

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE
SWARTHMORE, PENNSYLVANIA
PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

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Note: The American Council on Education
special report referred to on pages 2 and 3
is available in the President's Office for
those who did not see it previously.



Association of American Colleges

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Racial Problems and Academic Programs

Dear Colleague,

The Commission on Liberal Learning and the Commission on Students and Faculty have both been giving earnest consideration to the problems faced by our member colleges in meeting the special needs of black students and the larger responsibility of academic institutions to help close the widening gulf between the dominant majority and racial minorities within the American nation.

Those problems are rendered complex and intractable by the intertwining of emotional with intellectual factors, as well as by ethical, legal and political considerations. Our efforts to grapple with the problems must, in the opinion of the standing commissions, take account of at least six basic propositions:

- (1) American educational programs are intellectually defective so long as they rest solely on various interpretations of the European or Greco-Hebraic cultural heritage. Neglect of the cultural experience of minority groups, and especially the Afro-American group, in American society is as indefensible as neglect of the experience of non-Western societies.
- (2) Racial prejudice, conscious and unconscious, in the dominant majority is in part the result of almost complete lack of contact on equal terms with members of racial minorities and pervasive ignorance of their contributions to the development of American society.
- (3) The general welfare of the nation, no less than simple justice, requires that members of minority groups have equal opportunities with members of the majority group for unfettered self-development and professional achievement.
- (4) At the same time, the aspirations of the more sensitive and public-spirited members of minority groups will not be satisfied with unlimited opportunities for self-advancement within American society as it is, at the price of turning their backs on their own distinctive heritage and the needs of their less fortunate fellows. They may not wish to be lifted out of the ghetto but to help lift the ghetto above itself.

(5) It is not enough to provide academic programs that will satisfy the above needs and to ensure complete equality of access to such programs. Many members of minority groups not only lack intellectual preparation for a worthwhile undergraduate experience but have to surmount grievous psychological barriers to the development of personal identity and self-respect. They need the support of both fellowship and privacy in their effort to cope with an environment which at the outset is largely alien and to make it their own. More than other students, they need a sense of being masters of their own destiny, a sense of that power of choice whose absence is the most degrading and debilitating characteristic of an underprivileged status. Surely this is a large part of what black students are saying when they speak of "black power" and "decolonization of the mind."

(6) The nation owes a debt of gratitude to its minorities for giving a fresh and morally compelling impetus to the movement for restoring relevance to academic programs, not in any trivial or opportunistic sense but in the sense that the worth of an educational system is ultimately measured by the quality of the society it serves.

Many colleges and universities, foundations and other agencies, public and private, are striving to respond to the challenge by devising black studies programs and related enterprises -- with or without full appreciation of the practical difficulties to be overcome and the intricate inter-relationships of the factors involved. The Association of American Colleges is anxious to play its part without adding to the confusion by duplicating and competing with the endeavors of other organizations. We believe that a broad range of imaginative experiments needs to be coupled with a concerted effort to coordinate them under a common strategy.

We therefore welcome the decision of the American Council on Education to make the theme of its 1969 annual meeting "The Campus and the Racial Crisis." We understand that, in preparation for that meeting, the Council is assembling a mass of relevant information such as has hitherto been lacking.

I should like to commend to your attention the enclosed Special Report on "Black Studies Programs and Civil Rights," which endeavors to classify the various kinds of activities that are emerging under the general rubric of black studies and to summarize the issues that remain to be resolved. I believe you will find the report illuminating and helpful, but I should also be grateful if, between now and July 1st,

you would examine it critically in the light of your own experience and let me know if you think that any significant issues have been omitted. It would be helpful if you would go on to outline any programs or projects in this area which your institution has undertaken, has in contemplation, or would wish to recommend for cooperative action. The aim of the exercise is to ensure that any concerted attack on the problems in question takes full account of the distinctive functions and potential contributions of liberal arts colleges.

Cordially,

Richard H. Sullivan
Richard H. Sullivan
President

Enclosure