

Diversity and Democratic Engagement: Civic Education and the Challenge of Inclusivity

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HOW SHOULD THE CIVIC EDUCATION MOVEMENT respond to the challenge of racial and class diversity in a time of significant demographic change in the nation, particularly among college-age populations? Should civic education concern itself with issues of racial and class inequality? Or does attention to the differences between us—ascriptive, cultural, economic—contradict civic education’s commitment to promoting the common good? On issues from affirmative action to the racialization of poverty, debates have raged over whether colorblindness or careful attention to racial conditions and outcomes is the best method for achieving racial justice. For some, the strength of the American civic tradition lies in its availability to all citizens, irrespective of race or ethnicity; those who emphasize racial and ethnic differences are seen as dividing the nation and thus weakening its commitment to the public good.¹ The point of this provocation is to argue that opposite point—that it is essential that the civic education movement helps students grapple with the lived experience of race and racial inequality in contemporary American society.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W. E. B DuBois famously wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”² Paraphrasing DuBois nearly 110 years later, we might say that the paradox of the twenty-first century is that, despite the defeat of legalized segregation and the repudiation of ideologies of racial superiority, race remains a powerful organizing force within American life, structuring the life chances available to many Americans. For the civic education movement, the challenges posed by racial diversity can be encapsulated in two questions: How should the civic education movement respond to persistent evidence of racial inequality on campus and in the wider community? How should we respond to the changes in the racial make-up of college-aged young people?

The civic education movement operates in a higher education system that is at the frontlines of changes in American racial demography and yet remains stratified along lines of race and class. According to the 2010 census, non-Hispanic white Americans now make up less than two-thirds of the total US population. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Latino/a and Asian-American populations both grew by approximately 43 percent, to 16.3 and 4.8 percent of

the total population respectively.³ The US Census Bureau currently projects that, sometime in the 2040s, the non-Hispanic white population will fall below 50 percent and the Latino/a population will surpass 30 percent.⁴ These demographic changes are taking place at a time when young people of color are significantly underrepresented in institutions of higher education. For example, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that, in 2007, African-Americans and Latina/os comprised 32 percent of all young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, but 43 percent of young people in that age group with no college experience and only 23 percent of those with some college experience.⁵ A 2009 study from the National Center for Education Studies found that non-Hispanic whites constituted 68 percent of undergraduate students in four-year colleges and 61 percent of students in two-year colleges, and projected that, among all degree-granting institutions, the percentage of racial minorities will increase from 36 percent of undergraduates students in 2008 to 42 percent by 2018.⁶

These demographic changes provide two sets of challenges for the civic education movement. The first is rooted in the racial gap between college populations and the society as a whole. In 1968, the Kerner commission famously agonized that the United States was on the verge of becoming two societies: “one black, one white—separate and unequal.”⁷ While there have been significant changes in the American racial terrain in the nearly fifty years since the Kerner report was released, the danger remains that the United States is breaking into two societies—one disproportionately white, with educational and economic opportunity largely determined by access to financial resources; the other disproportionately non-white and largely (though not completely) locked out of the educational and economic opportunities offered by higher education. Civic education has little meaning if it can’t help students make sense of, and develop strategies for addressing, the paradox of a colorblind society riven by racial and economic inequality.

At the same time, the civic education movement must be prepared to look inward, to ask how well the higher education sector is responding to the nation’s changing racial demographics. For more than forty years, affirmative action has been the prime means of diversifying selective colleges and universities, while underrepresented minority students have disproportionately attended less-selective institutions. Affirmative action may not survive its latest judicial review, given the conservative majority on the Supreme Court, but colleges and universities face an even broader challenge. The nation’s colleges and universities, particularly the most prestigious of them, will have to undergo much more fundamental changes—in terms of not just their admissions policies, but also their curricula and the make-up of their faculty and staff—if they are truly to reflect the majority-minority society that the United States will be by the middle of this century.

What role, then, should the civic education movement play in efforts to democratize higher education for a truly multiracial nation? What can we contribute to the undoing of the current racial stratification of higher education? In particular, how do we ensure that the professoriate of the future reflects the inevitable changes in student populations? The challenge, it seems to me, is to

approach the mandate of democratic engagement as a two-way street. As advocates of the engaged university, we must see our challenge as contributing not only to healthy communities and a democratic civic culture, but also to a democratic and inclusive university—one that is working to lessen racial and class stratification in the larger society, rather than serving as an instrument of that stratification.

Two papers, one very recent and the other a recent classic, suggest the ways that efforts to promote civic and community engagement can and should also contribute to the creation of diverse and inclusive college communities. In 2005, University of Southern California historian George Sanchez published *Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy*. This critique of the service-learning movement drew attention to the failure to make connections between efforts to encourage student involvement in poor communities, on the one hand, and challenges to affirmative action and other university initiatives to increase racial diversity among college students and faculty, on the other. Sanchez worries that “the widespread growth in service learning and community engagement at universities across the nation and the rapid decline in programs and commitments to make our own university communities more inclusive and diverse” are not coincidental.⁸ Rather, he suggests, they may reflect an ethos according to which it is enough to provide assistance to individuals in need without also addressing the social and political causes of inequality and deprivation. It is not just community service, Sanchez concludes, that is remade when engagement efforts are linked with initiatives to increase racial diversity on campus. While the Supreme Court declared in *Grutter v. Bollinger* that racial diversity provides educational benefits to the entire student body, Sanchez’s formulation pushes us to see the inclusive and engaged campus as an essential component of efforts to achieve racial and social justice throughout society.

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A more recent paper titled *Full Participation: Building the Architecture for Diversity and Public Engagement in Higher Education*, coauthored by Susan Sturm, Timothy Eatman, John Saltmarsh, and Adam Bush, builds on Sanchez’s formulation as well as on efforts on campuses across the country to propose a model for the linkage of diversity and engagement. For the authors, the term “full participation” captures the ways that “the intersections of student and faculty diversity, community engagement, and academic success [can serve] as a nexus for the transformation of communities on and off campus.”⁹ To put it another way, it is not simply that engagement and diversity are parallel and compatible positives for the university; when linked, each becomes a mechanism for achieving the other.

In a roundabout way, the counterpoint to Sturm et al. can be found in “Syracuse’s Slide: As Chancellor Focuses on the ‘Public Good,’ Syracuse’s Reputation Slides.” This article, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, purports to be about the ways that Syracuse University Chancellor and President Nancy Cantor’s dual commitment to engage the university in efforts to

revitalize the local community and to increase racial and class diversity in the student body have weakened Syracuse's academic reputation. In and among the quotes from Syracuse professors who fear that Cantor's commitment to engagement and diversity will compromise the academic excellence of the institution, however, the article provides strong evidence that Cantor's policies have not only strengthened the city of Syracuse, but have also strengthened the university's student body by increasing its racial and class diversity. In the seven years that Cantor has been at Syracuse, the percentage of Syracuse students who receive Pell grants has grown from 20 to 28, and the percentage of minority students has grown from 18 to 32.¹⁰

As David Roediger and others have shown, racial and ethnic identities and categories are historically dynamic and invariably change over time and space.¹¹ No one can be sure what the relevant racial issues or categories will be ten, twenty-five, or fifty years from now. But one can be fairly sure that America's racial future will be very different from its racial past. This is the challenge that the civic education movement must confront directly.

NOTES

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 13.
3. Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," (United States Census Bureau, 2010), 4.
4. Derived by the author from data available from, "2008 National Population Projections," US Census Bureau, accessed March 27, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/2008projections.html>.
5. Abby Kiesa and Karlo Barrios Marcelo, *Youth Demographics: Youth with No College Experience* (Boston: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2009), 4.
6. William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2018* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2009), 10.
7. The National Advisory Commission of Civil Disorders, "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 1.
8. George J. Sanchez, *Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy* (Syracuse NY: Imagining America, 2005), 6.
9. Susan Sturm, Tim Eatman, John Saltmarsh, and Adam Bush, *Full Participation: Building the Architecture for Diversity and Public Engagement in Higher Education* (New York: Center for Institutional and Social Change, Columbia University Law School, 2011), 4.
10. Robin Wilson, "Syracuse's Slide: As Chancellor Focuses on the 'Public Good,' Syracuse's Reputation Slides," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 2, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Syracuses-Slide/129238>.
11. David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).