



CAMPUS DIVERSITY TRANSFORMS LEARNING & SOCIETY

BY RICHARD L. MCCORMICK

Last fall, as thousands of first-year students at Rutgers University unpacked their suitcases and began their own personal journeys in higher education, their arrival marked a new milestone. For the first time in the nearly 250-year history of Rutgers—one of America’s original colonial colleges—more than half of the first-year class members identified themselves as non-Caucasian. Once a small, private liberal-arts college primarily for white men, Rutgers has become a remarkably diverse 52,000-student research university with a public mission as the State University of New Jersey, one of the most diverse states in the nation.

Rutgers President Richard L. McCormick watches as Rutgers Future Scholars experiment with the laws of motion. The program is preparing urban middle- and high-school students for success in college.

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Indeed, Rutgers has come a long way in recent decades. It was only 40 years ago that a small group of courageous students took over an academic building on the Rutgers-Newark campus to protest the scarcity of Black students and faculty members. Today, that campus ranks No. 1 in the nation for diversity in *U.S. News and World Report’s* annual college ratings, 12 years running. The Rutgers community takes pride in that ranking, as do the citizens of New Jersey. It is the result of hard work by many Rutgers faculty members, students and administrators over the years, and of support from government programs for low-income students such as the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund and the federal Pell Grants.

Statistical rankings themselves, however, are not an indicator of meaningful progress. If diversity at Rutgers—or at any college or university—is merely a demographic happenstance, the institution has missed the enormous opportunity that diversity in higher education offers for transforming the lives of students, the effectiveness of the work force and the fabric of society.

EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Across its campuses in the northern, central and southern regions of New Jersey, Rutgers is striving to take full advantage of, and to build upon, the diversity it has achieved. In 2007, I established a President’s Council on Institutional Diversity and Equity to ensure that, across the university, Rutgers seeks a diverse pool of applicants for every position and works hard to retain those it hires.

We also launched an innovative “cluster hiring” initiative to improve our record in building a diverse faculty. Recruiting faculty candidates in isolation can be difficult. This program instead asks deans to submit proposals for hiring three to five faculty members who would come to Rutgers as a group around a certain field. The proposal must demonstrate how the new hires would strategically increase the diversification of the university’s research and teaching. Already, two such clusters have been approved: one in the area of urban entrepreneurship and another in the emerging field of Caribbean studies.

Last year, Rutgers initiated the Rutgers Future Scholars program to expand the diversity of its

student body, which is ethnically and racially mixed. The program should draw more from New Jersey’s cities. Each year, 200 rising eighth-graders—50 from each of Rutgers’ host communities of Camden, Newark, New Brunswick and Piscataway, N.J.—will be selected. Overwhelmingly from disadvantaged backgrounds, these students will receive mentoring and college-prep help and will participate frequently in activities on our campuses.

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Those who apply and are admitted to Rutgers will be able to attend at no cost. The Rutgers Future Scholars program will eventually produce a constant pipeline of hundreds of urban students. We are working with local communities, P-12 schools, corporations and other partners to create opportunities for students and their families who might not otherwise even consider higher education.

Building the pipeline of diversity was also the theme of a national conference Rutgers hosted in New Brunswick in December 2008, in conjunction with Columbia University and the College Board. Among the more than 350 participants were corporate leaders, P-12 educators and administrators, nonprofit leaders, government officials and university faculty members. An important goal of this conference was to create and sustain collaborations across traditional institutional lines—from preschool to the workplace—to provide opportunities for individuals of all backgrounds in our communities to succeed. In turn, such efforts prepare our work force for global competition and our citizens for full democratic participation.

This is especially important as America faces its most difficult economic crisis in many decades. In the struggle to restore prosperity, our nation’s greatest strategic resource will be the knowledge and skills of our diverse citizenry. Investments in American higher education (still the best system in the world)



In Rutgers' Middle East Coexistence House, students of Jewish, Muslim and other faiths live and study together to further intercultural understanding.

offer the means to develop this human capital. In order to maximize this strategic asset, however, such investments must be made with an eye toward the rich array of backgrounds and perspectives represented in our society, so everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential. Ensuring diversity in higher education is critical to ensuring that the return to prosperity reaches every neighborhood and community.

Having a student body that reflects the multiethnic, multiracial and multicultural face of New Jersey and the state's broad range of religions, languages, physical abilities and socioeconomic and immigrant statuses can have marvelous educational advantages.

DIVERSITY MAKES US STRONGER

Scott Page, professor of political science and economics at the University of Michigan, has shown, using mathematical modeling and case studies, that organizations with people from many backgrounds and life experiences perform more effectively and solve problems better than organizations whose members come from more homogenous backgrounds, even if they are all intellectually gifted. The same dynamic holds in the classroom, where everyone learns more and better when a variety of viewpoints and backgrounds shape discussions.

This semester, Rutgers-Newark Chancellor Steve Diner is arranging seminars at which faculty members from every discipline, including the hard sciences, will learn and share ideas for maximizing the educational benefits from the diversity within their classrooms.

Diner recognizes that it is not enough to say we are diverse; we need to ask how that diversity can make us better and stronger as a community. Interesting questions have already been raised in anticipation of the seminars, such as how students and faculty members should talk about oppression when a Black person now holds the most powerful position in the world.

At Rutgers, the opportunities for learning from our diversity extend far beyond the classroom to residence halls and living-learning communities. At the Middle East Coexistence House, for example, students of Jewish, Muslim and other faiths have shared a hall, a dialogue and a course on Middle East conflict resolution. Such conversations have fostered friendships across a longstanding divide, and as one student put it, "I think small steps will lead to a big difference."

Just as society continues to evolve, higher education's commitment to diversity must respond to new needs and realities. A growing number of our students are identifying themselves as Islamic or Hindu; more are coming to college at nontraditional ages, especially in a down economy; and more veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are enrolling.

Each group has its own needs and challenges. Just as important, each brings new perspectives to the learning process. It is, therefore, essential for the sake of students and society that universities such as Rutgers constantly seek to embrace and gain from the ever-changing diversity of our people. **DI**

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