College enrollment among students of color has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. Total minority enrollment in the nation’s colleges and universities is up from nearly 2 million in 1980–81 to 4.3 million in 2000–01. Our college campuses are all more diverse than ever before. Yet despite this diversity, the networks that students form, intentionally or unintentionally, are often racially and ethnically defined. Beverly Daniel Tatum, president of Spelman College, considers this pattern of social segregation and offers an approach for creating an environment where such patterns are countered by meaningful engagement across lines of difference. She emphasizes that diversity on campus is not an end in itself, nor is it just about being friends with people different from ourselves. Rather, it is about being able to connect with different people to become allies with them in an effort to effect change in a pluralistic society and, in the end, build a more just society.

Creating Climates of Engagement on Diverse Campuses

Mutual Engagement

While higher education enrollment has become more diverse, segregation at the K–12 level has been on the rise in the United States since the early 1990s. There is an extremely strong relationship between racial segregation and concentrated poverty. Segregation cuts children of color off from educational and employment networks of opportunity; thus, segregation and inequality are strongly self-perpetuating.

The ideal of a democratic education is to create
an environment where the cycle of segregation and inequality can be broken. The important first step in interrupting the cycle of inequity is mutual engagement. We will not be able to effectively dismantle systems of oppression—systems of inequity—without working with one another across lines of difference.

Given persistent residential and school segregation in this country, we can be sure that all members of our campus population have come to college with stereotypes and prejudices about some other segment of our student body. These biases are a barrier to meaningful engagement across lines of difference. Indeed, most of our students do not come with a capacity for connection with people different from themselves already developed—it is up to their college or university to provide opportunities for students to practice, to learn how to understand multiple perspectives during their college years.

How can we create campus environments where engagement across lines of difference is perceived as a norm rather than as an exception? How can we maximize the learning opportunities created by the diversity of our campuses? I propose a three-pronged approach: affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership. This approach has implications for curricular as well as co-curricular initiatives on campus, both of which are considered below.

**Affirming Identity**

The concept of identity is complex, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers? How am I represented in the media and in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether? As social scientist Charles Cooley pointed out long ago, other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves.

To create a climate of engagement, we must begin by asking what images are reflected in the mirror of our institutions. Does the reflection affirm the identities of all of our students? Every student should be able to see important parts of herself reflected in some way. All should be able to find themselves in the faces of other students and among the faculty and staff, as well as reflected in the curriculum. It is often harder for those students who have been historically marginalized in our culture to see themselves reflected. One of the recommendations of the American Commitments National Panel of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (1995) is that every college student should acquire knowledge of the diverse cultures, communities, and histories that compose U.S. society. Were institutions of higher education to revise their curricula with this recommendation in mind, the likelihood of seeing oneself reflected in the curriculum would certainly increase for members of historically underrepresented groups.

In addition to the important work of curricular inclusion, a common approach to affirming marginalized identities is through the establishment of cultural centers. Such centers provide specialized programming as well as a physical location to which students can briefly retreat from campus environments that, despite our best efforts, are alienating at times.

Some observers argue that while the existence of such curricular and co-curricular spaces affirms identity, they work against building community by encouraging separation rather than the cross-group engagement we seek. As paradoxical as it may seem, the opposite is more often the case. One persistent research finding is that student involvement with campus groups reflecting personal, cultural, or service interests helps students feel that they belong on campus, that they are contributing to the campus culture, and that their interests are reflected in the institution. Students who feel affirmed in this way are more likely to be willing to reach out beyond their own identity groups to engage with others. Consequently, acknowledging diverse needs and experiences can strengthen community.
Building Community

Even as we strive to reflect the diversity of our campuses, we still seek to inculcate a sense of shared purpose as members of a particular educational community. This task of creating unity from diversity mirrors the ongoing challenge of American society; our ability to successfully build community in a diverse context is excellent modeling for our students who will need these skills in the pluralistic communities they will enter after graduation.

Again, affirming identity is not contradictory to but rather a prerequisite for building community. Those who feel left out of the process do not readily participate in community-building activities. When institutions work to affirm historically underrepresented groups, however, it is sometimes students from dominant groups (i.e., whites, males, Christians, heterosexuals) who begin to feel left out. Though students from these groups have historically been reflected throughout the fabric of higher education, as institutions become more responsive to diverse constituents, it should be recognized that students from dominant groups may need help seeing that there is still a place for them in a pluralistic community.

Community building is often seen as the dominion of student affairs staff, or as a process that takes place in the residence halls rather than in the classroom. Certainly co-curricular initiatives can be effective in breaking down barriers between students, but the effectiveness is increased when there is a similar emphasis in the curriculum. Easily implemented pedagogical strategies such as encouraging students to wear name tags until everyone has learned each other's names, or assigning students to diverse discussion groups (rather than letting them choose groups themselves) help students make connections with one another across lines of difference. G. W. Allport's four conditions for positive intergroup contact—equal status, common goal, interdependence, and support from authorities for the contact—have become axiomatic and can often be created in a classroom context. Students viewed as having equal status in the eyes of the teacher, assigned to work on a common goal (i.e., a class project) requiring intergroup cooperation, with guidance and support from the instructor, are likely to develop mutual respect and sometimes friendships. Indeed, cooperative learning, service learning, and collaborative learning communities have been shown to facilitate the development of intellectual complexity and multicultural competencies.

Other dimensions of community building in a classroom context are more difficult to achieve. Particularly when discussing issues related to social justice (i.e., racism and classism), passions run high and polarization rather than connection can result. However, engaging students in ongoing discussions of racism may be the most powerful tool for community building available to us. In his assessment of the impact of diversity and multiculturalism on students, A. W. Astin reported that “the largest number of positive effects was associated with the frequency with which students discussed racial/ethnic issues during their undergraduate years.” One of the strongest effects associated with frequent racial discussions was the positive impact on students' commitment to developing a meaningful philosophy of life. These benefits of self-discovery are made possible as the silence about racism is broken. These findings are intriguing, particularly given the tensions that are often associated with race-related discussions in racially mixed settings.

Cultivating Leadership

Every institution of higher education sees itself as preparing the next generation for leadership and effective civic participation. The question is, are we providing the tools needed for democratic participation and leadership in the 21st century? The multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious America of today is truly a new frontier. What is required in this new context?

The critical thinking skills associated with a liberal arts education are essential to function in a pluralistic democracy, but insufficient without experience. What is also needed is the opportunity to practice. Our efforts to affirm identity and build community inevitably create sit-
uations that allow students to engage in what Henry Giroux calls, “border studies, the points of intersection, where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.” When we encourage students to become border crossers, we are cultivating their capacity for leadership in the evolving democracy of the 21st century.

Some border crossing happens socially as students enter unfamiliar spaces on campus. For example, when “minority” students organize programming at their cultural centers and invite “majority” students to participate, a unique learning opportunity is created in that the invited students are required to shift their cultural lens from the center to the margin. Such experiences are essential for developing the skills required to interact effectively in our increasingly pluralistic world. Faculty and administrators need to model this border-crossing behavior whenever we can and actively encourage our students to follow suit.

Border crossing can be institutionalized in the curriculum as well. Academic courses that provide interdisciplinary understandings of intergroup relations, community, and conflict as well as ample opportunity for face-to-face dialogues are key. Discussion and dialogue exploring differing experiences of United States democracy and the impact of individual and group identity on the pursuit of equal opportunity, for example, can facilitate an experiential as well as formal understanding of these important topics.

As we consider creating climates of engagement, we must be intentional in structuring opportunities to cross the long-standing boundaries that separate us in American society. The more often we do so, the better prepared our students will be for leadership roles in the new millennium.

**Conclusion**

As we revamp old programs and implement new initiatives on our campuses, it is important to remember that our efforts to cultivate leadership must be built on the foundation of affirming identity and building community. Indeed, all three steps—affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership—must be woven together in a seamless fabric if we are to maximize the benefits made available to us by our diverse communities. If we create a climate that supports pluralistic expression and provides authentic and sustained opportunities to practice, we and our students will be ready for the challenges and opportunities of the new American frontier.

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