

It's Time to Get Angry About Underserved Students

By JOHN BROOKS SLAUGHTER

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Among countless petitioners to the incoming president, higher-education leaders have sent Barack Obama position statements and requests for action that extol the strengths and accomplishments of our nation's higher-education enterprise but also warn of its increasingly dire financial situation. They have asked that a share of an impending economic-stimulus package be devoted to resolving colleges' fiscal problems through infrastructure additions and improvements, increases in the Pell Grant and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant programs, expansion of the federal student-loan programs, and more support for academic research.

Such entreaties are all deserving of consideration and even support. But I am unconvinced that many colleges — in particular, many research universities — will use the infusion of capital to improve the access and education of economically disadvantaged students and underrepresented minority students, groups who are being increasingly underserved.

In a thoughtful statement supporting a "Higher Education Investment Act," leaders from public higher-education institutions convened by the Carnegie Corporation of New York referred to the fact that "the two fastest growing groups in our population have the lowest college graduation rates: only 37 percent for black Americans who start college and 44 percent for Hispanics who start college." The statement added that rising tuition and fees, caused in large part by inflation and decreases in state appropriations, have had a significant negative impact on poor and middle-class college students and their families. In a surprising and welcome bit of candor, the leaders admitted that "American colleges and universities have been inexcusably deficient in providing fair educational opportunities to our poorest students." Unfortunately, however, nothing was said about what those institutions planned to do to change the situation.

There is considerable evidence that the rising costs of tuition, fees, textbooks, and other expenses are making a college education out of reach for growing numbers of poor and middle-class students. In addition, many minority students face barriers to a good education because of anti-affirmative-action laws and other restrictive policies and practices. The net effect of those impediments is a worsening of our ability to compete internationally because a growing proportion of our population is being denied a full opportunity to an education that prepares them for tomorrow's world.

For example, one of the more important issues facing our country is that of preparing the next generation of scientists and engineers needed to sustain — and in some cases regain — our position of prominence in the ever "flattening" global marketplace of ideas and goods. Exporting jobs and importing talent are not sound and tenable national policies. By failing to provide opportunities for the education of all Americans, we doom ourselves to a future in which we are following the leaders in science and technology — thereby further threatening our economy and placing our national security more at risk.

This is not a time to cast blame, although certainly many people deserve blame. This is a time to act. Sure, government has a big role to play if we are to change the status quo, but every American has a big role as well. We need to stop just talking about the situation — we have done that ad nauseam — and begin acting in a manner that will produce change. We need to get angry.

We need to express our anger at school districts that assign the poorest-performing teachers to those schools where the need for good teaching is highest. Many of them possess neither an academic major

nor a certificate in the subject they have been assigned to teach. A recent release from the Education Trust noted, "While out-of-field teaching is particularly acute in mathematics and in high-poverty and high-minority schools, the problem is pervasive. Nationwide, more than 17 percent of all core academic courses (English, math, social studies, and science) in grades 7 to 12 are taught by an out-of-field teacher. In the middle grades alone, the rate jumps to 40 percent." It should be no surprise, then, that 70 percent of eighth graders are not proficient in reading and will probably never catch up, or that 1.1 million students drop out of high school every year (6,000 every school day).

We need to get angry with colleges and universities that are so bent on prestige that they slight their responsibility to educate in favor of being ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of "America's Best Colleges." College administrators and faculty members know that none of the factors used to rank their institutions bear directly upon the quality of the education that undergraduates receive in the classroom. Our colleges and universities should stop the snobbishness they convey with the attitude of, "My institution is better than your institution because the students at your institution could not be admitted to mine." We need to get angry about the fact that institutional financial aid that should be directed to the neediest students is instead being used to induce more-affluent students and legacies to enroll.

We need to get angry with those colleges and universities that herald their achievements in diversifying their student bodies but make little or no effort to diversify their faculty or senior administration. The underrepresentation of minorities, and in many instances women, on the faculties of our nation's colleges and universities not only is an embarrassment but also robs all students (not just those from minority groups or who are female) of a potentially important educational experience. Diversity is not the same as inclusiveness. Our goal should be the latter and not the former. Diversity is simply a matter of numbers. Inclusiveness implies participation and representation at all levels of the institution.

And, yes, we need to show our anger with those parents who do not understand that among their highest priorities should be the education of their children. They need to demand that the schools their children attend provide them with the learning skills they need to function effectively in an increasingly complex, pluralistic, and interdependent world. They must visit their children's schools, show interest in their education, and encourage them to do well. Many parents in our inner cities need to drop the dream that their child will strike it rich on the basketball court or gridiron and "get real," as Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint implored in their book *Come on, People: On the Path From Victims to Victors* (Thomas Nelson, 2007).

Most of all, we need to get angry with ourselves for allowing things to degenerate as they have. Education at all levels, from preschool to graduate school, must be improved and must be improved soon. And while Barack Obama must use his position and resources to make a difference, we must play our part by conveying our dissatisfaction to those in charge of our educational institutions and demanding change in order to see that lasting improvement occurs. We owe no less to those who follow.

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Section: Commentary

Volume 55, Issue 20, Page A68