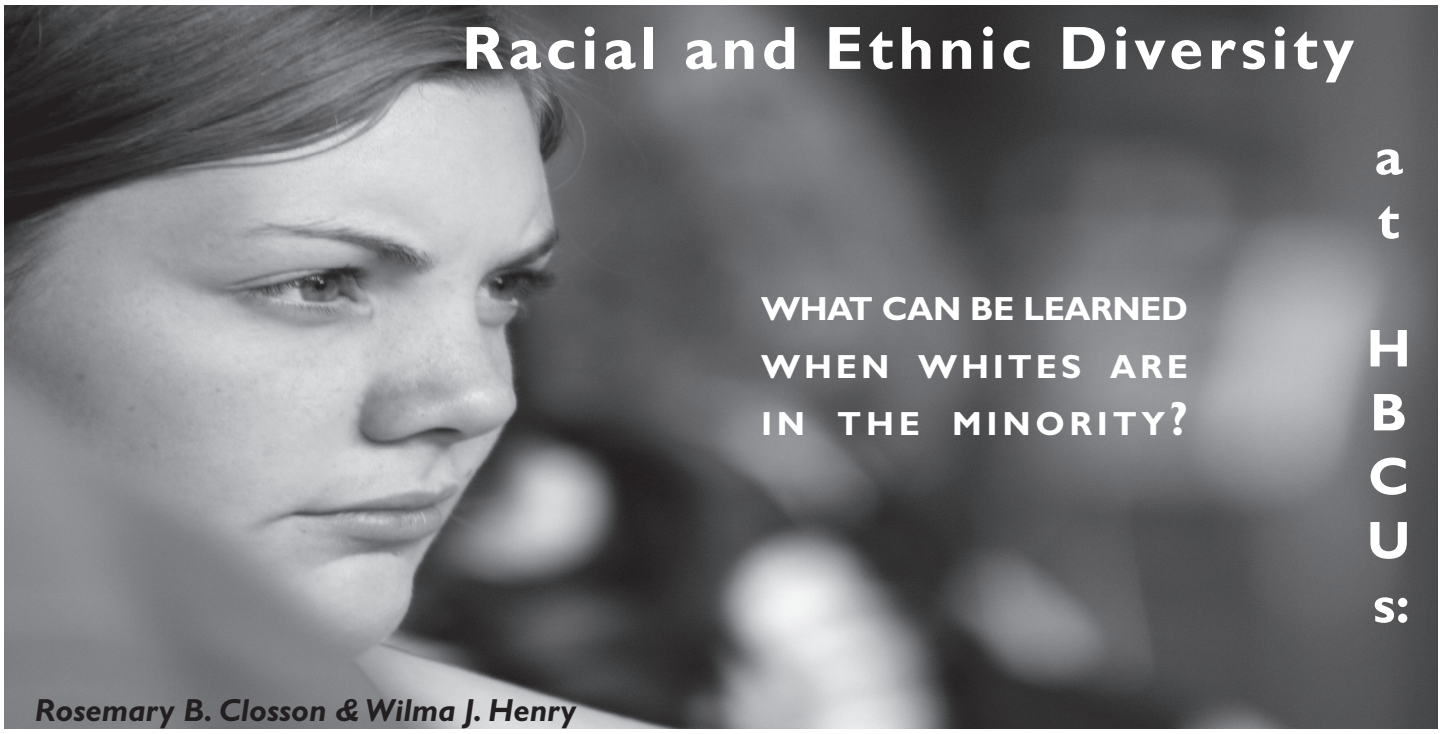

Racial and Ethnic Diversity at HBCUs:

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED WHEN WHITES ARE IN THE MINORITY?

Rosemary B. Closson & Wilma J. Henry

There was a book lying near Alice on the table…she turned over the leaves, to find some part that she could read, "—for it's all in some language I don't know," she said to herself. She puzzled over this for some time, but at last a bright thought struck her. "Why it's a Looking glass book, of course! And if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again." (Lewis Carroll, p. 29)

The demographics in the United States will continue to shift towards a more culturally diverse society (Judy & D'Amico, 1997); meanwhile, although diversity programs and multiculturalism efforts have multiplied and overt racist actions have declined, recent events such as Michael Richards' racial tirade in New York, Don Imus' racial slurs, and Hurricane Katrina's aftermath in New Orleans sobered us all into the recognition that a racial divide remains.

From 1954 until the present there has been an increasing emphasis within higher education institutions regarding the value of racial and ethnic diversity on college and university campuses. As Foster, Guyden, and Miller (1999) note "The civil rights movement pervaded every aspect of American life and integration slowly began to change the contours of the Black community" (p. 9). Moreover, Howell and Tuitt (2003) refer to the 1960s as the initial stages of transforming higher education institutions into multicultural organizations. Since the mid 1970s there has been a 65 percent increase—from 20,000 to nearly 34,000—in White students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005).

Prompted by state and government mandates, the diversity movement took hold. Especially throughout the South, entire states such as North Carolina, Tennessee, and Mississippi were court ordered to improve the racial balance in their state funded colleges (Bolsover, G. 2003). For example North Carolina's five Black public institutions reported a 12.5 percent increase in White students. Court orders charged Tennessee State to increase its non-Black enrollment by 50 percent and three universities in Mississippi were ordered to increase by at least 10 percent (Thomas-Lester, 2004, p. 3).

For some readers the perspective of the preceding paragraphs may be somewhat disorienting because the viewpoint presented is that of the historically Black university (HBCU). It is not the standpoint from which we typically view issues of diversity and multiculturalism despite the fact that HBCUs have consistently had racially and ethnically diverse student bodies and faculty for many years.

The personal experience of one of the co-authors in the 1960s at Howard University was that she was taught by a Chinese professor, several White professors, and of course numerous African American professors. Howard University's student body, even in the 1960s, was African American, Caribbean American, African, and East Indian.

Because historically many HBCUs were founded by churches or mission societies, White faculty were the first faculty in historically Black colleges. These instructors were predominantly clergy, missionaries, and teachers trained in northern universities (Foster, Guyden & Miller, 1999). In fact, the level of faculty diversity on HBCU campuses led Slater (1993) to state that the "only significant diversity in academic ranks in this country exists in Black colleges and universities."

Our Question

In this article we wonder—why has the academic community not stepped through the looking glass to see what diversity looks like and what might be learned when Whites are in the minority? We believe there is much to be learned from exploring the experience of White college students and their perceptions of race and racism when they become "temporary minorities" (Hall & Closson, 2005) on historically Black campuses. We explore the possible meaning embedded in the absence of such research. We will return to this discussion at the end of this article.

The Current Picture

On historically White campuses (HWCs) by 2015 students of color are expected to constitute two-fifths of undergraduate college enrollment (Carnevale

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& Fry, 2000). Bowen and Bok (1998) have gone so far as to say that preparing students to function in a diverse society is a core mission of the academy. Even though the diversity on college campuses as an antidote to prejudice and discrimination is not universally agreed upon (Bloom, 1987 and D'Souza, 1991), the value of increased minority enrollment in general is viewed by higher education scholars as an opportunity to prepare students to flourish in an increasingly diverse society (Astin, 1993).

For example, several research efforts have demonstrated a beneficial relationship between informal interactional diversity (students' engagement with diverse peers) and educational outcomes—defined as learning (e.g., active thinking skills), and democratic outcomes (e.g., perspective taking) (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002).

Diversity and the HBCU

Through an overview of publications regarding college classroom teaching, campus social climate, and social adjustment, we underscore an ellipsis in thinking and research that we believe is meaningful. Based on the literature we reviewed, we have found that diversity when discussed, whether it be about the classroom or about the campus environment, refers almost exclusively to the experience of African Americans, Asians, and other people of color in White environments.

Of course, this is not too surprising given that the American civil rights movement with regard to higher education was centered around increased access for African Americans to historically White colleges and universities. Segregation gave birth to the historically Black university, which in the context of this article is significant, given that at the same time that the civil rights movement advocated for access to White colleges it was not for the most part advocating the demise of the HBCU.

However, this demise has happened in the case of Lincoln University in Missouri and Bluefield State University in West Virginia, to name two. We turn the reader's attention to this phenomena in order to highlight the knife's edge existence of HBCUs. And it is to a discussion of the current challenges of the HBCU that we turn now.

Challenges of the HBCU

The challenges of historically Black colleges and universities to retain a viable role in higher education are multiple. There are pressures to increase minority enrollment (non-African American), strengthen and maintain institutional quality, and clarify the unique function of the historically Black college and/or university (HBCU) (Hall & Closson, 2005).

Conrad and Brier (1997) have noted that graduate programs at HBCUs in particular have increased in size and diversity. Master's program offerings in high-demand fields attract larger numbers of White students, often at much larger rates than undergraduates. Increasing complexities in graduate student populations at HBCUs raise questions regarding student interaction and experience, especially for White students at a predominantly Black institution.

For example, programs and policies designed to attract and retain students must on the one hand promote inclusion and at the same time stay anchored in cultural heritage and a dedication to serving the Black community. This requires a unique perspective in higher education (Hall & Closson, 2005).

The identity of the HBCU is perhaps the most critical challenge of all. Should HBCUs be race neutral or race conscious (Hall & Closson, 2005 p. 41)? Race neutral institutions lack the expectation to address issues of race overtly. Race conscious HBCUs might incorporate explicit dialogue about race, oppression, and perhaps Afrocentrism into their course offerings and research agendas.

Learning about Race and Racism Formally

We know that teaching about race is not easy. We know this primarily from accounts of teaching about race on historically White campuses. We know less about the dynamics when African Americans predominate in the classroom and Whites are in the minority. Along with the benefits of diverse campus environments and their positive influence on learning, diversity has brought many challenges to higher education. Teaching about racial difference in the college classroom is one of these challenges and has received a fair amount of attention in the higher education literature.

We read through five key texts (four of which were edited volumes and two were collections of articles from the *Harvard Educational Review*) regarding the teaching of race on college campuses: *What We Still Don't Know about Teaching Race* (Hughes, 2005), *Race and Higher Education* (Howell & Tuitt, 2003), *When Race Breaks Out* (Fox, 2001), *Multicultural Teaching at the Universtiy* (Schoem, 1993), and *Teaching for Change* (Geismar & Nicoleau, 1993). These five texts presented the teaching experiences of 66 faculty[1] teaching about race.

In only one of these books was the HBCU a point of discussion. None included HBCUs as a teaching site for an examination of how race might be taught in a predominantly Black setting. Cleveland (in Hughes, 2005), the single author who mentions teaching at an HBCU in the teaching texts identified above, noted a difference between his experience teaching race at an HBCU and teaching race on an HWC. Specifically he noted that at the HBCU he assumed that the Black students would understand that African Americans were oppressed. This was not the case and he found himself, to his chagrin, persuading the Black students to accept his position (Cleveland in Hughes, 2005). In hindsight, he believes that he should have instead focused on encouraging the Black students to think critically.

In a departure from the bulk of literature on teaching race, Sibulkin writes about her experience as a White faculty member on an HBCU campus (in Foster, Guyden, & Miller, 1999). Most of the authors in *Affirmed Action* (Foster et al.) discuss their experience at a more personal level, but from Sibulkin we hear about the potential of the HBCU classroom. She notes that the HBCU classroom is an excellent context for instruction and research from a multicultural perspective.

In her essay Sibulkin also mentions her attendance at a Ford Diversity Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, where she says "It was recognized that most HBCUs were misguided to think that because they were predominantly Black that they were sensitive to issues of diversity" (p. 62). Sibulkins' view is that both HBCUs and HWCs need to be educated about the advantages of including multicultural perspectives. Now let us turn to a discussion of the experiences of White faculty on predominantly Black campuses.

Learning about Race and Racism Informally: White Instructors as Minorities

"The first day of class I really felt White" (Henzy, 1999, p.17). "For the first time I experienced what it was like to be the 'other'"(Redinger, p. 30). "On the stairwell I realized I was the only White face in sight" (Bales, 1999, p. 38). These are significant insights White faculty gained while teaching on HBCU campuses. In Foster, Guyden, and Miller's text, whether White faculty had deliberately sought out an HBCU experience or were forced, due to a slack academic job market, to seek employment at an HBCU campus, almost all noted that they had learned much

about race and racism as a result of their experience.

Redinger, who taught at Bennett and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, both in Greensboro, was surprised to find that African American students were as new to Afrocentric thinking as he was. In similar fashion, DeLamotte (1999), while teaching at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, was amazed in 1961 to find that not all Black students were involved in civil rights work or interested in social justice causes. Most were interested in "grades, dates, ball games, sororities and fraternities" (p. 158).

However, several faculty found they had to change their teaching approach. For example, Jur (1999), a math instructor, changed from a static style that she had used at a historically White college to a more dynamic dialogic style. Her style, honed at HWCs, was one in which she presented a "carefully developed exposition on the days' topics, asked if there were any questions on homework assignments and answered the few questions that arose" (p. 74). At FAMU, however, she found the students more active and a dynamic dialogue developed between her and the students.

DeLamotte's (1999) commitment as a White person teaching at an HBCU was that he wanted Black students to know one White person "from the inside out"—consequently he "revealed much of himself" to his students (p. 159). Redinger (1999) realized while teaching at an HBCU that his knowledge and thus his course content about Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle did not acknowledge in what ways these early philosopher's thinking was drawn from older traditions in the "Egyptian 'Mysteries'" (p. 35).

Overall, faculty in *Affirmed Action* (Foster et al. 1999) describe the ways in which their sojourn at HBCUs helped them to identify not only false assumptions they held about African American students but these faculty discovered a racialization of knowledge, they learned more about teaching, learning, and their own racial privilege. As an example, Frankle (1999), who in 1999 had been at LeMoyne-Owen for 30 years, said she learned that it was White privilege that had enabled her to ignore race as a self-characterization for the first 20 years of her life (p. 81).

The lessons learned by these White faculty were not explicitly taught. These faculty did not attend HBCUs *to* learn about race but they *did* learn about race and racism through many informal channels, from comments made by students, by trying to solve teaching and learning problems in their classrooms, by challenges from administrators to Afrocentrize curricula, and by reflecting on their own feelings of isolation and uncertainty.

These White faculty admit they have been transformed through their HBCU experience. What we do not know is whether a similar dynamic occurs for White students who attend HBCUs.

White Students as Minorities

Studies attempting to document the effect of diversity on student populations have generally focused on the adjustment of African American students to a predominantly White environment (Schwitzer, Ancis, & Griffin, 1998; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Astin, 1990; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hart, 1984).

In fact, much of the effort to understand the effects of racial differences in general have centered on those who are the minority in the larger American population, i.e., African Americans, the Spanish-speaking, and Asians. There are far fewer studies that consider the experiences of the majority when they become the minority and interestingly many of these were done in the 1970s and 1980s—Hall and Closson (2005) is the most recent.

Conrad and Brier (1997), Elam (1978), Brown (1981), and Nixon and Henry (1990) are studies that examined the factors contributing to White students choosing an HBCU and also provided a profile of the White student who chooses to be a temporary minority (Hall & Closson, 2005). In 1972, Brown and Stein in addition to exploring reasons for choosing an HBCU, described how White students handled acceptance or lack thereof from Black peers.

In 1984, Libarkin interviewed a number of White graduate students attending an HBCU regarding their satisfaction level at the institution. Later in 1992, Nixon and Henry studied reports of racial incidents directed toward White students in South Carolina, and Georgia.

Future growth in college student populations will be from the increase of students of color. In 2000 the Educational Testing Service reported that as soon as 2015 the number of minority students in the District of Columbia, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico will exceed the number of White students (Carnevale & Fry, 2000, p. 1). The circumstance that currently may be seen as an anomaly on the HBCU campus will be a more widespread phenomenon by 2015. Now let us turn to a reflective discussion regarding possible reasons for the paucity of research exploring White minority experiences.

Invisible Centers and Color Blindness

Hegemonic conceptualization of the research problem may contribute some understanding of the lack of research about the White experience on HBCU campuses. Hegemony is a preponderant cultural or intellectual influence that predominates in a society and is often so imperceptibly infused that the non-dominant or marginalized do not realize the extent to which they have adopted a view that may control and even exclude them. Audre Lorde (cited in Ferguson, 1990) has characterized hegemony in terms of a "mythical norm" that is "White, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (p. 9). Ferguson (1990) referred to hegemony as an invisible center to which all else is compared. The absence of the HBCU from diversity discourse may be because we have a generalized mental model of universities and colleges as White and we have perhaps assumed, if we have thought about them at all, that HBCUs were entirely Black.

On the other hand, researching the Black experience on White campuses does seem a logical place to have started, especially when early in the civil rights movement integration of White campuses was featured so prominently in the news and the resistance to and concern for the safety of Black students was so palpable. White students attending Black colleges were perhaps observed more as a curiosity or a political statement of goodwill.

The post-civil rights research stream included a focus on inclusion and racial identity formation as researchers used a variety of frameworks to explore and examine the contribution of various ethnic and racial groups to American society and culture. This scholarship has multiple strands, e.g., Black Studies, racial identity, antiracism, Latino/a Studies, and multicultural studies.

Underlying this research are assumptions that by highlighting the contribution of minority groups and their cultures the majority would learn to recognize and appreciate important contributions of minority races and cultures and thus be more likely to include 'others.' More recently, White studies has developed as a means to focus on White racism and privilege.

Now scholars are reversing the lens so that it focuses on the majority (White persons) and suggests that the extent to which majority members can "see" themselves as racialized actors is the extent to which they may begin to take assertive steps towards creating a more inclusive society. Some

authors metaphorically refer to this as unveiling Whiteness (Hitchcock, 2002) in order that the social and structural influences of Whiteness can be made more apparent. Now, 50 years post civil rights, the perniciousness of racism perhaps suggests we consider stepping through the looking glass to examine the White temporary minority experience (Hall & Closson).

Within a critical race framework one might explain the absence of HBCUs from the diversity discourse as a case of color-blindness. Critical race theory (CRT) posits that racism is endemic (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) and thus normal in our society which requires a position of skepticism in regard to claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Further, CRT maintains that color-blindness can be understood as a "cover" to maintain the self-interests of the dominant group. Ladson-Billings characterizes CRT as an intellectual tool (1998, p.10). From this perspective, how could one interpret the meaning of the HBCU lacunae in the higher education diversity research? Do White researchers have a vested interest in not examining the temporary White minority experience? Do African American scholars have a vested interest in not conducting this research? We find this direction unhelpful.

However, CRT depends on the Gramscian notion of hegemony (described earlier) viewed through a racial lens and so CRT theorists question the diversity movement because they see it as a means to defuse the issue of White racism. Examination of those who are temporary minorities has the potential to expose not only profound learning and consequent positive perspective transformation on the issue of racism, but the reverse is also a possibility. In other words, such research may reveal that White racism is entrenched following such an experience.

And again, what about African American scholars? Why have they not explored this gap in the literature? We do not wish to ignore the right of scholars to choose their own research direction, but rather we seek to poke around for reasons why, to us, a glaring gap in the literature has remained for so long a time.

Historically black colleges and universities, whose permission, of course, is required to conduct such research, may feel vulnerable and do not wish to risk their campuses being viewed as anything but welcoming to White students because, although there have been increases in the enrollment of White students, there has by no means been a groundswell. There are still those who question the relevance of the post-civil rights HBCU and its place in higher education is by no means secure.

The types of negative experiences and complaints that African American students have had about White campuses, if uttered by White students at an HBCU, could be much more damaging—and then there is the problem of misrepresentation. Willie (2003), who researched African American graduates of Northwestern and Howard University, notes in her appendix the following quote from Gurin and Epps regarding their 1975 study entitled *Black Consciousness, Identity, and Achievement*:

> [L]egitimate suspicion [among respondents] also resulted from the publication of a few uninformed, insensitive, and invidious accounts of the historically Black colleges that nonetheless received unusual attention in educational circles. (p.166)

All of the above represent our thoughts about why HBCUs are not currently represented in the higher education literature and research on diversity. It is clear that such research will not be easy work, but it is our belief that a full picture of the effectiveness of campus diversity—structural, classroom, and interactional—will not be fully understood until the experiences at the HBCU are included.

Note

[1] In the edited texts each author in a multi-authored chapter was counted. Authors were not counted twice even if they had more than one chapter. In Fox's (2001) text, although 35 faculty were interviewed for her study, because they were not individually identified only Fox was included in the total number of 66.

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