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Before
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“MEASURING UP: PROGRESS ON STANDARDIZED TESTS AND THE EDUCATION OF BLACK STUDENTS”

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Good morning! I have returned to fulfill the commitment I made to you in September of this year, and I am pleased to be able to do so. I believe that you hold on your table an issue of the greatest importance for the future of higher education success in Virginia. As you have labored long in seeking to discover a response to the clear need to improve the performance and prospects of black citizens in Virginia higher education, I know that you understand quite well the incremental nature of progress in this arena. At the same time, I believe that you are aware of the substantial progresses that are often disguised by the constant evidence of lingering deficiencies. My goal this morning is to speak to you about the most notable example of lingering deficiencies, the reported achievement gap between black students and white students in every area of academic discipline both in Virginia and nationwide. While I shall focus these comments on Virginia students, you may assume that the comments apply equally well against the background of national statistics.

I - THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Defining the Gap

I am tempted to invoke the fabled astronaut's plea, "Houston, we have a problem," in opening this testimony. It is applicable because of the notably calm, non-hysterical voice with which a crisis situation must be approached by astronauts for whom nothing contributes so much to the possibility of

survival than the avoidance of panic. On the other hand, I confront the dilemma that you at mission control don't need to be told by me that "we have a problem." You are fully aware of the problem. What you may not know, however, is that the problem you have focused on repairing, before inquiring of me, is not precisely the problem that I have identified. Accordingly, my task is to convey to you the problem as I see it, with clear consciousness that my success in persuading you to see the problem as I see it is absolutely essential to my chances of returning home safely. More precisely, then, "Houston, I have a problem."

To convey the nature of my problem, I would like you to reflect on the background statistics that we all see regularly reported at the end of each summer as we begin a new academic year. They are summarized in the form of the October 30, 1998 *Chronicle of Higher Education* headline, "Persistent Racial Gap in SAT Scores." In that story the higher education newspaper of record cited a 200-point disparity between black and white verbal and math scores that has persisted almost unchangeably for the past twenty years. True, there was a period in the 1980s in which the gap seemed to be narrowing fairly significantly. But starting in 1988 it returned to pre-1980s's patterns and remains there today.

That gap was as large as 260 points in 1976, when the College Board, which administers the SAT, *started keeping track of scores by race*. It fell below 200 points in 1988, and has hovered around 200 since then.

Ever since we first took official notice of the achievement gap (though it is not often referred to by that proper name), we have recognized it as a problem. We have varied widely, however, in naming the problem. Some have regarded it as a reflection of the effects of discrimination, while others have reviewed it as reflecting differences in background, culture, and schooling. Still others have mused that it reflects native, unbridgeable differences. Almost everyone, however, has looked at it as a problem of *race* rather than as a problem of achievement, giving rise to the familiar syndrome of blaming either the victims or society in general. My task is to persuade you that the problem is an achievement problem, rather than a race problem; while race serves as an effective forensic tool to isolate the specific geography and demographics of the achievement problem, it does not begin to define or diagnose the problem. For that purpose, we need rather to consult patterns and evidences of achievement other than either gene pools or histories of discrimination.

Don't Blame the Victims

To begin with, let us remind ourselves that the same gap appears in every form of standardized testing that we use. The ACT and the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) no less than the SAT reflect such a gap. Moreover, all reflect similar background facts – most notably the relatively smaller percentage of SAT and ACT test takers among black high school graduates compared with white high school graduates and the still smaller percentages of black AP test takers in comparison with white AP test takers (a fact that will be especially relevant later). In Virginia for example, our first year college class in 1996 contained black students at the level of 17.3%, while they constituted 21.7% of all eighteen to twenty-four year old Virginians. At the same time, 5.5% of black high school graduates took the ACT exam, while black high school graduates made up 21.4% of all graduates (this compares reasonably closely with white test takers and graduates but conceals significant differences in the make-up of the two pools).

At a still greater level of detail, the numbers of black and white ACT test takers who also follow a core high school curriculum reflect a disturbing trend: for black test takers, the numbers following a "less than core" curriculum is consistently roughly equal to the numbers following a core curriculum (the higher concentration in the lower income group entails this result). For white test takers, on the other hand, the numbers following a core curriculum is consistently greater than (and by a very large number)

the numbers following a “less than core curriculum.” This trend is illustrated in the following table from ACT, which shows this discrepancy in the national data as well as in the data for Virginia.

Table 1
Average ACT Composite Scores
By Level of High School Coursework, Racial-Ethnic Group and Annual Family Income

1998 National Reference Group	Annual Family Income					
	Less than \$18,000		\$18,000-\$35,999		\$36,000 or more	
	N	Composite	N	Composite	N	Composite
All Graduates						
Total group	92562	18.5	217121	20.0	530981	22.0
Core	48614	19.5	126593	21.0	354544	22.8
Less than Core	42584	17.3	88368	18.5	172714	20.2
African-American/Black						
Total Group	25328	16.2	32779	16.9	27521	18.3
Core	13353	16.9	18804	17.6	17582	19.0
Less than Core	11708	15.4	13653	15.9	9683	17.0
American Indian/Alaskan Native						
Total Group	1979	17.6	3385	18.5	4256	20.3
Core	831	19.1	1688	19.8	2481	21.4
Less than Core	1034	16.6	1589	17.4	1693	18.8
Caucasian-American/White						
Total Group	41771	20.2	140537	20.9	432125	22.2
Core	21842	21.4	82195	22.0	289468	23.1
Less than Core	19561	18.7	57388	19.3	140216	20.5
Mexican-American/Chicano						
Total Group	7616	17.1	11198	18.2	11589	20.0
Core	3881	18.1	6132	19.1	7228	20.8
Less than Core	3685	16.1	4995	17.0	4304	18.5
Asian-American/Pacific Islander						
Total Group	4578	18.9	7656	20.6	14798	23.5
Core	3026	19.6	5431	21.3	11270	24.0
Less than Core	1472	17.3	2083	19.0	3332	21.8
Puerto Rican/Cuban/Other Hispanic						
Total Group	2923	17.6	5009	19.0	7169	21.1
Core	1527	18.7	3030	19.9	4977	21.9
Less than Core	1248	16.4	1847	17.5	2069	19.2

Source: ACT Assessment – 1998 Results

Because the testing gap remains within the categories thus distinguished, some observers question whether the differences in curriculum are explanatory. They neglect to observe, however, that *within* each category similar dynamics appear – i.e., numbers of students taking Advanced Placement courses, and the specific courses taken (even within a core curriculum) vary sharply. Thus the attempt to associate the achievement gap with race still faces the challenge to find an actual common ground on which to measure the gap in such a way as to discount the influence of background and especially the courses of studies followed. By the time measures of the numbers of black students who have taken pre-calculus are performed, therefore, observers are dealing with decreasingly significant populations. To a very much higher degree, the reference population of white test takers who have taken pre-calculus exceeds (in relation to its own base) the population of black test takers who have taken pre-calculus by several factors.

The point of these observations is not to explain away the achievement gap. Indeed, the very name, “achievement gap,” establishes it as real, substantial, and pervasive. However, my aim is to suggest that we look elsewhere for a diagnosis so as to advance the likelihood of a remedy. Where the Southern Education Foundation’s report, *Miles to Go: A Report on Black Students and Postsecondary Education in the South*, has focused on participation rates, economic disparities, and statewide remedial efforts, I would suggest that we can look closer to home for the answer to the achievement gap. In closing the achievement gap, moreover, I believe that we move most surely toward eliminating the participation gap.

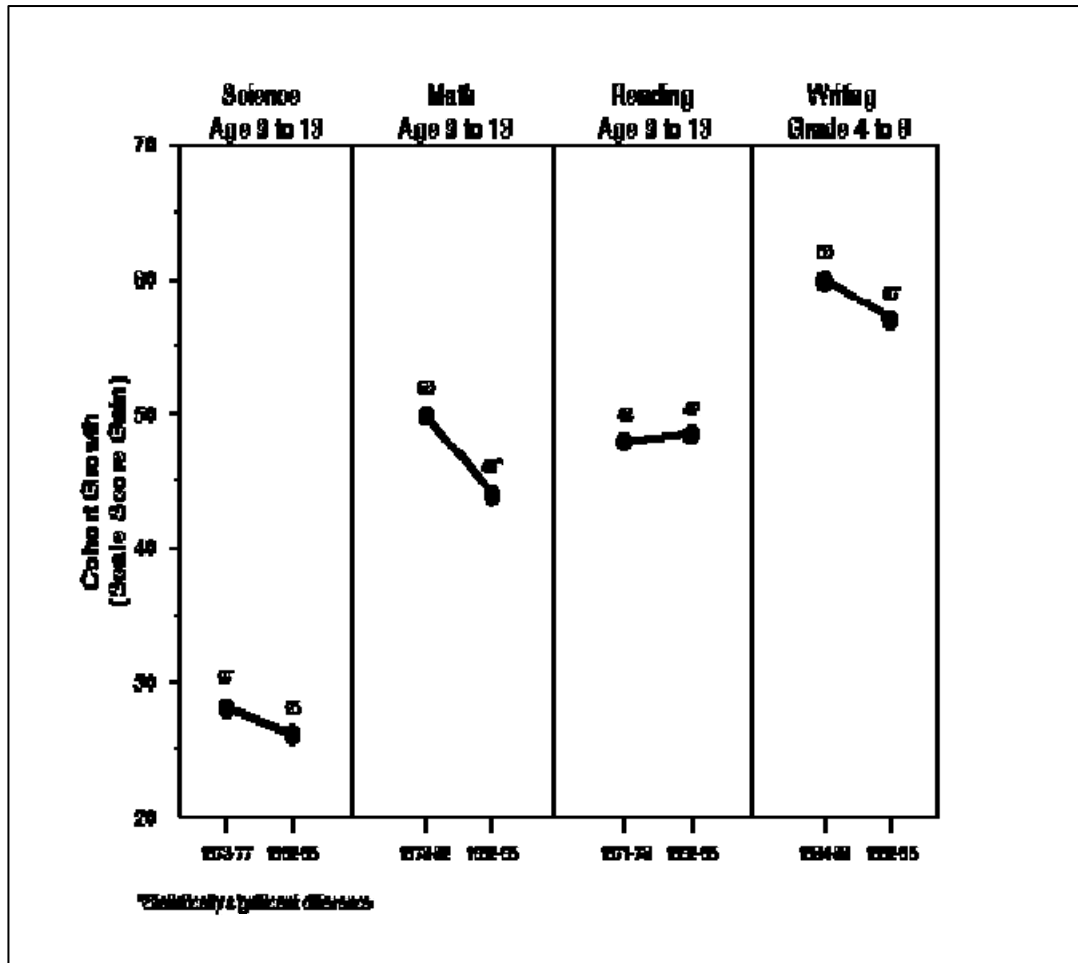
I tell a story of failed education rather than of students failing. In reply to the question, “where do we go from here,” my response would be, “education by any means necessary.” Not only do I not blame the students themselves; I am confident that they can do whatever we will ask them to do.

The Evidence of Developmental Analysis

I would buttress this position with reference to the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which has employed a “developmental” analysis to assess school and student performance in comparative perspective. The following series of tables, as well as excerpts of the text, come from the Educational Testing Service’s May 1998 report, *Growth in School: Achievement Gains from the Fourth to the Eighth Grade*:

There has been an explosion in standardized testing over the last 20 years or so, both to measure individual student progress and to monitor achievement at the school, district, state, or national levels. Students are almost always grouped by grade level, and the traditional focus is on tracking how students in those grade levels compare over time. Policy makers ask such questions as, “How do today’s fourth-graders compare to fourth graders 10 years ago in mathematics?”

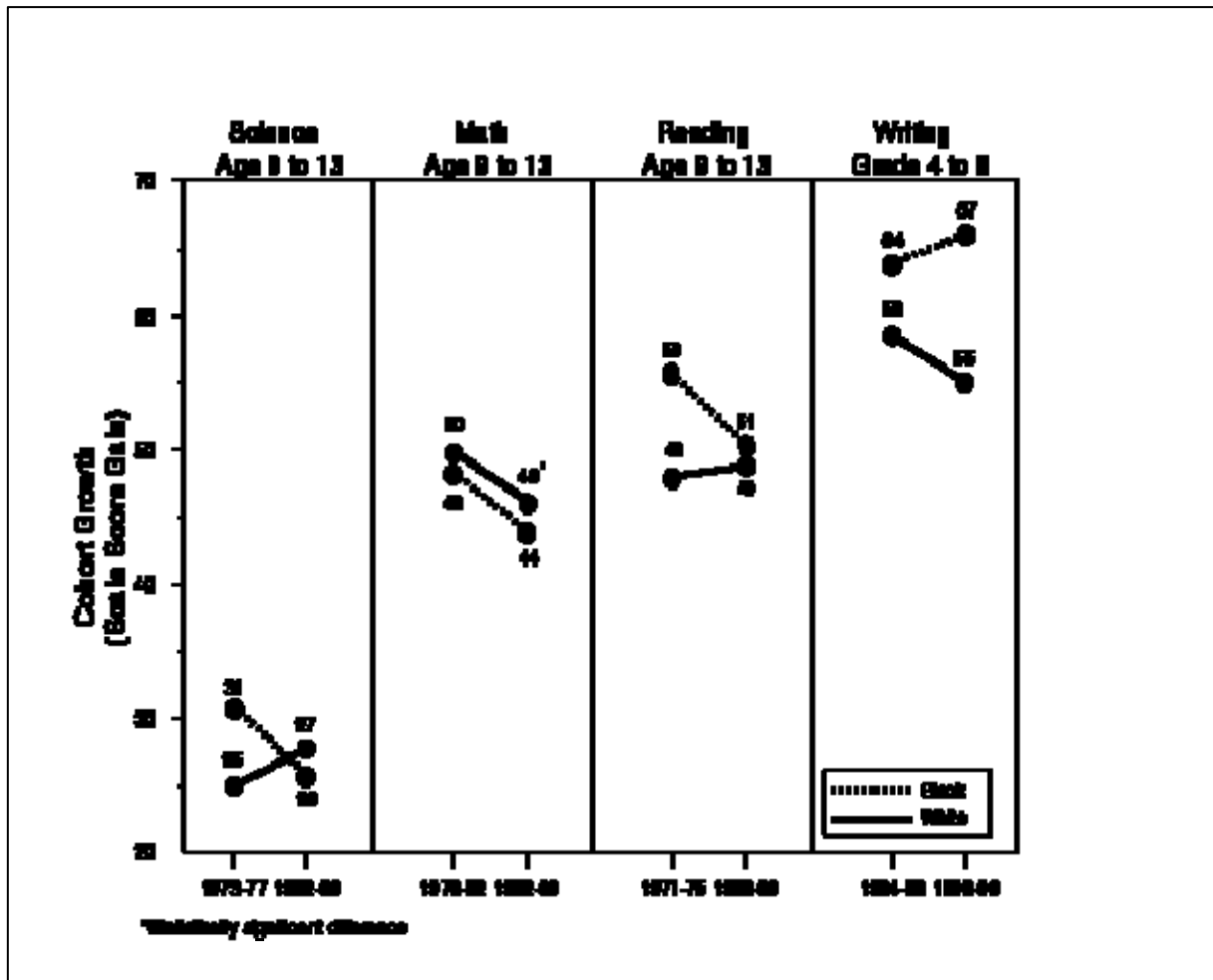
Table 2



Source of table: ETS, *Growth in Schools*, using data from the NAEP (with permission)

I submit that a developmental analysis is the specific response to the persistent achievement gap. Through it we may compare not only how students perform compared with one another, but also how they perform compared with themselves in relation to specific courses. By measuring “trends in cohort growth” we are able to identify specific points of difficulty and, therefore, of intervention.

Table 3



Source of table: ETS, *Growth in Schools*, using data from the NAEP (with permission)

Cohort growth can also be examined by race, for White and Black students... Only one of the cohort growth differences shown is statistically significant: the drop in math score gain between age 9 and 13 for White students. Of course, when viewed in terms of average age- or grade-based NAEP scores, achievement levels differ considerably by race and ethnicity.

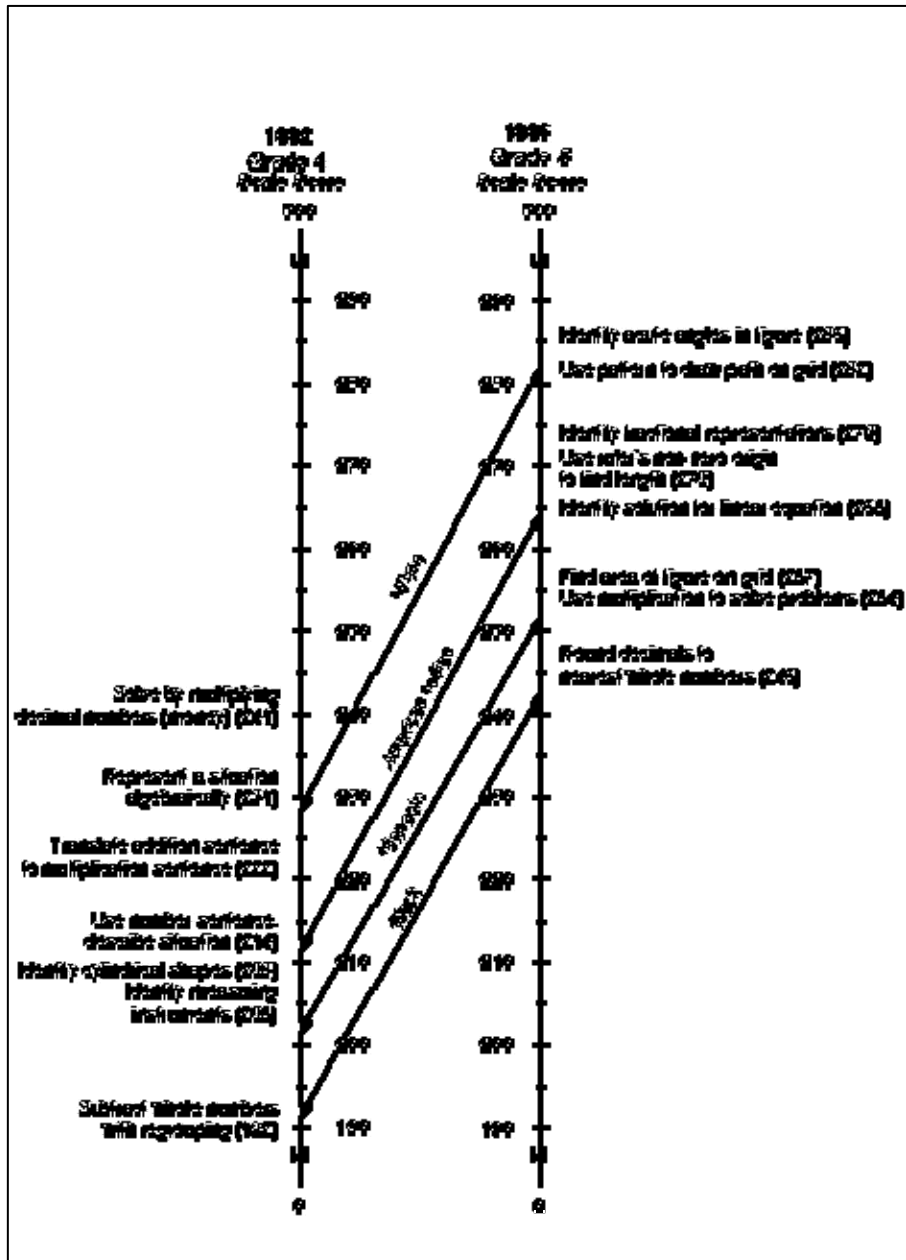
Following this approach the NAEP succeeded in identifying differences in white and black students, beginning in fourth grade, and continuing throughout schooling, but showing up especially in relation to math scores. The most intriguing element of its findings, however, was that there was virtually no variation in “cohort growth.” That is, black students and white students experienced like cohort growth and, after grade eight, like declines relative to international comparison groups.

For Black students, the score improvement of 50 points brought them to a point in the eighth grade where they were only slightly above the average for fourth-grade White students. The *gain* is similar, but the *level* is

very different, and the examples give some palpability to what the numbers mean in terms of achievement comparisons...

What is striking in addition to the differences among student subgroups is how close eighth-grade Black students are to fourth grade White students and how the “advanced level” for the fourth grade is considerably higher than the “basic level” for the eighth grade.

Table 4



Source: ETS, *Growth in Schools*, using data from the NAEP (with permission)

Let's be very clear about the meaning of these findings. Where critics heretofore have been swift to label the differences between blacks and whites as a racial gap (and implicitly "natural"), when confronted with the identical performance distinctions between American students and students in Japan or Germany, they instinctively labeled the latter an achievement gap. I submit either that both are achievement gaps and that neither a racial gap, or the gap between American and Japanese students, for example, must also be considered a racial gap. Typically we follow the findings regarding international disparities with a focus on the courses of study followed, the length of the school day, the length of the school year, and the rigor of studies – that is with specific attention to dimensions and conditions of achievement. Since the differences in educational practices to which most black students and most white students are subject differ as significantly, if not by the same magnitude, as the differences between American and Japanese students, then there is no credible reason to look anywhere else to explain the so-called racial gap than to the criteria of achievement we otherwise employ to explain the international gap. The time has come to redirect our attention.

Fixing the Problem

These vitally important findings not only reinforce the suggestion made by the Southern Education Foundation that attention needs to be paid to the courses of study followed by black students. They more importantly also pinpoint a moment of intervention.

Table 5

Trends in Cohort Growth Compared to Average Score Trends for 9- and 13-year olds			
	Cohort Growth, Ages 9 to 13	Average Score Trend, Age 9	Average Score Trend, Age 13
Science	Level	Up	Up
Mathematics	Down	Up	Up
Reading	Level	Up	Up
Writing	Level	Level	Level

Source: ETS, *Growth in Schools*, using NAEP data (with permission)

What is called for now is a focused analysis of the curricula black students follow in grades kindergarten through four. We are well aware that, at these ages particularly, many factors affect student learning, including parental education levels and parenting practices. But it would be unwise to leave it as a matter of assumption that nothing else is going on. Without a specific plan for the actual schooling experiences of black youngsters, school by school and course by course, we will be unable to isolate and respond to the achievement gap. Moreover, we know already that black student achievement improves, even if the gap is not closed, in proportion as the curriculum pursued toughens up. As I often like to say, even a black student who fails calculus will perform better on standardized tests than a black student who never takes calculus. We now require an immediate and dramatic ratcheting up of academic expectations for black students at every level.

This analysis, of course, points to the reduction of the achievement gap by means of intervention in pre-collegiate education. By definition, that is a long-term strategy (though not very long term!) rather than a fix for the immediate victims of past educational failures. For those students for whom long-term

advantage is not the answer, we must be content to continue to deal with piecemeal fixes, including support for remedial education in our community colleges. What is apparent is that the point of systemic intervention is clearly at the pre-collegiate level, with respect to the achievement gap.

Additionally, at the Council we have identified new ways to conceive performance measurements in the retention area. These methods emphasize who the students are and where they come from – a value-added perspective – that should produce incentives for our institutions to show more attention to developing the students who arrive at university with identified needs. The institutions that succeed in this endeavor should be recognized by the General Assembly as performing an exceedingly valuable service at a level of excellence commanding special reward.

II – INCREASING DIVERSITY

Now, there may well be other areas of concern beyond the achievement gap. The Commission has specifically requested that I respond to issues dealing with faculty and staff diversity in institutions of higher education and, also, an “African American Education Blueprint for the 21st Century, or problems that should be addressed in the blueprint.”

While I will offer a few modest suggestions, I would like to insist that I believe the hour has arrived for us to address ourselves to the broader question of entry into the established pathways of higher education. As the new book, *The Shape of the River* by William Bowen and Derek Bok, suggests, students are much affected by the institutions they attend as well as by the curricula they study (indeed, the authors seem to think even more so).¹ That implies the need to focus on further integration, advanced integration, as a specific means of building those cultural and community assets that can more reliably and usually command the resources of the larger American community in order to sustain continued social advance.

Focus on Recruitment

First and foremost, cast a wide net. Hiring officials ought to think broadly and imaginatively about job requirements, for, we know that, at times, in an effort to make it easier to sort through applicant pools, employers list a more narrow set of qualifications than is really necessary to identify qualified applicants. The goal is to ensure that faculty and administrators throughout the institution actively seek connections with other institutions, graduate schools, professional organizations, and the local community, which might put them in touch with qualified minority applicants.

Institutions might undertake internal self-evaluations of the backgrounds of new hires and involve a broad range of hiring officials in critiquing efforts to recruit black applicants. These reviews should be done not in an atmosphere of blame or recrimination for efforts and results not yet matching expectations, but rather in an atmosphere of pooling shared wisdom and experience with an aim to achieve better results as a consequence.

Focusing on recruitment has been one of the chief strategies for increasing the diversity of new hires for a very long time; however, it remains the most critical aspect of the whole business. Two aspects of recruitment need still more attention – rethinking job qualifications and using networking as a means to identify minority candidates and to encourage them to apply for positions. In many cases, it

¹ It is perhaps only fair to note that the argument and evidence in the text have serious defects and do not in fact prove what is claimed for them. Nevertheless, since their main premise is the mere commonplace that people who attend elite institutions derive therefrom significant networking advantages, their authority remains valuable here.

makes sense to list a qualification as “preferred” rather than “required” or to state that other comparable experience or credentials will also be considered. Such measures could improve the strength of applicant pools generally, not just with regard to the number of minority candidates.

Grow Your Own

Administrators

Institutions need to make sure they have a strong set of formal and informal mechanisms for staff development, especially to assist with developing academic leaders. Such programs will benefit all staff, not just black staff, but they can also be an extremely effective way for institutions to identify black faculty or staff who show administrative talent and to help them cultivate that talent. Mechanisms could include formal training programs, opportunities for employer-paid coursework, job rotation programs, internship opportunities, and an expectation that senior managers routinely seek to establish mentoring relationships to help existing faculty and staff with their professional growth. Institutions should be encouraged to cultivate organizational climates that reward staff for learning new skills, seeking continued training and education, and volunteering for assignments outside the range of “normal” job duties. Employees and supervisors should be encouraged to use the annual performance review not merely as a mechanism for assessing past performance, but also for focusing on opportunities for the employee’s long-term growth and development – even if it leads to a job elsewhere in the university or outside the university.

Frankly, these suggestions are simply fundamental elements of effective “human resource management;” nevertheless, they can also be one of the most effective means that a college or university can use to increase the number of American blacks on their administrative staff (assuming, of course, that the institution has American blacks on its staff at lower level positions). This can be an effective approach, because even after making efforts to broaden recruitment it will often remain the case that the institution will find only a small number of American blacks in its pool of external applicants.

Faculty

Through personal contact and financial aid, institutions should encourage black undergraduates to consider graduate education and black graduates to consider teaching. In addition, colleges and universities can increase their outreach to students in high school and middle school to encourage them to plan to attend college and to consider post-baccalaureate study as well. In addition to simple outreach, colleges can do more than they currently do to help high school students get ready to do college level work – through “Saturday academies” or other academic activities.

The percentage of American blacks who obtain doctoral degrees is still significantly below the percentage of American blacks in the overall population. Even if universities open up their recruiting process to eliminate overly narrow job requirements, a Ph.D. should continue to be a *bona fide* job requirement for most college teaching positions. So, the push to increase black doctoral students must continue.

Organizational Climate

The top leaders within the college and university administration need to “walk the walk” even more than they “talk the talk.” They ought to pay close attention to the hiring that they do personally, while also communicating a commitment to open hiring and promotion in their conversations with middle managers, with faculty, and staff – in both formal and informal settings. Such commitment might most

effectively be expressed, not in terms of meeting externally imposed requirements, but rather in terms of the ways that staff breadth can improve the work environment and the quality of the work.

One Example of Progress

A general understanding of the foundation of all of these recommendations may be gleaned from my experience as a college dean. Upon arrival I discovered very explicit criteria for including minority students and faculty in the population of the institution, including rather determinate numerical expectations and specific preferences operating to foster student admissions. I also discovered a pattern of consistent institutional under- performance in both areas. My task was to explain and correct this rather manifest contradiction. I began by abrogating the preferences and numerical expectations. I followed that by adopting energetic and expansive outreach activities. With students I carried the College's message directly into high school assemblies and classrooms. Regarding faculty, I specifically announced each opening to every identifiable minority candidate in the country. I withdrew from faculty search committees the "affirmative action" decision making they had been accustomed to practice (to little or no avail) and replaced it with a determinate ruling that, upon receiving the committees' general ratings of candidates from pools certified to be as open as they could be made, I would decide all cases of equivalent qualifications consistent with then existing laws and university regulations. It is by no means a scientific finding, but it is true nonetheless that the actual participation rates of minority students and faculty in the College (and, in the case of faculty, women also) increased dramatically beyond prior experience and continued to do so throughout my tenure. In short, a fair and open environment produced better social results than had ever been accomplished theretofore.

III – REFRAMING PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

While this concludes my remarks before the Commission today, I trust that we are at the starting point of renewed, expanded, and perhaps redirected efforts to address the problems you invited me here to discuss. Yes, Houston, we do have a problem – in fact, there are multiple problems that need our best efforts. My hope is that we can agree that the critical first step for us to take is to reframe the problems, not only for the clarity such a step would offer but, more importantly, for the prospect of finding new, more efficacious solutions.