

# **Overview: The Status of African Americans in the Academy**

Dianne Wright, Guest Editor

The status of African Americans in academe has been of concern to many in American higher education for almost two centuries. During the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement and the climate of social unrest of that era led to efforts to diversify higher education in the United States. Unfortunately, however, after almost four decades of implementing policies designed to provide for more diversity in American educational institutions, we are still grappling with the issue of race and under-representation of African Americans in all aspects of higher education in the United States. This volume provides historical perspectives and interpretations of current challenges.

Brian Haynes opens the issue with an overview of the evolution and participation of Black undergraduate students in the academy. The author places special attention on the historic events that have served as landmarks in this evolution.

In the context of the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision involving race-conscious admissions at the University of Michigan, Abraham and Jacobs analyze the current status of African Americans in graduate and professional schools. The authors note there has been a rise in the number of African Americans seeking degrees in higher education since the turn of the twentieth century. Today this rise, at best, has stabilized and continues to be insufficient to meet the need for faculty of color among the professorate. By way of analysis, the authors note that though there has been a rise in the number of African Americans seeking undergraduate degrees, over the last decade there has been a decrease in the enrollment percentage gap of African Americans in graduate school. The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) 2000/2001 Fact Book on Higher Education, which draws data from several national sources, provides much of the information for this analysis. The authors conclude that there is a "pipeline" problem. Strategies and recommendations are posed, highlighting the work of several of today's urban and metropolitan universities throughout the U.S. as well as that of the Southern Regional Educational Association (SREA) to address this pipeline issue.

Clara Awe continues with a focus on the status of African American faculty in U.S. colleges and universities. Numerous works are cited noting that historical accounts of minority scholars' exclusion from full participation in the academy is virtually absent from the standard histories of the United States and American education. Concerns about the status of African Americans within the professorate reached an all time high during the 1960s and 1970s. The Civil Rights movement and the climate of social unrest of that era led to efforts to diversifying the faculty ranks in higher education. Much of this concern, however, has dissipated over the last twenty-five years. In the

dawn of the twenty-first century and over the past almost three decades of implementing policies to diversify the professorate, issues of race and under-representation of African Americans in the professorate are as prominent as ever, though urban and metropolitan colleges and universities appear to be taking more of a lead in this area than the more traditional, rural, mature public and private research universities that have remained more inaccessible.

Wright, Taylor, Burrell, and Stewart address issues of African American administrators and staff, beginning with the unique role that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played in providing opportunities and going on to describe the impact of various court mandates, legislative acts, executive orders, and lawsuits. The writers describe the types of positions that African Americans have been able to garner as well as concomitant sources of funding and/or support. The authors conclude by noting that the situation is not much better for African American administrators and staff (including African American women) as college and university persons of power and authority than it was three decades ago and that racial discrimination is what continues to hinder their progress. Several urban and metropolitan institutions, however, are staying the course and are pointed out by the authors as examples to watch and follow.

The thesis of Wright's article is that the composition of higher education governing bodies, local boards of trustees, and state legislatures affects the internal functioning of education at all levels and, therefore, greatly impacts the results of policies affecting African Americans in academe. An underlying focus here, as in earlier *Metropolitan Universities* journals, is related to the theme of higher education governance. Wright contends that governance matters as higher education's leaders struggle with the myriad of challenges that will confront them in the twenty-first century. Statistics reveal that urban and metropolitan colleges and universities, most of which are public, tend to have governing boards that are more diverse in terms of African Americans and other minority individuals and, therefore, may not have the severity of legitimacy issues of some other institutions. Other, more traditional, rural, mature, and oftentimes public and private research institution boards are challenged on the grounds that they are too homogenous to govern what have now become diverse institutions.

Harper and Harper explore "institutions in transition" and focus specifically on the Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) and the changed higher education environment. As such, the authors note that HBCUs are being forced to reassess their missions and decide how best to serve their constituencies, which like their urban and metropolitan counterparts tend to include students who are economically, educationally, and ethnically disadvantaged, immigrants, first generation college students, and from diverse backgrounds. At the same time, urban HBCUs must continue to contribute to the shape and economic growth of urban areas, both nationally and around the world.

Robert Hall focuses on the future of African Americans in U.S. higher education. In this closing article, he notes that we are faced with some tough challenges, especially considering the current climate that does not consider an honest representation of African Americans in all aspects of higher education to be a pressing issue.

It is well documented that higher education in the twenty-first century is serving its most diverse population to date. This work traces the evolution of this diversity and features proposed strategies used by urban and metropolitan colleges and universities for turning around seemingly unsolvable issues of race and under-representation in academe. Each of this volume's writers is currently involved in an ongoing process of navigating these seemingly troubled waters, with some degree of success, albeit still in many respects, a struggle.

### **Author Information**

Dianne Wright earned a B.S. in Psychology, a M.S. in Counseling and Human Systems, and a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from Florida State University. She served as Equal Opportunity Office staff for the Florida Board of Regents, State University System; Equity Coordinator for Florida's State Board of Community Colleges; and Budget and Policy Analyst for the Governor's Office in Florida. She also served as Special Advisor to the President for Social Justice at West Virginia University. Dr. Wright earned a tenured Associate Professorship of Higher Education Administration at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, where she also served as Coordinator of the graduate program in Higher Education Administration and as the University's P-16 liaison.

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