

1997 NCA Presidential Address

'Advancing the Discipline: A Challenge and an Opportunity'

Editor's Note: The following address was given on November 22, 1997, at the NCA Annual Meeting in Chicago.

For the better part of the last year, I have been presenting pins to NCA members across the country that read, "Advancing the Discipline." I did so to emphasize that as we approach the new century and begin getting ready to celebrate the 100th anniversary of what is now the National Communication Association, our best thinking should be focused on the exploration of those ways in which our scholarship and research and our teaching and application can make a difference in education at all levels, at all kinds of educational institutions and in the greater society. It is a tall order—but we have begun to make some important strides. And it has been energizing to have had this watch—to have been "at the helm," if you will, at a time in which so many have done so much for the discipline and for the association. I am honored to have been your president and I thank you for providing me the opportunity.

I have viewed my three years in elected office as the once-in-a-lifetime occasion to pursue aggressively those of NCA's strategic goals and objectives that would begin to position the discipline and the association for assuming greater presence in the academy, as well as in external communities. During this year as president, I have written and talked about several important constraints and opportunities for such leadership. Tonight I choose to focus on one—the opportunity to be at the forefront in education's quest for increased diversity.

Even a cursory review of newspaper headlines in recent months might lead one to believe that this is the **worst** time to support diversity. I disagree, and I find support for my position in several events that have occurred recently.

In the past six months, we have celebrated the anniversaries of some critical events in American history—the 25th anniversary of Title IX, the legislation that has given most of the women in this room the opportunity to be where they are professionally; the 19th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's Bakke decision that expanded the implementation of affirmative action programs; the 33rd anniversary of the Voting Rights Act and, at the end of September, the 40th anniversary of public school integration at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Why do I mention these events in particular? Because as a result of them, many white, non-Hispanic Americans believe that the problems related to inequity, racial conflict and discrimination are a part of the past—that the problems have been addressed. Even as the population of the United States becomes increasingly composed of multiple groups of peoples, our approach to issues of race and ethnicity often counter this trend. In those instances where overt efforts are not made to ban racial preferences, practices either wither, do not reflect the ideal, or fall short of achieving real change. As the authors of the recent book *Race and Ethnic Conflict* argue, a dramatic shift in such relations has occurred in the United States at the close of the 20th century. They maintain that intergroup relations have "become more tense, more provoking and more confusing. Major corporations are charged with not hiring or promoting people of color. Protest activities and civil disorders follow court decisions perceived

as biased in favor of police defendants who assaulted minority citizens. Persons of Latino appearance or with Hispanic names are illegally detained and sometimes deported as a result of raids by government agents. Native Americans are coercively removed from their homelands and

their long-standing treaty rights are violated. Poor neighborhoods, especially where people of color are concentrated, are used as toxic-waste dump sites. And intergroup conflicts between blacks and whites, Vietnamese and whites, Koreans and blacks and homosexuals and heterosexuals have intensified."¹

President Clinton, in announcing his race initiative, lamented the current tension and violence between races and ethnic groups, stating, "...we still see evidence of bigotry—from the desecration of houses of worship, whether they be churches, synagogues or mosques, to demeaning talk in corporate suites. There is still much work to be done. . ."²

No, we should not be seduced into believing that 33 years of civil rights legislation and 30 years of affirmative action have solved the problems. In fact, I would ask that you consider the following four facts, several of which were originally brought to my attention in statements made during San Diego's Candlelight Vigil:³

1) White males comprise only 43% of the overall workforce, but of the senior managers of Fortune 500 companies, 97% are white and 95% are male;

2) Black men are paid an average of 21% less than white male counterparts and have almost 10 years less life expectancy than white men;

3) In 1991-92, before the anti-affirmative actions of the University of California regents and voter approval for Proposition 209, and before the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in Hopwood vs. The State of Texas,—at what we may assume was the height of race-exclusive scholarships—such awards made up less than one percent of all scholarships in undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States and about three percent of the scholarships awarded by professional schools;

4) The 62 member institutions of the prestigious Association of American Universities include only four women presidents and no presidents who are people of color. At those elite universities, a much smaller portion of the tenured faculty members are women than on other campuses. At Stanford, for example, 13.3% of the tenured faculty are women and at Yale the proportion is 13.8%. And a study released in June 1997 by the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA revealed that minority professors in



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1995-96 accounted for only 10% of the professoriate—up 1% since 1989. Moreover, minority faculty are squeezed into the lowest echelons of academia.

We cannot deceive ourselves any longer. As President Clinton noted in his speech commemorating the anniversary of integration at Central High School:

“... We cannot forget one stubborn fact that has not yet been said as clearly as it should: There is still discrimination in America...”⁴

Although the terms multiculturalism, diversity and affirmative action are frequently (although inappropriately) used interchangeably, it is, of course, affirmative action that has been, almost from its inception, under attack because of its core meaning—to take the positive steps necessary to include individuals from diverse and underrepresented groups in the fullest range of education, employment and citizen participation. In other words, it is the action to achieve the goal of diversity.

If we contextualize the attack on diversity and affirmative action to higher education, we can ask, why has the affirmative consideration of race to achieve diversity fallen into legal and social dispute? One reason, according to Jonathan Alger, an associate counsel for the American Association of University Professors, is that universities have not articulated and established in the public mind the fundamental link between diversity and their educational missions. Direct interaction with diverse groups of students and faculty help overcome prejudices that frequently persist because of the lack of direct exposure to multiple individuals from other races, or because views have been shaped or framed by the media.

As a recent study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found, diversity initiatives have a positive impact on the education of all students in that they promote increased tolerance and the understanding of differences, greater commitment to social justice and improved academic success and cognitive development. And, of course, because such exposure comes at a critical developmental time in students' lives, it allows the university to serve as a controlled microcosm previewing the larger society and working world into which the student will graduate—a world in which employers will expect their employees to work and interact with a wide variety of people in a global economy. As a recent survey of Fortune 500 executives conducted by the Business-Higher Education Forum indicates, those surveyed were pleased with the academic skills of graduates, but they also indicated that graduates needed more work on communication skills, and the ability to work in teams and with people from diverse backgrounds.

Thus, I would argue that those of us who teach, do our research and scholarship, or administer within the context of higher education and K-12, bear some of the responsibility for the public's failure to understand the direct link between diversity and the educational mission of our schools and our colleges and universities. In fact, any hope for preserving pluralism in American higher education now rests on our ability to marshal specific evidence that the institutions' core needs and values demand not only the presence of diverse racial and ethnic groups on our campuses, but the intellectual stimulation of multiple perspectives—the kind of debate and reflection that can add

knowledge, alter claims, lead to new questions or even provoke paradigm shifts.

Diversity may not quite be a dirty word, but recent legal and political developments in achieving it—programs of affirmative action—suggest some believe otherwise. The events that have led to this state of affairs are a combination of legal cases and unmoderated political beliefs. Let me go first to a brief review of the legal cases.

In the 1978 landmark case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*,⁵ the Supreme Court found that remedying the effects of past discrimination may constitute a “compelling interest” that could justify race-based admissions to universities. More recent decisions, however, have cast considerable uncertainty as to whether even the “compelling interest” of remedying past discrimination is sufficient to justify programs that include race-based admission considerations or the setting aside of scholarships for students of color.

For example, in *Podberesky v. Kirwan*,⁶ a program of scholarships to African American students at the University of Maryland was invalidated in spite of the fact that the program was the response to a federal directive to desegregate, in order to help remedy the effects of past discrimination. In March 1996, in *Hopwood v. Texas*,⁷ the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the University of Texas Law School “may not use race as a factor in law school admissions.” And in the 1997 term, the Supreme Court dealt affirmative action programs another blow by refusing to hear the *Hopwood* case on appeal, allowing the anti-affirmative action ruling of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals to stand.

Without question, however, the court decision that is the most far-reaching in its negative consequences for affirmative action is *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña*, Secretary of Transportation, et al.⁸ *Adarand* was a construction company that challenged the federal government's affirmative action requirement. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote the opinion for the Court which announced that all cases involving race—whether a case involving discrimination or a remedy for past discrimination—would be required to pass “strict scrutiny.” In other words, affirmative action programs must “serve a compelling interest and must be narrowly tailored to further that interest.” No affirmative action program can withstand the strict scrutiny test as laid out in the *Adarand* decision. Thus, what we are likely to see is a case by case, systematic dismantling of affirmative action programs when and if they are challenged in the courts.

The next case which was to be reviewed by the Supreme Court in January is *Piscataway v. Taxman*.⁹ The case involved a white school teacher—*Taxman*—who was dismissed as part of a lay-off at the school. In determining which teacher would be laid off, the school board examined the records of both *Taxman* and another business education teacher who was black. Because their qualifications were identical—down to the exact starting date—and because this teacher was the only black business education teacher in the school, the school board chose to lay off *Taxman* and retain the black teacher in an effort to maintain a diverse teacher population. The Supreme Court, in a rare move, asked the Clinton administration for its opinion on the case. Although the Clinton administration had supported the school board, it urged the court not to hear the case, for fear that given the

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recent decisions handed down by the conservative court, the decision might be the death knell for affirmative action programs. Yesterday, November 21, 1997, expressing agreement with Clinton's fears, a coalition of civil rights groups agreed to pay Taxman \$308,000 and the school board agreed to an additional \$125,000 to make the reverse discrimination case disappear. However, the settlement leaves intact a lower-court ruling that will limit the way colleges in Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania can consider race in employment decisions.

The anti-affirmative action stance of the courts has, in part, been paralleled in public political action. Currently, 26 states are considering legislation not unlike, at least in principle, California's referendum to end racial and ethnic preferences. And a bill that would end all federal affirmative action efforts is before Congress. The only bright spot has been that on November 4, 1997, Houston, Texas voters soundly rejected an anti-affirmative action proposition, in part because those opposed to it were able to word the proposition so that it could be understood as anti-affirmative action.

While states not affected by the Fifth Circuit Court have taken no specific actions, the debates and threats have reverberated throughout higher education. Notably, in October 1997, two white students filed a class-action lawsuit against the University of Michigan, saying the institution had discriminated against them by using different standards to admit students of different races. They are represented by a Washington, DC law firm that specializes in contesting affirmative action programs—the same firm that filed for Cheryl Hopwood in Texas. One other example is Northern Virginia Community College, which has agreed to stop awarding scholarships based on race. The college made the decision after the U.S. Office for Civil Rights concluded that the privately financed scholarship programs for minority students “did not comply with established federal guidelines for such programs.”¹⁰

Some argue that the erosion of affirmative action programs in admission and financial aid to state institutions threatens to resegregate American colleges and universities to a level not seen in more than a quarter of a century. And, in fact, the dismantling of affirmative action programs in the public universities of Texas and California has already resulted in ominous declines in black and Latino enrollment, even though a recent study found that an admissions process that allows for ethnicity and other special characteristics does not dilute the quality of the graduates. Fear is increasing that universities in these ethnically diverse states could one day become overwhelmingly white.

At the University of California's medical schools, applications from black students have dropped 22%. Notably, UC-San Diego accepted no African American students for fall 1997, despite receiving 196 applications.¹¹ UCLA has admitted 80% fewer blacks, 32% fewer Hispanics and 60% fewer Native Americans, while admissions of whites and Asians are rising.¹² In the four states where the Hopwood decision stands, the number of applications of minority groups to medical schools has dropped 17% from 1996 to 1997.¹³ And at Berkeley's Law School (Boalt), minority admissions have plummeted 80%. Boalt's entering class this fall has one student who had deferred entry for a year, down from 20 black students in 1996.¹⁴ In response, many of the prestigious law firms in the San Francisco Bay area are threatening to stop

recruiting law school grads from Berkeley unless the minority admission rate increases. Thus, in those states in which black and Hispanic people are expected to make up a majority of the population in the next century, a dearth of minority lawyers will undermine confidence in the law and add to racial friction.

As you know, NCA has long recognized the importance of diversity in the discipline. Our association's affirmative action statement clearly defines its importance: “...diversity enriches understanding, analysis and use of human communication, which can be understood only to the extent that ideas from all spokespersons and perspectives are heard and valued. The highest quality criticism and research of communication requires an understanding and appreciation of diversity within cultures.” The affirmative action statement also acknowledges that NCA and our discipline exist within and reflect a culture that does not provide equal opportunity for all individuals.

In order to assess what changes we could bring to the discipline, in 1995 I appointed a Task Force on Racial Diversity. The task force developed three questionnaires to determine the extent to which our discipline is racially diverse at undergraduate, graduate and faculty levels, and to assess the climate for racial and ethnic diversity in communication departments around the country.

The results from the first study support the assumption of the task force that students of color are under-represented in most communication programs. While communication programs have similar percentages of students of color as does higher education as a whole, many programs reported having few or no students within the four demographic categories used in this study. For example, African American/Black students tended to be at a few urban campuses and at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Students of Hispanic origin were generally enrolled at campuses in the Southwestern United States. Asian/Pacific Islander students were found on West Coast campuses.

The results of the second survey suggest that most communication programs participate in institutional programs designed to recruit students of color, but only a few are engaged in minority recruitment programs in addition to campus-wide efforts or offer programs specifically designed to retain students of color.

In survey three, students of color generally reported that there is more rhetoric than action on the issue of diversity in their departments or on campuses. They said, for example, that while the issue was often discussed, they did not see significant efforts to recruit students of color. They also pointed out that their campuses and departments have few faculty of color and argued that white faculty do not seem to be committed to diversity. On the one hand, students reported that their departments' faculty had tried to be accommodating to cultural diversity. On the other hand, they also reported that when they did voice a complaint, they were quickly labeled a troublemaker. Some students of color reported subtle acts of discrimination such as assumptions about their abilities to accomplish teaching or research assignments.

In an association-wide effort to begin confronting the challenges of increasing racial diversity in the programs and curricula of our discipline, I asked the task force to plan a summer conference to address these shortfalls.

The conference emphasized ways to diversify curricula and make any necessary institutional changes. It also explored the challenges to engaging in and publishing diversity research, provided innovative strategies for student recruitment and

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retention, presented model programs and practices and discussed campus climates from the perspective of students of color.

Conference participants developed guiding principles that will lead the discipline into the next century, and made more than 30 recommendations for action in the areas of scholarship, pedagogy, administration/recruitment and retention, and cultural, social and political climate. A sample of their recommendations for action includes:

- Establishing a research award to recognize outstanding contributions to the understanding of racial and ethnic diversity;
- Urging all communication departments/schools and colleges to adopt diversity statements as part of their mission and strategic plans;
- Requiring that editorial nominees indicate to the Publications Board how they would meet the association's goal of ensuring cultural diversity in the journal they seek to edit;
- Creating an ongoing advisory board which would assess current practices and offer advice to departments and universities about the evaluation of research and scholarly activity;
- Establishing a "model program" award to be given by the Legislative Council or Administrative Committee for departments especially successful in recruiting and retaining faculty and students of color; and
- Supporting (financially and politically) a team of communication scholars/teachers with expertise in teaching/learning multiculturalism. The team would facilitate workshops at NCA conventions, be available to do faculty development workshops for academic departments in colleges and universities across the country and serve as an advisory council to NCA's leadership.

Although it will take some time to work through the recommendations for action, let me tell you what we have accomplished since the July conference. First, the chair of the publication board has added a category to NCA journal editor applications that requires candidates to describe the ways in which they will support the association's affirmative action statement. Second, a copy of the conference proceedings was sent to all communication departments and programs. Third, NCA's National Office and individual members were part of the satellite link for the November White House Hate Crime Conference. Fourth, we have begun a process of identifying NCA members to serve as multicultural consultants. Fifth, the leaders of the conference work groups will be meeting at the National Office on January 25, 1998, to refine further the action recommendations. And sixth, we began a dialogue for increasing racial diversity and

multiculturalism in our discipline in an open meeting for all NCA members here in Chicago.

Over the years, a number of my predecessors have focused their presidential addresses on equality, diversity and multiculturalism, and now I extend their challenge. More than it has been in many years, the threat is real. Strong, well-financed forces are striving to reverse the progress of the last 30 years toward justice and understanding among those who differ in race, gender, religion or sexual preference. Our colleagues who attended the summer conference have provided us with guidelines, but efforts will be in vain if the members of the National Communication Association do not take personal responsibility within their own departments. In less than 24 hours I leave the presidency to rejoin you as a member of this association—a member committed to working to advance diversity and multiculturalism in the discipline and in its primary organization, NCA.

Please join me in a commitment to meet this challenge and take advantage of this important opportunity.

1. Pincus, F.L. & Ehrlich, H.J. (1994) *Race and ethnic conflict*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

2. Internet: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/initiatives/speech.html>

3. Johnson, F. (1996). A speech of celebration and commitment. In S. Dailey (Ed.), *Diversity: Celebration and commitment* (pp. 8-9). Annandale: National Communication Association.

4. Sack, K. (1997, September 26). In Little Rock, Clinton warns of racial split. *The New York Times*, p. A1.

5. *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438U.S.265 (1978).

6. *Podberesky v. Kirwan*, 38 F. 3d 147, 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, 1994.

7. *Cheryl J. Hopwood, et al., Plaintiffs - Appellees v. State of Texas, et al., Defendants - Appellees*, 94-50569, 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, 1994.

8. *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Pena*, 115 S. Court 2097 (1995).

9. *Board of Education of the Township of Piscataway v. Taxman*, 96-679, 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

10. Lederman, D. (1997, October 24). Northern Va. Community College will end race-based scholarships. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A33.

11. Burdman, P. (1997, August 1). 2 UC medical incoming classes have no blacks—minority enrollment shows sharp decline. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, p. A1.

12. Schodolski, V. J. (1997, June 14). Setting curiously apt for Clinton race agenda; University struggles with minority issues. *Chicago Tribune*, p. 2.

13. Walker Campell, P. (1997, November 14). Minority applications to medical school drop in states without Affirmative Action. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A46.

14. Berkeley law school responds to drop in minority enrollment. (1997, October 20). *The Pantagraph*, p. A3.