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In Diversity Gap at Michigan Flagship, Signs of a Lost Public Mission

By Scott Kurashige

From the earliest teach-ins against the Vietnam War to demonstrations for black-studies programs, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has historically served as a bellwether of campus movements to democratize our society. Recent student protests against racism and a hostile campus climate have again placed Michigan at the center of debates about the waning of student diversity at the country's elite public universities.

Indeed, the trend at Michigan is hardly encouraging. Black undergraduate enrollment peaked at 9.2 percent in 1996-97. It declined to 7 percent by 2006 and dropped to 4.7 percent in 2013. Despite the growth of the Latino population locally and nationally, Latino undergraduate enrollment peaked at 5 percent in 2003 and 2005 and has since fallen to 4.4 percent. Native-American enrollment plateaued at 1 percent from 2004 to 2007 before plummeting to 0.2 percent from 2010 to 2013.

Out of 6,225 freshmen entering Michigan in the fall of 2013, there were only 282 Latinos, 246 African-Americans, and seven Native Americans. Dartmouth, an extremely selective Ivy League college in a small New Hampshire town, has double the percentage of underrepresented minorities in its student body.

At Michigan, how can an institution so deeply committed to diversity fall so short of its lofty goals? Much of the attention has justifiably focused on the legal restraints imposed by the state ban on affirmative action and the financial constraints imposed by declines in state funds for higher education.

However, it's important to take a step back and look at these

developments within a broader trend that university administrators have aggressively pursued. Like the University of Virginia, the University of California at Berkeley, and other "public Ivies," Michigan is increasingly becoming a PINO university: public in name only.

The ranks of the student body are rapidly being filled by those who can afford to pay more than $220,000 for four years of college—just a shade less than the cost of attending Harvard.

In an ideal world, Michigan's administration would love to see the campus more diverse. But in the real world, in which officials jockey to secure their positions and justify salaries rivaling those of corporate executives, their primary focus is money. "Go Blue" may be the rallying cry in Ann Arbor, but the most important color is green.

Michigan has become a tale of two colleges: a moderately expensive one (approximately $27,000 a year for undergraduate tuition, fees, books, miscellaneous expenses, and room and board) serving an in-state student body that is moderately diverse, and an extremely expensive one (approximately $55,000 a year) serving an out-of-state student body that is overwhelmingly wealthy and white.

As Mary Sue Coleman, the university's president, called for increased enrollment of students "paying the full freight," enrollment from outside Michigan reached 46 percent last fall. The result is that the university not only reflects the race and class inequities inherent in our society, it actually reinforces and aggravates them.

Michigan's experience also exposes the fallacy that eliminating race-conscious admissions policies benefits low-income students of all races. The 2006 passage of state Proposal 2 banning affirmative action simply added new forms of racial disadvantage to already existing and intensifying forms of class-based exclusion.

Nearly three in five students come from families with annual

incomes higher than $100,000, while a growing number are drawn from the super wealthy. Roughly 30 percent of students come from families with annual incomes higher than $200,000, and only 4 percent are from "low socioeconomic status." Bear in mind, too, that the university defines "low socioeconomic status" as having a parent without a college degree plus a family income of less than $50,000—which is actually higher than the state's median income and more than double the federal poverty level for a family of four.

The effect on the classroom is palpable. I have routinely taught courses on the history of Detroit with more students from tony suburbs like Huntington Woods (population 6,288) than Detroit (population 701,475). I can only imagine what the climate is like in the School of Business, with 31 Latinos, 18 African-Americans, and one Native American out of 1,312 undergraduates, and the School of Engineering, with one black female out of 742 students in the freshman class.

In large measure, the decline in racial and ethnic diversity stems from the conscious effort to recruit students willing to pay a private-college-level tuition. African-Americans make up 14 percent of the state population, but less than 6 percent of in-state undergraduates are black; they are almost entirely absent from the full-freight students that Michigan enrolls from out of state. For example, the Fall 2013 entering class included only three African-Americans out of 379 students from New York.

Although always framed as a desire to promote global exchange, the recruitment of international students is another veiled effort to boost the number of full-freight tuition payers. Thus, international students from China (2,292) now far outnumber the cumulative graduate and undergraduate enrollment of African-American students (1,816) or Latinos (1,876).

As bad as undergraduate enrollment looks, the situation is often much worse at the graduate level. This year's first-year law-school class of 330 students includes only 13 Latinos and nine African-Americans. The medical school's first-year class of 321 students has 12 blacks and eight Latinos. But appalling numbers can be

found almost across the board—even the nursing school enrolled only four black women in a class of 280 students.

Students of color are increasingly decrying the university's bait-and-switch tactics, in which glossy marketing campaigns stress diversity to mask common occurrences of discrimination, alienation, and harassment. And for good reason.

As the law professors Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres have argued, communities of color serve as the "miner's canary." The paucity of diversity among the future leaders that Michigan is grooming to design our cities, care for our health, oversee our communities, shape our environment, and set policies for our government signals a looming collapse of the public mission at flagship universities unless we take bold action.

For better or worse, we stand at a turning point in the history of diversity in higher education. It's past time to jettison the flawed strategies that have polarized campuses and to transcend the feeble measures reeking of tokenism from bygone eras. True leadership is coming from below at Michigan, where the #BBUM Twitter campaign, which promotes black students on the campus, has led to seven demands from the Black Student Union to improve the racial climate. The issues include black enrollment, ethnic studies, financial aid, and housing.

Under the rallying cry "No More Excuses," the United Coalition for Racial Justice has organized hundreds of people on campus to demand sustained and systematic efforts to root out racism and inequity. For starters, they are calling for the sort of presidential mandate that has not been in effect since the late 1980s and 1990s.

Formally endorsed and paid for by the administration, the "Michigan Mandate" promoted a comprehensive approach to increasing representation of people of color among students, staff, and faculty, while advancing new curricular and extracurricular initiatives to boost retention rates and foster greater appreciation of diversity. The mounting challenges of the 21st century demand nothing less than a new and improved "Michigan Mandate."

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