

FOREWORD

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WE ARE PLEASED to provide a brief foreword to this important collection of “perspectives on racial diversity and higher education.” Not surprisingly, this is a subject on which there are more thoughtful perspectives—moral, constitutional, and practical—than there are contributors to this volume. Nevertheless, the essays and commentaries presented here are a stimulating contribution to the ongoing national debate. They can be grouped under three headings.*

First, there is the broad perspective that can be obtained by careful examination of the complex history of our country’s effort to achieve the “promise” of racial diversity while confronting the “dilemma” (or, we would suggest, dilemmas) that are also associated with race in America. Gene Lowe’s extensive essay, which is much more than an introduction to the volume, provides this needed historical context. Based on both his considerable personal experience as an educator at universities in the process of becoming more racially inclusive and substantial library and field research, Dr. Lowe’s essay reminds us of the ways in which the debate over these policies has changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. It also recalls the clarity with which Du Bois and then Myrdal, among others, saw what many chose not to see—then or now.

In addition, Lowe’s essay identifies certain recurring phenomena, including the “top-down” nature of much of the impetus for change, at both the governmental level and within educational institutions. It was the federal government (particularly the executive branch), not the states, that took the lead in pushing for affirmative action, and it has generally been presidents and deans, rather than academic departments and faculties, that have articulated, emphasized, and sustained the commitment to diversity within colleges and universities. One result has been ambiguity and even confusion when minority students, in particular, sometimes hear one official message from “on high” and then confront different realities in their day-to-day lives.

A second broad set of perspectives is provided by detailed empirical

* These essays all made an important contribution to the Princeton Conference on Higher Education (March 21–23, 1996) held on the occasion of Princeton University’s 250th Anniversary.

examination of the extent of the racial disparities in academic preparation and performance and of the factors responsible for these gaps. Scott Miller and Claude Steele's essays represent a welcome blend of tough-minded empirical analysis and candor. Miller summarizes a veritable mountain of data demonstrating the persistence of disparities while Steele presents an intriguing discussion of one very important factor explaining these outcomes—the often deeply debilitating effects of stereotypes. Neither Miller nor Steele has any inclination to gloss over the many remaining problems, and yet both authors also emphasize what can be done to make things better.

Uri Treisman's "practitioner's comment" on these papers is a most useful counterpoint in that he speaks from his own experiences at Berkeley and Texas in constructing model programs that set high standards and then enable minority students to meet these standards through group processes that involve high degrees of faculty involvement. Richard Light brings a statistician's skills to the discussion and reminds readers that when we discuss these issues in the context of colleges where admission is highly competitive we are dealing with "selection at the right tail" of the distribution of measured abilities. All of us concerned with these questions will await with keen interest the results of the Harvard Assessments that Light and his colleagues are now conducting in an effort to understand better how high-scoring students of all races can capitalize more fully on the opportunities afforded them by an undergraduate experience characterized by diversity.

The third set of perspectives is provided by examining racial diversity from a broader societal point of view. Neil Smelser has the advantage of having been an astute student of the national scene for a long time, an active participant at Berkeley in the shaping of events in California, and now an independent observer as director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto. His essay illustrates well the layers of meaning associated with commonplace words, phrases, and concepts; he demonstrates strikingly how both advocates and opponents of affirmative action have emphasized the same cultural value—equality of opportunity. Chang-Lin Tien comments on Smelser's paper from the position of someone who is an outspoken leader of a university (Berkeley) caught up in this debate and who also is an Asian-American. Those of us who were privileged to hear (and not merely read) his account of the social transformations he witnessed will not soon forget the passion that stimulated his decisions and, yes, his acts of courage.

Finally, the volume is enriched greatly, in our opinion, by the inclusion of an essay by Mamphela Ramphele, vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town. Dr. Ramphele presides today over one of the most important educational institutions on the continent of Africa, in a coun-

try that is testing, in “real time,” whether it is possible to overcome decades of state-imposed racial exploitation. Her university is dedicated to achieving both “equity and excellence,” and she describes eloquently why these goals need to be seen as complementary. She also is candid (as always) in noting that the policies she describes are far from unproblematic and inevitably will be attacked from both ends of the political spectrum.

In commenting on this paper, Randall Kennedy first relates the South African experience to the long history of inequality in our country and then ends by applauding Dr. Ramphele’s emphatic commitment to preserving meritocratic ideals while transforming her university. As Kennedy puts it, she thereby provides “an instructive lesson in righting wrongs while preserving what is best in existing institutions.” This is, we agree, an important lesson for educators everywhere.

