



## How Institutions of Higher Education Can Improve Efforts to Diversify Campuses and Include New Groups of Students

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Higher education institutions in the United States have long wrestled with the question of how, when, and why to expand educational access to minority student populations. Founded in the pre-Revolutionary era, the oldest American colleges along the eastern seaboard had a mission to educate young white men for either ministerial or political leadership. The earliest debates about extending access involved indigenous people, white women, and African Americans. Later the focus turned to students from poor and working class families as well as students with disabilities. As older debates continue, today's higher education leaders debate access – and continuing support – for undocumented immigrant students, transgender students, and the increasing populations of students with disabilities. Special concerns also focus on foster youth, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students, and students without adequate housing or food.

Efforts to include new groups often justify themselves by pointing to research that diversified campuses provide educational benefits to all students. Most institutional leaders and governing boards have recognized the value of diversity and committed their institutions to including formerly underserved groups. Debates then turn to how to include these new student populations – typically by better preparing the new students to deal with the institution, increasing their grit and developing their resiliency and efficacy. Less frequent, however, are discussions about how to better prepare *the institution* for the newly recruited and enrolled students. My research suggests there are several things leaders can do to better prepare their institutions.

### Diversity and Inclusion in the Development of U.S. Higher Education

My research examined the college experiences of African Americans who attended a set of small, private colleges in the northern U.S. between 1945 and 1965, using archival data and oral history interviews with 67 of these students. During that era, African American access to postsecondary education was mostly restricted to attendance at historically Black colleges and universities as well as some large, public institutions in the north. Although often perceived as liberal, private northern colleges enrolled very few non-white students. Across the 13 institutions I studied, the total Black student enrollment was less than 1,000 over the course of twenty years – and most did not graduate. In most cases, a Black student who enrolled in one of these colleges would be one of, at most, four or five Black students in a first-year class of four to five hundred.

Despite uplifting institutional missions and substantive recruitment efforts, most of the institutions I studied were unprepared for the arrival and participation of Black and African American students. Despite official campus principles of desegregation, racially segregated spaces remained in fraternity and sorority life, and

segregationist attitudes continued to be held by some white students and white faculty. Spaces where students interacted as equals across lines of race or class were rarely found.

Such failings did not occur because African American students were unprepared for the institutional environment. Rather, the campus administrators failed to prepare the institutional environment for the arrival and participation of African American students. Campuses may have been officially desegregated, but they did little to ensure actual inclusion and integration. This history drives home that it is incumbent upon campus leaders to go beyond mere expanded admissions to create institutional environments that foster and sustain positive relationships across established and newly arrived groups of students.

## **What Higher Education Institutions Can Do**

Presidents and governing boards need to move beyond words to ensure positive experiences for newly arrived minority student populations. In my research, institutions that achieved greater levels of integration had presidents who prioritized assessments of the quality of life for Black students, going well beyond simply tracking the numbers of Black enrollees. Even so, campus-wide integration cannot be achieved solely through the charismatic leadership of a particular person. Specific improvements involving many participants must be hard-wired into the institution's systems and processes.

To that end, campus leaders, particularly in student affairs, need to examine the policies and practices of student organizations to further minority student access and inclusion. In the mid-twentieth century, most white U.S. fraternities and sororities had racially exclusionary recruitment policies. Regardless of institutional proclamations, such chapters were not going to be open to Black, Catholic, or Jewish students. Other student-governed spaces practiced more subtle forms of segregation and exclusion, for example, by holding social events at locally segregated gathering spaces. To take effective steps to dissolve barriers, student affairs professionals need to understand how new minority populations could be excluded in subtle as well as explicit ways from full engagement in campus life.

Higher education institutions must work with external partners to ensure full access. At one institution in my study, racial segregation by employers prohibited many African American students from completing required internships in their major fields. Segregationist attitudes and policies in local school districts, businesses, and other workspaces affected the supposedly desegregated campus and derailed students' abilities to take full advantage of their educational experience. As this instance suggests, higher education institutions need to require openness from external partners who provide co-curricular experiences to students. Institutions must ensure that all of their students have access to learning opportunities both on- and off-campus. The burden of appeasing external partners should not be borne by new groups of students themselves.

History shows that U.S. institutions of higher education have long wrestled with expanding access to minority student groups. Truly inclusive changes must go far beyond enrollment increases to ensure that classes, campus extra-curricular experiences, and off-campus opportunities are all fully open to students from all backgrounds. Advertising the value of diversity is not enough. Greater focus needs to be placed on preparing the institution for new groups of student, rather than attempting to change the students to fit the institution. Through strong leadership that prioritizes dismantling segregated spaces on campus and reforming relationships with external partners, higher education's leaders will be able to create and sustain institutional

environments that are truly integrating and welcoming to all students.

**Read more in Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, *Experiences of Black Collegians in U.S. Northern Private Colleges: A Narrative History, 1945-1965* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).**