The system of higher education developed in the United States has long been the envy of nations around the world. Nothing, perhaps, has been thought to provide a greater “equalization” of opportunity in America or in the world than having a college degree. Initially, our colleges and universities were private institutions; up to the early 1900s, only 4 percent of this country’s population was able to attend college. Most of those who did were male and wealthy. That began to change with the introduction of the Morrill Act in the late 1800s, and public higher education opened the doors for a much more diverse cadre of students. However, most of us know that our higher education system has not opened its doors wide enough to admit and graduate a more diverse student body. As alarming, though, is the fact that there also has not been any appreciable cultivation by the higher education community of a diverse cadre of higher education leaders.

We have arrived at a point where increasing the diversity within the leadership ranks of higher education is one of the most important issues facing higher education. While many more students of color are attending college, U.S. Census data from 2009 shows that only 13 and 17 percent of Hispanics and African-Americans, respectively, hold a four-year
college degree, compared to 28 percent of the total of working-age adults 25 and older. According to an American Council on Education (ACE) study, *The American College President 2012*, the percentage of college presidents and who are women has remained at about 26 percent over the past several years, up from 105 in 1986. For African-Americans, 6.4 percent have become college or university presidents/chancellors; for Hispanics, only 3.1 percent.

Those numbers certainly do come close to reflecting the diversity of the students who are and will be attending college. Within the next 30 years, America will be a majority-minority nation; quite simply, no clear racial or ethnic majority will exist. If the higher education community does not act soon to find ways to dramatically change the diversity of this nation’s higher education leadership, many of our institutions will begin to fail. Many colleges and universities will likely be unable to fulfill much of their core missions. Moreover, the climates on the campuses of our institutions may not be able to withstand the upheaval they will undergo. (We have already seen evidence of that in several of the recent racial and diversity incidents on campuses where the administrative leadership did not reflect any real diversity.)

There are at least three important factors other than simply “doing the right thing” that should cause us to act now. The first one, as already discussed, is the rapidly changing demographic makeup of the students who will attend our colleges and universities. Further, the demographic shift occurring in the United States will likely become increasingly tied to campus climates. Without more leaders from diverse backgrounds, higher education institutions will likely begin to experience structural and psychological changes that may disrupt the campus climate in ways hard to repair. Where colleges and universities are able to diversify their leadership, the institutions will be able to more successfully build a more open and inclusive learning environment.

The second major factor is that, while more students of color are attending college, there is still a marked educational attainment gap that exists along racial lines. That gap must be closed. These students will become our workforce; they will become the leaders of this nation and will undergird our economy. Faculty members and how they operate are critical here. Institutions will have to undergo significant change to ensure that these students not only graduate, but that they have the knowledge base to ultimately lead in a global society. Make no mistake: such changes are more likely to happen under diverse leadership.

A third important factor also has a significant impact on our decision to act now: our aging college and university leadership base. Between 50-60 percent of U.S. higher education presidents and chancellors will retire within the next five to seven years, and recent research conducted by ACE and
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AASCU reflects that these numbers are holding fairly constant. AASCU presidents surveyed in 2015 reported that almost 74 percent were retiring or planned to do so within the next five years. Data will also show that about 50 percent of the faculty will retire in relatively the same timeframe. There are not enough people in either pipeline to adequately diversify and fill those positions.

While these factors address the crux of the matter, the diversification of presidents/chancellors, senior administrators and faculty does not simply happen because it is the “right thing” to do; it only happens with proactive attention and intervention. Having leaders of color, as well as leaders from the LGBTQ community and other underrepresented groups, is critically important for a campus to establish a culture of real diversity that permeates the entire institution and sets a positive and supportive tone and climate.

Before we can begin to come up with solutions that will help transform higher education practices, we must discuss the elephant in the room: racism. Racism has created deep divides in terms of, not only who goes to college, but also who leads our nation's colleges and universities. Higher education does not respond well to change and has not easily dealt with racism, be it outside or inside the walls of our institutions. Sadly, our system of higher education has been stratified by race and often other socio-economic factors. In order to derive solutions that work for our colleges and universities, we must deal with this reality.

The argument for greater diversity is not about whether African-Americans and Hispanics can learn from whites or others; of course they can. While I was in college and graduate school, I had a lot of white and foreign instructors who were great scholars and, sometimes, good mentors. I certainly learned from them. Nevertheless, while almost everyone can learn from faculty and administrators outside of their race, sex or ethnicity, research indicates that it is more likely that faculty and administrators with similar backgrounds can serve as strong role models.

When I first arrived on the campus of Tougaloo College in Mississippi as a freshman in 1968, all of this HBCU’s (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) elected presidents had been white males. The first African-American president of Tougaloo was selected to serve in 1965—almost 100 years after the institution’s founding in 1869. When I saw President George Owens and heard him speak, that was when I realized that I could get a Ph.D. or even, possibly, become a university president. He looked like me.

Faculty members and other senior higher education leaders have the ability not only to help shape the campus culture, but to become highly effective at helping to guide the lives of both the faculty and the students. When I was on staff at UT Dallas, I was the only woman and the only African-American, outside of the president, on the cabinet. Before I became a vice president, the president allowed me to sit in on cabinet meetings as an associate provost. As a result, when I became a vice president, I understood the budgeting process and how the institution worked; my onboarding time was minimal. Accordingly, as the only woman and African-American on the senior staff at UT Dallas, many women from across the campus came to talk to me about getting their Ph.D.'s or how to manage their careers and families. Judging from where they are now and that I still hear from them, I believe my presence made a difference.

Later in my career as a university president, I noticed that my institutions received many more applications from females and people of color. At any given time, I had four to six senior...
My presence as an African-American and a woman made a difference in how the campus operated in making decisions related to diversity.—Mary Evans Sias
which primarily targets African-Americans. The American Council on Education and AASCU both offer several other professional development programs—including programs to train presidents and other higher education leaders—that target higher education leaders of different backgrounds and train new presidents and chief academic officers. There is also a special diversity program targeting professional development for Hispanics and others from diverse backgrounds. But there is still more to be done. These programs must take deep dives into budgeting, successful fund development, athletics, governance and working with boards. Mentoring from sitting presidents is as important as professional coaching and a professional development plan.

Greater diversity of campus leadership will benefit all facets of our higher education campuses. Curricula will change, and academic support systems will evolve to more proactively help all students. Likewise, programs will be designed to help support women faculty members who want to continue their careers and receive tenure while raising families. Diversity of thought in problem-solving will also develop, and scholarly research will take on different subjects.

Recently I heard something that perfectly sums up, for me, what we must do: “We must remember that we are bound by the choices we make . . . not our history. There are no victories without battles. The best we can hope for is to find a place to make our stand.”

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