvement in higher education. Failure to do so may have serious effects on the individual, the institution, and, as suggested previously, the country. Many colleges and universities are funneling significant resources into minority recruitment and retention efforts. However, unless the campus racial atmosphere is taken into account, an important piece of the puzzle will be missing. Many students of color drop out because the environment does not affirm them. Of course, many others do persist and graduate. One wonders, however, about the long-term effect on students of being educated in a nonaffirming environment.

Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the actual impact; but one can assume there are many diverse personal, social, and psychological consequences for minorities educated in predominately white settings. Many minority students find ways to maintain their self-esteem and racial identity, but, because the need to belong is so basic, others compromise their cultural values in order to "fit in." Pride and self-worth then become dependent on one's ability to acculturate. "Fitting in" with the majority culture often means rejecting or no longer fitting in with one's family or community of origin. For many students of color, the negative perceptions and stereotypic expectations of majority faculty are internalized, leading to limited aspirations and diminished self-concept. Some Asian heritage students seek counseling when they find their abilities and interests are not in math or science, where often their families and faculty have directed

them. For minority students, typical sources of stress at college, such as choosing a major, can be exacerbated by the factor of race. While learning to negotiate academic pressures and nuances, students of color must also decide whether separation or assimilation will facilitate their survival in the environment.

Fundamental to one's mental health is a realistic sense of one's worth and identity. Minority students in predominately white institutions today are constantly bombarded with messages that impugn their competence, reject their cultural values, deny their intrinsic worth, and even question their right to be enrolled. Ethnicity is seen as a handicap by some minority students who will not associate themselves with anything that smacks of a special program. Others even try to deny their ethnic background.

Far more study is needed to determine the long-term effects associated with psychological assaults to the mental health of students of color. Study is needed as well to ascertain the extent of the damage done to white students in nonaffirming environments. When racially biased policies, practices, and behavior are allowed to flourish in institu-

Students of color must decide whether separation or assimilation will facilitate their survival.

tions of higher education, majority students are ill-served. Institutions which do not make concerted efforts to hire minority faculty and administrators, to infuse the scholarly contributions and concerns of people of color across the curriculum, and to provide opportunities for racially or culturally different students to interact and learn from and about each other are operating irresponsibly. They are tacitly perpetuating the myth of white superiority.

Psychologically, the self esteem and identity and, therefore, the mental health of white students is at risk if it is based, even in part, on a notion of white superiority and a belief that they are entitled to political, economic and social advantages they have enjoyed in the past. Perhaps the growing hate group movement is fueled by the perception that the success of people of color in the job market, in academe and in society in general contradicts the ego-sustaining myth of white superiority.

A college education that does not encourage realistic reappraisal of the myth or provide alternative belief systems does not adequately prepare majority students to be productive citizens of a pluralistic society. White students need to be affirmed as valuable, worthwhile contributing members of society, though not intellectually, culturally, or economically superior by virtue of race.

Suggested Strategies

The challenge is indeed tremendous, but the situation is not hopeless. Many institutions already have in place the pieces necessary to solve the puzzle. But piecemeal or bandaid solutions are not enough to create an

affirming climate. The significance of the need calls for comprehensive strategies. Campus climate, according to the American Council on Education *Handbook for Enhancing Diversity,* "embraces the culture, habits, decisions, practices, and policies that make up campus life. . . . It is shaped by tradition, values, and attitudes, many of which are unexpressed. Thus changing the campus climate can be a difficult and elusive task." Each institution has its unique culture, traditions, and character; therefore, no blueprint for change will be applicable to all. Herman Blake, noted educator, has identified four elements critical to the establishment of an affirming campus climate—institutional commitment, faculty commitment and sensitivity, high quality programs, and quality minority personnel to administer those programs. With the addition of another key factor, curricular change, a brief discussion of each element follows.

Institutional commitment.

The quality of the environment is the responsibility of all members of the campus community. The president and senior administrators must be committed to the goal of fostering a pluralistic learning environment in which diversity is valued and members of culturally diverse groups are appreciated for the unique perspective they bring. The institutional commitment should be asserted by top-level administrators verbally and in print whenever appropriate. However, "mouth honor" alone is insufficient. The commitment to diversity should be reflected in the mission and operation of every component of the university.

The institutional commitment to diversity should be evident in all policies and procedures. A clearly delineated policy against discrimination should define racial harassment, describe prohibited behaviors, and outline possible consequences of such behaviors. Procedures for filing such grievances formally and informally should be direct, simple, and nonthreatening so as not to discourage complaints. The policy should be distributed to all faculty, staff, and students.

A task force comprised of representatives of the various sectors of the university should be empaneled to monitor the racial climate. The committee could be charged to conduct a comprehensive institution-wide assessment of the campus racial environment, examining all components of the university including administration, staff, faculty, police, and students. Enrollment and graduation patterns, course offerings, judicial proceedings, employment, and complaints should all be considered in order to grasp a total picture of the campus climate. The committee would report findings to the university community and, based on those findings, recommend needed changes to the president.

The commitment to diversity must be reflected in the hiring and promotion of minority faculty and administrators. Diverse viewpoints will

facilitate the development of an affirming environment. Faculty and staff of color also serve as role models to minority and majority students. Two major obstacles that impede the hiring of minority faculty are the limited supply of minorities with doctoral degrees and departmental resistance to changing the status quo. Both obstacles require creative and innovative strategies. Forward-thinking institutions have established long- and short-term programs to improve the picture, with such initiatives as identifying undergraduates to be mentored and directed into graduate study, establishing postdoctoral fellowships, and hiring ABD's and providing support for degree completion. Incentives may be effective in diminishing departmental resistance. Holding departmental chairs and deans responsible for increasing minority faculty may also yield results.

Minority student enrollment, retention and graduation rates are indicative of university commitment. In the past, the emphasis was on recruiting black students with little attention paid to retention and graduation. Fortunately, the trend has shifted. Institutions have come to realize the need to concentrate resources and activities in both recruitment and retention. However, many universities have also become concerned with increasing admission standards. Undue weight on standardized tests scores denies access to many qualified minority applicants. Robert Atwell, in his address at the 1988 ACE annual meeting admonished, "Institutional change means giving up the practice of using test scores of entering students to measure institutional quality." All too often the image of institutional quality is enhanced at the expense of minority students. Multiple admissions criteria should be employed to improve minority admissions rates, and at periodic intervals the criteria should be reexamined to determine the impact on minority enrollment and retention.

Campuses where minorities are most successful are not necessarily those whose students have the highest SAT scores, but those with a critical mass of students of color. Institutions with 30 percent or more minority population have higher minority graduation rates. Thirty percent may be unrealistic, but as minority enrollments increase the minority alienation, isolation, and failure rates decrease. However, majority anxiety about being overtaken or overwhelmed may be heightened in the process. Institutions should anticipate this reaction and be prepared to deal constructively with the conflict that may arise.

Campuses where minorities are most successful are those with a critical mass of students of color.

Curricular change.

The most significant and most controversial change an institution can make in order to create an affirming learning environment is to infuse across all disciplines content by and about people of color. There seems no better

vehicle to root out ignorance and fear, the soil in which racism thrives. At Towson State, a project to mainstream multicultural studies has been proposed with the following objectives: to provide students with an understanding of and preparation for negotiating the complexities of national life, to familiarize Towson's increasingly diverse student population with their own cultural backgrounds and more fully demonstrate to students the historical and cultural significance of their experiences, and to encourage an appreciation of and sensitivity to diversity, thereby fostering a more hospitable learning environment for everyone. The anticipated project will provide training in content and pedagogy for interested faculty in several disciplines.

Other institutions have addressed the need for curricular change with deep-seated resistance and acrimonious debate. At Stanford, Wisconsin, Brown, and Berkeley, faculty have engaged in protracted discussions about revising the canon. Ron Takaki, professor at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote that faculty opposition at Berkeley was based on "an unwillingness to add another requirement, an insistence on the centrality of Western civilization, and a fear that the history of European immigrant groups would be left out." Many institutions have incorporated multicultural education in more limited ways. Some have instituted mandatory courses that explore various aspects of American pluralism; others have included courses in non-Western civilization; still others have added multicultural content in existing core courses. The curriculum transformation debate will and needs to continue, but if higher education is to prepare both majority and minority graduates to function in a multicultural context, curricular change is inevitable.

Faculty commitment and sensitivity.

Along with curricular transformation, faculty who are cognizant of and sensitive to minority issues are crucial to the development of a receptive learning environment. The horror stories of professors who offend students (most often unintentionally) are legion. Examples include those who have questioned incredulously whether a minority student belongs in that class; those who have allowed white classmates to turn to the only minority student in the room and snicker uncomfortably when topics concerning that student's ethnic group are discussed; those for whom no black, Hispanic, or other minority could possibly earn an "A" in their courses; and those who designate the only minority member of the class to be spokesperson for the concerns of his/her ethnic group.

The faculty are the role models for the entire student body, and the way they relate to minority students is very likely to be replicated in the behavior of other students. They should teach by material and manner that one's self-esteem need not be based on the devaluation of another.

Faculty need to examine and reexamine routinely their own racial attitudes and behavior. Along with self-assessment, faculty should engage in programs and activities that may help them eradicate, or at least lessen, areas of personal racial prejudice. Activities such as racial awareness training, cross-cultural courses, and therapy may help. The university should provide racial awareness programs in which faculty can be involved, perhaps as part of new faculty orientation and faculty development.

High quality programs and personnel.

The appointment of a high-level administrator with responsibility for coordinating minority affairs facilitates the successful recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority students. Institutions need to be careful not to use minority administrators as gate keepers, scapegoats, or window dressing, or more importantly, not to select people who would allow themselves to be used in those ways. Herman Blake points out that people in these types of positions "must have a high level of commitment and professional competence. They must not only be well-trained but also highly intuitive."

Though the title may vary, the primary responsibilities of the position should be to assess the needs of minority students; to advocate on behalf of students of color to insure that appropriate agencies within the university meet those needs; and to help the various components of the institution support, incorporate, and affirm minority faculty, students, and staff. Some institutions establish totally separate minority student services departments providing separate counseling, tutorial, and placement services. This arrangement may contribute to the perception of minorities as an adjunct rather than as an integral part of the institution. Such structures need to be reviewed to determine whether the benefits outweigh the costs.

Any initiatives that enhance the quality of life for students of color can be considered retention programs. They may be academic, financial, or social. They must be well planned and integrated into the total university. At Towson, two programs that meet these criteria are Students Achieving Goals Educationally (SAGE) and the Community Enhancement and Enrichment Partnership (CEEP). SAGE pairs incoming black freshmen and transfer students with faculty and with upperclass student mentors. Race is not a factor in selection of faculty mentors, but all student mentors are black. Student mentors help incoming students adjust to the environment by calling and meeting with them periodically one-on-one and in groups. SAGE also sponsors social activities. For the new student, the program provides a link to faculty, to university resources, and to a peer social network. Through their involvement, the faculty advisors become invested in the success of the students. Now in its fourth year, program results have been quite good: the first and second-year retention rates of black students are comparable

to those of whites, while black and white third-year rates are less than ten points apart.

The other program, CEEP, encourages minority student involvement in the campus community by awarding grants in exchange for participation in approved activities. With an individualized contract, students usually agree to at least two activities that coincide with their needs, talents, or goals. Among the more than 200 students who have received the award are a black jazz major who agreed to do free concerts on campus, a Vietnamese student who gave talks on the experience of being a boat person, and a black theater major who coordinated the Racial Improvisational Group. Most students choose a major-related organization and a social or cultural one. The CEEP program speaks to several needs simultaneously. It decreases students need to work, allowing them to spend time in community service and campus activities. It provides opportunities for students to bond with the university by being involved in activities they have typically avoided, and it brings minority and majority students together in activities that allow them to interact around shared interests.

Jacqueline Fleming demonstrated in her book *Blacks in College,* that for many African-American students, the social milieu is an important factor in academic success. The university needs to provide opportunities for relevant cultural and social activities. Participation in such groups as a gospel choir or an American Indian cultural society may provide students spiritual sustenance and motivation to persist. Student affairs personnel should encourage and facilitate the establishment of ethnic-oriented, cultural, and political organizations because such organizations provide a supportive cultural base, "a family" for their members.

The quality of the office that coordinates minority issues and the programs designed to enhance the minority educational experience is directly related to the quality of the personnel selected to administer them. Committed university leadership will provide the human and financial resources, the authority, and the flexibility necessary to effect meaningful change.

The Challenge

Creating an affirming climate is a multifaceted mission. Each institution of higher learning needs to take stock and determine whether its environment is receptive and supportive of minority students. Does it facilitate intergroup interaction? Does it foster a positive sense of self for all students? According to an African proverb, "He who asks questions cannot avoid the answers." If warranted by the answers to these questions, a comprehensive strategic plan for change should be developed within the context of the resources, limitations, history, and structure of the organization. With thoughtful input, constructive argument, long-range planning, and

commitment, we can build learning environments that prepare students to handle diversity without divisiveness. A campus climate conducive to the educational, psychological, and social growth of its minority constituents also will contribute to the growth of the majority.

Suggested Readings

American Council on Education, *One Third of a Nation.* Washington, D.C.: ACE, 1988.

Center for the Study and Prevention of Campus Violence, *National Campus Violence Survey.* Towson State University, Baltimore: CSPCV, 1989.

Clay, Camille A. "Campus Racial Tensions: Trend or Aberration." *Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal* 2, 1989, 21-30.

Fleming, Jacqueline. *Blacks in College.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1984.

Green, Madeleine I. (ed.) *Minorities on Campus: A Handbook for Enhancing Diversity.* American Council on Education, 1989.

National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence, *Ethnoviolence on Campus: The UMBC Study.* Baltimore: The Institute, 1987.

Pemberton, Gayle. *On Teaching the Minority Student: Problems and Strategies.* Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1988.

Shenk, David. "Young Hate." *CV Magazine,* 1, 1990, 34–39.

Smith, Darryl G. *The Challenge of Diversity.* ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 5, 1989.

Sue, Derald W. *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1981.

Takaki, Ronald. *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America.* Oxford University Press, 1987.