

Statement for AAAS/AAU Diversity Workshop

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During nearly all of the forty-five plus years that I have been involved with higher education, as a faculty member or administrator, the hope of achieving a more diverse faculty and student body has been a goal – too often an elusive one – of our universities. For the early years of that period, in the aftermath of the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, the goal of diversity was a given; universities “acted affirmatively” in recruiting minority students and faculty, empowered to do so by the decision of the Supreme Court in the Bakke decision of 1978. During the last couple of decades, affirmative action has been contested and challenged by court cases in Texas and Michigan; in the Michigan case in 2003, the Supreme Court overruled the adverse appellate court decision in Texas and ruled that consideration of race was permissible in university admissions where compelling reasons existed. However, affirmative action has been banned in several states through the initiative process.

Nevertheless, achieving more diverse campuses remains a central objective for our universities. We know, from several compelling studies,¹ that increasing campus diversity has profound educational advantages for all students, that achieving diversity and excellence are not mutually exclusive goals, and that the failure to reduce disparities of educational attainment among all of our citizens has profound consequences for national economic and civic development. In voting to preserve affirmative action in the Michigan case, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote that “the diffusion of knowledge and opportunity... must be accessible to all individuals regardless of race or ethnicity... Effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our Nation is essential if the dream of one Nation, indivisible, is to be realized.”²

The discussion undertaken by this meeting sponsored by AAAS and AAU is, therefore, very important. It is important that we understand the legally sustainable efforts our universities can undertake to achieve diversity; and it is important that we explore the means of succeeding in achieving diversity. What is legal and what works? While the discussion will focus on programs in the STEM disciplines, an important component of the overall AAAS/AAU diversity law and policy project is adapting the materials that emerge from this meeting to all disciplines, so that successful efforts in the STEM disciplines can be replicated in other disciplines. It is worth noting that one of the most compelling conclusions reached in the recent study by Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, in *Crossing the Finish Line*, is its refutation of the argument, often voiced by opponents of affirmative action, that students from lower socio-economic status, especially minority students, are best served by attending less selective, less challenging institutions where they have a better chance of success. What their study demonstrates is that the completion rate of these students is considerably higher at selective, more rigorous universities. If this is true for institutions generally, is it not possible that helping students enter the challenging curricula of the STEM disciplines will also enhance their success rate? The question is how to prepare them and help them succeed.

Our commitment to diversity is not a product of an effort at rebalancing the scales of social justice, however long they may have been imbalanced. Rather it is because we believe our institutions will be better, our society enriched, our economy enhanced by educating better our richly diverse population. And it is inspired as well by the conviction that all students admitted to our institutions are capable of succeeding in a challenging curriculum and carrying that success with them to their world beyond the campus.

¹ William G. Bowen and Derek C. Bok, *The Shape of the River* (Princeton, 1998); William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (University of Virginia Press, 2005), and William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line* (Princeton, 2009), to name several of the most carefully done studies.

² Cited in Bowen, et. al, *Crossing the Finish Line*, p. 10.