



TOWARDS DIVERSITY IN OUR INSTITUTIONS

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I AM VERY HONORED TO HAVE BEEN INVITED TO SPEAK HERE today. Let me begin by offering some perspective about ASU and its demographic context. ASU is the only public university in a city with a population of 3.5 million that is projected to grow to about 10 million in the next four decades. Within the next eight years, metropolitan Phoenix will have no majority population whatsoever. Our institution, however, remains approximately 75 percent white and 25 percent or less non-white in its student body population. We have a tremendous amount of work to do in this context, and we are engaged in this work on the front lines.

I thought that today I would not talk about that front line engagement, but about the complexity of the task before us. Because I will say to you now, and defend my statement later, that the mere attainment of mathematical diversification of student body numbers is not the attainment of diversification of education in the United States.

In 1954 our society and institutions were not open. The very concept of diversity was understood by only a few. Universities were not leading centers for social change and

diversification. At the time, in fact, our nation's universities were mirrors of the rest of society, if not actual leading centers defending the lack of diversification. Universities, in fact, maintained their core cultures unaltered despite all that was going on around them.

Fifty years later—now, 2004—our institutions are opening slowly. The numbers are changing. But the core culture of universities is not changing. The concept of diversity is well understood by most, but poorly implemented. Universities are bellwether institutions—they have changed to some extent and accomplished much, but academic culture remains fundamentally unaltered. Universities are still very much institutions in which change is occurring at the margins, with the old academic culture maintained at the core, and people of all backgrounds moving through that core in the same way.

Fifty years is just a few days in the life of a university because universities—this thousand-year-old institutional form—change very slowly. So it is not unrealistic to start thinking about what change we want 50 years from now. In 2054 the very concept of diversity will change

as we become a nation with no majority population. In 2054, with no majority population, we will be able to label ourselves nothing other than what Governor Wilder has suggested—all of us Americans, with no other label. We will be living in a post-dominant-culture America. Hallelujah: no dominant culture.

Unfortunately, universities are not evolving quickly enough to meet the challenges of this post-dominant-culture America. Universities are, in fact, in many ways the keepers of the keys—in control of many of the variables that maintain certain elements of the existing dominant culture. Inside our academic institutions, our university culture itself remains elitist, European in origin and cultural centrism, exclusive, incomplete, slow to change, and not adaptable. Of course, there are certainly meaningful exceptions to this.

In my mind, we have to find ways to reconsider the very design of our institutions to truly educate for a diverse America. Because, again, to be diverse is not only a function of the numbers. It is time for us to design universities that can do the following kinds of things—and I know that many of us try to do this, but it is not a central part of the design of our institutions.

We must find ways to reach into all our communities with warmth and openness. One of the things I have learned in Arizona is that we send out a lot of signals that are not necessarily received warmly. We are not reaching across ethnic boundaries with our signal strength—at least not at ASU. We have not figured out how to do this.

We have to learn how to communicate and teach between all ethnic and cultural perspectives. Not with a dominant cultural perspective and marginal alternative cultural perspectives, but across all of these. We have not figured out how to do this yet.

We have to move past the Eurocentric philosophical focus of the university. That is the same philosophical focus that enabled the climate in which segregation and apartheid exist. Therefore there are clearly some limits to that philosophical focus, and it cannot be our only guiding frame. We have to move past that and replace it with an American philosophical focus.

We have to move our universities—our educational enterprises—to new measures of success. Test scores reveal but little. We need to look at things like transforming our community. What has been the impact of our institutions in the communities we are charged with serving? What is the product of our university? We must not only consider the quality of students admitted to the university as the sole measure of success of the institution.

We have to accelerate our academic cultural transformation in every discipline, not just cultural disciplines, not just ethnically oriented disciplines, but every discipline—civil engineering, for example.

Where are we? We are moving too slowly. We are unable to see the cultural box in which the university is presently trapped. We need to embrace cultural diversification in America and change the culture of the university itself as a critical first step.

AT THE END OF THE DAY—A THOUSAND YEARS AFTER THE formation of this institutional model—how can we still look, smell, and feel like Oxford and Cambridge and other institutions that we hold in such high esteem, when those institutions themselves have not embraced all that we are addressing here? At ASU we see ourselves as an institution redesigning itself into a new kind of American university. We will probably take the label that Governor Wilder has suggested to us—“Americans First”—and strive to create a uniquely American institution, with all that we represent, setting new standards, moving in new directions, and redefining what education and diversity are all about.