The Continuing Campus Divide

_by Terry Jones_

A dean resigns and a search committee for his replacement is selected and begins its job. This simple act occurs regularly on campuses throughout the nation. Periodically, though, things happen that disturb the business-as-usual cycle of such searches and provide a glimpse into problems that fester just below the surface. In this article, I describe a dean search at the California State University Hayward (now California State University East Bay) and how a seemingly innocuous suggestion resulted in considerable faculty turmoil. An examination of what happened here, I believe will provide a picture of the racial dynamics that operate to maintain white privilege in the California state university system and on campuses throughout the nation. And until we come to grips with the issues raised here, we will be unable to achieve the cultural, racial, and intellectual variety higher education needs in an increasingly diverse America.

**BACKGROUND**

In 1963, the California State University system opened a campus in Hayward (CSUH) on the eastern side of San Francisco Bay. At the time, Hayward was a sleepy little town 18 miles south of Oakland. Its chief claim to fame was a tomato processing plant that spewed an odor for miles in every direction. A combination of politics, economics, cheap land, and cultural and racial insensitivity worked in

_Terry Jones_, professor and chair of the Department of Social Work at California State University East Bay, teaches the history of social work, social policy and a variety of courses on race and race relations. His research interests include social policy, affirmative action and race. He is a recipient of the Human and Civil Rights Award of the California Faculty Association, the Outstanding Professor Award for CSU Hayward (1990), and is past chair of the National Education Association’s Human and Civil Rights Committee.
concert to ensure a bypass of Oakland, arguably the Black cultural capital of the state and home to the largest Black population in northern California.

Few Blacks lived in Hayward when CSUH was established and fewer still ventured there for employment, recreation, or other purposes. Hayward was perceived as a “good” place to locate a college because it was far removed from the revolutionary atmosphere of 1960s Berkeley and Oakland and the urban tensions caused by large concentrations of the poor and people of color. In addition, CSUH was built high on a hill, with almost no public transportation linking it to the urban communities to the North.

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The urban communities to the North. What developed, not surprisingly, was an all-white administration, an almost all-white faculty, and a student body with but a sprinkling of minority students. Since its inception, CSU Hayward has been saddled with the image of a “white” institution where people of color—especially African Americans—are to be seen but not heard. Despite these hurdles, as times and the demographic make-up of the area changed, the population at CSUH changed also, and minority students now make up more than half of the students at the institution.

Most of the communities within the university’s service area now are multi-ethnic also. According to the 2000 census, Alameda County, where both Oakland and Hayward are located, had the following racial demographics: White, 49 percent, Asian American, 20 percent, Hispanic, 19 percent, and African American, 15 percent. In Contra Costa County, CSUH’s other major service area east of Alameda County, the percentages in 2000 had changed also, with minorities 35 percent of the population.¹ In 2005, partly to position itself as a larger, regional entity, CSUH changed its name to CSU East Bay.

Even though there are considerable minority populations in the service area and in the student body, faculty of color remain absent in any significant numbers in the professoriate. At CSU East Bay, African Americans are 7.2 percent of the total faculty, a percentage that represents both Africans and African Americans. In real numbers there are 33 African or African American faculty members, down 17 from a high of 50 as recently as the mid-1990s.² Nationally, fewer than 6 percent
of faculty in public colleges and universities are African American and the figures for Latinos are even worse at approximately 3 percent. At CSU East Bay, there still is not one tenure-track African American professor in the departments of history, political science, anthropology, or criminal justice, a reason where there are African Americans available in the work force pool in significant numbers. In the history department two recent searches failed to produce an African American faculty member although they were represented in the pool of finalists. It is this sort of track record that angers the African American faculty and further alienates them. The conclusion they reach is that even when qualified minority faculty candidates are found they somehow get disqualified.

Over the past 13 years, there have been seven deans in the CSUH College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences (CLASS). The first served for many years before retiring. Since then, a series of “permanent” and interim deans occupied the position. Turnover is common throughout CSU East Bay’s administrative ranks and, from the perspective of minority faculty, in too many cases the replacements are white males. For much of the university’s history, the administration and the white faculty have lamented their inability to attract and hire “qualified” minority faculty or administrators. Rarely have I heard white officials use the term “qualified” to describe white candidates. The university had trainings and workshops, and developed manuals and procedures, but the yield of minority faculty continues to be low. The inauspicious beginning of the most recent dean search that I describe here might shed some light on why this is so.

In a prelude to the search for the dean of CLASS, the chair of the search committee sent an e-mail to the faculty listserv in which he noted:

[The College] has been in search of an outside leader for over a decade. A great deal of effort and money has been poured into this Sisyphean toil. All of the school and administration cannot help but ask, what can be done better this time? The current search committee will devote our collective talents to this round, but I cannot honestly say that we have more to offer than the prior failed teams.

Between the pressure from above and below and the amount of learning neces-
sary to understand a school that lumps most of the range of human expression and scholarship in its subject matter, the long search for outside leadership has proven fruitless. To focus on recruiting to get another external boss to eventually fail and join a department as instant senior faculty is to simply choose to ignore our collective experience. Speaking for myself only, I am quite sure that if we had moved to democratically elected deans serving for fixed terms the past years would have proven far less vexing.

For a number of us—14 or 15 faculty of color and white faculty members in the college—who had been working for years to make real the university’s commitment to diversity and affirmative action in hiring, this e-mail was a red flag. We saw it as an attempt to circumvent the university’s affirmative action plan and to instead follow the “business as usual” practice—prevalent not just in our college but throughout the university—of thwarting the university’s affirmative action procedures and hiring someone’s old crony from down the hall.

In a university with a racially diverse faculty and administration, in which minorities are represented in significant numbers throughout, an internal search would not necessarily be harmful to the university’s claim to be an affirmative action employer. But given the low numbers of faculty of color on our campus and even fewer minorities in faculty leadership positions—and a majority of departments with no African-American faculty representation at all—a call for an internal search or a departmental election virtually ensured that no person of color would be seriously considered for the position.
After some discussions, our group decided that this pronouncement by the search committee chair was so inappropriate that it invalidated the search and so embarrassing to the university that the chair should resign that position. We called upon him to do that. But in a private meeting with two of us from the group, the chair, while conceding that he’d made a mistake by sending the e-mail, said that he had not intended to bypass the affirmative action procedures and refused to step down. When he refused to resign, our group sent an e-mail to the school list-serv with copies to the president and other administrators explaining why we thought the search committee chair had biased the search. Specifically, we wrote that the chair’s message was irresponsible, expressed a bias against external candidates, and potentially exposed the university to bias charges. We again called for him to step down as chair of the search committee. We also contacted the affirmative action officer and the special assistant to the president, asking that they investigate the matter. They “promised” to look into the situation.

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What happened then was significant. Normally, controversial incidents create a rush of e-mail responses on the faculty listserv. But very few people stepped forward to express their views or concerns about the search committee controversy. The response from one segment of the faculty was shocking. This group of our colleagues—altogether about seven or eight—sent e-mails to the list attacking me as a “self-avowed keeper of the black flame,” whose “personal mission is to place as many blacks in faculty and administrative positions as possible.” One accused me of “playing the big nationalist,” while another claimed I was “guilt tripping liberals.” Still another denigrated my colleagues, claiming, “ironically, he has co-signers (except one or two) that follow in knee-jerk fashion.”

The attackers accused us of “playing the race card,” and one accused us of labeling the chair a racist and defended him against a charge that we hadn’t made. Another wrote, “It is quite a stretch to read _____’s message about the search as hostile or even insensitive to minority candidates.” They did everything but address our concerns that the search had been biased by the actions of the chair.

Shortly after we sent our e-mail and the defenders of the search committee
chair sent theirs, the provost met with the entire search committee. The chair did resign his post (although he remained on the committee), and the search committee, with a new chair, went on with its work. Thus, seemingly, the discussion ended. Yet in another way, it continued, but underground. During the episode, I received numerous calls, e-mails, and notes from faculty expressing support for our protest, but few of these colleagues risked going public with their support. Even some who opposed our efforts let it be known that they thought the search committee chair’s e-mail had been a serious error. But no one would speak publicly.

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One European-American faculty member did raise her head and attempt to set the record straight, but there were no responses to her e-mail. When race is the issue, people get quiet, cautious, and tentative. Fear cuts off effective discussion and the ability to problem-solve. So, once more, a controversy with racial overtones came to the fore on campus, and just about everyone buried their heads. Those of us who did stick our necks out were never publicly attacked, but we did risk becoming marginalized for our lack of civility in interfering with “business as usual” on campus.

Why did we send the message provoking this controversy and unsettling our relationships with our colleagues? To understand why we did what we did and why the faculty had such widely differing views about what happened, it is important to face some truths about the history of faculty relations on our campus and at others across the nation. It also helps to look at how power replicates itself in terms of race, and how race impacts the day-to-day lives of faculty.

At CSU East Bay, there has been a long history of animosity between faculty of color and the white faculty and administration. African-American faculty in particular report feelings of alienation and disrespect by white faculty as a source of constant tension. They feel that they are excluded from participation in governance of the university. These feelings are not unlike those expressed by faculty of color nationally, as echoed in the findings of a 1997 study by the Higher Education Research Institute that found faculty of color are twice as likely as white faculty to identify subtle discrimination as a source of stress. In part
because of this history, when the situation with the search arose on our campus, faculty of color reasoned that if there were a genuine interest in increasing diversity on campus, the search committee would want to cast its net wide, rather than doing a room-to-room search on campus.

According to recruitment theory, the more thorough the search process and the wider the net is cast, the better the possibility of attracting quality candidates. Such an open, deliberate, and widespread search process also is believed to be the best way to attract minority candidates. The process sends a clear signal to minorities that the search is fair and not slanted in favor of an internal candidate. An internal search, faculty of color feared, would not produce a diverse pool but a candidate who would continue business as usual. The constant drumbeat at this university over the past 30 years is one of white faculty and administration claiming they are doing all they can but just can’t find qualified faculty of color.

In this case, the search committee chair appears to have assumed that his opinion on how to conduct the search was more valuable than that of human resources experts. But I don’t believe his actions were consciously racist. Rather, I believe they resulted from a lack of awareness. Race reared its head because most of those in power at CSU East Bay are white and, when the issue arose, they recognized their whiteness and that there are few people of color in real decision making positions in either the informal or formal structure of the university. Such recognition creates fear of being revealed as a racist in a racist institution.

As Derrick Bell points out in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, racism is more than bad white folks whose discriminatory predilections can be controlled by well-informed laws, vigorously enforced. Traditional civil rights laws tend to be ineffective because they are built on a law enforcement model. They assume that most citizens will obey the law. But the law enforcement model for civil rights breaks down when a great number of whites are willing—because of convenience, habit, distaste, fear, or simple preference—to violate the law. It then becomes almost impossible to enforce because so many whites, though not discriminating themselves, identify more easily with those who do than with their victims.
Bell puts his finger on the nature of the problem with race relations in the academy. It is not so much that our European-American colleagues are incapable of knowing and understanding race and racism. European-American faculty members who commit acts construed to be insensitive racially are not usually one-dimensional card-carrying racists. To the contrary, they are friends and colleagues of other European-American faculty who know, value, and respect them. In a disagreement or a dispute such as the one described here, it is easier for them to believe those accused, especially if accused by a person of color, because of what sociologists refer to as a consciousness of kind. Most white faculty members have no, or very few, such relationships with African-Americans or other people of color and, therefore, have less ability to empathize, sympathize, or see their world view as valid. This leads to a propensity to accept the foibles of their European-American colleagues around issues identified as racial by people of color.

Those who are part of the power structure are typically unaware of the nature of that structure and how it impacts minorities. Trower and Chait document how women and people of color are adversely affected by the conventional academic culture. In the traditional institution, a hierarchical, competitive, one-way-of-doing-things mindset serves to perpetuate the dominant (white) academic model. They write in Harvard Magazine.

People in powerful positions—professors, department chairs, faculty senate officers, deans, provosts, and presidents—are well situated to articulate and perpetuate a university’ prevalent culture. After all, these individuals, almost by definition, have been well-served by the prevalent norms. Women and minorities, on the other hand, are both under-represented in leadership roles and lack a critical mass—circumstances that afford them little leverage to reduce or eliminate cultural barriers to change. To compound the problem, some members of the majority, for reasons of self-interest or self-defined notions of ‘quality,’ are reluctant to grant newcomers a toehold. As a result, the status quo proves to be a formidable and intractable force.

Similarly, Susan Kiyomi Serrano, found that “the discrimination that some groups suffer results not from the tyrannical acts of a dominant rule, but from the
daily practices of a generally well-intentioned society—it is embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols.” The isolation of minority faculty and a failure to include African-Americans in both formal and informal decision making helps create an unhealthy racial climate. The power of racial thinking is reinforced by the inability of too many to admit its existence. When apparent racial incidents occur, we are quick to either deny them or to dismiss them as “isolated incidents.”

Because racism has become less blatant over the years, a kind of blissful ignorance has taken hold in our society. In Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audi-

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ences, and the Myth of the American Dream, Jhally and Lewis argue that the increased appearance of Blacks in middle- and upper-class settings—whether fictional, such as television shows or in real life situations such as higher education—results in a subtle form of racism. While Blacks and other minorities are no longer portrayed in a crude Amos and Andy fashion and, in fact, are often presented as successful within the larger white culture, those who don’t succeed are perceived as being failures. “The only way to explain the failure of most black people to achieve what the Huxtables [on The Cosby Show] achieved,” they write, “is to see most black people as intrinsically lazy or stupid.”

In higher education, there is a similar reality. White faculty ask about minorities: Why haven’t they achieved positions of leadership? Why haven’t their numbers increased? Thanks to what Alphonso Pinkney calls the “myth of black progress,” white faculty are accustomed to the idea that minorities can fit in, and the vast majority believe inclusion to be a good thing. So if they don’t fit in or get in, it must be a personal failing because the system certainly encourages success.

Business as usual means the white faculty leadership behaves as if they know about people of color and what is good and bad, right and wrong in race relations. African-Americans and other people of color do this, too. We “know” all there is to know about “those” people. In fact, we believe we must “know” in order to avoid the wrath of more powerful whites in American society. This is the duality W.E.B. DuBois talked about in reference to African-Americans needing to be proficient in two worlds, one Black and the other white. DuBois is right, in that
African-Americans and other people of color are far more aware of and informed about whites than whites are about African-Americans and other people of color. Out of necessity, people of color have become knowledgeable about whites. Whites, because of their privilege in society, suffer no penalty for their ignorance of Blacks and other minority populations.

In the public arena—faculty meetings, academic senate meetings, and other public gatherings where there is an interracial mixture—people of color tend to be on guard, looking for signs of danger, insult, or contempt in order to position themselves for reaction. Whites, on the other hand, are often not aware they are being scrutinized, believing they “know” and are in charge. They are not usually aware that they are in danger of displaying racism or insensitivity as perceived by people of color. A failure by a committee chair to recognize a person of color trying to make a point in a meeting, the emphasis on one point over another, an “insensitive” remark about affirmative action, or the assignment of an unpopular teaching assignment to an African-American faculty member are all potential signals to people of color of racism in the behavior of whites. Whites might think these are overreactions, but should consider that in the academy people of color are outnumbered, believe they have little power, and are therefore on guard.

Invariably, white faculty and faculty of color come to the university community from vastly different private worlds that are, for the most part, rigidly segregated along racial lines. Our loved ones, our friends, and even close associates tend to be from our own group. Within the confines of our private or primary group relations, we do discuss race, and we have little difficulty expressing our opinions about race and racial issues. But in interracial or public settings, such conversations don’t take place because there is the ever-present danger that one will say something that will be misunderstood, or that one will fall into the unenviable position of having one’s racial ignorance revealed. For African-Americans and other minority faculty, there is the fear that you will be punished, denied tenure or promotion, or passed over for the administrative position you covet if you speak out or appear to have the least bit of racial consciousness. Therefore, most play it
safe and stay away from the danger of racial issues in the hope of being rewarded, or at least escaping punishment.

At CSU East Bay, once the issue surrounding the search committee chair got framed as it did, communication shut down and a chill enveloped the incident. It does not take too many conflicts or blow-ups between whites and faculty of color for both groups to become defensive. A way of “being” develops between the groups where no serious discussions take place. A racial etiquette develops where whites attempt to be civil and deal with racial issues by denying their existence, and African-Americans and other people of color agree not to bring up difficult dialogues on race and racism. In fact, if people of color initiate discussions about race or racism or suggest that some action of whites is racist, they run the risk of being isolated and marginalized for breaking the code of civility between the races.

On the other side, white faculty members fear they will do something to be singled out as racist, and there is perhaps no greater fear among whites in the academy than to be accused of being a racist. What develops because of this fear on both sides is a code of silence. Race and racism are submerged in the culture of the academy. This type of behavior gives the impression of normalcy even when the behavior demonstrated by both groups is highly abnormal.

What happened on our campus after the controversy died down is that the search proceeded under the direction of a new chair with the utmost caution. The net was cast wide. The committee bent over backwards to make sure there were minority candidates in the pool, and in the end an African-American, Alden Reimonenq, a professor of English and interim dean of the College of Humanities at CSU Northridge, accepted the position of dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at CSU East Bay. The dean, now in his third year, seems to be well respected by all segments of the CLASS faculty. But the controversy over the e-mail from the search committee chair calling for an internal search, our reaction to what we saw as the impropriety of the chair’s message, and the reaction of a group of CLASS faculty to what they perceived to be the impropriety of our challenge,
this entire controversy has never again seen the light of day.

This should not be—although I’ve learned many lessons from this “tainted” search, lessons I believe may have value at my university and beyond. The first is that bias is more than the clear violation of official rules, regulations, and laws of a society. Frequently, bias is masked in unofficial practices and “neutral” standards we unofficially apply. Bias is not always done with evil intent or even knowingly. Second, when issues are perceived as racial, conversations go under-

When issues are perceived as racial, conversations go underground and there is a reluctance to engage in constructive dialogue. Studs Terkel found, while researching Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession, that race is never far from our consciousness and we sometimes discuss it within our respective “tribes” but hardly ever between “tribes.” Although discussions about race are difficult, they are, nonetheless, important if we wish to move beyond a climate of mistrust and misunderstanding. Third, European-American colleagues who appear to agree with the perspective of the minority group are reluctant to publicly acknowledge their agreement. They will often call or in a private meeting acknowledge the validity of an argument put forth by faculty of color but do not have the stomach for public acknowledgments.

What can be done? European-American faculty and faculty of color are in need of continuous dialogue on race in the academy. This dialogue must involve both the formal and informal leadership of the university. We also have to develop strategies that protect people of color who engage in these discussions, as well as white faculty who dare to challenge the status quo, because there are consequences to challenging “business as usual” on campuses.

Such efforts to promote dialogue should not be stand-alone feel-good sessions but must be a meaningful part of the deliberative planning process of our institutions. Faculty of color should be viewed as multidimensional full participants in the fabric of the university, not as minority specialists. Additionally, the concept of majority rules is of little value in the university unless it is accompanied with an attendant respect for an appreciation of the needs and condition of the minority.

One popular excuse for the lack of women and minority candidates is that
there are too few women and minorities with the requisite degrees. Many call this the “pipeline problem” and bemoan the lack of diversity from which to choose. But, according to Trower and Chait, this only acknowledges part of the problem.

“In fact,” they write, “even if the pipeline were awash with women and minorities, a fundamental challenge would remain: the pipeline empties into territory women and faculty of color too often experience as uninviting, unaccommodating, and unappealing.” Finally, top administrators cannot wait on the sidelines to see which way the wind is blowing. They must show leadership from the start on issues of race, diversity, and multiculturalism.

Possibly, during the CSU East Bay dean search, we attempted to interject “truth” in a form unfamiliar to our white colleagues. This produced fear, resistance, and anger, making it difficult for our colleagues to respond to our concerns. Possibly, because of the outsider status of faculty of color in the university, there was resentment and resistance to us raising such concerns. Whatever the reasons for the peculiar reaction of our colleagues, this incident provides a teachable moment for us all. In a race-conscious society how do we more appropriately respond to one another across race lines?

What is certain is that the conflict described above will not be the last between our faculty members. What is not as certain is whether we will learn anything from conflicts such as the one described here. To this point, on our campus, no one from either side appears willing to step forward to begin any constructive engagement. I expect better from my colleagues and hope that some will step forward and exhibit behavior more appropriate for scholars in a multicultural university. After all, if we cannot discuss these issues in the university, where can they be discussed?

ENDNOTES

1 The percentages here don’t add to 100 percent because, according the U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.”

2 IPEDS.

3 *NEA Higher Education Advocate*, vol. 21, no. 5. p. 13.

4 Because of the potentially contentious nature of this article, the authors of the e-mails cited in this article will remain anonymous.


6 Michigan State University. “Support for Hiring Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities.”

7 Bell. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, pp. 55-6.

8 The idea of a consciousness of kind was first posited by Franklin Giddings in 1922.

WORKS CITED