

Opening The Doors - Again - For Black Faculty

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The alarming shortage of African-American faculty on college campuses today is but one chapter in a long and difficult history of struggle for equity in the U.S. educational system.

The legacy of racial segregation and lack of access to quality education for blacks have had an ongoing and far-reaching impact. Despite the victories of the civil rights movement and in spite of the corrosive backlash, clearly there is much more work to be done.

It is important to note that challenges for equity have occurred at all levels of the educational system, and institutions of higher learning have been the testing grounds for some of the most significant struggles for racial equality in the United States.

In 1946, for example, Ada Sipuel, an African-American woman, filed a lawsuit against the University of Oklahoma when she was denied admission to its law school. In response to her legal protest, the U.S Supreme Court ruled in 1948 in *Sipuel v. University of Oklahoma* that a state must provide legal education for both blacks and whites. This case and others that followed paved the path for the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 and forced institutions of higher learning to revise their discriminatory admission policies.

By the middle of the 20th century, African-Americans began matriculating in predominantly white universities in unprecedented numbers. In 1960, most of the 200,000 blacks enrolled in college were attending historically black institutions. By 1970, three-fourths of the 417,000 black college students in the country were enrolled in predominantly white institutions.

During the years of active commitment to affirmative action, minority scholarship programs and minority recruitment efforts, significant gains in African-American educational success occurred at both high school and college levels.

The point of this brief history lesson is that not only did these efforts increase the chances that African-Americans would have access to enriching and diverse educational experiences, they also increased the possibility that more African-American students would seek and earn terminal degrees - just the first steps in establishing careers in teaching.

Attacks on affirmative action policies began in 1978 with the *Bakke* decision, and a short period of gradual but dramatic progress in black education began to decline. The losers were African-Americans, particularly those from low-income families, whose best chance at attending college was provided by programs that recognized the social and economic barriers they faced.

While access to education remains an issue of grave concern, there also are some core issues affecting our education system at all levels. In fact, we cannot begin to discuss the low and diminishing numbers of black faculty on university campuses without considering the systemic barriers that make it difficult for African-Americans to even enter college.

Today, shifts and restrictions in admission policies coupled with a rapidly expanding underclass means that fewer African-Americans will attend college and few will participate in the creation of knowledge and ideas.

The most serious of these issues is the gripping force of systemic poverty. Recent census figures indicate that 16 million Americans live in extreme poverty. African-Americans suffer from poverty in disproportionate numbers and the disparities are increasing.

Children growing up in poor housing conditions and lacking proper nutrition are at risk for failure in school. Many of these children will never earn a high school degree. If there was ever a time for policymakers to look unflinchingly at the multiplicative impact of education and economic policies in America - it is now.

It is also incumbent upon the too-few African-American faculty across the nation to be concerned enough about these issues that we commit ourselves to mentoring, shaping and supporting future scholars. As each year passes, some of our brightest and most creative thinkers may be knocking at doors that are rapidly closing. Ultimately, it is our responsibility to guard those doors that were so recently opened for us.

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