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“Diversity”—Demography, Culture, and Education for a Changing New York

Introduction

Pedro Cabán, Vice Provost for Diversity and Educational Equity, State University of New York

The History of SUNY Conference was a much-needed retrospective on the origins, current challenges, and future directions of the nation’s largest comprehensive system of public higher education. The organizers of this seminal conference, keenly aware of SUNY’s mission of providing educational services of quality with broad access and full representation of all segments of New York State’s population, created a panel on “The Changing Face of SUNY: Diversity and Educational Equity.” The panel speakers explored the function and origin of race and ethnic studies; the history and development of educational opportunity centers and programs and student retention programs; and presented an original conceptual framework for assessing the educational imperative for representational diversity.

The title of the panel was not meant to be ironic, although presenters identified the tensions between the changing racial and ethnic composition of the student body and the seemingly inalterable makeup of the SUNY professoriate and senior administration. However, the speakers did affirm that while SUNY has faithfully adhered to its institutional commitment to expand access and opportunity to economically disadvantaged and underserved communities, it has been unable to significantly diversify its professoriate and high-level academic administrators and executives.

Professor Jose Cruz’s essay “Changing Demographics and Representational Dilemmas at SUNY” challenges a university committed to diversity to pursue universal representation. Universal representation pertains both to the composition of the community of scholars that make up the university, and to the content and scope of knowledge creation and dissemination. Professor Cruz adroitly avoids the issue of specifying a numerical measure of diversity, since no comparable measure for diversity of knowledge and academic human resources can be established. Nonetheless, the jarring disparity

between the demographic composition of the student body and the faculty who teach, and administrators who manage the system does raise issues of SUNY's ability to fulfill its mandated mission. Implicit in Professor Cruz's argument is that academic excellence requires that universities be inclusive of new and challenging knowledge, and promote a diverse learning environment in which the experiential differences of both those who disseminate knowledge and those who are its recipients constitute a vibrant intellectual and learning community.

Carlos Medina's and Jeffrey Scott's essay "Creating Educational Opportunity for All: A Brief History of EOP and EOC" reviews the socio-economic changes and political forces that moved New York State to expand access and opportunity for economically disadvantaged students. By the 1960s, the growing economic desperation of urban youths denied educational opportunity had become a major policy issue for state governments. SUNY, which had been established as a public alternative to the state's private universities, was becoming increasingly inaccessible, precisely when New York's population most required its educational services. The educational crisis virtually guaranteed that the state's economically disadvantaged would be deprived of the opportunity for social and economic advancement. To counteract this situation, New York established the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Educational Opportunity Centers (EOCs). These programs enhanced the prospects for underserved communities to receive an academic preparation that had been out of reach. The EOCs also set SUNY on a new mission to educate students for employment in a changing labor market and to prepare students to pursue a postsecondary education.

Both essays emphasize SUNY's unique attributes as a comprehensive public university. It aspires to be a people's university by providing access and creating opportunity. In fact, access, equity, and inclusion were the founding principles of SUNY when it was established in 1948. Demand for higher education increased dramatically in the aftermath of World War II, but opportunities were primarily confined to the private universities. Some of the financially well-endowed universities and colleges resisted the efforts by New York State to build a public university. These very universities fought the enactment of the Fair Educational Practices Law that sought to bar the discriminatory admissions policies they freely practiced. Prohibitive tuition denied access to untold numbers of academically prepared, but economically disadvantaged, young people and veterans. These restrictive policies preserved a social hierarchy increasingly at variance with New York's changing socio-economic and demographic realities. New York's post-World War II restructured economy demanded technically competent workers and highly educated professionals in numbers the private institutions could not possibly supply.

The higher education challenges that New York State encounters today are different from those it faced six decades ago. However, these challenges

are comparably daunting and will require the visionary and determined leadership that resulted in the creation of SUNY. Two major differences are that in 1948, New York State had the financial resources and political determination to build a public university founded on the principles of access and equity. The state's current fiscal plight, marked by deterioration in revenues not experienced since the Great Depression, will severely test SUNY's ability to provide a quality education to New York's residents. Moreover, the profound demographic transformation marked by the unprecedented growth of Latino and Asian American residents, projected to significantly continue in the foreseeable future, challenges SUNY to develop cost-effective programs to enhance inclusion and representation.

In anticipation of this evolving need to develop a comprehensive approach to enhancing diversity and promoting inclusion, SUNY established the Office of Diversity and Educational Equity (ODEE). ODEE has developed system-wide initiatives to support campus efforts to diversify the university's academic human resources and to strategically invest resources to enhance academic excellence. Through various initiatives, including the Graduate Diversity Fellowship Program, the Doctoral Diversity Fellowships in STEM, the Faculty Diversity Program, the Empire State Scholars Program, Explorations in Diversity and Academic Excellence, and the Native American Initiative, ODEE contributes to enhancing diversity at SUNY. ODEE is committed to obtaining support to recruit professors, graduate, and undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds, including from groups that have historically been underrepresented in higher education, and providing them with the resources to excel. With appropriate funding ODEE will support curriculum reform that promotes diversity, support new research directions, and finance and organize regionally based multi-campus faculty diversity research initiatives. It will seek additional funding to expand ongoing system-wide diversity efforts and to develop new initiatives to promote cross-campus collaboration on public policy issues of critical importance to the state. ODEE may well be the only one of its kind in a public higher education system, and support for its proposal for a series of integrated initiatives to advance diversity system-wide is novel, if not unique. In the late 1980s, SUNY emerged as a national leader in creating programs to enhance access and equity, particularly for historically underrepresented students. In establishing the Office of Diversity and Educational Equity with system-wide responsibilities, SUNY created a unique opportunity in public higher education and reaffirmed its historical mission of providing access to a quality education.

In these troubled times, the tendency is to think of diversity as a luxury. Yet it is precisely at this moment in history that it is incumbent on SUNY to move creatively and forthrightly on diversifying its academic human resources and supporting diversity related research initiatives. Success for SUNY's students in the fast paced, internationally competitive world depends on developing

their analytical and technical abilities, cognitive skills and cultural competence to respond to new opportunities and challenges propelled by the forces of globalization. Those universities that conceptualize diversity as critical to their academic mission will very likely succeed in creating an intellectual climate that fosters respect for differences, stimulates innovation, and encourages collaboration. Students educated in this environment will be prepared to live and work productively in our multiracial and multiethnic democratic society. In short, diversity is critical, not only for attaining academic excellence in the extremely competitive higher education environment, but SUNY's contribution to New York State will be more substantial and enduring if it diversifies its academic workforce and student population and promotes the integration of diversity-related research and teaching.