

The Journey Ahead

University of Kentucky Martin Luther King Day Celebration

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The theme of tonight's observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day is "Journey." I want to focus on one particular journey in the history of race relations in this country, that of Affirmative Action. This journey began with President Kennedy's 1961 executive order setting up the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity mandating "affirmative action" to eliminate racial bias in hiring in organizations receiving federal funds. The journey takes us through the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin. Then we arrive at President Johnson's declaration in 1965,

"We seek not just freedom but opportunity—not just legal equity but human ability—not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result."

In 1965 President Johnson issued the executive order requiring government contractors to "take affirmative action toward prospective minority employees in all aspects of hiring and employment. Contractors must take specific measures to ensure equality in hiring and must document these efforts."

We then arrive at the 1978 medical school admission case of *Bakke*, in which the Supreme Court imposed limits on affirmative action if it led to reverse discrimination against the majority. This journey toward "equality as fact" has been no easy journey, pulling apart the civic fabric of US society

along the way. It has been a confounding judicial journey, with racial quotas being ruled permissible under certain circumstances, ruled unconstitutional in other circumstances.

From 1995 through 2003, we have traversed through both judicial and political challenges to the 1965 concept of Affirmative Action, and the terrain continues to change. Texas, Washington, California, Florida, and Michigan have now passed legislation outlawing race-based admissions to college and professional schools. In 2003, the US Supreme Court upheld the use of race as a consideration in admission decisions, ruling that “race can be one of many factors considered by colleges when selecting their students because it furthers *‘a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.’*”

Were Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. living today, how would he view this *“compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body?”* Would he see this as a dilution of the remedy for past discrimination from the legacy of slavery? I don’t think we need to speculate at all, because he so eloquently expressed his sentiments already in 1967, in his last book. He wrote:

We have inherited a large house, a great “world house,” in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we

can never live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

The title of the book from which this quotation comes is "Where do we go from here: Community or Chaos." In this journey of affirmative action, the question for you and me is where do we go from here? Sadly but not surprisingly, not everyone is as broad minded as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." Many who entered universities during the early era of Affirmative Action policies seem resistant to the changes mandated not only in the judicial and legislative arena, but by the inexorable social forces of globalization. They must change; they must embrace diversity in the larger context. They must do so not only because the law requires it. They must do so because they are responsible for preparing today's youth for the diversity they will face.

As the chief academic officer of the University of Kentucky, I assert that this great university will have failed, and failed tragically, if its students do not develop an ability to think deeply about Dr. King's question – where *do* we go from here? In our classrooms and residence halls, UK's faculty and staff must engage their students in what continues to be the most pressing issue of our time, of our 21st century: how can we share, in the words of Dr. King, this "great 'world house?'"

The foundation of the undergraduate experience at the University of Kentucky is its general education program, a curriculum that all students, irrespective of their major, must complete. Just before the close of the fall term, I issued a position paper, based on several reports authored by teams of faculty, which calls for significant reform of our general education program. The centerpiece of the model curriculum we are considering is a course of common studies we call *Education for Citizenship*. The learning goals for *Education for Citizenship* include:

- To develop a deep respect for cultural differences;
- To understand how power relationships may shape cultural practices;
- To cultivate and apply one's understanding of self as a global citizen;
- To cultivate a capacity for civic engagement;
- To explore and affirm the ethical basis for personal and civic behavior;
- To develop a rich historical and comparative understanding of American cultures and the role that race, ethnicity, gender and class have played in shaping contemporary American cultures.

We intend to have in place by the 2008-2009 academic year a revised general education program, including the learning goals that underpin *Education for Citizenship*.

How a university responds to Dr. King's question - where *do* we go

from here – will define its character and that of the students it educates. The immediacy of the task resounds in the words with which Dr. King frames the concluding section of his final book:

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of *now*. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time....The “tide in the affairs of men” does not remain at flood; it ebbs.

The University of Kentucky will ride the high tide that brings it once again to the shores of Dr. DuBois’ “color line.” And in its sandy shore we will, for we must, fashion an educational experience that will enable our graduates, as adult members of their chosen communities, to help tear down the “color line.” The University of Kentucky has no greater calling than to answer Dr. King’s question by affirming community over chaos. Maya Angelou wrote, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” I hope you will stand for making this great “world house” a community, not chaos.

Thank you.