



**SEEKING AND SECURING EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE:
ISSUES OF EQUITY, ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 12-13-07, p.A-7

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There is a critical struggle going on in California and the country around the meaning and right of education, and it should not be lessened, taken lightly or seduce us into a sense of victory not yet achieved. It is a struggle around issues of justice, equity, access, opportunity and the kind of educational system and society we all deserve and want to live in and pass on to future generations. This was clear in the fervent and dedicated statewide struggle of students of color and their allies to force rescension of Standing Policy 1 and 2 (SP-1 and SP-2) within the UC system which eliminated the university's ability to consider race in admissions, hiring and contracting. The intensity and urgency of the struggle exposed an increasing crisis in the University of California, defined by the devastating effects of conservative efforts to undermine and deny equal access to higher education for African Americans and other underrepresented students of color. It is reflected in the educational wreckage left behind by the short-lived SP-1 and SP-2 and the still-present Proposition 209 which prohibits affirmative action and limits other increased efforts to insure educational justice for underrepresented groups.

In the wake of Proposition 209, enrollment of African Americans and other students of color dropped dramatically at UCLA. The number of African American freshmen admitted declined by 50% and over 50% of African American students admitted chose not to enroll as a result of the chilling effect of the adoption of SP-1 which cultivated a sense of their being excluded and unwelcomed. In spite of its declarations of innocence of conceding to the conservative attempt to exclude rather than include, the decreasing presence of people

of color in the university compromises the integrity of the university's claim to inclusion and fairness and its claim to provide a quality education which by definition is multicultural. It represents the rankest kind of hypocrisy to claim to view diversity as an asset and then eliminate or severely reduce the numbers of the diverse peoples who provide that diversity. It is a reprehensible and racially ambivalent attempt to embrace the *abstract concept*, while excluding the *real people*.

In the 60's we waged a successful struggle to interrupt the long self-congratulatory Eurocentric narrative offered as curriculum and demanded a multicultural educational approach to a multicultural human reality. We also struggled for and won increased enrollment of peoples of color so that they would bring their own experience and knowledge to the campus and classroom to enrich and expand both the quality of the discourse and the meaning and value of the educational enterprise as a whole. It is unconscionable that we should be on the road of return to the former state of things where one group sits around in classrooms congratulating itself on its humanity, while denying the majority of humanity intellectual relevance and the right of presence.

Certainly, there have been some gains, but the readings of real success are wrong and thus unreliable. Surely, as result of the struggle of students, allied alumni, the community and supportive faculty members, SP-1 and SP-2 were rescinded. Moreover, UC Resolution RE-28 was adopted with a commitment to "seek out and enroll a student body. . .that encompasses the broad diversity of backgrounds characteristic of California." But how that plays out in the

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midst of other compelling criteria is still to be seen. Indeed, it has led to self-congratulatory announcements by UCLA that it had admitted 392 Black freshmen in 2007 as distinct from 249 and that those who actually enrolled doubled from 103 in 2006 to 203 in 2007. Not to minimize efforts made under the stress of struggle, but it's hard to be grateful for minimum movement forward after such a lurch or leap backward. It's like knocking a person down and wanting praise for lifting them half-way back up.

The ancient Egyptians called human beings "*rekhyt*," knowing beings, which spoke not only to the conception of how important knowledge is to our understanding of our humanity, but also to realizing it in its most expansive form. Moreover, they taught in the sacred *Husia*, that "Better is a book than a well-built house; better is a book than a memorial plaque in the temple." Likewise, the ancient Yoruba taught in the sacred *Odu Ifa* that "full knowledge of things in the world" was the first criterion of a good world and that "wisdom adequate to govern the world" was the first requirement of creating that good world.

No one can seriously doubt the indispensability of higher education to the level of one's earning and the quality of one's life and life-chances. Thus, to deny students of color increased access to this critical social space is to willfully limit their capacity to assert themselves successfully in the world. Given the indispensable and enduring role education plays in life and life-chances, we understand education as a human right, not as a social privilege.

Therefore, to establish policies which deny or diminish the practice and promise of this right is to commit a human rights violation of the most serious personal and social consequences. And no society can claim to be just or equally regardful of its members if it does this. It is to prevent this reversal of hard-won gains and to expand the realm of freedom, justice and opportunities on campus and in society that this important struggle does and must continue.

Our struggle also, is and must be directed toward improving the universities' hiring and contracting practices dedicated to increased efforts to insure equal access, equal opportunity and justice for underrepresented groups. For our interests in students, is of necessity, part of a larger interest in the presence, position and treatment of persons of color in every area of university life and in equal access and opportunity and justice for each and all of them.

Anything less makes a mockery of the University's stated educational mission to provide a quality education which again by definition is a multicultural education, achieved through both the valued study and presence of diverse peoples in every area of university life. What is at stake, then, is not simply seats in a classroom, but rather meaningful and deserved positions in society and the world through the right and acquisition of a quality education which is a human right to be fiercely fought for and defended. Thus, we create free space for those who will as Dr. Bethune said, "discover the dawn" and share it in the interests and expansion of good in the world.