

Draft Op Ed

What is happening on our nation's campuses? As I end my first year in office, I find myself reflecting on the many incidents of racial and ethnic harassment and other intergroup conflict that have been reported at colleges and universities across the country. I'm sure you ask yourself as I do "what is going on" ? Why do we hear more about this conflict on campus than in other institutions of our society? Are colleges more biased than other institutions? I don't think so. In fact, I think they are one of the few institutions in our society that are trying to cope with, and not escape from, some grave social problems. Let me describe some of the forces I see at work.

First and foremost, universities reflect as well as help shape their societies and there is no doubt that racism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination continue to be the most painful, divisive and damaging problem confronting America. Students come to our campus--Afro-American, White, Jewish, Arab-American, Latino--from communities that today are too often isolated and homogeneous. Whether our children grow up in big cities or suburbia, or most small towns, more often than not they grow up and go to school with children like themselves. American communities and schools are not just segregated by race these days but often also by class, economic status, nationality, and in many areas also by generation. Ironically, this trend to separation is occurring at a time when our national population is radically changing. [More Demographics and globalization here]

Another expression of the centrifugal forces at work in American and a factor influencing campus events is that the special interest politics that have come to dominate the national scene also serve as the model for activism on the campus. This means that our campuses aren't just dealing with racial polarization and tension, we have conflict between Arab -American and Pro-Palestinian and Jewish and pro-Israeli groups. Native Americans and Asian-American students are each organized to advance their particular agendas as are gay activists and host of other groups with a special interests and grievances. There is far less counterbalancing impulse to cooperation and community..

Exacerbating the situation is the sense that there is also a great deal more tension among today's young people--a feeling that their future won't be as bright as their parent's was and this is a first for American youth. They rightly feel a concern about the future and whether there will be jobs or at least jobs that will pay enough to afford decent housing and other necessities let alone luxuries. They confront a breathtaking acceleration of changes in the workplace, the economy and society and in the explosion of knowledge as we fumble on to a new century. It is well known that fear and uncertainty do not often

nurture confidence trust and cooperation as often as they give rise to defensiveness and mutual hostility among people from all groups.

So it is on American campuses that many students for the first time come together to live and work with others from many different backgrounds and experiences. And it is here that they begin the transition to adulthood in a time that is arguably more problematic and anxiety ridden than for earlier generations of Americans. In these circumstances it is not surprising that there is conflict and tension among students at our colleges and universities. This reflects the breakdown of community and consensus in our society as well as all the uncertainties growing out of the rapid social changes we are experiencing.

While education has always been the crucible for forging common civic values and some cohesion in American society, I would argue that now it falls more to the universities than any other institution to carry this role because of the increasing segregation that continues to be such an alarming trend in our country. Thus to me it isn't so surprising that there are examples of ethnic tensions and conflicts reported on our campuses.

What is perhaps equally worthy of attention is that our universities are struggling hard to meet their responsibilities to students and society by trying to live up to our national ideals of equal opportunity and by providing some grounding for all students in the common civic and academic values that will help bind people together as our society increasingly is becoming more diverse. For a few short years young people from many backgrounds do have the chance to live and learn together in communities bound together in academic communities by an ancient heritage of academic and civic values.

Significantly, too, the majority of our colleges and universities are addressing racism directly. But attempting to face our problems openly and squarely, means that we sometimes play out our struggle in the daily press. This heightens anxiety both within higher education and among our supporters and constituents, but in the long run I think this is healthy and may be the most constructive means we have to bring about change not just for ourselves but for America.

At Michigan we have evolved a plan we call the "Michigan Mandate" that sets high goals for national leadership in dealing with problems of racism and diversity on our campus. Many other colleges and universities are committed to similar efforts. We have made progress. Not just in numbers but in launching successful support and outreach programs and getting people's attention about the critical importance of educating minorities and women for leadership in our society.

Academia is a critical force for change but it won't happen overnight. And colleges and universities cannot do the job by themselves. We have a major part to play but we cannot reform education, end racism and segregation or create equal economic opportunity by ourselves. Of course, students expect us to perform miracles. It is the job of students to remind us of our ideals and responsibilities. They help keep us on track. No doubt there will be setbacks and disappointments and negative headlines in the paper and on the television news but we cannot let any of this deter us from meeting our own goals and responsibilities. I know higher education is trying to do its part. But what ultimately is needed is that our entire society mobilize the will and commit the resources to address pressing national issues including equal economic and educational opportunity for every child in America.