

It's time to re-examine diversity and inclusion programs to make real progress

BY SHERWIN K BRYANT, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 04/05/18 02:15 PM EDT 175

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

This week, many high school seniors around the country are beginning to receive news of their college acceptances with, no doubt, both great enthusiasm and some nervousness. Other, younger high school students have perhaps just returned from a spring break spent visiting many of the same schools their older classmates are now considering.

The competition for these students is fierce, and aspiring universities promise a great deal, including campus environments that are "diverse" and "inclusive" — synonyms that both conjure and silence concerns about that unspoken American boogeyman of race.

The current conversation in the U.S. around race is a robust and touches many areas of society, and higher education is no exception. But, while the tone and shape of discourse might be distinct and evolving, the structural issues and long-held attitudes in place throughout higher education have old roots and enduring branches.

In the era of Spanish colonialism, Spain innovated the practice of selling racial certificates of whiteness known as the *gracias al sacar*. The *gracias al sacar*, translated literally as thank you for taking away [the stain], was a government-issued writ of whiteness, without which non-whites could not marry into families considered to be whiter, nor gain admission into guilds and universities.

By the 1780s, Spain expanded the practice of selling such licenses to those who could show that they and their family of origin approximated whiteness. Racialized subjects seeking such writs advanced their claims through carefully crafted, often fictional familial narratives. Others tried to whiten their genealogies through successive intermarriages with those further along the racial spectrum towards white status.

Others increased their reputations through their associations, comportment, and military service, situating themselves closer to whiteness along Spain's

vast colored spectrum of castes. Yet, the point was not upward mobility for Latin America's colored subjects, but to police the boundaries of whiteness while preserving white authority.

Similarly, our discussions of "diversity," and "inclusion" are often laden with assumptions of white merit. The very premise of these terms normalizes whiteness, limiting diversity to a deserving few.

Indeed, these discursive moves keep us from ever considering that white people remain overrepresented in every arena of society, especially in higher education. Whites in positions of power often preside over policy decisions that reproduce the reign of whiteness in the American academy, especially at the most selective colleges and universities.

Whereas most affirmative action discussions concern themselves with increasing minority access, like *gracias al sacar* it would behoove us to note the degree to which many institutions have remained white.

While some might point out that *gracias al sacar* seems more like an authoritarian barrier met skeptically and granted begrudgingly by Spain to its colonial subjects, I insist that affirmative action itself was similarly met skeptically, granted begrudgingly, and systematically undermined and attacked. Moreover, the sterile, corporate language that we use — diversity (which now means everything but race), inclusion, or even a new supposedly more progressive term "equity," all suggest that much ground has been lost in the battle for equal access.

Recent analysis of data compiled by the Department of Education and many highly selective universities reveal that elite universities now contain fewer Blacks and Latinos than they did 35 years ago. At Ivy League schools Blacks make up 9 percent of the incoming freshman, and yet constitute 15 percent of college-age Americans, a figure quite similar to the gap found in 1980.

Elite liberal arts colleges such as Bowdoin, Carleton, Davidson and Grinnell, for example, show on average white populations of nearly 70 percent. The white population percentage dropped at most Ivy League schools as the rate of Asian Americans increased, and is now closer to 50 percent. Dartmouth

and Brown remain the whitest with population percentages at 56 and 52 percent respectively.

Columbia has the lowest whiteness rate among the Ivies at 40 percent, one of the lowest in the country outside the University of California system. At other top universities, the rate of whiteness is comparable though trending higher than the Ivies. The University of Chicago and Northwestern report 59 and 55 percent, respectively. Among its peers, Notre Dame remains most troubling at 73 percent.

Still, the most egregious cases are found at flagship state institutions. In the big ten, Indiana University, The Ohio State University, and the University of Iowa report white population percentages of 78, 79, and 76 percent respectively with the most egregious being the University of Wisconsin-Madison at 83 percent.

To be sure, most experts say this overrepresentation of whites begins much earlier, insisting that predominantly black and Latino elementary schools often have less experienced teachers, fewer advanced courses, and lower quality facilities. Yet, recent studies show that diverse well-resourced districts such as **District 65 in Evanston**, I'll continue to promote and serve white students best regardless of socio-economic background. Such districts continue to fail Black and Latino students at embarrassing rates given their stated goals and the resources at their disposal.

The stakes are high. Surveys of Black and Latino students as well as non-white faculty reveal the impact of such broad regimes of whiteness. One need only consider recent climate studies at universities such as the University of Michigan, Northwestern, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison to see the impact of stymied efforts at limiting the reign of whiteness in the academy. While things have changed to a considerable degree these studies reveal many of the very same concerns that animated a previous generation. In short, not only have successive conservative legal efforts curtailed and criminalized affirmative action, they have limited severely, if not reversed, affirmative action.

Affirmative action has now eroded into terms and initiatives broadly termed "diversity and inclusion," terms that continue to placate and promote white normativity, and worse, silence discussions of race and whiteness. After all,

"diversity" and "inclusion" suggests that we have something normative to "diversify" as well as ongoing practices of "exclusion." Some would argue this is progress. Yet, our discourse distracts us from reckoning with the pain of white normativity, preventing us from questioning presumed white merit while promoting a kind of willful silence in the very rooms where "diversity" and "inclusion" are discussed and promoted.

Sherwin K. Bryant is associate professor of African American Studies and History at Northwestern University. He is the author of "Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito."