

# Black Commencement and the Value of Affinity Initiatives

By *David H. Roane*

In 2017, Harvard's Black Commencement gained national headlines for being the school's first commencement exercise intended solely for its Black students. And yet, with this occasion, Harvard was merely catching up to many other institutions across the country, including Stanford, Temple, Michigan, and schools in the California State University system.<sup>1</sup> It's almost certain that the trend toward minority-specific ceremonies will continue in future years, which might astound or concern some people. For those who continue to be shocked or confused by initiatives that appear—on the surface—exclusive in their intent, I offer a modest primer, with last year's event at Harvard serving as an example.

While the existence of affinity initiatives, like Harvard's Black Commencement, may seem to perpetuate the social isolation of minority students, the opposite is true. By addressing minority feelings of otherness and exclusion, these measures not only strengthen individual groups, but also strengthen the larger community.

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Overall, our nation's college campuses are becoming more diverse. While white students accounted for 84 percent of all college students in the U.S. in 1976, they only accounted for 58 percent in 2015.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, for the second year in a row, the majority of Harvard's freshman class was students of color.<sup>3</sup> Still, on most campuses the percentage of any *single* racial or ethnic group, apart from white, remains small.<sup>4</sup> At Harvard specifically, according to federal data, white students represent 43 percent of

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the overall student body—compared to just five percent for Blacks.<sup>5</sup> As is the case for most of our nation's white students, membership within the majority, or plurality, has its advantages, chief among them an entire culture normed to one's existence and experiences. As a result, those living outside of the majority culture often feel alienated or overlooked, and are often taxed with the burden of explaining the value of their contributions.

In recent years, events at Harvard have demonstrated the extent to which Black and brown students feel alienated, invisible, or “othered.” In 2015, framed portraits of several Black law professors were defaced.<sup>6</sup> A year later controversy ensued regarding the design of the law school shield, which had been modeled after the crest of an 18th-century slaveholding family.<sup>7</sup> For Black students on campus, these kinds of painful gestures leave them with the paradoxical experience of being highly visible due to racial differences that simultaneously render them socially *invisible*.

One's presence as a minority always represents a teachable moment for those in the majority. Minorities remain in the rather self-conscious position of having to explain themselves to the larger community, or, worse, justify why they are here at all. This is their tax. This is their burden. And it doesn't stop there. In addition to justifying their existence, minorities find themselves forced to explain—or even prove—maltreatment. Black Lives Matter, for instance, was designed to reveal what the

general public should have already known: that police brutality really does occur. This time last year, when the Baltimore Orioles visited Boston and one of its outfielders claimed that a Red Sox fan taunted him with shouts of the N-word, some demanded cell phone evidence as proof.<sup>8</sup>

So, when student organizers of last year's Harvard Black Commencement said the ceremony was an opportunity to "build fellowship and build a community," and that its purpose was to "add something that was missing," we might conclude that what had been missing for Black students is a thoroughly validated existence.<sup>9</sup>

#### AFFINITY INITIATIVES AS REFUGE AND SANCTUARY

As a minority, living an expository existence, instead of a validated one, has the potential to be emotionally draining and oppressive in nature. Affinity initiatives, however, offer opportunities for minorities to honor the impulse of bonding with those of similar background and experiences, where people needn't feel the pressure to explain themselves, because who they are is assumed to be understood. It's the pleasure of solitude, of being alone with self, only scaled up for groups. As sources of refuge and sanctuary, affinity initiatives provide a temporary reprieve from the existential tax burdened by the occasion of one's "othered" status, effectively closing any emotional advantage gap between social groups. Relief can assume the following purposes.

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#### *Refuge from Ambassadorship*

Affinity initiatives may ease the burden minorities feel in having to represent their group and serve as teachers for the outside world. For example, white students touching the hair of Black students and wondering about its texture forces Black students either to recoil or explain the rationale behind straightening versus "going natural."

Even when performed in the spirit of cultural exchange, the task of educating members of a larger public about who one is and where one comes from—and convincing those members of the value inherent to both—can be exhausting. Living with even the vague expectation that one must serve as the cultural ambassador for an entire group can leave a person emotionally depleted.

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At Harvard's Black Commencement, each graduate donned a stole made of African Kente cloth. "Your parents, your colleagues, and those who are there in the audience are there to celebrate you because they know your common struggle," a Harvard organizer said. "There's a shared history; there's a shared struggle; there's a shared identity." Affinity initiatives make affirmation, empathy, and validation available in ways that don't require any previous convincing for students to receive.

### *Refuge from Duality: A Sanctuary for Personal Wholeness*

Fear of being excluded for their differences can drive minorities to conform in ways that don't match who they are on the inside, resulting in a tension between external and internal realities, public and private forms of identity. Consequently, a Duboisian double-consciousness emerges in which minorities may find themselves straddling two worlds: one represented by membership within the minority or subdominant group, the other by a desire for inclusion within the majority or dominant culture. Survival requires an understanding of the norms particular to each world, proficiency in the interpretation and use of expressions associated with those norms, and the almost super-human ability to quickly switch between their cues and codes, a phenomenon known as "code switching." For many minorities, efforts to be included within the dominant culture come with a cost, one that is paid with a sense of loss concerning, for example, one's native culture or heritage.

Affinity initiatives, however, can provide relief from such pressures in the form of singular communities held together with cultural references that are not only shared, but native. Even temporary relief from duality can deliver lasting alleviation from the “schizophrenic-like” negotiation of living such complicated existences.

Offering a chance for repair and recovery, affinity initiatives exist as sanctuaries for self-healing and wholeness. In so doing, affinity initiatives become resources from which minorities can derive the personal strength needed for positive and constructive membership within the larger community.

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#### THE MATTER OF SELF-SEGREGATION

Despite the salubrious effects of affinity initiatives, their existence does raise some stubborn questions. For instance, do such initiatives over-emphasize otherness by placing too much value on difference? Do they perpetuate feelings of isolation among minorities, serving to further any existing alienation? Do they reinforce human tribal instincts, thereby mimicking the very systems of exclusion that led to the need for such affinity initiatives in the first place?

These questions, while valid, fail to acknowledge the privilege afforded to people within the majority who can cluster in ways that are exclusive to their group and not have others perceive the act as self-segregating.<sup>11</sup> Think of all those instances involving majority white gatherings and how the homogeneity of those gatherings goes largely unnoticed, their exclusive nature barely regarded.

Harvard, like many of our institutions, continues to be appraised and claimed as white space. As the defaced portraits of black law professors demonstrate, the claiming of school space as white space occurs through the display of photographs and plaques, the naming of buildings, and, as we’ve also seen at Harvard, the use of symbolic crests belonging to old

white families. These spaces—and the natural clustering of white people within them—exist as powerful affirmations of how entrenched as the norm racial majority culture remains and, as a result, how widely available white affinity is for those who happen to be white.<sup>12</sup> Black affinity stands out because it stands in contrast.

Some people feel that the promotion of affinity initiatives is another example of identity politics run amok and that racial affinity grouping and

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the willful “re-segregation” enacted by minorities represents a step backwards in race relations. In response, one might ask, “Why that criticism now?” Where’s the outrage over the exclusion that Black and brown people have experienced historically and still experience today? It’s possible that, as a form of minority empowerment, minority affinity intimidates those in the majority who perceive it as a threat to their own privilege and position.

Finally, the more misguided aspects of post-racial thought might also lead some people to believe that, in general, diversity is something that should be *lived* and not engineered. Such thinking incorrectly assumes that addressing issues of race grants race more power than it deserves and that any effort to address the existence of race robs diversity of its authenticity.

Diversity and racial justice, however, cannot be created accidentally. Unless we are intentional about addressing issues of race, we risk defaulting towards systems that are set up as unjust, making us complicit in the legitimization, perpetuation, and defense of those systems. When redressing racial injustice, we do so by intentionally confronting race and the racism it produces. Only then, by creating diversity through the conscious and deliberate means of *nurture*, will we ever achieve diversity as ordinary *nature*.

## THE QUEST FOR WHOLENESS

Ultimately, for affinity initiatives to work, they must be about wholeness—on all levels. They must function to heal both the minority group and its individual members, as well as the larger community. In fact, the relationship is causal. Heal the individual; heal the community.

Placing individual wholeness and group affinity before communal diversity is tricky business. Anytime there is an attempt to promote one part of a body, there always is the risk of denying other parts. The absurd nature of the irony should be clear in any case where a person or thing risks severing a vital so it can exist as a whole. This goes for students and their individual bodies, but also for student bodies that constitute schools as institutions. Racist systems are built on such reductions, highlighting the risks associated when using any essentialist notion—such as ethnic or racial identity—as criteria for establishing affinity among people, the ultimate effect being a potential reversion to the aforementioned tribal mindset.

Generally, at the heart of any quest for wholeness lies a paradox inherent to the creative process. What we create, including our sense of self and the institutions we observe, becomes both pronounced *and* imperiled precisely when the differences that constitute its complexity are greatest.<sup>13</sup> Herein lies the creative struggle of trying to assemble individual and disparate components into a collective and cohesive form.

However, for academic institutions to succeed in constructing communities that are genuinely vibrant (i.e., diverse *and* cohesive) they must affirm and validate the very differences that compose their student bodies so everyone feels they belong to the same community. For their part, minority affinity initiatives must function as sources of strength for members seeking *reconnection* to and inclusion within this larger community. Without an expressed intent of reconnection, affinity initiatives expose

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themselves to accusations of perpetuating climates of exclusion and purveying hurtful isolation.

The process governing any affinity initiative involves two steps. First is a necessary retreat inwards within the minority group, where, swaddled in the sanctuary of common experiences, members start to feel whole again. As a result, members emerge galvanized and stronger, and better able to engage the second step, which must be re-entry within the larger community. The first step is analytical in nature, involving a descent into “I”; the second step is synthetic, commanding a re-formulation back into “We.” Indeed, Harvard Black Commencement 2017 was conceived with this two-step process in mind, as Black students also were slated to attend Harvard’s regular commencement two days later.

To the extent we value community at all, affinity ought to be available for every level of self-identification no matter how specific or atomized. More important than the breaking down of identity groups into smaller and smaller sub-groups, however, is the rebuilding that must occur afterwards.

## CONCLUSION

So long as there exists a statistical minority and a corresponding dominant or majority culture, there will exist a psychology that justifies diversity as a pertinent need. So long as there remains in our schools—primary, secondary, and post-secondary—even *one* student who feels vulnerable to the threat of being alienated, invisible, or “othered” based on a minority characteristic, schools should compensate the student with as many systematic forms of emotional support as possible.

Ultimately, the mantle of inclusion is for everyone, not just for minority populations. Consequently, schools need to conceive of plenary forms of inclusion that still somehow maintain an intimate link to concerns affecting minority students. Not only can both be done, they go hand in hand. 



## ENDNOTES

1. The University of Michigan has been holding such ceremonies for each of its Middle Eastern, Native American, Hispanic, and Black groups of students, and held its first API (Asian Pacific Islander) graduation this year. Many of the California State System schools also have Hispanic graduations. This year was the 42nd Chicano/Latino commencement at Fresno State. Also, Eastern Washington, Illinois State, Florida Atlantic, and Texas State are among the institutions with Lavender Graduations, ceremonies meant to address the interests of those within a school's LGBTQ community.
2. National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts."
3. Fernandes, "The Majority of Harvard's Incoming Class is Nonwhite."
4. As of 2015, the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions when compared to all U.S. residents was 17 percent. It was seven percent for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 14 percent for Blacks, and 0.8 percent for American Indian/Alaska Natives. See National Center For Education Statistics, "Fast Facts."
5. Binkley, "Black Harvard Students Holding a Graduation of Their Own."
6. Bidgood, "Tape Found Over Portraits of Black Harvard Professors."
7. Hartocollis, "Harvard Law to Abandon Crest Linked to Slavery."
8. Vennochi, "Adam Jones and the Burden of Proof."
9. Levenson, "Black Students at Harvard to Hold Their Own Commencement," and Binkley, *op cit*.
10. Levenson, *op cit*.
11. Tatum explores this bias in what has become her classic meditation on race, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*.
12. Mauck's analysis in "Noble and Greenough's Black Alcove" serves as inspiration here.
13. For more on this dynamic, consult the introduction to *Race Matters*, p. 8.

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