

# MAJOR TRENDS FACING NORTH CAROLINA

## IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR STATE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA



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**Student Diversity:  
Why the Public School Pipeline is Failing Our Colleges and Universities?**

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## **Student Diversity: Why the Public School Pipeline**

### **Is Failing Our Colleges and Universities?**

The issue of student diversity at the college and university level is of growing concern for many university administrators. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Marx, 2004), in the school year 1999-2000, 41.2% of public school children had limited English proficiency, while those of color were as follows: 1.2% American Indian, 4% Asian, 15.1% Latin American, 17.3% African American and 62.5% were White. According to Villegas and Lucas (2007), by 2003 41% of total enrollments in United States public schools were ethnic minority students. Based on these data, the public school pipeline is composed of a diverse student body. What then happens from public school to college and universities?

According to Marx (2004), one issue may be that this diversity is not within the teaching profession, which consists generally 83.5% of elementary schools and 85.9% of secondary schools are composed completely of White teachers. While it is true these teachers can be effective in the classroom, it cannot be assumed that they instinctively know how to reach each of their students from a non-Eurocentric point of view (Ambrosio, 2004; Brimijohn, 2005; Hoerr, 2007; Marx, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2007; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). For example, when discussing the expansion of the United States is this presented as the inexorable march of democracy or is the viewpoint of the indigenous American Indian explored (Hoerr, 2007)? Teachers may have the notion that “one size fits all” and what we do for one student will work for another (Brimijohn, 2005, p. 254; Dearman & Alber, 2005).

In recent studies by Marx (2005) and Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2006) White teachers were asked to estimate the beliefs about awareness of cultural diversity. In both cases these teachers described Whiteness as neutral or normal and associated people of color as generally disadvantaged from various aspects of their culture creating deficits.

This “deficit thinking” (as cited in Marx, 2005, p. 35) was viewed as deficits associated with people of color in their culture, home languages, families, intelligence and self-esteem. From the “neutral” perspective different cultures or differences in the way groups behave, dress and hold certain beliefs are viewed as deficits if they do not conform to the norm. Language differences as displayed as dialects or colloquial dialects if they do not conform to “normal” English may be viewed as a deficit. It must be understood by teachers that language is very much a cultural artifact and may be culture-bound, being tied intricately to the culture. Another form of “deficit thinking” is how families of people of color are viewed. If these families continue to follow certain aspects of their culture (i.e. behaviors, language, dress, beliefs, etc.) and have not completely assimilated into the “American Way” is often misunderstood and viewed as strange and unusual (Marx, 2005, p. 36; Santrock, 2008). Finally, there is the view that people of color may not be as intelligent or work as hard as White people. It is believed that people of color have unsupportive families creating insecurity and low self-esteem. It must be remembered that this is the perception of White teachers and not people of color themselves, where Phinney (1996) found ethnic groups to have high self-esteem and pride in their ethnicity.

### ***Race, Ethnicity and Intelligence***

Numerous studies have studied the relationship between race, ethnicity and intelligence (Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Kidd, 2005). When it comes to race there is no such thing. Race is a socially constructed concept, not a biological one, which was created out of human's desire to classify people (Sternberg et al.). Researchers today define cultural groups using labels such as African American, American Indian, Asian American, and Hispanic and others that describe ethnic groups, hence the term ethnicity. Ethnicity may be defined, as a sense of one's self robustly coupled with membership with an ethnic group with the attitudes, behaviors and feelings of that ethnic group (Phinney, 1996).

Some researchers have tried to make a link between genetic intelligence and ethnicity stating this explains some of the educational gap among groups. Studies by Sternberg et al. (2005) suggest that the division lines concerning intelligence and ethnic groups "are highly fluid and that most genetic variation exists *within* all social groups-not *between* them" (p. 57). Group-average differences on test scores of academic abilities and achievement among children of different ethnic groups show differences that depend on what is being tested. According to Sternberg et al. analytical tests designed to measure general abilities tend to favor American of European or Asian decent, while tests of creative and practical thinking show very different patterns. Basically, the cultural bias in testing does seem to disadvantage ethnic groups from culturally different populations (Malgady, 1996).

### *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*

For many school districts the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has had a negative effect on teachers, educational opportunities and outcomes for its students (Ambrosio, 2004). For states that receive federal funds, NCLB requires annual testing in reading, math and now science. Teachers must be “highly qualified” and have full state certification with at least a bachelor’s degree in their subject area. If a school receives a rating of “needing improvement,” according to Ambrosio (2004), teachers were required to send letters to parents informing them they could transfer to another public school. Ambrosio found that this process being labeled “needing improvement” and having teachers left feeling “not highly qualified” was “humiliating and demoralizing” giving families strong incentive to flee the school (p.711).

Under the NCLB Act school districts, according to Ambrosio (2004), are being set up for failure with unrealistic goals, unreasonable timelines and inadequate funding shooting for the miraculous 100% by 2014. Ambrosio notes that others criticize NCLB as a means to create alternative schools and to create profit-making private school corporations through vouchers. The growing emphasis on testing and test preparation leads to “teaching to the test” narrowing the curriculum, thereby giving little or no time for subjects not being tested (Brimijohn, 2005). Therefore, the NCLB Act does not prepare students for the critical thinking necessary for college and university level work.

### *The UNC System*

What can be done in order for colleges and universities and more specifically the UNC System, to recruit a more diverse student body? Education programs need to actively recruit people of color to their programs in order to have a more diverse teacher

population within the various public school systems. The University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) has developed a unique program within the American Indian population of education students entitled the First Americans Teacher Education (FATE) program. FATE accepts qualified American Indian students that enter the teacher education program and provides them tuition, a laptop computer, tutoring services, childcare allowance and a stipend each month. They have to agree to teach in the state of North Carolina where there are American Indian students for two years or for the time of their training. This program has helped ensure American Indian students become teachers, thereby allowing American Indian students to have a teacher in which they can relate. Programs such as these could be implemented within the UNC System for other populations of color helping to ensure these students for success and hopefully for those students in the public school pipeline.

The UNC System could review their admissions policy. There is much research to support the notion that standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is culturally biased to students of color (Calvin, 2000; Santrock, 2008; Sternberg et al., 2005; Wightman, 2000). According to Rooney (as cited in Calvin, 2000):

...the early roots of the SAT lie in the racist, anti-immigrant Army Alpha tests of the 1920s. And the use of intelligence testing for college admissions began at Columbia University in 1917 in order to limit the number of Jewish and other students without a formal policy of restriction. Now as then these tests help exclude qualified students from all backgrounds and should therefore be sharply de-emphasized. (p. 21)

All students do not test well; one size does not fit all. Other means of assessment should be implemented in the admissions process. Interviews, letters of reference, extracurricular activities should carry more weight than an entrance exam.

Studies conducted by Wightman (2000) demonstrated that national law school admission data suggests that test scores and grades alone accounted for nearly 60% of the variance for admission decisions for White applicants. When the same analyses were applied to people of color the number of admissions for minority applicants were reduced to the levels of the 1960s. This data is clearly pertinent considering the projected increase of Hispanic/Latino students and the decline of male African American students in North Carolina. Certainly, the UNC System needs to review admission policies that are more inclusive to people of color with diverse worldviews than the majority population. Again, as with most social issues, there is no one clear solution. An eclectic perspective, which would implement various methods including those previously mentioned, should be explored.

### *Conclusion*

What has been presented here is but one aspect that affects the level of student diversity from public schools into college and universities. There have been researchers that have tried to make a link between ethnic groups and low educational attainment and base this on inferior genetics (Santrock, 2008). The majority of research according to Santrock note that it is not their ethnicity or genetics that is the important factor affecting low educational attainment among ethnic groups, but more importantly it is the social environmental factors. Socioeconomic status, which generally is low among ethnic groups exposing them “to more family turmoil, violence, separation from their families,

instability, and chaotic households...less social support and parents are less responsive and authoritarian” are the key factors (p. 147). According to Myers, Baer, and Choi (as cited in Santrock, 2008), air and water are more polluted and homes that are more crowded, noisy, and of lower quality creating nonexistent enriching environments.

It is important to remember that there is no one solution to the problem of delivering the diverse number of students from public schools to the college and university system. Public school teachers should embrace and engage students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and learn to value their diversity. In order to be a culturally responsive teacher requires more than specialized teaching techniques, but demands a new way of looking at teaching that is grounded in an understanding of the intersection of culture and language (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

An understanding of constructivist learning theory is essential. Learners from this perspective use their prior knowledge and experience and beliefs to make sense of these new ideas and construct knowledge (Santrock, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). From this point of view, it can be seen that students without prior knowledge or experience in some domain cannot be expected to be up the level of those who have had previous exposure to these experiences.

One size does not fit all.

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