

The Monster In Our House: Racial Incidents on College Campuses

Farrell J. Webb

The Growth of Racial/Ethnic Incidents

Reports of racial incidents on college campuses have risen dramatically in the past four years. Data from recent surveys indicate that minority students, specifically blacks, will experience some form of discrimination during their academic careers.¹ Recent data from other studies reveal that racial and ethnic violence has occurred on at least 70 U.S. college campuses.² Efforts to assert one racial/ethnic group over another have often created social conflicts. These social disagreements may take several forms, usually imitating behavior outside of school: shouting discriminatory remarks or becoming physically aggressive or violent.

The belief that it is legitimate to make distinctions between and among groups based on the perceived status of particular groups is both overtly and covertly supported by the structures of our major social institutions, including higher education, yet a number of investigations have revealed that institutional social differentiation can be reduced through education.³ It is difficult for minority students to understand why the very institution that they must turn to for support is the same one that blocks their progress.

Educational institutions have tried to reduce these philosophical inconsistencies by establishing ethnic studies programs.⁴ These new curricula were designed to make students more sensitive to the needs of others--both majority and non-majority students.⁵ But why is it that despite the number of years ethnic studies and academic sensitivity programs have been included in college curriculums there has been an increase in racially motivated violent instances on college campuses during the latter half of the 1980s?⁶

These issues will be examined by (1) exploring the relationship between

the institution and the new student body; (2) examining the motivations behind some of the recent attacks; and (3) examining the structural features of higher education that have allowed for the growing racial and ethnic tension on college campuses.

There are three major reasons why these racial/ethnic incidents are continuing. First, there is a low priority given to resolving racist actions by university administrators in the hope that issues will resolve themselves. This is very similar to the same type of treatment given to gender-related issues such as "date rape," an issue once believed not to be important. Secondly, student conservatism is much greater today than it was ten years ago, allowing for attitudes of racial/ethnic discrimination to grow.⁷ Finally, racially and ethnically motivated actions are not considered important unless they rise to national prominence, and at that point it is already too late to undo the damage.⁸ By keeping an incident "in our house" universities are allowed to continue their *laissez-faire* policies. The present structure of higher education by covertly promoting inequality through lack of enforcement and public response gives *carte blanche* to students to practice racial and ethnic elitism.

The issues surrounding the new attacks on minority students are more complex than just the presence of minority students or the alleged differences among students' abilities. These differences are covertly reinforced by the values and curricula of higher education institutions. The perpetuation of the white male canon is one example of how educational values create problems for racial and ethnic minority students by disenfranchising them.⁹

More devastating than the student attacks and the recent shift in student attitudes is the action taken by administrators and policy makers toward the recent upswing of overt racial and ethnic discrimination. For example, a trustee at one fairly large Southern institution recently made slanderous and uncomplimentary statements about black students. Although he eventually apologized, the university had sought to keep his remarks out of the public domain.¹⁰

On one hand, the general response of university administrators has been to establish programs designed to increase minority enrollment. These programs, while appearing beneficial on the surface, do nothing about addressing the issues that gave rise to the racial and ethnic hostility that proceeded them. Thus, an addition of more minority students does not reduce the racial/ethnic discrimination experienced by these students; rather, it exacerbates the problem.

On the other hand, the university's non-responsiveness has indirectly fed racially/ethnically motivated incidents on college campuses. This is ironic especially when one considers that colleges and universities are preparing for the diverse student populations of the future.¹¹ Farrell and Jones in their report on racial incidents in higher education concluded that inaction breeds environmental racism--racial discrimination within the university and its surroundings.¹² For example, support institutions

such as campus bars, restaurants, and social organizations may not be supportive of minority students or of the university's commitment toward non-discrimination. Because university administrators seldom have the time or opportunity to monitor these support institutions in any direct manner, the inaction has allowed these sub-institutions to establish their own policies, some of which are overtly discriminatory toward racial and ethnic minority students.¹³

Studying the Problem

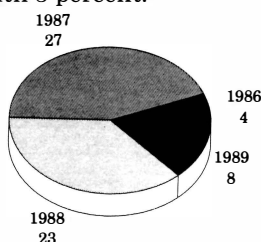
The methodology used in this investigation is content analysis. Reports of racial/ethnic incidents on college campuses during a four-year period were analyzed (1986-1989). Only those reports covered in national level media were extracted (for example *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, or *The Chronicle of Higher Education*).

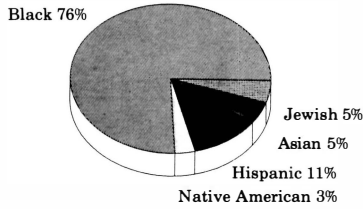
Each reported incident was broken up into its component parts. For example, a racial/ethnic incident that involved name-calling and then violence was counted as two separate instances. The most current college catalog for each school mentioned in the incident was checked to determine if there was an ethnic studies program, course(s) on ethnic studies, required course on ethnic studies, or any related course such as minority group relations. Data for each institution was then placed into two categories: (1) has no ethnic studies or related courses; (2) has ethnic studies, related courses, or ethnic studies major.

The names of the institutions involved are withheld since the purpose of this paper is to expose a problem that is growing on all campuses not just those examined for this study. Furthermore, it is pointless to identify the institutions since it will not alter that which has already occurred.

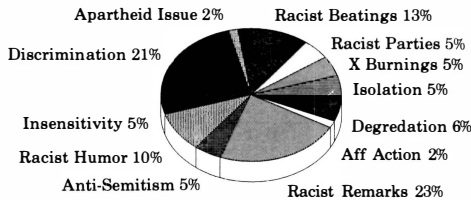
Results

The data revealed that student conservatism and the lack of concern by policy makers led to an increase in racial/ethnic incidents. The number of documented racial incidents on college campuses rose from 4 major incidents in 1986, compared to 27 in 1987, and several already widely-known incidents in the first two months of 1989. If this trend were to continue there could be at least 50 racially motivated incidents by the end of 1989. To date, blacks accounted for 76 percent of all major acts of racial/ethnic aggression on college campuses.¹⁴ Hispanics followed with 11 percent and Asians with 5 percent.

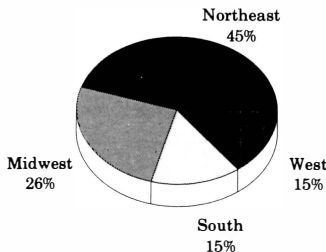




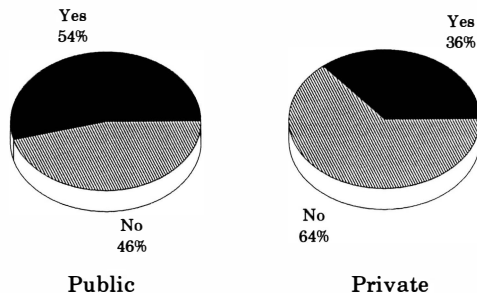
Two more important features about the recent racially/ethnically motivated incidents were (1) where they took place, and (2) what types of incidents were reported. Twenty-one percent of all the incidents involved some type of overt discrimination. Despite being against the law, racial/ethnic discrimination continues to exist on some college campuses. Racist remarks and other inappropriate vocalizations accounted for 23 percent of all incidents. The data suggested that almost one-half of all incidents on campuses involved some direct communication or action toward its victims. Clearly, if such things as cross-burning and racially motivated beatings were included, then over 62 percent of all incidents involved direct contact.



Another important aspect of racial/ethnic events on college campuses was geographic location. Although the South traditionally has been associated with overt discrimination, it was the Northeastern part of the country that had the highest number of racial/ethnic incidents. It was not exactly clear from the data why racially/ethnically motivated incidents should be so prevalent in the Northeast; however, the geographic isolation of some of the schools in this region could account for the difference. With the exception of the two cross-burnings, all other acts of physical aggression and violence took place on campuses in the Northeast and Midwest. In fact, at some of the larger and more famous northeastern schools racial and ethnically motivated actions involved severe beatings and strong racist literature.



The presence of ethnic studies on campus had some impact on the frequency of racial/ethnic outbreaks. Of the schools where racial incidents were reported, 53 percent had no ethnic studies program or related courses. However, 47 percent of all the schools had some form of ethnic studies; in most cases this consisted of a course or some sort of disjointed ethnic studies program. Another difference in the presence of racial



incidents appeared when controlling for institution type. Public institutions accounted for 60 percent of all racial/ethnic incidents during the last three years, while private institutions accounted for 40 percent. The differences between the racial incidents and ethnic studies programs controlling for institution type was significant ($\Sigma^2=7.84$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). In other words, one was more likely to experience a racially/ethnically motivated act of aggression in a public rather than private institution whether the private school had an ethnic studies curriculum or not.

In general, ethnic studies were more prevalent in public institutions than in private institutions, yet the more severe racial/ethnic instances occurred on public institution campuses. There were more acts of aggression and more overt acts on public school campuses than on the private school campuses where the issues usually centered on affirmative action, anti-apartheid, and cultural insensitivity. Another interesting parallel was that all instances of racial/ethnic isolation took place at private schools while all racist/ethnic humor was expressed by students in public universities and colleges.

Campus Racism: The Social Mirror

The existence of racial/ethnic violence on college campuses is indicative of other social problems. Each year the types and level of severity of racial/ethnic incidents continue to grow. And every year the incidents become more life threatening. Why racial/ethnic motivated violence continues points toward the growing conservatism in America. The general attitude toward less government has led to less accountability and less responsibility. This is very similar to other periods in our history where social atrocities such as slavery, the internment of the Japanese, the holocaust, and discrimination against boat people were allowed without strong public reaction. Although most people were aware of these social atrocities, the actions were largely ignored because they did not

directly affect majority citizens. The reawakening of racism is now following the same pattern.

Some of the issues that give rise to racism are directly linked to the social problems facing this nation. For example, drug epidemics, failing infrastructures, homelessness, unreliable local economies, and severe shortages of employment opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities, and an ever increasing minority dependency ratio all are now daily realities. Majority and minority students are well aware of the difficulties facing them. In many cases students bring with them their resentments, built up outside of higher education, and then reinforced within the institutions of higher education. As a result, colleges and universities begin to reflect the social ills of society.

It has long been believed that racial/ethnic violence and hatred could be reduced through higher education. Unfortunately, it now seems that higher education has become a breeding ground for racial/ethnic differences as well. The type of student, more than the institution type, is more the issue; however, higher education is not blameless. In fact, the failure of most institutions to adequately address racial and ethnic incidents, no matter what type of student, is symptomatic of institutional problems.

Conclusion

The issue of race and ethnic relations remains as complex in the 1990s as it was in the 1940s. There are no magical solutions to the social ills that have given rise to the inequalities supported by prejudice and discrimination. As such, it is not possible to expect a rapid solution, but it is possible to regain social control. The role of education in ameliorating social problems and reducing social prejudices is well known. As educators concerned with ethnic studies, we must act to reduce negative responses to racial and ethnic minorities.

First, we must establish well organized, fully integrated ethnic studies programs.¹⁵ These programs can do a great deal to reduce the racial and ethnic problems in our society. However, as long as ethnic studies are marginalized within higher education, and as long as the programs continue to follow traditional canons, focusing exclusively on the folklore, literature, philosophy, and history of the racial and ethnic minorities in this country without introducing modern empirical data, issues of ethnic studies will fail in its mission. This is not to say that traditional areas are not important; however, these areas should be addressed in conjunction with some of the current problems faced by the racial and ethnic minorities in today's world.

Clearly a progressive program (one centered in an Ethnic Studies department) must be added to the curriculum of all college campuses. Programs modeled after those at Bowling Green University or the University of California, Santa Barbara, might prove to be beneficial.

If the program is to work, it must be more broad based than the

traditional ethnic studies found in most universities today. The program must be progressive, and it must attack the issues of racial and ethnic discrimination directly. Ethnic studies curriculum must be revised to address how the differences among the groups can be addressed for a more meaningful and peaceful coexistence for all.

Second, faculty, staff, and students must voice their objections to the oppressive racial/ethnic atmosphere on college campuses. This means becoming unpopular when necessary, and in some cases putting one's career on the line. Only through continued efforts to battle racism can we hope to eliminate the harmful effects of prejudice and discrimination.

Notes

¹W.R. Allen, L.D. Bobo, and P. Fleuranges, *Preliminary Report: 1982 Undergraduate Survey of Black Undergraduate Students Attending Predominantly White State Supported Universities* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Afro-American and African Studies, 1984).

²G.D. Jaynes and R.M. Williams, Jr., *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington: National Academy Press, 1989).

³G.D. Jaynes and R.M. Williams, Jr., *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989); R. Farley and W.A. Allen, *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987); W.J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); J. Mincer, *Schooling, Experience, and Earnings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

⁴See the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 1989 edition for a complete discussion on the advancements in ethnic studies curriculum.

⁵R.L. Perry and S.M. Pauly, "Crossroads to the 21st Century: The Evolution of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 11, 1 (January 1988): 13-22.

⁶O.L. Scott, "Ethnic Studies Past and Present: Towards Shaping the Future," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 11, 1 (January 1988): 37-46.

⁷Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1988* (Los Angeles: UCLA, February, 1989). Complete discussion of national survey of 308,007 entering freshman and their attitudes about a variety of issues.

⁸W.C. Farrell, Jr. and C.K. Jones, *Recent Racial Incidents in Higher Education: A Contemporary Perspective*. Unpublished Manuscript, 1989.

⁹See the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for calendar years 1988 and 1989 for ongoing discussions of this issue.

¹⁰See Farrell and Jones, *Recent Racial Incidents*, for a brief historical discussion of racism in Southern universities.

¹¹UCLA Public Affairs, "Enrollment of Ethnic Minorities in University of California is Growing." *UCLA Today* 10, 1 (July 17-August 20, 1989); See also the United States Department of Education, *Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities*, and *Office of Civil Rights Compliance Reports* (1987), both of which address the increasing number of ethnic minorities in higher education.

¹²Farrell and Jones, *Recent Racial Incidents*.

¹³W.C. Farrell and C.K. Jones, *Recent Racial Incidents in Higher Education: A Contemporary Perspective*. Unpublished Manuscript, 1989; W.R. Allen, L.D. Bobo, and P. Fleuranges, *Preliminary Report: 1982 Undergraduate Survey of Black Undergraduate Students Attending Predominantly White State Supported Universities* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Afro-American Studies, 1984); C.V. Willie and D. Cunnigen, "Black Students in Higher Education: A Review of Studies, 1965-1980," *Annual Review of Sociology* 7: 177-198.

¹⁴This data is consistent with the findings reported in the survey by Allen and his colleagues in 1984.

¹⁵J.M. Vazquez, "The Co-Opting of Ethnic Studies in the American University: A Critical View," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 11, 1 (January 1988): 23-36.