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## Diversity as a Spiritual Pursuit

In his 2006 convocation speech as well as in some of his earlier appearances on campus, President Thomas J. Haas posited diversity as an intellectual pursuit, meaning that diversity should be an integral part of our intellectual journey both as individuals and as a community of learners. President Haas was thus restating an increasing commitment of GVSU to the issue of diversity, which has seen a multiplication of initiatives at all levels of the University as echoed by this comment from Tim Chad, former vice-president for Finance and Administration. When asked about his accomplishments in his exit interview, Mr. Chad said, "I am most proud of the significant improvements in diversity and intercultural awareness in the Finance and Administration Division in the past five years." One would expect a reference to the University's sound finances and growing endowment. This comment underlies a growing understanding that diversity is key to our success as a community. While the issue of diversity has dominated the University's public discourse over the past years, it has reached a critical momentum with the debate over Proposal 2 and the community's reaction to racially motivated incidents on campus last year. Contrary to what its proponents had expected, the passage of Proposal 2 has only led to a renewed commitment to diversity in education. University of Michigan's President Mary Sue Coleman has pledged to "consider all options to preserve diversity," while GVSU's Thomas Haas has stressed that "We will continue to strive for diversity within all our campus communities." Against this background, I would like to contribute to the ongoing discussion by introducing a new paradigm shift, which frames diversity as a spiritual pursuit. To that end, I will first survey the key arguments in favor and against affirmative action (AA), before focusing specifically on the diversity defense of AA in higher education.

### **Affirmative Action, a Highly Controversial Issue**

I attended a meeting on campus in the morning of November 8<sup>th</sup>. The atmosphere in the room was heavy. One could feel a sense of shame. This was a bad day. Faculty present at the meeting expressed their disappointment, sometimes anger, over the passage of proposal 2. How could this have happened? What does this tell us about Michigan? There was a sense that 58% of voters did not understand what was at stake the day before. While listening to these post-election lamentations, I thought: How many of us took an active citizen role in the societal debate leading up to November 7<sup>th</sup>? How many of us went out of our academic comfort to discuss the stakes of Proposal 2 with our neighbors and the larger community? How many of us used our intellectual and social capital to frame the debate and weigh on an initiative of such importance, which challenges the mission and very values we stand for as a university?

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While it would be useful to conduct a systematic study of voters' motivations in favor or against Proposal 2, it seems relatively safe to say that the debate leading up to the vote did not address the full range of arguments in favor or against AA policies. Public discussion evolved primarily around racial, compensatory justice and resource allocation arguments, all of which conveyed a narrow view of AA policies. More specifically, the diversity rationale in defense of AA in higher education seemed to have received only peripheral attention. The extreme focus on race—with all its sensitivity, resentment and emotion—ultimately made Proposal 2 look like a black and white issue, which might have played a decisive role in voters' decisions. Now that the people have spoken, maybe it is worth revisiting the key arguments for and against AA policies, to which the question of diversity in higher education is intimately linked.

### **Pro Affirmative Action Arguments**

AA has been rightly defined as a “passionately held moral issue” (Anderson, 2006). The issue is extremely controversial to say the least. Arguments in favor of AA can be divided into four principal categories: arguments on the grounds of justice, democracy, social utility, and free speech and education. The last will be addressed in a separate section as it pertains to the mission of the university.

Arguments on the grounds of justice frame AA both as a just reparation for historical injustice (McGray, 1977) and as a corrective instrument for current institutionalized or unconscious discrimination (Ezorsky, 1991). In particular, Anderson (2002: 1235) argues that “racial integration of mainstream institutions is necessary both to dismantle the current barriers to opportunity suffered by disadvantaged racial groups, and to create a democratic civil society. Integration, conceived as a forward-looking remedy for de facto racial segregation and discrimination, makes better sense of the actual practice of affirmative action than backward-looking compensatory rationales, which offer restitutions for past discrimination, and diversity rationales, which claim to promote nonremedial educational goals.”

The democracy rationale represents another important line of defense for AA policies. Post (1998: 23) addresses this question in relation to the mission of the university. He focuses on the need for race-based AA policies in university admissions because universities “aspire to cultivate the remarkable and difficult capacity to regard oneself from the perspective of the other, which is the foundation of the critical interaction necessary for active and effective citizenship.” Samuel Issacharoff (1998) defends AA on the same ground by contending that a racially integrated elite is a building bloc for a democratic society and that, through race-based AA, universities can achieve their compelling interests in pursuing both meritocracy and integration of all groups into the nation's elite. A robust defense of the democracy rationale is also offered by Anderson (2004:

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120) who argues that “the good of integration is directly connected to realizing democracy through the promotion of racially integrated elite, which in virtue of its racial diversity, is more accountable to and more knowledgeable of the problems of citizens from all walks of life than a homogeneous and insular elite.”

Social utility arguments emphasize the diversity benefits of AA and its positive role both in the provision of professional services to disadvantaged populations and in broadening the labor pool. Besides appealing to considerations of compensatory justice, social utility arguments in defense of AA tend to be forward-looking. One central idea in defense of diversity benefits generally underlines the notion that group attributes can contribute to positive outcomes over and above the attributes of individuals. Anderson (2006: 22) writes: “The diverse whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Diverse groups are more effective at solving problems than relatively homogeneous groups, even if the average individually-measured merit of the homogeneous group is higher than the average individually-based merit of the group.” Hong and Page (2004) have provided some empirical evidence of the benefits of group diversity in the outcome by testing the “diversity trumps ability theorem,” a formal model which shows how groups of the best problem-solvers are outperformed by groups of diverse problem-solvers. For their part, Rudman, et al. (2001) have argued that diversity in education can reduce prejudices and stereotypes. Other arguments have linked the defense of AA to a better provision of social services to disadvantaged populations. Cantor, Miles, Baker and Baker (1996) found that there is a weak but significant association between patient socioeconomic background and physician. Minority and women physicians are much more likely to serve minority, poor, and Medicaid populations. They make a strong case that access to care for these groups of populations would be impaired if we were to end AA in medicine. The final set of social utility arguments considers AA’s role in correcting biased criteria of merit and thus broadening the labor pool. Purdy (1984) stresses that women are often perceived to be less qualified than they are, so that AA corrects for a sexist perceptual bias in evaluations of merit. Along the same line, Davis (1983) contends that being black can, under certain circumstances, count as a merit or qualification for office. AA thus does not necessarily contradict the principle of merit or constitute reverse discrimination. All these arguments have received strong rebuttals from AA opponents.

### **Arguments Against Affirmative Action**

The battery of arguments against AA is generally grounded on moral and practical considerations linked to its social utility. Arguments on moral principles put forward four lines of criticism. First, AA is “reverse discrimination.” Newton (1973) stresses that by violating the equal protec-

tion of the laws (“colorblindness”) in favor of historically disenfranchised racial groups, AA is as unjust as the original discrimination that it seeks to redress. Second, AA violates the principle of merit (Walzer, 1983). Third, AA violates fundamental principles of compensatory justice. Gross (1994) has argued that by placing an unfair burden on people who have not engaged in any kind of discrimination themselves, AA departs from the tort model of just compensation. Fourth, the use of race as a proxy for morally relevant variables is wrong. Posner (1998) finds the use of race as a proxy for morally relevant variables (e.g. being a victim of discrimination) to be unjust for being both under and over-inclusive.

Social utility arguments successively contend that, besides being economically inefficient, AA harms its intended beneficiaries and contributes to a socially divisive environment and polarized society. It has also been argued that AA doesn’t adequately address the problem of unconscious discrimination and that the state should disengage from the promotion of diversity, which should be led by voluntary efforts of the private sector. More specifically, Steele (1991) contends that AA carries with it a stigma for its intended beneficiaries by somehow implying that they are less competent and cannot compete on equal footing with others. Blackstone (1975) opposes AA programs on the grounds that, by virtue of inviting an unlimited number of groups to claim special privileges on account of historical discrimination, such programs inevitably act as incentives for individuals to identify more with the aggrieved groups than with the nation as a whole, a process which leads to social fragmentation and increasingly divisive competition among different groups for their share of preferences. For Loury (1997), not only do AA programs contribute to a negative perception of middle-class blacks for conveying the false impression that they are not competent enough to compete with whites on a level of playing field, they are also economically counter-productive in that they impair blacks’ incentives to succeed and accumulate human capital by systematically applying double standards of admission and employment. Chen (1999) has argued that the diversity defense of AA could only be justified in relation to First Amendment interests in pursuing diversity of viewpoints, but, by rewarding looks rather than viewpoints, the diversity defense of AA was an offense to the core democratic values embodied in free speech jurisprudence. Ga glia (2004) has rejected the diversity defense of AA in higher education on the grounds that it lacks empirical evidence and is ultimately misleading. Although he doesn’t per se repudiate the diversity argument, Schuck (2003) strongly advocates a disengagement of the state from its promotion.

### **The Diversity Defense of AA in Higher Education**

With the passage of Proposal 2, Michigan universities—more than any other public entities in the state—have gone on the offensive in trying to

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find ways of preserving diversity within the constraints of the new reality. What is the educational value of diversity? How important and different is diversity in educational settings compared to other areas?

AA in education raises special issues not necessarily encountered in other areas. The Supreme Court has specifically recognized universities as having a First Amendment right to free speech and hence academic freedom, under which admissions and hiring policies are included. It is within the framework of the First Amendment as well as the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and civil rights laws that the legality of AA policies must be considered. Opponents of AA in education have, for the most part, put forward merit-based arguments, which seem rather weak when one considers the specificities of educational context in relation to relevant issues of choice, efficiency and outcome.

On the issue of choice, it is clear that few students have a choice over schools. As Anderson (2006: 30) superbly puts it: “their [students’] educational attainment is largely a function of the resources the state has chosen to devote to them. This in turn is a function of place of residence, which, given pervasive housing segregation, is a function of race. Conventional criteria of “merit” for admissions therefore do not measure purely individual factors (talent and determination), but also reflect many dimensions of class, race, and gender privilege.”

The efficiency rationale in support of a merit-based argument against AA makes sense only in a context driven by the production imperative which commands to assign the most talented people to perform specific tasks. Given its mission and exceptional role in society, the university does not answer to a logic of production because its ultimate goal is about learning, not production. Students are not assigned to specific tasks like in a factory. That said, it is true that students play an essential role in producing the educational environment in which the learning process takes place. Therefore, universities have a compelling interest in selecting students in part for what they can contribute to that environment and hence the education of their fellow students. Given its cardinal role in the learning process, diversity deserves to be included in the meritocracy selection, here defined as “being able to bring to the educational environment various perspectives shaped (not defined) by having lived in substantially different circumstances from the majority of students...” (Anderson, 2006:30).

The educational value of diversity (multiculturalism) in education can be approached from two angles: in regard to the curriculum and to the student and faculty body. Nussbaum (1997) has articulated a rationale for multiculturalism (expanding the canon, relatively new disciplines of women’s studies, African-American studies, gay and lesbian studies, etc.) in terms of an ideal of the liberal arts as advancing cosmopolitanism by offering to people the opportunity to learn from others in all aspects and

dimensions of life. Lauter (1991) uses case studies to illustrate the pervasive roles of sexism and racism in framing the study of American literature by substantially disregarding works written by women and African-American authors. As for the benefits of diversity among students and faculty, Brown (1998) approaches the issue from a psychological standpoint by demonstrating how the inquirer's social position (race, gender) influences his or her own unconscious biases, which in turn affect all inquiries. Therefore, research communities that lack diversity along these dimensions are ill-equipped to detect their biases. Diversity of researchers enriches theoretical constructs by infusing a more rigorous critical review from a variety of perspectives. By the same token, Butler (1998) offers a sharp criticism of the University of California's Regents decision to abolish consideration of race, ethnicity, and gender in admissions and hiring for its failure to consider and respond to the educational value of diversity. Butler contends that diversity is not to be defended on the assumption that the meaning or value of an individual's contribution to inquiry can be reduced to or predicted by that person's social identity. Rather, she pursues, discourse in a diverse community is valuable in providing inquirers with opportunities to change and interpret the significance of their identities through exchange with others who are differently positioned.

In the debate leading up to the vote on Proposal 2, the educational value of diversity was not clearly articulated. We did not focus enough on why diversity in education is and should be treated differently from any other public entity. Nationally, there seems to be a renewed commitment to the issue of diversity in education as shown the recent wave of appointments of chief diversity officers in many universities. Although their titles vary, these administrators often are vice presidents or vice provosts and manage larger budgets and more people than their predecessors of a decade or two ago, when the top administrator in this area was often called "minority-affairs director." Harvard University, Texas A&M University, and the Universities of California at Berkeley, Texas at Austin, and Virginia, to name just a few, have created chief diversity officer positions in the past two years. A database of administrators who oversee diversity efforts at colleges compiled by Steve O. Michael, vice provost for diversity and academic initiatives at Kent State, indicates that 80 out of 400 these administrators are chief diversity officers, meaning they have titles such as vice president or vice provost (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 29, 2006). This trend, that some have been quick to call a "sea change," is however questioned by Gose (2006: B3) who asks: "Is it really a sea change, or a public-relations campaign? Are universities making a serious new commitment to diversifying the faculty, curriculum, and student body, or are these high-profile appointments a way for university presidents to appease minority students and professors who have been clamoring for a stronger

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voice on campuses?” The answer, he says, appears to be both. Does this new trend signal a shift to the business case for diversity on university campuses? There seems to be some indication in that direction. As one chief diversity officer notes: “Corporations were ahead of us in terms of making diversity a comprehensive part of the organizational structure” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 29, 2006). In his book, *The Global Me*, Pascal Zachary shows how cosmopolitan corporations set the pace for diversity, which is directly linked to competitiveness and success in the global market. Speaking of diversity, one corporate executive says: “When you lack diversity you can see the difference in terms of a poorer grasp of context, perspective and the ability to think out of the box in a situation. There is no question about that” (Cited by Zachary: 202).

The management of and quest for diversity in the corporate world emphasizes a materialistic and instrumental approach to diversity, which is based on the notion that the creation of a gender, race, culture, and sexual-orientation-sensitive workforce is good for the bottom line. Demographic trends involving an infusion of minorities, women, and immigrants into the workforce, plus the increasing internationalization and globalization of business are among the many factors that are cited as reasons to embark on company-wide diversity initiatives.

The new discourse on diversity in education seems to echo the same materialistic and instrumental approach, which tends to focus too much on the end-product by linking diversity to a better preparation for the workplace. The underlying and core message is that diversity in the school prepares students to better compete in a globalized world. If this is true, such an approach offers only a limited and distorted perspective on diversity. I would like to suggest a paradigm which goes beyond the business imperative of diversity (as exemplified by both the “valuing diversity” and “managing diversity” approaches), and its legal and ethical imperatives (as exemplified by Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action frameworks) and speaks to an agenda that is more personal and universal: the desire to be a broader, deeper, and more conscious human in a shifting and uncertain time.

### **The Spiritual Value of Diversity**

Talk of spirituality tends to bring academic and political discussions to a dead halt. Perry (2005:14) attributes this reaction to the fact that “The modern social sciences are predicated on the principle that all problems are material in nature and their solution is only a matter of rearranging material relations between people—their money, land, jobs and so on.” I am aware that the term “spiritual” is a loaded term and to many implies religion, which is actually a culturally-based expression of spiritual values.

But what I mean here is not religion, but spirituality in the broadest sense of the term, which implies “the development of higher moral values and the awareness of transcendental reality” (Lewis, 1995). Perry (1995:11) addresses the relationship between spirituality and religion in these terms: “Spirituality is an innate potential in human beings; religion is the means for realizing that potential.” What is the nexus between diversity and spirituality? What is the common ground between diversity work and spiritual work?

When leading the community prayer during President Hass’ investiture ceremony, Rabbi Albert Lewis said: “...with discernment comes the acceptance of diversity.” Rabbi Lewis’ words are echoed in a more expressive and concrete way by T.D. Jakes (1990:42), one of today’s most influential spiritual leaders, who writes, “It’s natural to be attracted to others like yourself. Builders like to interact with builders. Singers like to interact with singers . . . . But if you look closely, many times these relationships are difficult to maintain. Relationships are more productive when we interact with people who complement us without duplicity . . . . It is unwise to surround yourself only by people who think just like you. You need to be in harmony, but there is a difference between harmony, which is derived from two distinctly notes that blend together, and unison, the same note made at the same time. Harmony is more appealing to hear than unison. Your relationships should be harmonious without being in unison.” Rabbi Lewis’ reference to discernment and acceptance, and T.D. Jakes’ call to confront our natural impulse to stick to people who are like us, underscore diversity as a spiritual journey in which, as Green (1995: 2) says, “One seeks to come to terms with existence in an ineffable fashion that transcends the conventions of religions.”

The diversity imperative in organizational structure put forward by corporations, and increasingly by universities, centers on the experiences of the others, here conceived as members of groups who have been historically disenfranchised. The point of gravity in this approach is on the question “who are you?” It relates to the experiences of members of these groups. This focus on the other, while necessary, also serves to block some individuals from recognizing themselves in relation to other (Green,1995). The fundamental dynamic that drives the dominant approach to diversity is about reallocation or creation of material resources and expansion of opportunities. As intellectually and economically beneficial such an approach of the diversity imperative might be, it often fails to qualitatively change individuals involved as well as intergroup relations. For Green (1995: 2), “The internal experience seldom shifts in any fundamental manner, primarily because issues of power and the feelings associated with

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a shift in that power are seldom directly addressed. In this light, diversity . . . becomes a tool to sustain the status quo, despite the obvious need to make a difference.” This failure of the dominant approach to diversity is underscored by this comment from a corporate executive: “I can understand, on a philosophical level, what diversity means for the corporation, but I cannot understand what is in it for me.” (cited by Lewis, 1995: 2). This one-way approach to diversity is often resented by minorities who feel counted and approached with contempt, and are sometimes regarded only as beneficiaries of a public mandate imposed upon the institution, not as individuals whose personal experiences and perspectives are beneficial to the whole and can be transformative.

In addition to the question “who are you?” the diversity imperative—conceived as a spiritual pursuit—introduces a self-centered approach which proposes to answer the following existential questions: Who am I? What is in it for me? How can I relate my experience to yours? How can I, through “you,” learn about myself? How did we get there in the first place? These questions can be answered because the heart of diversity is about something much deeper than cross-cultural competence and sensitivity to individual and cultural differences; it is about something much deeper than intercultural awareness; it is about something much deeper than intellectual empowerment, professional success or economic vitality. As superbly articulated by Lewis (1995:1), “True diversity is not simply about adding to bottom lines, but about expanding individual horizons and broadening the notion of self. By helping individuals become less grounded in the constraints of their identity as determined by such factors as ethnicity, culture, or gender, diversity helps them expand their notions of who they are. Diversity . . . can be said to be in an individual’s self-interest because it enables participants to become freer, more comfortable in any arena they find themselves. In this regard, diversity is not just political or even educational work. In fact, it shares the agenda of and can be seen as a complement and counterbalance to spiritual work.”

The quest for diversity and spirituality share several implicit similarities. First, the individual incentive towards both is the longing for connection, belonging, and understanding of the self. Second, both quests support the broadening of the self by encouraging the transcendence of beliefs and attitudes that limit growth. Third, each provides a practice field for the development of harmonious intergroup relations or individual and group interdependence. “Accepting and appreciating the differences of others provides us with new data about the world. It stimulates and challenges us to get out of our ruts” (Jakes, 1999:41).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The passage of Proposal 2 seems to signal the beginning of a national movement aimed at banning AA. Michigan was just a step in what seems to be

a well-coordinated and organized strategy. Energized by its November 7<sup>th</sup> victory, the Michigan group that puts the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative before the voters has already announced its intent to extend the campaign in nine other states. While Grand Valley is assessing the implications of Proposal 2 and lawyers from both sides are refurbishing their arguments for the long legal battles still ahead, three important lessons can already be drawn from this experience.

First, as a community we have a special responsibility in shaping social policy. We should use our intellectual and social capital to weigh in on social issues that affect our institutional mission and values. To that end, it is essential not to limit our debates to campus but to find creative ways of engaging and challenging the larger community both locally and in the state.

Second, we should start thinking about creative ways of preserving diversity. The national debate which is unfolding and some of the AA related legal cases before or in the pipeline to the US Supreme Court seem to indicate the end of an era in AA policies. While the majority of people would agree on the need to strive for and preserve diversity given its democratic, economic, educational and, as I have shown, spiritual benefits; not everyone agrees on how to achieve such a goal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As far as diversity in education is concerned, a number of alternatives to current AA policies have emerged from the ongoing debate. One would be to move from race-based remedies to class-based remedies. Another would be to eliminate “legacy” admissions—which favor alumni’s children—to universities. Another would be to give some preferences to students coming from specific localities (e.g. inner cities). Another would be to radically change the ways schools are funded and to provide equal resources to all schools coupled with specific incentives in order to attract qualified teachers in disadvantaged areas. Such radical change would have the benefit of better preparing students of all ethnic, racial and socio-economic background and thus reducing the pressure on universities’ admissions criteria. All these ideas deserve further consideration and will dominate the discussions ahead.

Third, and more specifically, whatever the immediate implications of Proposal 2 might be, it is vital that, in this time of uncertainty for all and despair for some, we broaden our understanding of and perspective on diversity and make it an integral part of our spiritual journey as individuals and community. The University of Michigan, which has emerged as the leader in the national debate in defense of diversity in education, has already embarked in this journey. Speaking of its particular approach to diversity (what they call the “Michigan Difference”), the University stresses that, “It is more than a statement, or an image. It is a commitment to progress of mind and spirit.” Regardless of Proposal 2, this is what will endure the

test of time. This is what we should strive for. Proposal 2 might limit our material ability, but it cannot constrain the spiritual pursuit of diversity.

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