

Grade Point

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Scalia made headlines. But the real story is how colleges have failed to truly integrate.

by RICHARD GUARASCI

In December, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia made some unenlightened comments during oral arguments in the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas*, involving the university's affirmative action program. Justice Scalia's assertion that African American students would benefit from attending "a slower-track school where they do well," is simply wrong and unsupported by evidence.

Since affirmative action began, we have made significant progress toward diversifying campuses across the U.S. However, as many critics have pointed out over the years, even schools that have achieved goals of educating increasing numbers of minorities have not always succeeded in creating true integrated communities.

In fact, I believe the United States is as segregated today as anytime since *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The exceptions are the military and corporate worlds, where there is a strong incentive to overcome segregation. We have an imperative to do just that in higher education, despite ongoing challenges.

Students arrive on campus from islands of difference, and our job is to create truly engaged intercultural communities.

In the 1978 landmark Supreme Court ruling on college affirmative action, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, one of the main arguments the court made in favor of affirmative action was that when diversity increases in our higher education system, everyone on these campuses and in our larger society benefits.

More than just attracting diverse students, though, we need to engage them as full participants in the campus community. We need to build a truly integrated experience where each of us can learn from others who bring differences in outlook and their life's journey.

While those of us in academia clearly have much to do on this front, it's heartening to note that there are a handful of campuses that quietly continue to do excellent work of building communities.

At the University of Redlands, the campus diversity and inclusion team encourages teachers to bring what they term "difficult diversity discussions" into the classroom. It's an effort to break through the uncomfortable moments when race, gender, sexual orientation or disability are part of a conversation. Instead of allowing the exchanges about those topics to flounder into silence or erupt into anger, faculty encourage discussion by bringing in guest speakers and working these themes into their curriculum.

The University of Michigan has another strong effort offering different courses to help students analyze and understand social conflict, intergroup relations and issues of diversity and justice. In addition to several on-campus courses and workshops, the program steps out of the bubble of academia into its community. It facilitates discussions among young people of African, Asian, European, Latino and Middle Eastern descent in Detroit schools in a way that challenges discrimination and creates change.

At Wagner College, we provide a different dimension to inclusion through our partnership with the neighborhood of Port Richmond. Here, students of all backgrounds work within the community to help solve systemic issues across many sectors — in hospitals, in schools and in businesses. Another part of this partnership connects Wagner College students of color with minority students in the public schools of Port Richmond. These young students are inspired when they see others like themselves who are in college.

Our students return to campus after these experiences with greater self-esteem and a desire to take on leadership roles in shaping this program. They are becoming agents of change in other campus and community organizations, as well.

Right now, we are witnessing a period of chaos and upheaval across many college campuses and in our society itself. One side effect of that is we are not doing a lot of listening. We are not honoring the ideals of free speech and liberal education.

We should seize this moment to move from chaos to opportunity, to work together to address the inconsistencies in our own programs and create a more robust experience for everyone on our campuses.

Beyond numbers and quotas, we should be creating a community that elevates what each unique individual can contribute to advancing a better world.

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