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Our University: Race, Ethnicity and Other Forces

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Our University: Race, Ethnicity and Other Forces

Seventh in a series of who our students are and how they perform.

<http://walterwendler.wordpress.com/>.

The factors that influence ethnic and racial diversity in universities are many: wealth; preparation; ability, whether innate or learned; station in life; determination; commitment and drive are all present in degrees in every student. Successful students find a will to succeed - some learn it, some earn it, but without will, little else matters.

The group consisting of mother, father and child is the main educational agency of mankind.

- The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

There has been a valiant, if not always successful, effort over the past half century to include people who were traditionally denied access to higher education. And this is right and just. *"In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available on equal terms."* - Chief Justice Earl Warren, Brown v. Board of Education (1954).

Over half of the college students in the United States are women. The glacial pace of change was not satisfying, but the mountain has moved.

In 1976, just over 15% of college students were members of minority groups, and by the turn of the century the figure was near 30%. The Hispanic population is growing dramatically, yet Hispanic enrollment in college remains around 10% of the total. This figure and the trend that produces it cause concern both on- and off-campus.

Students from underrepresented groups borrow a lot of money. According to observations from Charlotte Allen in a May 2010 forum, *Minding the Campus: Reforming our Universities*, the highest debt levels for students earning bachelor's degrees are among African Americans. Allen suggests that family income alone cannot account for the suffocating level of debt many students leave with. When family income exceeds \$100,000, debt levels are color blind. However, the disparities surface at lower incomes. Nearly two in five African Americans leave the university with backpacks bulging with bills, many loans not federally insured and subject to unsubsidized interest rates. In the meantime, Asian American students graduate faster and with the least amount of debt.

Over the past few decades, as race-based decision policies have come under fire from the court, university leaders have found ways to substitute other characteristics that model race closely. For example, many selective universities admit larger numbers of low income students to achieve a similar result: greater diversity with more African American and Hispanic students. Carnevale and Rose argue in *Socioeconomic Status, Race/ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions*, that even more credence should be given to income level in admissions to attain greater diversity with the social value it produces.

However, students of color graduate at significantly lower rates than either their majority counterparts or Asian Americans, whose graduation performance exceeds every subgroup on the university campus by 13%, according to a recent study by a midwestern university.

SAT scores fell two points in the past year, but minority participation was up. This is a good trend for students from a diverse range of backgrounds who want to study in a university. In last year's SAT cohort 33% of the students claimed to be first generation college students, and, surprisingly, 25% said English is not their first language. Gaston Caperton, guru of the College Board, says SAT takers are a predictor of growing diversity for U.S. universities.

Is it possible that the single most reliable predictor of college success and preparedness is not ethnicity or race, income level or Zip code, but family structure?

Many students succeed despite coming from less than ideal situations. But students in every subgroup graduate faster and with less debt when they come from a two-parent household, according to Allen.

This correlation is awkward for many of my associates in higher education. The benefits of a traditional family are a taboo subject in polite and intelligent company, like politics and religion. But those of us who would equalize opportunity cannot wish circumstances away.

Dr. King was right. Again.