

The New Campus Racism: What's Going On?

By Noel Jacob Kent

EDITOR'S NOTE: Racism, noted Noel Jacob Kent in this 1996 article, has been surging on our campuses since at least the late 1980s. The only credible solution to the "new racism," he suggests, lies in implementing a transformative strategy. Such a strategy begins with the professoriate examining this profound moral crisis—and getting its academic houses in order.

"Racism and bigotry are back on the campus with a vengeance."

—Professor William Damon
Clark University

Colleges and universities could once pretend to offer a refuge from the swirling gonisms of a highly racialized society. But no longer.

The incidence of verbal and physical harassments and abuses directed against Latino, Asian and Jewish-Americans, foreign students, and, above all, African-Americans has been surging on our campuses since at least the late 1980s.

Why so much bigotry and intolerance at institutions long seen as

dedicated to reason and the search for truth?

Part of the answer is that life on campus closely mirrors the dominant patterns and attitudes of the larger society. In both, racial structures and meanings are in flux and hotly contested, and racism, driven by a profound "moral crisis," has proven an entrenched and virulent social force.

Another part of the answer: Our economy in the late 20th Century is going through its most profound restructuring since the dawn of the Industrial Age. The consequences of that restructuring—diminished opportunity, stagnating wages, a decline in the quality of life for many families—

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directly conflict with the mythic American dream. The result: depression, confusion, and wide-ranging anger throughout the society, a reaction that the campus is not immune from.

Here we will attempt to demonstrate how these interrelated phenomena fuel the rise of intolerance on our campuses. We also hope to suggest how campuses might respond to the current crisis with transformative solutions, rather than the current response, which has usually been reactive, after-the-fact, and too little-too late.

The great triumph of the civil rights movement of the 1960s was to end legal segregation in the United States. A consequence of that movement was that white attitudes toward African-American inclusion shifted demonstrably. The idea of Black participation in formerly white-monopolized spheres of national life became widely accepted throughout the society. A wholly new set of opportunities and possibilities seemed to open up.

The transformation, however, remained both uneven and incomplete—an odd “mixture of striking movement and surface change.”¹ The belief in equal opportunity did not lead to widespread acceptance of equal opportunity in practice. Rather than the steady decline of

discrimination and maturing of the “colorblind society” envisioned by integrationists, “racial meanings” remained bitterly contested. The battle for full participation continued as “trench warfare” in bureaucracies and courts.²

Given the nation’s history and the psychological and material advantages that skin pigmentation confers upon whites, the emergence of a “New Racism” is hardly surprising. Anti-Black prejudice continues as a cultural norm central to the white American worldview and identity.³ Indeed, as a “fluid, variable and open ended process,” racism simply plays too many essential roles to be easily abandoned.⁴

If the United States in 1996 no longer perfectly fits the “two societies, one Black, one white—separate and unequal,” described by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1969, it is not so very different either. Older theories of biological inferiority and white supremacy have given way to a new view that combines negative Black stereotypes with the glorification of individualism and meritocracy.

The accepted “wisdom” of the “new racism” is that “a racially balanced society” now provides equal opportunity for all to pursue the American Good Life.⁵ Individuals can rise above their environment. There is opportunity for all. Failure results from personal inadequacies,

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splintered families, and a culture of failure.

Minority poverty, labor market ghettoization, segregated neighborhoods, and disproportionate rates of incarceration are attributed to the moral failure of the people involved.⁶ Groups "lagging behind are in essence faulted for their own circumstances."⁷

Crudely overt displays of racism represent a second level of the "New Racism." Its proponents are the fairly large number of whites who remain unable "to perceive Black members as legitimate full members of the polity."⁸

These undisguised acts of bigotry take the form of everyday harassment, violence, and intimidation, ranging from street epithets and the primitive stereotypes bandied about during radio talk shows to the vicious assaults orchestrated by vanguard neo-Nazis, Klan, and other white supremacists.⁹ What marks the latter groups, notes Robert Cahill, who monitored white supremacist movements in the Northwest, are their "proudly explicit" racial beliefs, "radical alienation from racial amalgamation," and violence.¹⁰

The "New Racism" also has its political front. The New Right, the champion of white protectionism and identity, has been a key player

in an unlikely coalition of Southern whites, Northern blue collars, religious fundamentalists, and the affluent that practically monopolized the White House from 1968 through 1992. The GOP has been especially effective in turning *crime, busing, welfare, and quotas* into highly charged codewords.

All these approaches feed into each other. In Professor Mari Matsuda's succinct phrase: "Gutter racism, parlor racism, corporate racism and government racism work in coordination, reinforcing existing conditions of domination."¹¹

The timing is certainly opportune: For the first time since the civil rights era, a majority of whites believe equal rights have been "pushed too far in this country." Much of the Republican Party's 1994 electoral success stemmed from playing to white voter anger at federal social programs and "enforced diversity." The leading 1996 Republican presidential candidates uniformly bashed affirmative action programs, and one, Pat Buchanan, made their abolition a central plank of his platform.¹²

In retrospect, the right-wing success in shifting the national debate from the historic foundations of minority poverty and disadvantage toward the twin myths of total individual responsibility and "color-blindness" has been nothing short of phenomenal.

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That our colleges and universities are not immune to the racial polarization of society at large should come as no surprise. Well before entering college, young people have gotten the messages—subtle and not-so-subtle—from family, peers, and the media about the appropriate racial hierarchy.¹³

Many white college students, those from highly segregated suburbs and smaller cities, carry the larger society's stereotypes of Blacks as violent criminals/willing welfare dependents. Given their narrow cultural framework, it is difficult for these students to accept non-white presence and cultural expressions on campus. For them, African-American students may appear to be intruders. At least some whites associate difference in skin color with disadvantage and, often, deviance.¹⁴

But there are also many white students who genuinely support the idea of a color-blind society. For them, the intense skepticism of Blacks to this idea is troubling if not bewildering. They have come face to face with a basic obstacle to real communication: the radically differing views Black and white students have about the meaning of racism. That even the most well intentioned whites and Blacks have entirely different reference points becomes startlingly evident not only over campus issues, but in national and

international events like the Gulf War, the O.J. Simpson trial verdict, the Million Man March.

Professor Robert Blauner of the University of California at Berkeley argues that there "are two languages of race in America" and that young whites and Blacks are talking past each other when they discuss "racism." What whites see as peripheral and mainly an historic artifact, Blacks view as absolutely "central" to U.S. history and contemporary society. "Whites," he says, "locate racism in color consciousness and its absence in color blindness," whereas Blacks expand the meaning to include power, position, and equality in the structuring of American society.¹⁵

Blauner points out that when Black students act in conventionally American *ethnic* ways—by forming Black Student Unions, for instance—whites interpret this as racial exclusion. White students don't understand why "students of color insistently underscore their sense of difference, their affirmation of racial and ethnic membership." In contrast, minorities of color "sense a kind of racism in the whites' assumption that minorities must assimilate to mainstream values and styles."¹⁶

This is an increasing point of conflict as campus Blacks mirror

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the “defensive ethnicity” many whites have adopted. Integration has always taken a psychic toll. Now across the spectrum of African-American society—and especially on campuses—cynicism about the entire undertaking is increasing. Black separatism, once a tactic in the integration struggle, has emerged as an end in itself.

African-American students have always had difficulty in “recognizing” themselves and their heritage on white majority campuses.¹⁷ “I know that whites are never going to respect me on face value,” says an Atlanta student.¹⁸ “It feels like I don’t exist here,” commented one Black student in the midst of a 1995 dispute at the College of the Holy Cross over the barring of whites from a Black campus organization.¹⁹

Since most campuses don’t provide a supportive infrastructure, and have a generally unfavorable racial climate, African-Americans increasingly form their own campus enclaves. “It’s a Black thing. You wouldn’t understand” read the t-shirts worn by college students, who increasingly choose to segregate themselves from whites in dormitories.²⁰

To comprehend the larger forces driving campus racism, we should look at recent structural changes in the United States and the flourishing of old and new fears.

The escalating racial polarization of American society is intertwined with what Professor Charles Maier calls a national “moral crisis.” Americans are no longer able to make sense of, much less respond to, the massive changes now confronting them.

Moreover, many certainties and rituals that once provided meaning and stability are now threatened. A public—adrift and dislocated—no longer knows what social progress means. That same public has grown disenchanting with traditional political processes incapable of providing protection.²¹

Americans recite a litany of fears, ranging from loss of jobs and medical coverage to rising taxes. The sense of every-citizen-as-victim is mirrored on primetime television sitcoms and is the food and drink of immensely popular, immensely spiteful talkshow hosts.

Public discussion is saturated with mean-spirited rhetoric catering to knee-jerk instinct and irrationality. Working people rant at being victimized, yet direct their rage at those even more powerless. The inevitable search for different “others” to blame helps to repress both conflicts within the white majority itself and the need to address society’s most deep rooted problems.

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At the heart of this contemporary crisis is the collision between the American Dream's myth of individual upward mobility and the reality of the radical restructuring of the U.S. political economy.

The American Dream tells us that if you work hard, you succeed. The nation's vast resources, technical ingenuity, and fluid social system will reward the conscientious, thrifty individual—and, if not her or him, then surely, that person's children. "Americans," remarks Paul Wachtel, "have viewed the future as rightfully providing them with more."²²

Today, however, pessimism reigns. Forty-three percent of those surveyed shortly before the 1994 election expected life to be worse by the end of the century.²³ A 1995 survey found 55 percent convinced the nation was in longterm decline.²⁴

Such pessimism flows from a quarter-century of stagnant and declining family and individual incomes and wages. Personal savings have fallen dramatically, along with discretionary incomes. The buying power of most families remains approximately at late 1970s levels.

The more than 10 million new jobs generated during the Clinton era, significant increases in the rate of women working, and multiple job

holding have not reversed income stagnation and decline. A large majority of the population has lost ground absolutely or relatively. People in the lowest income groups have lost the most.²⁵

Big Business has jettisoned the post-war social contract and consciously conducted anti-union campaigns with a vengeance and outsourced millions of high-paying jobs to cheaper labor areas. "Downsizing" has become this decade's *leitmotif*. Internal corporate labor markets now feature a core of stable, relatively privileged employees surrounded by low-paid, casual, contingent workers lacking rights or benefits.²⁶ Solid primary sector jobs, with middle class incomes, career ladders, and job security, are driven out by what Chris Tilly calls "firms that have adopted a low-wage, low skill, high turnover employment policy."²⁷

College educated workers—middle managers, engineers, professionals, and other white collar workers—have been displaced at a previously unimaginable rate, as corporations flatten hierarchies and hire fewer permanent, well-paid staff.

Youth are at the epicenter of this social earthquake. Today's young adult man is less likely than his father was at the same age to own his own home or have a secure career and opportunities for future

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mobility.²⁸ American society now mocks young people's needs for a long-term, secure place in society. The decline of homeownership opportunities has led to a sharp increase in the "unexpected home-comings" of married and unmarried 20- to 30-year olds.

Young adults share the prevailing pessimism about the future. Meanwhile, they continue to desperately cling to the disintegrating American Dream. Throughout the '90s, about three-quarters of college freshmen surveyed agreed they are in school "to be able to get a better job" and "to be able to make more money." Large majorities believe that "the chief benefit of college is that it increases one's earning power."²⁹

The latter belief does contain some truth. Higher education credentials have become more crucial than ever before for those aspiring to middle class lives.³⁰ Yet the hopes of collegians for professional jobs and pay are simply out of line with new labor market realities. Higher education no longer offers a guaranteed payoff.

The collapsed job market for college graduates of the 1970s reappeared in the early 1990s. Job prospects for the 1993 graduating class were "dismal," as fewer recruiters arrived on campuses offering fewer jobs.³¹ The mid-'90s

"prosperity" has improved things only marginally. More college graduates are working at jobs not requiring college level training.³²

Even students at the most prestigious institutions are digesting the unpalatable truth that they will wind up poorer than their parents. "There's a general sense of helplessness that students have that they're not going to be able to find a job that will pay them enough to live on," notes one college counselor.³³

This perception drives the often frantic pressures to link college and professional career. Job hunting becomes a preoccupation almost from the freshman year. The college years become more a financial investment in the future and less a *rite de passage*.

Contemporary young people, perhaps more than any other American generation before them, are trapped between the prevailing "psychology of entitlement" and an economic environment that demands austerity and sacrifice.

We have already seen how the "question of color" arrives on the campus laden with extensive ideological baggage. Now the struggle toward the always elusive goal of racial justice takes on the added dimension of scarcity: The possibility of a livable future has become scarce—for whites as well as Blacks.

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Given their increasing financial worries and their deteriorating job prospects, white college students readily perceive of themselves as victims. From a zero sum game perspective, affirmative action programs seem to further stack a deck already loaded against them. The feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and difficulties in identity formation now epidemic among youth have been identified with the propensity to scapegoat minorities.³⁴

In a culture where very often expressions of rage and frustration are directed at race, terms like “reverse racism” and “terminally Caucasian” take on real power. A white student leader organizing against the white student union at the University of Florida has summarized the mood: “There is a growing realization by white males that they no longer have their privileged advantages, who feel they may not do as well as their fathers, and they are looking for scapegoats.”³⁵

At UC Berkeley, one embittered student complains that “being white means that you’re less likely to get financial aid. It means that there are all sorts of tutoring groups and special programs that you can’t get into, because you’re not a minority.”³⁶

Underscoring these intense feelings is the fiscal crisis of higher education in the United States,

which is victimizing white students (among others). Cutbacks in federal, state, and local funding over the last decade have meant that, at a time of growing enrollments, institutions have left faculty and support positions unfilled, pared back classes, eliminated departments, and shortened library hours.³⁷

Meanwhile, as tuition and fee increases soar well beyond inflation rates, financial aid awards have diminished. Financial pressures compel many white students to spend more time working and less in school. Ironically, even as students are being whipsawed between the demands of school, work, and family life, counseling services are being cut back, too.³⁸ Some would-be full-timers are now part-timers with a long trajectory to graduation. A “ratcheting down” process forces many students to attend a lower prestige school than they might have attended only recently.

White students, reacting out of helplessness and free-floating anger, scapegoat minority students. This demonization leads to the overtly racist acts that occur on our campuses.

Colleges and universities have, of course, never been “ivory towers.” The racial divisions and economic dislocation that plague

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society as a whole play themselves out on our campuses. And never more than today.

How to break this vicious cycle of escalating campus racism and polarization? Senator Bill Bradley maintains that racism will thrive as long as “white Americans resist relinquishing the sense of entitlement skin color has given them throughout our history.”³⁹ Seldom, however, does the college experience cause students to question whether such entitlements exist. Neither do they find their own, nor their society’s, racial biases seriously challenged by the curriculum they study or the associations they make.

Few institutions mandate study of cultural identities and values. Only infrequently do white undergraduates investigate the framework in which African-Americans (among others) are marginalized by both university and larger society. For the vast majority of white students, then, college does not change their sense of race and race relations in the United States.⁴⁰

College and university administrators trying to address the race issue have tended to be reactive. They draw up guidelines for conduct, promulgate hate speech codes, and mete out punishments for campus offenders. This has raised a storm of protest and a slew of court actions.

Given the campus racial climate, firm rules to define acceptable behavior are certainly needed. Every student has a basic right to a safe and secure campus learning and living environment free from harassment. No college or university should tolerate violations of those rights. But such policies should be part of a transformative strategy that takes as its point of departure white and minority student attitudes, fears, and self-conceptions. This strategy should help students learn “the different languages of race” cited by Blauner. Make these languages mutually intelligible and students will begin to “get it.” Mutual empathy is an indispensable step toward mutual respect and cooperation.

Curriculum reform—as when Stanford broadens the canon to include non-western literature and Wisconsin-Madison requires undergraduates to take courses with an ethnic studies component—is probably the most widely used transformative vehicle. Conflict mediation programs, such as the one at UCLA which emphasizes resolving diversity related conflicts, are also critical. But developing empathy across subcultures demands more. Majority white colleges and universities must take some risky initiatives along uncharted ground. Black sensibilities and experiences

must be given widespread voice. White students, too, must have a safe and dignified way to express and work out their grievances and fears and find answers to their own questions of identity. We must not underestimate the mutual hunger for honest talk across racial bunkers. Interracial campus activities and dialogues should be encouraged, so students can appreciate each other as (different) equals and members of a community sharing similar goals. White students should have the opportunity to experience the daily realities of being “otherness” by living in a majority African-American dorm, volunteering in a minority neighborhood, or studying abroad.

Faculty are critical agents in the process. As Gay Reed suggests, learning about other cultures and “celebrating diversity” is only a minor part of understanding “the cultural and historical roots of diversity which have made it so problematic in American society.” Reed sagely

argues that faculty “need to become aware of their own personal microcultures and understand how this microculture affects and is affected by the larger macroculture.”⁴¹

Programs must move beyond the campus to creatively challenge racism in the community. White children and teenagers at the K-12 level need to be educated about the harsh historical realities of who were not allowed to be “We the People of the United States.” Researchers at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst are conducting racial and ethnic diversity and tolerance programs in those Boston elementary schools from which the university has drawn some of its more aggressively racist students. Public and private colleges might, as an institutional mission, adopt local schools for race relations education.

Higher education has a vital role to play in reversing the tide of bigotry and hate in the country, but, right now, the best contribution we can make is to begin getting our own academic houses in order. ■

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

This article was originally written to help stimulate thinking about the critical need for colleges and universities to take the initiative in challenging racism and the widening racial divide on many campuses. Progress, four years later, is slow: Few institutions have launched programs of “transformative education.”

Of course, the obstacles, including limited resources and fear of student and alumni backlash, are as formidable as ever. Sheer denial also remains a potent force—I remember one *Thought and Action* reader, a faculty member at a small Pennsylvania college, calling to say that the article had really excited him and that his college had profound racial conflicts, but the culture of denial was such that new initiatives were probably not possible.

The last four years also show that neither the nation’s “Goldilocks” economy, with its hot job prospects for certain categories of graduates, nor the popularity on campuses of Latino and hip hop music, has done much to lessen student racial stereotypes or fears and anxieties. On most campuses, *de facto* apartheid still reigns. Imaginative policies and programs in the “transformative mode” are needed now more than ever.

Endnotes

- ¹ Schuman, 1985.
- ² Omi and Winant, 1986.
- ³ Pettigrew, 1975.
- ⁴ Sivanandam, 1983.
- ⁵ Belz, 1991.
- ⁶ Lewis, 1978.
- ⁷ Sears, 1988.
- ⁸ Reed and Bond, 1991.
- ⁹ Walker, 1991.
- ¹⁰ Cahill, 1990.
- ¹¹ Matsuda, 1989.
- ¹² Walker, 1992; "In Louisiana," 1996.
- ¹³ Leo, 1993.
- ¹⁴ Jones, 1988.
- ¹⁵ Blauner, 1996.
- ¹⁶ Blauner, 1996.
- ¹⁷ Keeton and Jans, 1992.
- ¹⁸ Whittaker, 1990; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1992.
- ¹⁹ Gose, 1995.
- ²⁰ Gose, 1995.
- ²¹ Maier, 1994.
- ²² Wachtel, 1983.
- ²³ Seelye, 1994.
- ²⁴ *Money*, May 1995.
- ²⁵ Schor, 1992; Newman, 1993; Kuttner, 1995.
- ²⁶ Sweeney and Nussbaum, 1989; Howard, 1995.
- ²⁷ Tilly, 1989.
- ²⁸ Matters, 1990; *Business Week*, 1991.
- ²⁹ "Attitudes and Characteristics of College Freshmen," 1992b, 1994.
- ³⁰ "K Mart Economy," 1990.
- ³¹ *Wall Street Journal*, 1993.
- ³² Mishel and Bernstein, 1995.
- ³³ Cage, 1992.
- ³⁴ Yinger, 1983.
- ³⁵ Wilson, 1990.
- ³⁶ Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1990.
- ³⁷ Adams and Palmer, 1993.
- ³⁸ Cage, 1992

³⁹ Kramer, 1992.

⁴⁰ Ramirez, 1988.

⁴¹ Reed, 1996

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