
Regional

Racial issues in higher education will continue

After months of racial incidents at the University of Missouri, system President Timothy M. Wolfe resigned and the campus chancellor, R. Bowen Loftin, announced that he would step down by the end of the year. Racial issues were not the only problems at Mizzou. The university has been dealing with others, such as threatening to stop paying for health insurance to graduate teaching and research assistants.

But the racial incidents publicized in the press and the lack of appropriate response by the leaders of the institution were not the only determining factors in their resignations. Mizzou was contractually obliged to pay Brigham Young University \$1 million if its football team, the Tigers, who went on strike over the incidents, did not play the following weekend. Further, if the players' strike lasted to the end of the season, Missouri's final Southeastern Conference football game in late November against Arkansas – which is to be televised by CBS – would have had to be cancelled. CBS pays the conference \$55 million a year for television rights.

Sometimes money is more powerful than righteousness when it comes to making ethical decisions.

And the University of Missouri is not alone facing racial issues. Ithaca College, Yale University, Smith College, Vanderbilt University, Claremont McKenna College and the University of Kansas have also garnered their share of news. We in higher education are also hearing that similar situations are developing elsewhere. These incidents are affecting all kinds of colleges and universities, private and public,

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large and small, from California to Connecticut.

Make no mistake about it; higher education in the U.S. has now added racial tensions to its long list of problems, including financial difficulties, leadership failures and poor student preparation. The difference between racial issues and all the others is that every time we talk about race we become either very defensive and emotional or we try to ignore the issue altogether. But now the latter is no longer a viable option.

Except for those who have no knowledge of the history of academia in this country, or who have tried to ignore the problem for decades, we all cannot be surprised with what is going on. Higher education in the U.S. has had long-standing issues with ethnic diversity. This may sound surprising since academia is usually accused of falling into political correctness, while the fact is that colleges and universities have had a notoriously bad history when it comes to racism.

As late as the 1930s a great number of the most prestigious academic institutions in this country, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania had quotas on the number of people they accepted that were not "wasps." Yale, for instance, had a written admissions policy that stated "never to admit more than five Jews, take only two Italian Catholics and take no blacks at all,"

as was noted by Gerard Burrow in his 2008 book "A History of Yale's School of Medicine." And all these schools are located in the northeast of the U.S., not in the Deep South.

How is this possible? As with any large and complex problem, the reasons are many. We can blame it on the sense of elitism and seclusion that are part of the culture among most institutions of higher education. We can also blame it on the boards of trustees who select as leaders at their institutions people who are just clueless about racial issues in academia. These trustees have also been directly responsible for reducing the number of minority leaders of those institutions – even at those that serve mostly minority populations.

We can also blame the atmosphere of intolerance that has been created in many campuses, from banning speakers whose views seem to be unpopular to not hiring people who do not seem to conform to the stereotype of a college employee. Add to that the fear that changes in demographics create and then you have the perfect combination for a disaster.

Despite the fact that almost without exception colleges and universities publish a statement about being "equal opportunity employers" and to "encourage" applications from people who, because of their ethnic background, are not normally represented in academia, the fact of the matter is that many times those words just express hypocrisy. As a person who has supervised the hiring of both staff and faculty in higher education, I have found on multiple occasions how a search committee recommended a Caucasian (and usually male)

candidate over equally (or even more) qualified minority ones. After hearing the arguments from the committees (which included some self-proclaimed "liberals") my conclusion was always the same: subtle bigotry.

Higher education does need to be much more proactive in making their demographics, from administrators, to faculty, to staff, to students, more similar to the demographics of this country as a whole, and that is not achieved by simple proclamations in the job ads. The University of Missouri Board of Curators made the right decision by appointing former University of Missouri-Columbia Deputy Chancellor Mike Middleton as interim president of the University of Missouri system. He has substantial academic experience and is African-American.

The question is, will other colleges and universities follow suit or will they forget about it as soon as the news on racial strife on campuses fades from public attention? We should not forget. If there is one thing history has taught us is that bigotry seems to be deeply ingrained in the human condition, and it takes a lot of courage, vision and determination by leaders to start changing that.

We should expect more than perfunctory words from these leaders in moments of crisis for higher education. We should learn to be more open and accepting of change and different points of views. We should behave differently.

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