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## Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education

Texas State University

November 2, 2006

Good Afternoon! It is a pleasure to have been invited to this conference on "Race, Ethnicity, and Place," here at Texas State University. ~~I want to personally thank your President, Dr. Denise M. Trauth, for this invitation.~~ I know that this University has long had an interest in these subjects: I first came here in 1981 to attend a lecture by one of the nation's most prominent scholars, Dr. John Hope Franklin. Then, in the early 1990s, my colleague, Ricardo Romo, who is now President of UTSA, and I, both history professors at UT-Austin at the time, gave presentations on this campus.

*I am really here on fact-finding mission for my son. He is considering two schools in the Tx State sys.*

~~Because of my scholarly interest, which started in graduate school in 1972 with my writing a paper on "Black Higher Education in Kentucky," and increased when I became a History Professor, and most surely has continued in my present position as a College President, I have often been invited to various forums to discuss some aspect of higher education.~~

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This week started out with my receiving an invitation that is truly an honor: I received a call, followed by a letter and packet, informing me that the Secretary of the Department of Education, Margaret Spellings, has nominated me to serve on the National Advisory Committee on Institution Quality and Integrity. This committee advises the Secretary with regard to her responsibility for publishing a list of State approved and National recognized accrediting agencies, assesses the process of eligibility, and certification of institution of higher education and the provision of student financial aid. There will be a lot of work, <sup>but</sup> ~~and~~ I am delighted to be engaged in this endeavor.

By nature, I am an optimistic person, and this carries over in my discussion of education. Like many Americans, I believe firmly that an education can make all of the difference in the life of an individual, that it can dramatically change one's station in life. When putting this thesis into an historical context, I can cite numerous examples that all of us are very familiar with. And, we all know of someone in contemporary society where this is still the case for them as well.

Yet, as an historian of race relations in the United States, and even more specifically of the Afro-American experience, I point out the contradictions and dilemma that blacks have faced that ~~has~~ resulted in the American dream often being beyond their reach. Segregation and discrimination have most surely existed in higher education and ~~led to~~ <sup>led to</sup> blacks failing to achieve anywhere near what whites have accomplished. In other words, both the black success stories, that we are all very familiar with, and the failures of blacks to move up in spite of the many educational opportunities that have existed are both real.

*Very sensitive: Hispanics could attend white colleges. This school admitted the 1st 100 years ago. UT did so even earlier. Herman Sweet case of 1950.*

The quest for equal opportunity for blacks (and other minorities to a certain degree) occurred throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Most of you are familiar with the Plessy vs. Ferguson Decision of 1896; this Supreme Court ruling would be used to justify “separate but unequal” in education for at least 5 decades and would mean that catching up would be all but impossible once it had been overturned in 1954.

But part of the contradiction is that for those black Americans who are part of the generation dubbed the “Baby Boomers,” i.e., because we were part of that population explosion that occurred between World War 2 and the early 1960s, we have benefited greatly just like our white colleagues ~~because~~ <sup>from</sup> increased access in higher education.

When I tell you that I started college in 1968 and obtained the Ph.D. degree in History from Duke University in 1977, in other words, after 9 years, you might conclude that “the brother is smart!” I wish that was true; but that is simply not the case regarding me. **Instead the truth is that I came along at the right time and the Federal Government, and to a lesser extent some State Governments, but most surely various national Foundations such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, were determined to bring about changes. This is the key.**

The Brown Decision became the driving force for change in spite of the widespread opposition to it.

Appropriately we are here today at the University where President Lyndon B. Johnson attended. He deserves high praise for the changes that occurred. Note the programs that I personally benefited from while in high school.

Then, there were white educators at places like the University of Kentucky and Duke University who were committed.

**A thought: back then, American society acknowledged that the playing field had not been level for blacks and they found it appropriate to devise programs to specifically benefit blacks. We don't feel comfortable with doing that today.**

It is during the 1970s-1990s that my sense of optimism led me to believe that equality would be achieved in my life time and that all blacks and other minorities had to do <sup>WAS</sup> to take advantage of the opportunities that existed. I was slow to realize that many blacks were frustrated, and these were not just the people who failed to go to College, but were often blacks who had attended some of the most prestigious Universities in this country and were employed at these institutions. I heard people talk about the lack of courses being “relevant” to them; that what existed was tokenism; that there was segregation within the supposedly integrated institutions. **Above all, they explained that whites were at best insensitive and worst, racist.**

*I heard blacks call Duke University, “The Plantation.”*

The often bitter debate on Multiculturalism, which is a fore runner to today’s discussions on Diversity.

Here in Texas would be the Hopwood Decision.

**A key event was May 2004, the fifth anniversary of the Brown Decision.** Many of the black scholars and leaders who I have so admired centered their comments around the failure or shortcomings of Brown. That made me think deeply about our country and what has occurred in the area of race relations and black progress or the lack thereof. My conclusion: “Progress along the way.”

*I reminded people about J. H. Franklin's experiences in N.C. during his early life.*

*I told people about going to UK in 1962... & now I have an Honorary Doctorate & I am in their Distinguished Hall.*

## Conclusion

Toward the end of his life, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., asked the question, "Where Do We Go From Here?" My conclusion is not hardly profound and is actually consistent with the way I have always viewed what has occurred during my life time.

I believe that leaders in higher education are concerned about access, that because of cost and even because of an uneven playing field, that many minorities have not been able to take advantage of going to a University.

I believe we understand better today, than we did two decades ago, that both race and class are issues that must be addressed in our society.

Yet, there are some things that greatly concern me. Many people, of all races, do not see the need to press fully for equal opportunities for some Americans who are in need of assistance. And, this is not just whites being unconcerned about the plight of blacks. At my University, there are blacks opposed to the opening of our doors to Hispanic young people. *It is as if we believe today that helping someone will be done by taking something away from me. That clearly was not the belief when I was assisted in the 1960s & 1970s.*



Also, my University is engaged in another aspect of the problem: the University of Houston, (a school that I want to call pre-dominantly white but their leaders disagree with that designation but at the very least they cannot deny that it is a historically white University) is attempting to move into our service area. And, when doing so, they have said that there are no civil rights violation. Even if that is true, they seem not to appreciate “the spirit of the law” that we live under in this nation.

We must continue to push for changes in the area of Higher Education. These changes will come at a high cost. These changes are needed just as much as they were when I was a young person in the 1950s.