External Event Assignment

Aligning For Black Excellence in Higher Education Summit

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The event that I attended was *Aligning For Black Excellence in Higher Education Summit*, which was hosted by University of Southern California (USC) Black Alumni Association at USC Tutor Campus Ballroom on February 7, 2015. This was a think tank conversations regarding selective research universities in Southern California. In this discussion, they started with providing a context of the problem which includes a fragile decline of Black enrollment in highly selective institutions. Part of this problem stems from the misaligned dated diversity policies regarding income and race. Another part of the problem includes how United States admission pools for Black students is heavily targeted toward the middle class, yet these populations remain underserved and unrepresented. If Black students were better integrated into predominantly White institutions, then the alumni of the Black students can positively impact potential applicants, students, and other alumni. The three key factors which contribute to Black student inclusion includes their socioeconomic aspirations, which is most important for generational advancement of their careers; prestige, which is important in determining one's lifetime income based on influential networks; and finally, price sensitivity, which is the most important part for a student's choice of college. The seven key areas discussed in this event includes access, diversity policy alignment, financial aid incentives, racial wealth gap, enrollment management models, current diversity policy frameworks, and leadership diversity initiatives. This paper will address how all seven of these areas intertwine with our readings and classroom discussions.

In reflecting on what was spoken on in regards to access to higher education amongst Black students in highly selective institutions, I felt that there was more to it as opposed to the statistics. Each of these numbers have underlying themes, and what was was not brought up in this discussion was how these Black students were performing in comparison to the other races. A heavy focus on the discussion was "expanding diversity" through the lens of having more Black students in the classroom, as opposed to assessing what their prior performance indicated of their capabilities. "Race is about what we look like. Race is about how the tone of our voice settles on the ear. Race is how we understand the world, which is representative of culture, among other things," said Clarke-Ekong (Hesman, 2006). In this sense, race is multifaceted because it stems off educating others about

one's cultures and customs. This relates to our class discussions in that everyone starts at a specific socioeconomic point, which may have been influenced by our race, class, or privilege. We spoke on various topics such as racial profiling, institutional accountability, as well as governance over resources as an institution; it is ultimately the responsibility of the administrators and students to create a campus climate that is conducive to learning.

In terms of diversity alignment, in which less than two percent of institutions factor race into objectives, it is imperative to ensure balanced racial distributions for each incoming class. A key concept shared during this discussion includes how institutions are being more privatized, as in endorsing online education; in order to adapt to society's changes and are therefore expanding experiential learning. I believe this is a step in the right direction because although institutions can only do so much to increase different races into their institution, it remains important for there to be other avenues of retaining quality students. Additionally, collaboration with fellowships is one of the initiatives several institutions are taking place. One such fellowship is Consortium, which is a fellowship offered to underrepresented minorities holding unusually high academic profiles – the winners of this fellowship are eligible for a full ride at select institutions to pursue a Master of Business Administration. I think that if there was something beyond these fellowships, for example, adding a condition that the students receiving the scholarship must spend a minimum of three years working in an organization focused on increasing college access for Black students; then there would be more purpose towards maintaining these fellowships. "The key concepts in regard to individuals are that (1) learning is done by individuals who are members of an organizational entity such as a college or university, an administrative division, an academic department, or a research team; (2) individuals inquire into a problem collectively, on behalf of an organizational entity (Huber, 1991); and (3) organizational culture and structures can promote or inhibit individual learning" (Bensimon, 1994). This quote taken from our readings on *Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education: An Organizational Learning Perspective* by Estela Mara Bensimon supports the importance of community engagement and corporate social responsibility to fuel positive multigenerational change amongst students of color wishing to attain a college education. This also relates to our classroom discussions, for example, when we were responding to how President Nikias responded to the protest about raising wages for USC employees – he

smiled, nodded, and did not say anything. If we want to create a positive campus culture, it important that at the administrative levels, we take immediate actions towards ensuring that all problems are collectively resolved and examined, as long as they align to the university's mission.

The next area of focus was financial aid and the racial wealth gap, which is where this think tank discussion tended to lean most heavily towards. This think tank discussion introduced the three-step plan of input, action, and outputs. First, input includes community engagement and feedback from their cultivated partnerships. By having these talks, there can be more scholarly research being directly integrated towards tackling issues such as race, class, and diversity. Secondly, actions include informing the community and stakeholders about advocacy initiatives so policies can be changed. By having the support of the community and developing disseminate resources, there can be stronger tools used to support the institutions' learning environment. Lastly, outputs are the support from external groups who react to policy changes, and therefore host and support forums that amplify financial aid for Black students wishing to attain a college education. I think that this process is highly effective because it really focuses on community engagement and forming corporate partnerships for financially supporting Black students. I personally believe there is a lot of stigma around being a certain race, partially because society continually perpetuates some of the already established inequities. In John Ogbu's *Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education*, he touched on how voluntary minorities who admire conventional role models worked their way from the inside and played by the rules. "Involuntary minorities tend to criticize minority professional as unconventional, rule-breakers, people who achieved success because they worked twice as hard, were twice as smart, twice as strong, and sometimes were just lucky" (Obgu, 1978, p. 173). When I specifically asked Jonathan Wang, who was one of our speaker during the panel in VKC 150, about how race is socially constructed and how it plays a role in one's professional identity, his response seemed very accurate in that it is important to be mindful of the history that comes with being a certain race.

The next critical issue that was discussed was the enrollment management methods, with particular emphasis on community college transfer requirements. It is important that each two-year and four-year institution is explicit about creating a college readiness campus culture and upholds resilience for yielding

success. If there are low expectations, or if failure is seen as normal, then there is a lack of community engagement focused on social responsibility. Part of managing enrollment is creating opportunities that embrace leadership and focus on expanding diversity. I completely agree that these are key areas, particularly for Black students who plan on first attending community college to then transfer to a four-year institution. Not only do they save money, but it shows they are resilient and focused towards moving upward in their education. In terms of the administration of these colleges, it is important for the admissions committees to be very elaborate, specific, and explicit about what is expected of these students wishing to transfer as well as any requirements for doing so.

The last two areas of focus in this discussion includes current diversity policy frameworks as well as leadership diversity initiatives. Dr. Ross, who was one of the speakers at this event, said that six decades after Brown V. Ferguson, 80 percent of Black boys in urban schools were below reading proficiency the moment they reached the third grade (Ross, personal communication, February 7, 2015). As such, it is important to incorporate within any diversity policy framework to be inclusive of self-sufficiency and not rely merely on one's income to carry them into college. A key area within leadership diversity initiatives is to embrace corporate social responsibility and form community partnerships that focus on interest, values, and opportunities. In terms of institutional accountability, colleges must focus on the voice of its students as well as transparency so that there is little room for error. After hearing the talk about self-sufficiency being incorporated into diversity-policies, I agree somewhat, but an area I disagree with is that there were no mentions of supplemental training or direction as to how these institutions will support these Black students looking to be self-sufficient. Being self-sufficient is an excellent model when looking at the future of Black student inclusion within four-year institutions; but at this moment, it is important to create a roadmap that will lay out how these Black students can be aware of campus resources and forming relationships that would help with retention.

Citations

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