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Becoming a More Diverse College

Challenges and Benefits

I f I had stood before the entering freshman class at Amherst College in the fall of 1967 (the first year for which data on race are available), almost all the 304 male faces looking up at me would have been white and affluent. How white? All but 12. There were no Puerto Ricans, no Chicanos. There was one Asian American student. Seven of the students were from abroad, including two from Canada. How affluent? Sixty-two percent of the class was receiving no financial aid, and for those who did receive it, many of the awards were nominal. Nearly a quarter of the class were legacies—that is, sons of Amherst alumni.

Fast-forward to Sunday afternoon, August 29, 2005. Katie Fretwell, director of admissions at the college, is about to deliver her welcoming speech to the 431 entering first-year students. The faces she looks out on are strikingly different from those of 1967, and the differences go well beyond outward appearance. As Dean Fretwell describes the class to itself: "Fifty-two percent of you are women and 48% are not. . . . One-third of you have self-identified as students of color. . . . Twenty-nine of you are non-U.S. citizens. Twelve percent are first-generation college students [first in their family to go to college], and more than 47% are receiving financial aid from the college." Further, she noted, "For almost 15% of you, English is not your first language. You speak 31 different languages in your homes (one of you can actually sing in five)." She could have added that one in eight of the students before her was a legacy, compared

with one in four in the class that had arrived 38 years before. One statistic had barely changed: the percentage of students from private schools (39% in 1967 versus 38% in 2005).[1] What had changed were the students selected from those schools. Today many of the students of color come to the college from private schools.

Although just over half of the students entering the college in 2005 were able to pay the full costs of over $40,000 a year without financial aid, the differences between the two classes at Amherst represented a sea change, and one with important social and educational implications. The vastly increased diversity in race and class in the student body not only afforded opportunities for social mobility to underrepresented minorities and students with less financial means; it also had the potential to increase students' understanding of those different from themselves and to challenge previous notions about race and class. But was that potential realized? And what challenges did students of different classes and races face in coming to live together in a diverse community? These two questions and their answers serve as the focus of this book.

How Admissions Policies Have Changed—and Why

Many currents coursing through our society over those 38 years contributed to redirecting admission to the college and thus transforming the Amherst community. Until the 1960s, elite private colleges and universities in the United States recruited their students largely from New England boarding schools, private day schools, and a select few public schools almost exclusively located in wealthy suburban communities. The students selected were affluent, white, and well-rounded, not one-sidedly intellectual. These schools gave preferential treatment to legacies and went to some lengths to develop policies to exclude Jews.[2]

The emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960s brought with it a dawning awareness among leaders of government, business, and education of the importance of reaching out to underrepresented minorities. Amherst's efforts to diversify the student body were part of a larger pattern occurring at private colleges and universities. According to sociologist Jerome Karabel, the powers that be, including those in higher education, came to recognize that "taking strong measures to rectify racial injustice was not simply a moral imperative; it was also a matter of enlightened self-interest at a time when the existing order was under challenge."[3] Along with the movement to provide equal legal rights to minorities came the idea of "affirmative action," righting past racial wrongs by giving a leg up to disadvantaged blacks. In addition, the argument was made that more diversity on campus was to every-

one's benefit, an argument articulated by former Harvard University president Neil Rudenstine:

> In our world today, it is not enough for us and our students to acknowledge, in an abstract sense, that other kinds of people, with other modes of thought and feeling and action, exist somewhere—unseen, unheard, unvisited, and unknown. We must interact directly with a substantial portion of that larger universe. There must be opportunities to hear different views directly—face to face—from people who embody them. No formal academic study can replace continued association with others who are different from ourselves, and who challenge our preconceptions, prejudices, and assumptions, even as we challenge theirs.[4]

In response to this shift in awareness, in the late sixties colleges such as Amherst began to reach out to underrepresented minorities and actively recruit students who, prior to the civil rights movement, had little access to these institutions. Minority students were given an admissions advantage at elite schools through race-sensitive admissions policies.[5] Other changes in admissions followed, including a decline in the preference given to students from prep schools and to legacies (the 431 entering freshmen at Amherst in 2005 came from 342 different secondary schools). The rise of the women's movement in the wake of the civil rights movement helped impel the admittance of women to formerly all-male institutions. Amherst admitted its first women students in 1975. Jews were accepted in increasingly large numbers, as were students from a broader range of public schools and a broader range of states across America and countries around the world.[6]

In addition to racial and gender diversity, in recent years elite colleges and universities have turned their focus to another underrepresented group, white students who have few financial resources or whose parents have never attended college. Arguments are being made for increasing opportunities for lower-income students based on the principles of promoting social mobility, social justice, and equity. Concern has grown at the elite schools that they are "reproducing social advantage instead of serving as an engine of mobility."[7] William Bowen, former president of Princeton University, and his colleagues argue that social mobility is an important societal goal, and that "the sense of democratic legitimacy is undermined if people believe that the rich are admitted to selective colleges and universities regardless of merit while able and deserving candidates from more modest backgrounds are turned away."[8] Lawrence Summers, former president of Harvard, argued that these schools have a "profound responsibility to help meet our national challenge of achieving equal opportunity."[9] The lack of access to elite colleges for students of

lower socioeconomic status has also been framed as a problem of lost talent in the educational system.[10] Gifted white students with little if any financial means or from families with no experience with higher education have, until recently, gone unrecruited; quite likely, they have been unaware of opportunities to attend elite schools on scholarships—opportunities that are expanding. Thus, they never got the challenges and rewards afforded by those schools.

But concern for social justice is not the only reason advanced for admitting more students with little financial means. Another argument for this change echoes the one raised by Neil Rudenstine in support of racial diversity. Anthony Marx, president of Amherst College, in 2004 argued that if we do not increase opportunities for lower-income students, "we will neither prepare any of our students for the world, nor will we serve our role in that world."[11] In his 2006 Convocation Address, he told the entering freshmen: "The fact that we are not all the same is not merely a pleasant aspect of this college: it is an essential strength. We select and gather differences purposefully, and at some expense, precisely to build that strength. We build it because we learn more than if we were or behaved as if we were all the same. . . . Your differences are also your best gifts to each other. . . . How to build a community on the basis of diversity is the pre-eminent challenge of our world and our time. If we don't do it at Amherst, we'll find it only harder beyond here."[12]

Having set the goal of creating a diverse student body at the college, Amherst goes to great lengths to find and attract students from all walks of life, from all over the United States and beyond. High school advisors, family and friends, Amherst alumni, and surveys and rankings of liberal arts colleges such as that of *U.S. News & World Report* have put Amherst on the map for some students. But in the increasingly competitive world of college recruitment for racial and economic diversity, these passive approaches have been supplanted, at Amherst and other wealthy institutions, by enormous investments of time, personnel, and money in active recruiting. The Office of Admission at Amherst uses its substantial budget to bring the college to the attention of those whom it seeks to enroll in its attempts to diversify its student body. It not only sends staff out to schools in search of students, but also brings students it wants onto campus, often in groups, sometimes individually. In recruiting black students to Amherst, programs such as Prep for Prep[13] and A Better Chance[14] are invaluable, and many minority students at the college have been in these programs or similar ones. These programs identify and work with gifted and motivated minority students from an early age (10 years old, in the case of Prep for Prep) to get them prepared for and enrolled in private preparatory schools from which they can go on to colleges that are actively looking for well-prepared minority students. In recent years Amherst has subscribed to the services of QuestBridge,[15] which finds and

then matches intellectually gifted and financially needy students of all races with colleges looking for economic as well as racial diversity. Students accepted through QuestBridge are guaranteed full scholarships for their four undergraduate years.

When Anthony Marx spoke of selecting and gathering differences "at some expense," he was understating the resources that have been put into play to create a truly diverse student body at Amherst. The work of the Office of Admission is just the beginning. The class that entered Amherst in the fall of 2005 received over $5.5 million in scholarships and grant aid that academic year from the college, with an average amount of almost $28,000 (out of the over $40,000 tuition) for each of the 47% of the students getting aid.

Benefits, Costs, and Challenges of Diversity

Considerable social science theory and research back up the belief expressed by Anthony Marx and other educators that a diverse academic community can change its members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.[16] Most of the work is directly concerned with race but is arguably applicable to social class as well. In 1954 Gordon Allport, an eminent Harvard social psychologist, wrote in his classic *The Nature of Prejudice:* "Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports . . . and if it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups."[17]

Other social scientists have found support for Allport's contact theory and have enumerated additional factors that enhance the impact of contact: greater diversity in terms of numbers belonging to the different groups increases the likelihood of social interaction across racial lines; the contact should be regular and frequent; it should occur across a variety of settings and situations; it should be personalized and allow sufficient time for development of cross-group friendships.[18] Given the pattern of segregated housing and schooling in America, many students enter college from communities that have given them little experience with peers from diverse backgrounds, whether racial or socioeconomic.[19] This lack of experience is truer for whites at Amherst than for blacks, as many of the black students have gone to predominantly white private high schools and thus have experience with the world of white wealth.[20]

The social science literature suggests that people in an in-group (e.g., the majority) tend to see members of an out-group (e.g., the minority) as homogeneous and lacking in variability, while seeing themselves as more heterogeneous.[21] This sets the stage for stereotyping. Getting to know those in the

out-group, however, gives in-groupers an opportunity to develop cognitive empathy, which entails taking another's perspective, and to reduce prejudice as they learn about the out-group and come to understand out-groupers' differing world views, norms, values, beliefs, and perceptions of the in-group.[22]

Judging from Allport's contact theory and the subsequent research, a college campus such as Amherst that has committed to creating a diverse community of students seems ideally suited to break down stereotypes. Students live on campus and interact across a variety of settings and situations. They are housed together in dormitories, eat together in a common dining hall, attend classes together, and take part in sports and other extracurricular activities on an equal-status basis. They have repeated contact on campus over a long period of time. They work cooperatively in numerous endeavors toward common goals, collaborating on group projects in class, competing as teammates in sports, rehearsing for musical or theatrical performances, publishing a magazine or newspaper. The college provides students with the opportunity to reconsider their attitudes toward those from a different social or economic class, a different race, or both. Such a community also encourages students to think about their own race and class in society. According to psychologist Nancy Cantor, such experiences "set the stage for replacing unfair stereotypes, even the favorable ones, with something more individual and realistic."[23]

While a diverse college campus seems like an ideal place to interact across the boundaries of race and class, the social science literature suggests that there are obstacles to be overcome. A college may bring together black and white, rich and poor, but psychologists Patricia Devine and Kristin Vasquez argue that students have few guidelines for "how to do the inter-group thing well."[24] Students are aware of implicit rules about speech—for example, that racial or ethnic slurs are inappropriate—but they have few guidelines for which types of actions are appropriate. Most students lack experience in producing positive inter-group interactions, and as Devine and Vasquez put it, "There is a great deal of potential for miscommunication that arises out of the expectations and concerns that both majority and minority group members bring to the interaction."[25] Students in the majority tend to discuss difficulties arising in an inter-group encounter only with members of their own group, and not with minority group members, missing the opportunity to work through their difficulties as interaction partners.[26] In describing his experience as an undergraduate at Harvard, Ross Douthat, an associate editor at the *Atlantic Monthly,* observed that "unsuspecting eighteen-year-olds are packed together in tiny spaces with people vastly different from anyone they have ever known before, relieved of adult supervision, and asked to learn from one another's differences. The nation's future, Justice Powell would say, depends upon such experiments."[27] Yet for the most part, on most campuses, the faculty and administration leave it to them to find their way.

The literature suggests that all students, black and white, lower-income and wealthy, face challenges in a diverse community. Lower-income first-generation white students face class-related difficulties at college because they differ in economic, social, and cultural capital[28] from their more affluent white counterparts and have a harder time achieving a sense of comfort and belonging.[29] One study found that these difficulties were more acute at an elite college than at a state college because of the greater disparities in economic, cultural, and social capital there.[30] The same study found that lower-income white students, and, in particular, first-generation students, who were most lacking in cultural capital, reported feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, deficiency, and exclusion; they worried about deficiencies in their linguistic skills, clothing, and knowledge of how to act in certain social situations.

Concerns have been raised about costs of affirmative action to racial minorities at selective institutions.[31] Dinesh D'Souza, a fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, claimed in his book *Illiberal Education*, "American universities are quite willing to sacrifice the future happiness of many young blacks and Hispanics to achieve diversity, proportional representation, and what they consider to be multicultural progress."[32] Sociologist Joe Feagin and his colleagues found that blacks at a predominantly white university faced stereotyping, hostility, and discrimination, and reported "an environment filled with racial obstacles and hurdles created not only by other students but also by white instructors, other staff members, and security personnel."[33] Other evidence, however, shows that race-sensitive admission has not harmed the beneficiaries.[34] Based on data from 28 academically selective colleges and universities, William Bowen and Derek Bok, former presidents of Princeton and Harvard respectively, found that the more selective the institution blacks attended, the lower the dropout rate, the higher the likelihood of graduating and earning an advanced degree, the higher their satisfaction with their college experience, and the higher their eventual salaries.[35]

Bowen and Bok's data do not cover the day-to-day experiences of blacks on these campuses.[36] Nor do we have much data about the challenges faced by wealthy black students, who have lived in a largely white world, when they are expected to connect to other blacks on campus. Even affluent whites, whose wealth, in the past, might well have assured them status, face challenges on a campus where values and norms are changing.

The Research Study

What, then, actually happens to students at Amherst? What is the return to the college community on its enormous investment in diversity? As noted

earlier, Amherst College president Anthony Marx told students, "Your differences are your best gifts to each other." Are those gifts actually used? Does having racial, ethnic, and class diversity at Amherst result in people interacting in ways that enhance their understanding of those different from themselves, as Allport's theory would suggest? Or do students self-segregate? Do previous notions about race and class go unchallenged and unchanged? And what price, if any, is paid for those gifts? What challenges do students from distinct racial and socioeconomic worlds face in coming to live together at Amherst?

The chapters that follow show the results of a study conducted at Amherst College over the 2005–2006 academic year involving 58 students in their first year, the year that an increasing body of evidence points to as critical to overall success at college.[37] The study was designed to discover the effects, if any, of living in a diverse community over the course of students' first year at the college, and what challenges they faced based on their race and social class. The day-to-day experiences of students with their peers were explored, bearing in mind the finding of Alexander Astin, professor emeritus of higher education and organizational change, that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years."[38]

The students were selected from four distinct groups: (1) affluent whites, (2) affluent blacks, (3) whites with high financial need, limited family education, or both, and (4) blacks with high financial need, limited family education, or both. Through on-line questionnaires and face-to-face interviews at the beginning and end of their freshman year, the 58 students (roughly 15 from each group) laid out their notions of race and class, their past experiences with diversity, their experiences with diversity during their first year at Amherst, and what challenges and changes, if any, these experiences led to in their thinking or behavior.

Students had many stories to tell as they became part of a diverse community and faced the challenges that entailed. Their responses were as varied as the students themselves. Some embraced those challenges; others paid little attention to those different from themselves. This book will take a close look at these 58 entering freshmen and explore what they actually experienced and learned about race and class on their journey through their first year. For example, Emily, a young white woman from a small farming community, spoke of being raised in a world that was almost exclusively white. Blacks were routinely referred to as "niggers," she reported in her fall interview, and folks in her community, including herself, carried stereotypes of blacks gleaned from television. During her first weeks at Amherst, Emily was sitting at a table in the dining hall when three male students of color came and sat with her. "I was very uncomfortable because I just didn't know how

to interact with them. Because I hadn't met them, I didn't know anything about them. . . . So I was just sitting there, trying to think of what to say or how to begin a conversation while trying to stay politically correct." How would this diverse world she was now entering affect her? Would she achieve a degree of comfort? Would she remain worried about what words might come out of her mouth? Would she come to feel some rapport with and understanding of students of color, people so unlike those with whom she was raised?

And what about Matthew, an affluent prep school legacy? Asked if social class would make a difference in choosing friends at the college, he answered: "A little bit. It sounds insensitive to say, but college is so much about making connections and your relationships with people. It is about learning, but the most important thing is networking at college. Period. And the networking will help you get the jobs or know people or whatever, and the people who are more likely to help you get the jobs you're looking for are of a certain class. That's not to say that kids of another class won't extend this, but say the probability that a relationship is going to help you later down the line is going to be much higher if it's a person from a higher class than another." Would this young man's experience at Amherst make him view class and his classmates differently over time? Would he develop friendships with students from class backgrounds different from his own?

Brianna, a low-income black student, the youngest of many siblings and the first and only child in her family to graduate from high school, came to Amherst carrying the un-asked-for burdens of early success, of being held out as an example to the younger children in her extended family, of great expectations and vicarious triumphs. "I'm representing my whole race, and I don't like that, 'cause it's like I shouldn't be made to represent my whole race. . . . If I don't become this world-renowned doctor, then I kind of feel I didn't meet [my family's] expectations because that's what they wanted me to do." She carries much greater pressures to succeed than the average affluent white student. Would these added pressures be too great a burden? How would she fit in among predominantly white, affluent students?

William, a black student from a wealthy family, could not at first find his place at Amherst. "Black people made jokes about me being lighter skin . . . so I felt at first I couldn't fit in with them. . . . And then white people, I mean, I don't completely fit in." He spoke of an additional challenge posed by his race: "At nighttime, people will see you, especially a big male such as myself, being black, as potentially a sex offender, or an attacker. I've noticed that sometimes when I come back late from the gym, people, girls especially, will avoid eye contact and be kind of shy around me." Would he find a comfortable place on campus with blacks and whites? Would other students recognize and get beyond the stereotypes they hold about him?

Robert, a white student with high financial need, spoke of his sense of not belonging as he listened to a wealthy white friend talking with others in the dorm about things like "summers in the Hamptons and he takes his friend's yacht over there every summer. To me, this is something that I used to see on TV. A summer in the Hamptons, it's something you read about in magazines. I don't feel comfortable chipping in because I don't know what they're talking about." Would he continue to feel excluded from conversations? Would he likewise feel excluded from activities because he lacked sufficient discretionary funds?

Overview

In the chapters that follow, I provide details about the study I conducted, drawing heavily on the voices of the 58 students to convey the results of my research. These students spoke openly and candidly about the very pressing but politically charged issues of race and class, and they expressed in compelling ways why race and class matter and require our attention. In Chapter 2 I describe how the participants in the study were selected, their backgrounds, and their prior experiences with race and class. I go over how the data were collected at the beginning and end of the academic year, and then analyzed. The next seven chapters present the results of the study.[39]

Chapter 3 focuses on students' expectations about the year and their initial experiences on campus. How aware or concerned were they about the possessions they brought with them, about their clothes and appearance, their knowledge of and experiences in the world? What did students perceive to be the advantages or drawbacks of their race and class status over the early weeks at college? I will examine the nature and extent of the concerns they voiced about the expected role of race and class in their experiences in the year ahead.

In Chapter 4 I look at the complex issues students faced in coping with class differences on campus. They were confronted daily with great disparities in wealth and had to find ways to handle these differences. This chapter opens with an analysis of students' understanding of their own position on the class spectrum and its consequences. It considers the extent to which students desired to hide their class backgrounds: affluent students, black and white, wanting to hide their privilege out of guilt or fear of being stereotyped negatively by classmates; lower-income students wanting to hide what they lacked out of feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. How salient was social class in their daily lives as the year progressed? Finally, I discuss the benefits students with high financial need, black and white, derived from relationships with other students from a similar class background.

Chapter 5 looks at the extent to which students segregated themselves by race or class or formed cross-race and cross-class relationships.[40] Did the

students in the study get to know students of another race and class well? I look at the challenges entailed in reaching across race and class lines, the value placed on doing so, and the extent to which this occurred. I examine whether students felt left out based on social class from interactions such as eating out, spring break trips, or off-campus activities and describe the types of efforts students made to bridge race and class differences and be inclusive.

In Chapters 6 and 7 the focus shifts to what benefits, if any, students gained from diversity both inside and outside the classroom. Race is the focus of Chapter 6 and class the focus of Chapter 7. Inter-group contact on campus fulfilled the optimal conditions Allport described in *The Nature of Prejudice* and thus had the potential to reduce prejudice. Further, according to social psychologist Thomas Pettigrew, inter-group contact can lead to "learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal."[41] These chapters address two vital questions. Did students gain a new understanding of their own racial or class group or of other races and classes over the course of the year? Did they become more aware of and sensitive to other people's lives?

I examine the race- and class-based stereotypes students held and then look at whether informal interaction helped break down stereotypes and revise assumptions and misconceptions about members of different races and social classes. I look at the extent to which students engaged in meaningful, honest conversations about racial and class issues, and what they learned from these conversations. I examine issues of classroom diversity, a term used by social scientists to refer to both learning about diverse groups through the formal curriculum and learning by interacting with diverse peers in the classroom.[42] I report on whether students took courses that addressed issues of race and class, and what, if anything, they learned from hearing in class the personal perspectives of students from a different race or class. I look at classroom issues that arose for black students: feelings about being the only black person in a class, about being called upon to present the "black" perspective, and about hearing insensitive or racist comments or negative stereotypes presented in the classroom.

Chapter 8 explores some of the unique issues blacks faced on campus.[43] The blacks in the first-year class were an extremely heterogeneous group, differing, for example, in their class backgrounds, in whether they self-identified as African American, Caribbean American, biracial, or mixed-race, in the degree to which race was central to their self-definition, in their attitudes and beliefs about how African Americans should live and interact with society, and in the darkness of their skin. I discuss the benefits blacks gained from connections to and bonding with other blacks on campus, as well as the issues that arose as they negotiated their differences among themselves. I look

at questions black students faced about not being "black enough," or of "acting white"—not because of their academic achievement, but because of their speech, clothes, tastes in music, skin tone, or choice of friends. I examine the expectations many black students felt to hang out with black students rather than whites, to join the Black Student Union, or to date blacks, and the sanctions they experienced for not meeting these expectations. I then move on to the complexities of black-white relationships, the racial joking on campus, the difficulty of building trust in black-white relationships, the problem of handling racist comments, and what language was appropriate and which terms might offend.

In Chapter 9 I examine the extent to which race and class were related to students' self-reports about their academic experience and their social and psychological well-being at the end of the year. In the academic realm, were there differences along racial and class lines in how well students felt they had been prepared for the academic challenges at college, in their academic confidence, and in their academic success, as measured by final grades? Students from families with high financial need and/or limited family education were now on a trajectory of upward social mobility. What costs, if any, might accompany the benefits of an Amherst education? I consider the ways in which these students were changing, including their perceptions of the families and communities they were leaving behind.[44] Having opportunities that their parents and siblings lacked could be a burden, as such students carried high expectations from immediate and extended family members.

In the final chapter I summarize the study's findings about race- and class-based diversity, looking at the challenges that were faced and the learning that occurred. The college has made great strides toward becoming a diverse community and allowing students to learn from these differences, but more could be done to take full advantage of the opportunities that such a diverse community offers. While students are being asked to adjust to the culture of an elite college, are there adjustments that the college must make to incorporate a more diverse student body? This chapter suggests ways in which administrators and educators might better facilitate students' learning from differences and support them around matters of race and class.