

The Urban University Response to a Community in Transition: From African American to Hispanic/Latino

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Abstract

California State University, Dominguez Hills and its surrounding community made a dramatic shift in demography to a much larger proportion of Hispanic/Lation residents in only a few years. The University's sense of its urban mission, diverse student body, and leadership role in the community inspired it to implement strategies to help both the campus and community respond to the challenges of community change.

I would consider myself an unabashed proponent of the urban university. The urban university is playing as important a role as did the land grant university 140 years ago. Nowhere in my research have I discovered any evidence that the land grant faculty and staff were embarrassed by their mission designation. Yet, as critical as is our work in modern urban communities, urban universities have too often felt apologetic about their roles. I have actually had faculty members at urban/metropolitan universities ask me why it is necessary to refer to us as urban rather than just a public comprehensive university.

Given the critical role that we play for the metropolitan communities we serve, how can there be any questions about our importance? Institutions like ours provide important access to a higher education at a time, format, and price that are convenient to the public. We offer courses during the evening, on weekends, on television, and on-line. Most of our students come from the metropolitan Los Angeles area, nearly 70 percent of whom are community college transfers, with an average age of approximately 31; there are three times as many females as males. Most of our students work and take less than a full load (15 credit hours). Our racial/ethnic mix reflects the diversity of Carson, California, which was once identified as the most diverse city in America.

We are very proud of our track record of civic engagement. We are actively involved with PK-12 in most of the school districts in our region. Not only is our faculty in the School of Education involved on a daily basis with the public schools, they are actually in the classrooms assisting high school teachers with the teaching of reading and mathematics. We also have high school students working on campus in our Theatre Department helping with our major productions for the year. Most of these

students will be attending our university when they graduate. We even run a community health facility that is located in a predominately Latino neighborhood. At this facility, members of the community receive a variety of services in the health arena as well as basic education. Our students and faculty are very engaged in the community as individuals within programs, academic departments, and Centers.

One of the projects in which we are involved that is getting international attention is our partnership with the Anschutz Entertainment Group and the Home Depot Corporate Office. Together we have created the Home Depot National Training Center. This \$125 million private investment will not only give us the opportunity to provide high quality athletic facilities for our community, but it will also create a multi-million dollar economic impact on our city and surrounding metropolitan area. California State University, Dominguez Hills will become the location for the training of some of the Nation’s top amateur athletes in the areas of soccer, tennis, track and field, and cycling. Throughout our negotiations we stressed the educational and economic benefits to our metropolitan area.

Rapid Changes in the Demography of the Community

With only a few exceptions, we are on the way to becoming a model urban “communiversity.” The real challenge for our campus, I believe, is how we assist our metropolitan area in coping with the transition that is taking place in our communities. Metropolitan Los Angeles is experiencing a racial/ethnic shift from African-American to Hispanic/Latino. Our campus, which reflects the demographics of the metropolitan area, has seen its student population shift from African-Americans as the largest ethnic group in 1998 to Hispanic/Latinos in 2002 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Rapid Changes in Ethnicity of CSU Dominguez Hills Students

Enrollment by Ethnicity, 1997–2001					
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Percent					
Hispanic	28.3%	30.1%	31.5%	33.0%	35.2%
African-American	29.3%	30.0%	30.6%	30.2%	31.3%
Numbers					
Hispanic	3,169	3,203	3,486	3,762	4,028
African-American	3,211	3,194	3,394	3,444	3,590

We are a campus that “looks like America,” and therefore must help America meet its challenges head-on. Most of the local jurisdictions are also challenged by this demographic shift, and some have already asked if we have consultants skilled in the area of human relations. Two of the better-known cities in our service area have both struggled with this difficult issue, and have received national media attention. All eyes were on the most recent mayoral election in the first city, even though neither candidate in the general election was African-American. Unlike New York City, where a so-called Black/Brown coalition got together and supported the Latino candidate, in this case the African-American community was divided. Many African-Americans believed that the Latino candidate was the best candidate and would be an excellent Mayor whether he was potentially the first Latino mayor in the city’s history or not. Many other African-Americans, worried that the Latino community might become too powerful, chose to support the Anglo candidate.

The Anglo candidate was the son of a very well known County official who was very supportive of the black community. This allowed many of his African-American supporters to argue that they should throw their support behind him because his father was so supportive of black causes. One might ask why the African-American community would turn its back on a Latino candidate for mayor and vote for someone whose father was supportive. I would suggest that if the strongest argument on behalf of a candidate is that his father was a supporter of black causes, then folks really are seeking a justification for their actions. The bottom line in all this is that the African-American community was unable to adjust to the increasing political power of the Latino community. They would actually vote for an Anglo candidate in order to keep the Latino candidate from taking office. Rumors already had it that the new mayor would terminate African-American employees and replace them with Latino employees.

In the other city, there are many who believe that the black community is doing anything and everything to stave off the increasing Latino political and economic influence. This community is typical of what has happened in many of the communities in our area, in that it has gone from Caucasian to African-American to Latino in recent years. Many in the Latino community feel that African-Americans are trying to hold on as the Caucasians did when they moved in. The African-American community, on the other hand, sees the growth in the Latino community as a threat to their leadership. Even in our city we have already seen signs that suggest a concern on the part of African-Americans that “too many Mexicans are moving into Carson.”

The National Training Center that is being constructed on our campus was my first direct experience with the hostility/fear that many African-Americans in Carson, California are feeling. Before the National Training Center concept was expanded to include a tennis venue, a velodrome, and a new track, I talked about a new 18,000-seat stadium on our campus that would serve as the new home of the LA Galaxy soccer team. The opposition to my proposal was swift and vocal. While there were a number of legitimate reasons why this Los Angeles bedroom community would not be happy about my plan to locate a major league soccer team on the campus, I soon learned that

many who spoke out against the soccer stadium had another agenda. Even at this late date in the construction, and having announced on several occasions that this project has many components and is not just about soccer, many people still talk about the soccer stadium. The manner in which this item was handled at its inception has brought this issue to the front.

The developer announced that he was looking at an alternative to a nearly 100,000 seat Rose Bowl in the mostly white community of Pasadena, California, when in fact the Galaxy is drawing fewer than 20,000 fans per game. But he went on to say that moving the team to the campus of California State University, Dominguez Hills was very important demographically because it was moving closer to its true fan base in the South Bay. The Galaxy following was predominately Latino and the move to Carson would put them right in the middle of most of their fans. While some saw the wisdom in moving to a smaller location, others interpreted this to mean that thousands of “Mexicans” would be coming to Carson each year to watch soccer, and some of them might choose to remain there. It became such an issue that I was forced to tell an audience that I would not continue a dialogue that was racist. I advised them that I would talk about air and noise pollution, traffic congestion, air quality, traffic flow, parking for the games, and public safety, but I was not going to talk about “the Mexicans.”

Why is there so much fear in the black community about the increasing number of Latino citizens in Southern California? Why is there so much fear about the Latino community taking control? The answer is probably quite obvious to the reader. Nobody prepared us to be the second largest “minority” group. Nobody told us that before we cut our piece of the “American Dream Pie,” another group would be asking for assistance! Nobody told us that before we could get seated at “the Table of Brotherhood,” another group would be pulling up a chair alongside us; and to make matters worse, knowing that this new player has used all of our strategies, all of our arguments, and all of our legislative initiatives, without having to “pay their dues” is more than many people can handle. If the Asian population continues to grow as it is being projected, African-Americans could find themselves in “third place.” With all of this going on in the broader community, it is no surprise that it has hit the campus. We are one of the so-called commuter schools in the system. The vast majority of our students work and live in their communities; however, they bring those community issues to the campus and we are challenged to respond to them. If we can help our students learn to better handle racial/ethnic conflict and tension on the campus, we hope they will be in a better position to provide leadership when they return to their communities.

It is not my purpose to either present an exhaustive review of the literature, or to present a particular hypothesis. But it is important to point out that scholars and researchers have been talking about the growing issues between Blacks and Hispanics for many years. *Table 2* provides just a few references for your information.

Table 2 Examples of Research on Black and Hispanic/Latino Relations

- Blalock, Hubert M., *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967).
- Hahn, Harlan, and Timothy Almy, "Ethnic Politics and Racial Issues: Voting in Los Angeles." *Western Political Quarterly* 24 (1971): 719–730.
- Oliver, Melvin L., and James H. Johnson, Jr., "Inter-Ethnic Conflict in an Urban Ghetto: The Case of Black and Latinos in Los Angeles," *Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change* 6 (1984): 57–94.
- Browning, Rufus P., Dale Rodgers Marshall, and David H. Tabb, *Protest Is Not Enough* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- Henry, Charles P., "Black-Chicano Coalitions: Possibilities and Problems," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 4 (1980): 222–232.
- Warren, Christopher L., John F. Stack Jr., and John G. Corbett, "Minority Mobilization in an International City: Rivalry and Conflict," *PS* 19 (1986): 626–634.
- Estrada, Leobardo, Chris F. Garcia, Reynaldo F. Marcias, and Lionel Maldonado, "Chicanos in the United States: A History of Exploitation and Resistance," *Daedalus* 110 (1981): 103–132.
- Mohl, Raymond A., "Race, Ethnicity and Urban Politics in the Miami Metropolitan Area," *Florida Environmental and Urban Issues* 3 (1982): 1–6, 23–25.
- Weaver, R.C. "The Impact of Ethnicity upon Urban America," in *Ethnic Relations in America*, Lance Liebman, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982).
- Falcon, Angelo, "Black and Latino Politics in New York City," in *Latinos in the Political System*, F. Chris Garcia, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988).

It would be interesting to see what might be the result of some of these studies if they were replicated today. Some of these studies have proven to be very insightful. For example, Paula D. McClain and Albert K. Karnig, in an article written in 1990, focused on political and economic issues related to Blacks and Hispanics. They asked whether the significant presence of one minority group affected the other minority group. And, are political and economic outcomes complementary or do the successes of one minority come at the expense of the other? Their conclusions were quite significant:

In our initial analyses, the socioeconomic data revealed no harmful competition in general. Where one group does better socioeconomically, so do the other two groups. Political outcome data presented a somewhat different picture. When either Blacks or Hispanics gain politically, they do so at the expense of Whites. Political competition between Blacks and Hispanics is evident only when controls for White political outcomes are introduced. This suggests that as Black and Hispanic political successes increase, political competition between Blacks and Hispanic may be triggered, especially as fewer Whites reside in minority-dominated cities.

In addition, evidence also indicates that competition does appear to occur as the size of the Black population increases with consequences to Hispanics, particularly on several socioeconomic measures. Moreover, in the small sample of cities in which Blacks are a plurality or majority, Hispanics seem to fare less well socioeconomically and in particular, politically. (McClain and Karnig 1990).

It is very clear to me that a lot of research will be needed in order for communities to have a scientific basis with which to deal with this issue. Otherwise, leaders will be left to operate on the basis of emotion and anecdotal evidence.

The University's Response

What, then, do we do to best address this serious community issue? First, our Student Development staff, through their individual and career counseling, respond to all personal expressions of concern over the issue of diversity. We have established several support groups on campus for African-American males, African-American females, and Latino students. Our Multi-Cultural Center is also playing an important role in helping students deal with their differences. In addition to the number of Ethnic Studies programs on campus, our College of Arts and Sciences, with the help of a Ford Foundation grant, has established a program in Global and Diaspora Studies, a deliberate attempt on our part to encourage our students to look beyond their individual racial/ethnic groups, and think in broader terms. While these activities have been very successful, perhaps the activity of greatest campus interest has been the "Diversity Chats." These chats have included topics such as Racial Identity Development: Bi-Racial Identity Issues and the always exciting topic "Black-Brown Relations: Can't we just get along?" These Diversity Chats are moderated by trained

members of the National Conference on Community Justice (NCCJ), who can methodically deal with issues so that those who are in attendance will open up and talk freely and honestly. They get immediate feedback, which has proven to be very important in the success of these chats. The university's Multi-Cultural Center has made these programs one of its highest priorities.

This summer the Division of Student Affairs had a first time "Human Relations Retreat" that proved to be a very powerful experience for all who attended. Most, if not all, of the "isms" were discussed at one point or another during the retreat. Student differences and commonalities were discussed and explored, which allowed the participants to look at stereotypes and prejudices and where they are most likely fostered (i.e., home, school, and workplace). A basic purpose of the workshop is to provide Human Relations Training to our students in order to create a core group of "Ambassadors" for the university. We are planning to hold a Human Relations Retreat for Ambassadors each fall and an open Human Relations Retreat for other students during the spring semester. The Ambassador Retreat will further the training of that core group, which we expect will grow each year, so that they can plan and help out with the general student retreat. We strongly believe that this type of training involves life lessons and learning that will assist them personally to live and function in a pluralistic society, far beyond their stay at California State University, Dominguez Hills. It should also help prepare them to respond to this increasingly important community issue.

We as a university are being very proactive about addressing this issue. During our Summer Bridge Program, where the student participants are mostly Latino and African-American, we actually make housing assignments that will pair students with someone whose cultural background is different from their own. This experiment has proven to be a very helpful but not-so-subtle way of introducing students to issues of diversity. Our Student Affairs Staff regularly monitor activities on campus and step in to try to keep lines of communication open. They work closely with the Associated Students, Incorporated to observe student elections and appointments to make certain that if problems arise, there is professional support available to step in and provide assistance where needed. We expect our student leaders to model appropriate behavior when it comes to issues of racial/ethnic diversity on campus.

We are not just waiting for students to come to the campus before we begin to address this issue. During the last academic year I set aside some funds for "Communiversity Grants." We provided the opportunity for schools, departments, programs, and individuals to receive a mini-grant for initiating projects that would have an impact on our community and reflect the spirit of "Communiversity." One of the projects was called the Communiversity Leadership Conference. This program was directed at high school juniors and seniors in our service area. Wherever possible the presenters addressed the topic of diversity on college and university campuses. Two specific topics, "Breaking Down the Walls of *Racism*" and "A Lunch Date with Diversity," forced these young leaders to move from their comfort levels as high school students and deal with this important issue in our community. Based on the very positive

feedback that we received, the Division of Student Affairs plans to write a grant for funding to institutionalize this program.

Conclusion

While I am not so foolish as to think that California State University, Dominguez Hills can solve this community problem by ourselves, I do believe that we are making a difference by helping students from the South Bay area of Southern California prepare to take on leadership roles in the effort to ensure that all of our citizens live in harmony in this racially diverse community.

Based on the daily support network of many of our faculty and staff and the formal campus activities we have initiated, California State University, Dominguez Hills is an urban university making a difference in a community that is changing dramatically. We may have a long way to go, but we have taken the first steps.

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