A historical perspective is offered to explain how race has declined in significance as higher education and student affairs have moved toward multicultural social justice. Educators and administrators are urged to reconsider race and racism in dialogues, programs, policies, and institutional change efforts.

Resituating Race into the Movement Toward Multiculturalism and Social Justice

B. Afeni Cobham, Tara L. Parker

A revisionist history “reexamines America’s historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities’ experiences” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 21). It demonstrates how racism and racial discrimination were and continue to be staples of American education in large part due to local, state, and federal policies undergirded by racist practices. Such practices are well illustrated in the experiences of marginalized communities of color. For example, in Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality (2001), Spring explained that in the 1800s, legislation in Texas and California declared English the language of instruction in segregated public schools, severely limiting educational opportunities for Latina/o children who were not fluent in English. He also noted that Native American children, removed from their families and tribal traditions, were placed in segregated boarding schools. They were subjected to a curriculum that prescribed English as the standard language, an environment that declared their cultural values uncivilized and inferior to those of the White majority, and teachings that diminished their societal roles to manual laborers. These examples of deeply entrenched subjugation were consistent in the educational experiences of people of color in the United States.
For communities of color, American education was used as a medium to reinforce oppression through segregation and isolation, forced language requirements, a curriculum rooted in Eurocentric ideals taught by White teachers, and the powerlessness of students of color to express their unique cultural values. The impact of the civil rights movement obligated the federal government to address educational inequities through strategic support programs and services that were conscientious of racial disparities, yet such efforts have never been free from criticism. Today a proverbial spin campaign waged by opponents of race-conscious initiatives characterizes such efforts as reverse discrimination. Colleges and universities, eager to respond to this criticism, “celebrate” diversity in all its forms by highlighting similarities among students as opposed to amplifying their differences. Hosting cultural dinners and ethnic dances and hiring multicultural affairs professionals symbolize a supposed commitment to diversity. Many of these efforts, however, fail to address the deeply layered issue of institutional racism and often dilute race-focused initiatives that are regularly touted under the guise of multiculturalism.

In this chapter, we provide a historical perspective on race in American higher education. We also examine the ways in which racial issues have been supported and confronted on college campuses, as well as how the consideration of race has lost momentum in the light of a movement toward multiculturalism and social justice. In doing so, we offer a cautionary note about negating the historical educational experiences of underrepresented students of color. Such an approach, coupled with legal power struggles over the interpretation of civil rights legislation, has left many in higher education bamboozled. As a result, over the past few years, support services, scholarships, admission policies, and programs designed to level the playing field for historically underrepresented students of color have either been altered to reflect broader notions of diversity or eliminated altogether. Opponents of race-conscious initiatives advance the belief that we live in a color-blind society where academic merit should exclusively be the driving force that determines access to education and other social equity resources.

In this chapter, we challenge these assumptions and call on leaders in student affairs and academic affairs to promote social justice by addressing persistent and prevalent racial issues on college and university campuses. We conclude with recommendations to assist in understanding the current and historical significance and the multiple layers of race in higher education and offer an illustration of how multiculturalism can be realized in a way that resituates race.

A Historical Perspective

For more than forty years, the United States has maintained social policy at the federal and state levels as well as judicial orders to address racial inequality. In higher education, a myriad of diversity awareness and sensitivity trainings have been hosted on campuses across the nation. The issue
of race and racism, however, continues to plague our society in general and American higher education in particular. As such, the emphasis, or lack thereof, on race has significant implications for individuals as well as organizations in higher education.

The historic case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), for example, continues to leave the United States grappling with race and our approach to resolving racial issues in this nation. In 1896, the Supreme Court held that racial segregation on railroads was constitutional provided facilities were “equal.” This decision, although specific to railroads, legalized segregation in virtually every service or institution of American life, including restaurants, housing, and education. It was Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan’s famous dissenting opinion, however, that is most germane to the evolution of race in the current political climate. Harlan argued, “Our Constitution is colorblind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. . . . The law regards man as man and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guaranteed by the supreme law of the land are involved.”

While opposing the concept of separate but equal, Harlan’s dissent supported the notion of a color-blind society. As a result, those on both sides of racial policy debates have quoted his opinion to buttress their arguments. Many colleges have implemented admissions and retention policies with the underlying principle that a color-blind society actually exists. Indeed, many higher education professionals advocate celebrating student similarities, rather than differences, in efforts to “build community.” Community-building initiatives, however, inferred that diversity promulgated a “loss of community” (Martínez Alemán, 2001), as opposed to enhancing it. Furthermore, sensitivity training or diversity awareness programs often resulted in creating politically correct campuses rather than igniting political activism.

The celebrated landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) legally outlawed racial segregation, yet many predominantly White institutions (PWIs) across the nation failed to admit students of color. As a result, it was not until the 1960s civil rights movement that the doors of PWIs began to open slowly for students of color (Anderson, 2002). In some cases, the doors had to be pried and propped open or even taken off the hinges. In 1961, for example, Charlene Hunter-Gault and Hamilton Holmes arrived at the University of Georgia with the purpose of integrating the institution. Their presence on campus incited racist riots, which prompted the university to suspend both students “for their own safety.” Similarly in 1962, federal marshals escorted James Meredith, the first Black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, to campus. A riot ensued, the campus was set afire, and two students were killed (Anderson, 2002).

Often state officials chose to close public colleges rather than to desegregate, let alone integrate, them. Many, laws that attempted to desegregate education, create access, and promote equity failed to eradicate the spirit of inherent racism that persisted in college student life, student interactions,
institutional policy, employment, and pedagogy. It became apparent that PWIs were not created to facilitate a holistic educational experience for non-White Americans or immigrant people of color. Many students of color attending PWIs found the campuses to be alienating or unwelcoming. Confronted with real or perceived racial discrimination, overt racism, and few mentors on campus, they formed groups under the banner of student activism in an effort to cope with these conditions and address issues internal and external to university communities (Patton, 2006). The foundation of ethnic mobilization on college campuses derived from two sources: the political tone of America in the 1960s, and the Black power movement. Ogbar (2005) explains, “Black Power [did not] advocate for white acceptance. . . . It affirmed Black people, their history, their beauty and set them at the center of their worldview. It approved Black anger at the vicious cycle of white supremacy . . . [and] declared Black people’s right to autonomous space within white-controlled domains” (p. 156).

With little administrative support, Black students, as well as other racial/ethnic student groups, took matters into their own hands and demanded a change in the campus climate and the resources afforded to students. Consequently, organizations like black student unions emerged to help make PWIs more hospitable and reflective of the cultural wealth Black students brought to campus. Several communities of color borrowed from the political agency of Black student unions and began to form similar organizations. Between 1968 and 1969 several Chicano student organizations emerged to advance a Chicano civil rights movement that illuminated the atrocities Mexican Americans suffered in areas of education, employment, and land ownership. The Asian American Political Alliance, founded at the University of California, Berkeley, called for an end to the Vietnam War and the exploitation of Asian farmworkers and sought to eradicate the stereotype of the model minority. The National Indian Youth Council and the Native American Student Association led the red power movement. According to Ogbar (2005) these groups used college campuses to bring awareness to the plight of Native Americans as “rates of alcoholism, high school dropout, unemployment and death were higher for them than for any other group in the country” (p. 176).

In addition to their own student-run organizations, students of color petitioned and protested for increases in faculty of color, ethnic studies departments, and separate campus facilities (Patton, 2006; Williamson, 1999). New faculty brought new ideas and new scholarship. Many helped to establish Black studies departments as part of a larger political objective. Through Black and other ethnic studies programs, faculty served as “instruments with which oppressed peoples could learn to change society” (Williamson, 1999, p. 98). The significance of emerging Black studies programs thus extended beyond a simple change in the academic offerings of an institution. Students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds protested and fought for these programs in the name of democracy and social justice. As a result, Black studies programs were successful examples of multiracial
activism toward social justice. Brooks (2006), however, argued that despite nearly five hundred Black studies departments and programs on today’s college campuses, they are rarely linked to the collective struggle of eradicating persistent social inequalities and racial disparities. The perceived purpose of these programs therefore seems to have changed. Perceptions of these programs as glorified affirmative action initiatives have left Black studies departments and their faculties in a constant struggle to prove intellectual legitimacy (Villalpando and Bernal, 2002) and circumvent mergers into larger academic programs as an interdisciplinary minor.

Moreover, Omi and Winant (1994) argued that educational programs and practices of the 1960s were gradually dissolved, dispersed, and defused. Initiatives associated with affirmative action, for example, began spiraling downward in 1978 when Allan Bakke sued the University of California Medical School for reserving sixteen spaces out of one hundred for historically underrepresented students of color (Bowen and Bok, 1998). The outcome of the case became a legal tipping point in the crusade to dismantle similar programs at colleges and universities. As this was true in the access arena, we see numerous other examples of how campuses have followed suit.

**Loss of Momentum in the Movement**

These historic racial realities beckon leaders in higher education to acknowledge, confront, and appropriately respond to the idea that the social construction of race has created systemic provisions that exclude all non-Whites from full citizenship, ultimately creating two worlds within one society—those who are privileged and those who are not—exclusively based on race (Spring, 2001). Moreover, Omi and Winant (1994) suggested that by reducing race to a single component of a larger diversity umbrella, higher education policymakers and institutional leaders may fail to recognize the sociohistorical, political, and economic significance of race. Indeed, there are several circumstances that can be attributed at least in part to the declining significance of race in the movement toward multiculturalism. In the following sections, we briefly discuss five examples that demonstrate the momentum lost in the ongoing fight for racial justice in higher education.

**From Affirmative Action to Negative Reaction.** Forty-two years after the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, an anonymous Web blogger asked, “How long must we pay for the sins of racism?” In our view, this question suggests the following: feeling cheated by affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, believing these programs have already repaid the debt of past racism and discrimination, and no longer perceiving race as problematic due to a visible increase in structural diversity. In contrast, we argue that the admission of underrepresented students of color is not indicative of a thriving multicultural community. Instead, higher education has become the battleground for calculated assaults on initiatives that were designed to expand access and provide some degree of social justice.
In 1997, Barbara Grutter sued the University of Michigan Law School for considering race in its admissions decisions. Like Bakke, the plaintiff and those who supported her case failed to acknowledge that the past transgressions of racism were in direct correlation with cyclical and long-standing access issues that kept racial/ethnic minorities underrepresented (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). A recent report published by the American Council on Education found that over the past thirteen years, White women outpaced White men and men and women from all other racial/ethnic groups in the category of conferred bachelor degrees (King, 2006). Notwithstanding, after the Grutter decision, several institutions altered the original objectives of equal opportunity programs through broadened diversity programs that included a wide range of populations, while others eradicated these initiatives altogether, citing fear of legal reprisal under the guise of reverse discrimination.

Schmidt (2006) provided several examples of the deracialization of programs and initiatives on campuses across the country. At Cornell University several offices in the undergraduate schools removed the word minority from their programs or services and began to use broad labels like diversity or multicultural. Tufts University altered the eligibility of a summer research program by making it available to economically disadvantaged students as opposed to maintaining its focus on underrepresented students of color. Washington University changed criteria for a scholarship program originally aimed at students of color by making it available to “students who demonstrate leadership potential.” In addition, the Andrew Mellon Foundation and National Institutes of Health ceased financial support to college programs that factored race in the selection criteria (Schmidt, 2006). Most recently, an independent research organization in support of fiscal accountability demanded a strict accounting of funds spent on diversity initiatives at the University of Colorado-Boulder. It is compelling that this same group has not sought accountability of expenditures related to athletic recruitment, courtship of alumni children, or the family members of high-end benefactors.

**Reverse Discrimination or Cultural Capital?** Cultural capital is defined as “the knowledge, skills, education, and advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2). In the larger scheme, most underrepresented students of color enrolled at PWIs have less access than their White counterparts to resources and relationships with peers, faculty, and staff who possess cultural capital. As a result, students of color participate in ethnic organizations, Black fraternities and sororities, and other groups or offices, otherwise known as counterspaces (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000), that purposefully take race into consideration. Counterspaces allow students to engage their racial identities, focusing attention on self-discovery and discarding internalized stereotypes about one’s own group.

Critics, however, have argued that institutional support for ethnic organizations, departments, and racially divided facilities was counterproductive to cross-racial engagement and “legitimized a regime of double
standards that divides and Balkanizes the campus” (D’Souza, 1992, p. 242). In 2002, a group that espouses to be “the voice of sanity about race and civil rights” argued that an institution’s commitment to increase ethnic communities is “contradicted by on-campus segregation that is college-sponsored” (Meyers, Mohajer, and Sung, 2002, p. 4). This criticism illustrates the contradictory social practices and perceptions that continue to polarize racial inequality at PWIs. Criticism of racial/ethnic communities that choose to come together for support, social networking, the exploration of their own cultural identities, and the cultivation of cultural capital is both compelling and all too familiar. In stark contrast, White students are not subjected to such criticism when they choose to remain in familiar comfort zones that cluster them in predominantly White fraternities and sororities, athletic teams, student government, religious cultural centers, theme housing centered on European culture, and in every other facet of the university social setting. Furthermore, research shows that White students are less open to interracial engagement and withdraw from opportunities to interact with students of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Balenger, Hoffman, and Sedlacek, 1992; Steward, Davidson, and Borgers, 1993).

Reinserting Race into Movement at Institutions

As Lori Patton, Marylu McEwen, Laura Rendón, and Mary Howard-Hamilton noted in Chapter Three, critical race theory (CRT) has the potential of illuminating racially inept institutional practices. CRT offers epistemological space to study and learn from the cultural capital that students of color bring with them from their socialized experiences. CRT as a framework creates an opportunity for educators and administrators to foster campus climates that facilitate learning from an array of “cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). Yosso also asserts that CRT is beneficial in educational settings because it shifts the view of socially marginalized communities as hopelessly disadvantaged and culturally deficient. Furthermore, CRT offers a lens through which to develop and advocate for institutional practices that simultaneously situate race and multiculturalism in every facet of the campus culture.

This can be accomplished, in some measure, by acknowledging that race and issues of racism are embedded in American history (Spring, 2001). As such, postsecondary institutions must develop “cultures of inquiry” (Dowd, 2005) that promote the continual assessment of policies, practices, norms, and data disaggregated by race. Scholars have argued that educators and decision makers in higher education must be aware of the differences among underrepresented groups and not compress them into a meaningless whole (Graves, 1990; Wilkerson, 1987; Yosso, 2005). In other words, it is the responsibility of institutional leaders and policymakers to acknowledge that while some issues may be universal to underrepresented students, there are many issues that are not and therefore require heightened attention.
Responding to the realities of race requires skillfully and consciously multitasking the multiple dimensions of multiculturalism without compromising one for the other. Social justice on behalf of all marginalized and oppressed groups requires serious institutional effort. Notwithstanding, reinserting race into dialogues, actions, critiques, and scholarship is essential, especially given that race has been socially constructed for each student who attends and every person who works on a college or university campus.

References


Bakke v. Regents of the University of California, 553 P.2d 1152 (Cal. 1976).


Plessy v. Ferguson. 163 U.S. 537. 1896.


B. AFENI COBHAM is assistant provost for student life at the University of Denver.

TARA L. PARKER is assistant professor of higher education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.