

Fifteen years ago, when the University first began its observation of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, it took a somewhat different tact from many other elements of our society. Rather than simply regarding the day as a University holiday to commemorate the accomplishments of this great American leader, it chose to go beyond this to launch a month-long series of events designed to stress and reaffirm the importance of diversity to the University. This has grown over the years to become one of the most extensive and significant efforts in the nation and provided leadership for all of higher education. Such activities have particular importance in these difficult times for our nation.

A distinguishing characteristic and great strength of American higher education is its growing commitment over time to serve all segments of our pluralistic society. Higher education's broadening inclusion of talented students and faculty of diverse ethnic, racial, economic, social, political, national, or religious background, has allowed our academic institutions to draw on a broader and deeper pool of talent, experience, and ideas than more exclusive counterparts in other places and times. This diversity invigorates and renews teaching and scholarship in American universities, helping to challenge long-held assumptions, asking new questions, creating new areas and methods of inquiry, and generating new ideas for testing in scholarly discourse.

We have never needed such inclusiveness and diversity more than today when differential growth patterns and very different flows of immigration from Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Mexico are transforming our population. By the year 2030 current projections indicate that approximately 40 percent of all Americans will be members of minority groups, many—even most—of color. By mid-century we may cease to have any one majority ethnic group. By any measure, we are evolving rapidly into a truly multicultural society with a remarkable cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity. This demographic revolution is taking place within the context of the continuing globalization of the world's economy and society that requires Americans to interact with people from every country of the world. These far reaching changes in the nature of the people we serve and the requirements of global responsibility demand far-reaching changes in the nature and structure of higher education in America.

Our rapidly diversifying population generates a remarkable vitality and energy in American life and in our educational institutions. At the same time, it gives rise to conflict, challenging our nation and our institutions to overcome at last our long history of prejudice and discrimination against those groups who are different, particularly and most devastatingly, those groups identified by the color of their skin. Tragically, race remains a significant factor in our social relations that profoundly affects the opportunities, experiences, and perspectives of those discriminated against as well as those who discriminate. To change this racial and cultural dynamic, we need to understand better how others think and feel and to learn to function across racial and cultural divisions. We must replace stereotypes with knowledge and understanding. Slowly, we Americans are learning, but there remains a great distance to go.

The tragic events of last September remind us once again that as we enter a new second millennium, humankind, for all its advances in learning and technology, continues to fall victim to the horrors unleashed by racial, religious, and ethnic prejudice and discrimination. If anyone should doubt the urgency of our task in seeking to overcome this evil heritage, they have only to recall the Holocaust or to look around the world today at the religious, racial, and ethnic conflicts that have killed millions of innocents, made millions of others refugees, ripped nations asunder, set neighbor against neighbor, and poisoned the minds and hearts of generations. From Rwanda to Timor, from Kosovo to the Afghanistan, the endless toll of violence and suffering rises unabated. Some see this as evidence that the ideal of tolerance and understanding is impossible to achieve. We cannot accept such defeatism. We must meet this challenge to overcome prejudice and discrimination here and now. America's colleges and universities have a critical part to play in this struggle.

This means we must not falter in our national commitment to ending discrimination and achieving the promise of equal opportunity. In recent years academia has made a dedicated effort to make progress towards diversity. It can point to significant gains as a result of these efforts. Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, this progress has given rise to a growing backlash. An increasing number of Americans oppose our traditional approaches to achieving diversity such as affirmative action. Federal courts are pondering cases that

challenge racial preference. In state after state, voters are taking aim through referenda at an earlier generation's commitment to civil rights. At such a time, it seems particularly important that we in academe talk openly, with boldness, about the need for more, not less, diversity. There is plenty of room to debate the merits of various methods of achieving our ends, but as our nation and our world become ever more diverse, ever more interdependent and interconnected, it is vital that we stand firm in our fundamental commitment to our diversity.

During the 1990s, through strategic efforts such as the Michigan Mandate, but more significantly, through the commitment of thousands of students, faculty, and staff, the University of Michigan has provided leadership for the nation in building a diverse learning community. During this period, the representation of underrepresented minorities among our students and faculty doubled. But, perhaps even more significantly, the success of underrepresented minorities at the University improved even more remarkably, with graduation rates rising to highest among public universities, promotion and tenure success of minority faculty members becoming comparable to their majority colleagues, and a growing number of appointments of minorities moving into leadership positions in the University. The campus climate not only became far more accepting and supportive of diversity, but students and faculty began to come to Michigan because of its growing reputation for a diverse campus. And, perhaps most significantly, as the campus became more racially and ethnically diverse, the quality of the students, faculty, and academic programs of the University increased to their highest level in history.

Through this experience at Michigan I have become convinced that excellence and diversity are not only mutually compatible but, in fact, mutually reinforcing objectives for the 21st Century university. In an ever more diverse nation and world, the quality of a university's academic programs—its very relevance to our society—will be greatly determined by the diversity of our campus communities. After all, our social contract is with *all* of the society that sustains and supports us, not just with the privileged few. Beyond our social obligation, it is also clear that diversity contributes directly to the intellectual vitality of our scholarship. Social diversity provides different ways of

conceptualizing and addressing intellectual issues that give new vitality to our education, scholarship, and communal life.

Higher education in America is far more diverse today than it was fifty years ago or even ten years ago. Yet the university is not monolithic and neither is discrimination; both are shifting constantly. We move ahead, knowing we can never simply rest.