Presentation before the IBHE Committee on Diversity

It is my understanding that this Committee is charged with increasing diversity within the higher education community. More particularly, it seeks to find ways to increase the pool of diverse students who choose to teach in Illinois institutions of higher education, it seeks to discover how the search process undertaken by those institutions can bring a more diverse staff into the colleges, and it wants to find ways to retain that staff once hiring has taken place. My qualifications for commenting on these questions are that I am a recently retired Mathematics Professor at Harold Washington College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago (henceforth, CCC), and I have had thirty-four years of experience teaching in the CCC, plus some moonlighting at Chicago State University and at Illinois Institute of Technology, where I received my doctorate in Mathematics.

I have little to say about the first of these questions, except that increasing the number of qualified people of any stripe to the calling seems a good thing to me as long as it is done in an acceptable way: the more qualified people to choose from, the better for our students and everyone else. I also have little to say about the third question other than to make the obvious remark that the bigger the drive for minorities in higher education, the harder it is for institutions like the community colleges to get such minorities, leaving them with the option of forgetting about it or being willing to settle for less quality than they should, as the senior institutions suck up the best talent from a small pool.

I will concentrate on the second question about the search process, and I would like to start by pointing out that no one seems to have asked whether such searches are desirable, moral, or, indeed, even legal, especially for
public institutions. The fact is that the relentless drive to be more inclusive has run into trouble recently on moral and legal grounds in a number of places, leading its exponents to change the grounds for its justification: we hear less and less about affirmative action these days, and more and more about the desirability of diversity. A diverse teaching force is supposed to be a good thing for our students, although strangely it is supposed to be good for minority students to be taught by someone who is like them, and it is supposed to be good for white students to be taught by someone who is not like them. Truthfully, the arguments don’t matter, because the drive for diversity is not, in my opinion, a conclusion at all but rather a premise: this is why shifting conditions always bring up new reasons for doing the same thing.

My experience in this began when I was hired; the department chairman who hired me at Crane College, which became Malcolm X College a year later, told me straight out that he would have hired a black person instead of me if he had found one, and sure enough he succeeded soon after. It is a measure of how long this quest has been going on that both his new hire and I are retired.

I transferred to Loop College, now Harold Washington College, in the Spring of 1972, and it is at that college that I began to see how the diversity game is played out. Decades ago, one woman was counted as Hispanic even though she is not Hispanic; her ex-husband is Hispanic and everyone assumed that someone with her name fit that profile. My own Mathematics Department was continually promised faculty members, which it needed and did not get, while the administration used what dollars it had to hire a minority in another department which did not need more faculty members. More than a decade ago, the Wright College administration ordered one of its departments to rank all of its choices. It then went down the list to choose the first black
person on the list, a man who ranked more than twentieth, in order to get its first black mathematician. The fact that he was the first is not evidence of any discrimination on the part of the college, since blacks are a minority to begin with and a much, much smaller minority in the mathematical community: very few black people get Ph.D.s in Mathematics, and the number of black people getting a masters degree in that field is far, far smaller than their proportionate numbers in the population.

However, it wasn’t until the last few years that this game has gone from the absurd to the insane. In the past, with a few exceptions, the administration wisely deferred to the departments to choose its own people. It would call candidates in to talk to them, but rarely if ever did they veto the decision of the department or try to influence it, other than to ask it to be on the lookout for minority candidates.

All this has changed. The order (which I am happy to say is often ignored) to the departments is that they propose four candidates for one position (or six candidates for two positions), and that the candidates be unranked. It is this last requirement which so blatantly gives the game away, since the first candidate could be vastly superior to the three other candidates the department is forced to submit, and yet the president can claim that he isn’t engaging in discrimination in case he chooses someone other than the first choice, since he doesn’t know who the first choice is. The department is pushed to include at least one minority in those it submits as qualified, and then the administration chooses from among the unranked choices. I think this is a scandal, and I think the CCC is chancing an enormous lawsuit with consequences that could call its very viability into question.
About five years ago, a department made two selections, neither of them minorities (although one of them was a foreign woman, but she wasn't black). When the President found out that the selection committee had asked each of the interviewed candidates whatever questions popped into their heads as a result of reading their resumes, the two choices were voided on the grounds (never before stated) that the selection committee had to ask the same questions. Note that the requirements were that the department had to interview a diverse selection of candidates and ask them all the same questions, although follow-up questions based upon the answers were allowed (it is not clear why different initial questions based upon resumes were not allowed). This same department had its chairman called in by the same President in the Summer of 2002, who told him that despite a budget freeze it might be possible to hire a specific Hispanic individual (so much for the wider search). The Chancellor has been pressured recently to hire Hispanics, and he has put pressure on all the presidents to put pressure on all of their departments to hire Hispanics. In this case, there was no search at all, other than this one person. Indeed, the chairman was supposed to interview the woman with the Dean, but he insisted on getting other members of the department to interview the candidate, and it was during the interview that it was discovered she did not know the material that she was supposed to teach in the elementary courses. The woman then went to a different college in the system where they also discovered that she did not know material she should have learned in high school. I wonder if she managed to get in elsewhere in the CCC. At another department in the first school the chairman was again given a choice of one person, although happily this candidate was first rate and would have been the first choice of the department anyway, although it is doubtful that anyone will believe it.
Elsewhere in a third CCC college, there had been no new hires in a particular department for more than twenty years, and the chairman was quite happy to be told that he would now be able to hire. The department advertised nationally in February, 2002 and interviewed sixteen candidates out of the eighty resumes submitted, none of them minority except for one Chinese woman (I do not know if this counts as a minority, since the meaning of the word “minority” has changed considerably, as the fact that women, who outnumber men, are sometimes counted as minorities, whereas Jews, who constitute about two percent of the population, are never counted). The department submitted six of the candidates to the President without ranking them, the President chose the Chinese woman, and she wanted to choose one of the men, but he turned the department down. Bargaining then ensued between the President and the Department Chairman, with the President promising to recommend any of their remaining five candidates if they could find a minority to go with that person. The search committee dutifully went through all the new resumes that had come in, including one name submitted by the President, eliminating all names that were not (or did not appear) black or Hispanic. They eliminated the name they got from the President on the ground that the person had a bad verbal reference from his place of employment and that he had changed his name to an Hispanic name, but they finally came up with a first rate candidate, a black woman. However, the Chancellor would not agree to the deal to include another candidate.

In the Summer of 2002, the drive for Hispanics was on everywhere in the CCC. The same department was suddenly given the resumes of two Hispanic to consider, and his President told the chairman that if he could pick an Hispanic candidate, another attempt would be made to get one of his original choices. One of the aspirants had comma splices in his resume (this was rightly deemed unacceptable for this department), while the other had
never taught (this person was hired in a single day at a different college). The Chairman then e-mailed his friends, found an acceptable candidate who was Latina, and hired her. However, the central office again refused to hire anyone else. It should be noted that the student statistics driving this quest count non-academic students along with academic students, dramatically raising the percentage of Latino students and invalidating the argument (such as it is) that Latino students are not seeing Latino teachers in the "proper" quantities. It should also be noted that the woman the Board refused to hire was the only candidate out of all eighty plus who was qualified to be a teacher-trainer of English, a big program at the CCC these days, someone with vital skills who had the full, unanimous, and aggressive endorsement of the hiring department and the local administration was not hired so that the Board could meet a self-imposed Hispanic quota.

There are even worse examples. One department chairman told me that in the Fall of 2001, she handed in three choices to the President. The first two choices were significantly superior to the third, but because the second choice was a man, and since the President was determined to hire only women for this department, the man did not get the job. This woman was told on her answering machine by the department secretary that the President would not interview men for this job, but the union leadership of the college objected to this along with the chairman, and the man was interviewed (this message was confirmed to me by the woman who told the secretary of it). Ironically, the President asked different questions to the male candidate than she had to the two successful female candidates (so much for uniform quocitene), and both the applicant and the department chairman who was present at all the interviews with the President believed strongly that the President was openly hostile to this man. I am not charging that this woman discriminates against men generally: in another department
she decided that there weren't enough men and told the department not to consider women. I would call this equal opportunity discrimination.

The same department was searching again in the Spring of 2002 when the CCC budget crunch hit, with new hires being the first thing sacrificed. The President informed the chairman that the Chancellor wanted an Hispanic because a recent study indicated low numbers of them in the faculty (and also because of pressure from Hispanics), and she might be able to use this to get around the hiring freeze. No Hispanics had applied for the position they were hiring in, but this department combines different specialties, and she went through the list of applicants for other jobs with Hispanic surnames who might be qualified to teach what she needed taught. She found and hired someone who is qualified but whose English and technological skills do not measure up to the other candidates she had on tap. Had she been able to hire without regard to the person's background, she would have chosen someone with demonstrably and significantly higher skills than the person who was chosen. What she said to me was, "Oh, you should have seen the people we could have had."

At a different college than the above (four of the seven City Colleges have been involved in this presentation) a faculty member was told by his President this summer that the faculty member's department did not have to pick the best qualified person; it was sufficient that a qualified person be selected, one who was Hispanic. The department chairman was told that she could hire only an Hispanic teacher. Two years earlier the same department hired another Hispanic whose expertise is limited to Hispanic Literature. This teacher does not teach the general core courses expected from all teachers; instead the faculty member teaches courses in Hispanic Literature, but she has neither the inclination nor the background to teach anything else. More
qualified teachers were passed over so that this person could be hired.

Such are the perils of pushing diversity. What never seems to be addressed in all this is what diversity is supposed to mean. At Harold Washington College, the recent death of a wonderful teacher left the Social Science Department without a single Republican. I am someone who votes almost exclusively Democratic these days, but I think we need opposing voices so that our students (and some of our faculty) can learn different perspectives. Needless to say, no one in the establishment seems to care about this kind of diversity. Also, when I retired it left my own department without a single Jew; in fact, in both the Physical Science Department and the Math Department at Harold Washington College there is not a single Asian, even though the number of Asians in most colleges in these two fields (especially in Physics) is huge. No one objects to this, and no one should object to it, since there is no discrimination against either Jews or Asians at Harold Washington College, but it is passing strange that the demand for diversity is concentrated on only certain minorities and not others. The difference, I believe, is political pull, pure and simple: affirmative action has become racial patronage.

It is time to stop this: it is unfair to the superior teachers who are passed over by these processes, and it is unfair to the students, who deserve the best teachers that can be found. It is even unfair to the excellent minority faculty who would have been hired anyway, since they will always be suspected of getting the job on something other than merit. A process that insists that everyone be considered is good, but a process that demands that people be hired according to race and political clout is immoral, illegal, and a blow to the very students in whose name this is being done.
Make no mistake about it. Experience has shown that the drive to represent certain kinds of faces before the classroom inexorably leads to discrimination against the innocent and a lowering of standards, as administrators do what they do best: make the numbers come out right. It is because pressure has been brought to bear not only on faculty members but on the presidents of the colleges that I have not identified any of the people involved in these practices in the last ten years. When the lawsuit comes, as I am sure it will one of these days as someone passed over decides that he has been treated unfairly, I think these presidents will tell the truth about what they have been ordered to do, and the consequences could be dire. The IBHE could help by not pouring fuel on this fire.

If any of you doubt these stories, get a list of department chairmen in the CCC and start making phone calls.

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