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**Recent Racial Incidents
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A Contemporary Perspective**

by

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**RECENT RACIAL INCIDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE**

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of racial/ethnic conflict at predominantly White institutions of higher education. Incidents of harassment and violence at the University of Michigan, the University of Massachusetts and other campuses have highlighted the continuing racial/ethnic divisions among majority and minority students (Wilkerson 1988; Farrell 1988a and 1988b; Simpson 1987; Williams 1987). These incidents have emerged during a period when the society, in general, has expressed concern about the declining enrollment of racial minorities -- particularly Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans -- and, to a lesser extent, Asians, in higher education. Therefore, it is ironic that those minority students already enrolled in predominantly White institutions of higher education are experiencing increasing levels of racial/ethnic discrimination and feelings of isolation.

APPROACH

To that end, this paper is a preliminary attempt to develop a perspective on this apparently worsening situation. In order to establish a contemporary understanding of this problem, a general content analytical technique was employed to delineate the most significant contemporary issues/factors surrounding racial/ethnic incidents on the campuses of predominantly White institutions of higher education (Borg and Gall 1979; Babbie 1983). Content analysis has been determined to be an effective tool for monitoring social change. During the past year, there has been an emergence of reportorial interest in racial/ethnic conflict on White university campuses, thus the employment of this technique. The basic approach was to examine the patterns of focus in selected newspapers and related publications and to summarize emergent themes and trends.

For the purpose of this qualitative analysis, a national newspaper, *The New York Times*, a local newspaper and selected black-oriented newspapers were reviewed for the calendar years 1987 through June, 1988. In addition, related books, articles and periodicals on higher education issues also were assessed. The specific objectives of this investigation were to:

- to provide an overview of minority students on White college campuses,
- to examine the general perceptions of racism in contemporary society,
- to determine the scope of racial/ethnic incidents on campus of predominantly White institutions of higher education, and
- to assess prospects for change.

The main results of this analysis indicate that Blacks were the primary minority group impacted by these "reported" racial incidents, but Hispanics and Asians also have been found to be experiencing increased levels of "actual" and "perceived" racial discrimination. Native Americans have not

emerged in this content analysis as being victims of "reported" racial incidents in contemporary higher education.

MINORITY STUDENTS ON WHITE CAMPUSES: AN OVERVIEW

Available research on minority students enrolled in predominantly White institutions of higher education has repeatedly affirmed that there is a poor fit between minority students' social, economic and cultural status and that of the institution (Allen 1986; Fleming 1984; Fields 1986 and 1987; Simpson 1987). Although they evidence occupational aspirations similar to their White counterparts, they remain plagued by serious problems of institutional adjustment (Allen 1986). They are more likely to be less academically prepared, to be of lower economic status, to be first generation college attenders, and to be disproportionately concentrated in two-year institutions.

Moreover, their behaviors, lifestyles and values are likely to be substantially different from those of Whites. These factors, in turn, often have had a negative impact on their ability to successfully negotiate the university environment (Wilkerson 1988); thus, their academic achievement suffers (Simpson 1987; Field 1986 and 1987). Universities, on the other hand, have made limited adjustments in their organizational and administrative structures to accommodate the diverse and complex needs of their minority student populations, especially Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans. This institutional adjustment failure, in many respects, serves to explain the precipitous decline of these minority groups in higher education during the past decade.

Between 1976 and 1985, the high school graduation rate of Black students rose from 65 to 75 percent, while their college-going rate fell from 34 to 26 percent. For Hispanics, high school graduation rates increased from 56 to 62 percent, while their college-going rate fell from 36 to 26 percent. In 1976, Black students constituted 9.4 percent of higher education enrollment, but that proportion had fallen to 8.8 percent by 1985.

During the same period, Hispanics' share of enrollment went up from 3.5 to 4.3 percent. However, it should be noted that the available pool of Hispanic students has increased even more substantially; thus their college-going rate and their percent of higher education enrollment is not keeping pace with their demographic realities (Jaschik 1987a and b; Change 1988; Fiske 1987 and 1988; Evangelauf 1988). Among the minority student groups, Asian enrollment is growing most rapidly, and they have encountered fewer problems of adjustment, while Native American students fare least well overall.

Of all problems faced by minority students on White campuses, those of isolation, alienation and lack of support appear to be the most serious. Minority students have often found it necessary to engage in voluntary segregation in order to survive the college experience (Bernstein 1988; Allen 1986; Jones 1987a-d; Louis 1987). The empirical and case study research suggests rather strongly that minority students are not adjusting successfully to White institutions under normal conditions. Moreover, they find themselves at an additional disadvantage when they are forced to endure acts of racial discrimination and racism in addition to the continuing problems of social, economic, cultural and educational adjustment.

RACISM IN THE LARGER SOCIETY

Many observers of the contemporary scene have contended that racism against minorities is again on the upsurge and that its implicit encouragement by the national administration and by majority individuals in leadership roles has fueled this decline in racial tolerance (Holman 1988; Iverem 1987; *Carolinian* 1987b and c; Ferry 1988; Heller 1988; *Milwaukee Journal* 1988c; Purdum 1987). These views have been given legitimacy by a variety of studies which have affirmed that America is moving even more rapidly toward a separate and unequal society along the lines of race and class (Kotlowitz 1988).

Even more disconcerting is the fact that senior staff members of the President of the United States have been alleged to have made racial slurs regarding civil rights enforcement (*Carolinian* 1987a). Elsewhere, extremists in the U.S. Department of Education and on the National Council for the Humanities have been forced to resign due to making disparaging remarks about racial minorities (Kusnet 1987). What appears to be occurring is a societal capitulation to the promulgation of uncivil and racist attitudes and racist expressions of conduct toward racial minorities (*Carolinian* 1987c), a virtual epidemic of bigotry. Although there are those who decry this characterization on contemporary society (Marwell 1988), it is clear that racial insensitivities are on the rise.

They may be due in part to societal uncertainty as Americans have expressed a decreased level of optimism about the future (Roberts 1988). The emergence of the view that America is in a state of decline has generated a high level of insecurity and an intense focus on private concerns (Schmeisser 1988). Consequently, minority students are having to pursue higher education in a climate of economic scarcity and uncertainty, which has led to an escalation of conservative attitudes which in turn have led to increased racial intolerance (Jaschik 1987c). Although racial attitudes, as measured by survey data, indicate a positive trend, observed and documented racial practices tend to point in the opposite direction.

CONTEMPORARY RACIAL INCIDENTS

Contemporary reported racial incidents in higher education largely have been a result of conflicts between Black and White students. Hispanic, Asian, Jewish and Native American students have been victimized to a lesser degree. However, as indicated in Table 1, there has been a surprising consistency among the types of incidents, irrespective of region of the country. Racist threats, remarks, slurs, graffiti and fliers tended to predominate, while beatings, brawls and cross burnings were less prominent. An examination of the factors underlying these incidents reveals that they can be divided into three basic categories: White insensitivity, environmental racism and Black student assertiveness (Associated Press 1988; *Chronicle of Higher Education* 1987 and 1988; Connell 1988; Farrell 1988b; Farrell 1987; Farrell and Pollard 1987; Friederich 1987; Gibson and Mitchell 1988; Gibney 1988; Gold 1988a-f and h; Jet 1987; *Milwaukee Journal* 1987a-c; *Milwaukee Journal* 1988a-b; *Michigan Alumnus* 1987; *The New York Times* 1988a-f; Olive 1988; Stevens 1988a-b; Tobin 1987; Wilson 1986; *Change* 1988; Yardley 1988).

White Insensitivity

A sizeable proportion of White students, White staff and White faculty at predominantly White institutions have had minimal contact with or exposure to minorities, (specifically Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans). Additionally, they have not been encouraged or required to expand their social and cultural vistas to be responsive to the social, economic and cultural backgrounds of minority students. There have been numerous examples of the indiscriminate use of racial slurs, racial jokes, racist costumes -- by Whites -- in their interactions with minorities.

The subtlety of the racial discrimination can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby minority students come to believe that they cannot fully participate in university life no matter how bright and well-prepared they are (Simpson 1988; Louis 1987; Wilkerson 1988).

But potentially more damaging than the virulent examples of racism cited in Table 1 are the smaller, chronic incidents which often fail to make the headlines of the daily newspapers or the evening news. These are the unspoken hostilities and the insensitive remarks and actions by students, faculty and staff faced by minority students at both public and private institutions of higher education. Many of these students are away from home for the first time and have never encountered such behavior from their peers or teachers.

In an attempt to respond to such problems, university administrators have opted for initiatives which would foster more minority enrollment rather than confronting the racism directly, thus confusing cause and effect. Instead of advancing strong sanctions against racist behavior, they assume that the enrollment of "more minorities" will result in a reduction in racially discriminatory behavior by all members of the university community (Jones 1987a, b, c and d; Jones 1988a, b, c and d; Johnson 1987). Thus, minority students are frequently forced to negotiate a virtual gauntlet of racially insensitive behavior. Nevertheless, pursuant to the rash of racial/ethnic incidents, some higher education administrators have initiated required ethnic orientation courses, a review of policies governing student behaviors and an assessment of campus environments (Shaw 1988; Yardley 1988; Camper 1988).

Environmenta Racism

The larger university community often supports the racial discrimination within the university. For instance, restaurants, bars and other social outlets in close proximity to university campuses, frequently encourage racial intolerance by their respective actions. For example, it has been reported that:

- campus bars may discourage minority student patronage and may alter the environment (i.e. not playing black and/or other minority music) to deter minority patronage;
- restaurants may be slow to serve minority students and/or treat them in a hostile manner; and
- restaurants, bars and movie theaters may permit racial slurs to be made on premises.

These institutions in the larger campus environment will often take their cues from majority students in the racial behaviors that they will accommodate. Moreover, university administrators seldom monitor campus-area institutions to determine the level of treatment received by their students in general and their minority students in particular (Jones 1987; Jones 1988; Johnson 1987; Stanford 1987).

Minority Student Assertiveness

Today's minority college students, largely from low-income environments, represent the most assertive generation ever to enter higher education. They are by-products of the cultural and social transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, where for the first time, large numbers of them questioned, and often times rejected, the value system governing our society. It was at this juncture that minorities began to establish new frames of cultural and social reference, en masse (Carolinian 1988).

The campus struggles of today are simply the community struggles of yesteryear -- in a different environment. The same forces of injustice remain in our society and reveal themselves whenever competing racial and ethnic groups face each other. The integration of colleges and universities did not include the integration of freedom and opportunity in the educational centers of the nation. It simply meant that minority and majority students would be able to enter the same institutional front doors together and attend athletic events together, although often segregating themselves in the process.

Furthermore, the attitudes shown by students often reflect attitudes learned at home, and it may be fair to say that the college students are trained to be more subtle and sophisticated in their reaction to other groups. Therefore, it may be useful to reiterate that contemporary minority college students, even more so than they were in earlier years, are articulate and aggressive, and that they are operating from new phenomenological and existential constructs which do not permit them to accommodate social, physical and intellectual assaults on their personhood.

Each generation pursues vehemently the American dream within whatever environment it exists. The result is that students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds reflect the continuing and underlying thread of racism that has always been in our society. (We cannot assume that the evils which existed in the 1960s and 1970s and which required student protest have been cured.)

The initiatives which led to more minority students matriculating in many predominantly White institutions of higher education between 1965 and 1976, and today, irrespective of the current decline, appear only to have addressed the paucity of numbers and not the motivating factors which led to them. Thus, student conflict is not surprising. The essential question is where will the conflict surface in the future.

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

If universities are truly concerned about the presence of minorities within their student bodies, university officials must begin to indicate in a direct way that "racist actions" will not be tolerated and that infractions will be dealt with severely (Short 1987; Milwaukee Courier 1988; *Milwaukee Community Journal* 1988). And if minority students are not given this explicit signal of commitment, they will neither be attracted to or

retained in these institutions. A concomitant strategy to counter such attitudes would be for colleges and universities to better integrate their faculty and staffs so as to reflect the diversity of the larger society (Gold 1988g; Massey 1987). Although it is imperative that the environment on campuses of higher education be conducive to learning, the larger society must implement safeguards which impose sanctions against those who act to harass others because of their racial/ethnic differences.

From random insults on the street to graffiti in dorms to fistfights on fraternity row, minorities are increasingly viewing a major part of their education as learning how to cope with racism. As Robert Atwell, President of the American Council on Education has stated so eloquently, "We have hit the wall on minority participation and are loath to face the tough road ahead. Our own inner fatigue has been accentuated by an administration that has not seen equity issues as important."

It is imperative that we not continue to allow the casual nature of racism to envelop the progress that we have made during the past quarter century.

SUMMARY

A preliminary content analysis of selected periodicals revealed quite clearly that the problems being faced by minority students on White college campuses are of concern to the larger society. The reporting and interpretation of racist incidents by national and regional newspapers demonstrate the depth of this concern. Nonetheless, the mere acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation does not offer sanguine prospects for change. What has also been revealed is that in too few instances have chief administrators in higher education responded with creative, aggressive and programmatic leadership -- save a few -- which holds promise for meaningful and substantive change (Kingson 1988; Shaw 1988; Gold 1988h).

In far too many situations, the responses suggest a reiteration of strategies of the past which were not successful then and are not likely to be successful now. Although many would suggest that universities have been working at their problems of racial discrimination and declining minority enrollment, it is urgent that more immediate progress be made.

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TABLE 1

**REPORTED RACIAL INCIDENTS AT SELECTED U. S. PREDOMINANTLY
WHITE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, 1986-88**
(Perpetuated by Majority Students Against Minority Students)

Institution	Year	Description of Racial Incident	Recipient Racial Minority Group
U. of Massachusetts, Amherst.....	1986/ 88	Racial discrimination/ racial beating	Black/Hispanic/ American Indian
Univ. of Michigan-Ann Arbor	1987	Racist fliers/Racist Jokes	Black
Univ. of Alabama, Tuscaloosa	1987	Cross burning	Black
The Citadel, Charleston, S.C.	1987	Cross burning	Black
Purdue U., West Lafayette, Ind.	1987	Cross burning	Black
Univ. of Texas, Austin	1987	Verbal threats	Black/Hispanic
Columbia Univ., New York City	1987	Physical attacks	Black
Northern Illinois U., Dekalb	1987	Racist remarks/fliers	Black
Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison	1987	Black-face fraternity party	Black
U. of Virginia, Charlottesville	1987	Racial discrimination	Black
Farleigh Dickenson Univ., N.J.	1987	Racial brawl	Black
MIT, Cambridge	1987	Racial isolation/ condescension	Black/Asian/ Hispanic
Tulane Univ., New Orleans	1987	Black-face fraternity party	Black
Dartmouth University	1987	Racial slurs/verbal assaults	Black
Univ. of Pittsburgh	1987	Racial insensitivity	Black
Univ. of Pennsylvania	1987	Racial insensitivity	Black
Univ. of Wisconsin, Milwaukee	1988	Racist fliers/remarks	Black
Marquette Univ., Milwaukee	1988	Physical beating	Black
Hampshire College, Amherst, Mass.	1988	Racist treatment	Black
Harvard Univ. Law School, Cambridge, Mass.	1988	Black student demand more minority faculty	Black
Denison Univ., Ohio	1988	Racist slurs	Black
Univ. of Kentucky, Lexington	1988	Racist remarks by trustee	Black
Penn State U., Univ. Park	1988	Racial discrimination	Black
Univ. of Wisconsin, Eau Claire	1988	Racist cartoon in student newspaper	Black
Univ. of California, Berkeley	1988	Racial harassment	Black
Univ. of California, Los Angeles	1988	Racial discrimination	Black/Hispanic
Univ. of Mississippi	1988	Racist behavior/racist party	Black
Stanford Univ.	1988	Racism/cultural insensitivity/ racial harassment	Black
Yale University	1988	Burning of shanty protesting Apartheid	Black
University of Arizona	1988	Harassment of Jewish faculty	Jewish
Syracuse University	1988	Anti-Semitism	Jewish
Indiana Univ., Bloomington	1988	Racial beating	Black
Williams College	1988	Affirmative action protest	Black