

Accreditation by Quota: The Case of Baruch College

William R. Beer

On 5 April 1990, the *New York Times* reported that Dr. Joel Segall, president of Baruch College of the City University of New York, was resigning from his job, following a critical review by the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges. There was no allegation that Baruch was anything less than an excellent college. In fact, it is widely regarded as one of the four top business colleges in the country and trains almost one out of every three of the certified public accountants working in New York. Rather, the complaint was that there were not enough “minorities” in the faculty and administration and that not enough “minorities” graduated. Disturbing though this is, even more unsettling is the fact that the criticism was concocted by the central offices of the accrediting agency, acting independently of its own guidelines and evaluation team.

While it contained some criticisms of Baruch’s curriculum, the public report issued by the evaluation team itself was on the whole quite positive. (The thirty-seven-page document contained some complimentary points in addition to others mentioning ethnic tensions and the lack of minorities on the faculty. The report did not state that accreditation was to be withheld or deferred because of these matters.) According to procedure commonly followed in accreditation, Baruch was given an opportunity to submit a statement answering the criticisms in the team’s report. Following the college’s response, a still confidential letter from Sarah Blandshei, the chair of the Middle States Association, is said to have indicated that accreditation would be “deferred” because of the “minority” attrition rate and the lack of “minorities” in the administration and faculty.

Dr. Howard L. Simmons, executive director of the Middle States Association, acknowledges that under his leadership, the agency has undertaken a new activist role. He has asserted, according to a recent issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education*, that all universities must be made responsible for the success of “minorities” in higher education.¹ In order to do this, Simmons said in an interview, the faculty and administration “must reflect the composition of the service area of the student body.”² This is part of a broad initiative by Simmons. According to published reports, fifteen to twenty other institutions have also been threatened on these grounds by the association; Baruch’s is only the first case to become public.

The attack on Segall and the Baruch faculty represents an ominous direction taken by accreditation. For the first time, an accrediting agency is criticizing the

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ethnic composition of a college's graduating class, as well as making specific complaints about the racial makeup of its faculty and staff. According to a source on the Department of Education's National Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility, such a step is entirely unprecedented. No other accrediting agency has ever undertaken an aggressive role in attempting to impose racial quotas on faculty, administrators, and graduates.

In itself, the attempt to control the ethnicity of university personnel is nothing new. In the last twenty years, the concept of affirmative action has evolved into a quota system in which white males are routinely excluded, as John Bunzel has documented in a recent article in the *American Scholar*.³ Although deeply threatening to the integrity of the university because they undermine the concept of professional peer review, quotas imposed on personnel committees have been a long time aborning, and it does not appear that they will be easily abolished. Until recently, however, the federal government was the principal agency in this coercion. Now, it appears, the effort has shifted from government to private agencies such as Middle States, accompanied by the notion that henceforth a college may have its accreditation withheld if it does not graduate the right percentages of certain ethnic groups.

A Racial Graduation Quota?

When asked if a college could be found delinquent for failing to graduate sufficient numbers of "minority" students, Simmons agreed that Middle States does use an "outcomes-based approach" for granting or withholding its approval. He denied that Middle States has any "hard and fast rules" regarding minority retention rates, indicating there is "never a single standard" in assessing a school's performance in this regard.

Simmons has claimed that his approach comes from *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Standards for Accreditation*, the handbook used by Middle States. In fact, there is no statement whatsoever in that manual concerning minority retention rates. When this was pointed out, Simmons changed his mind and said that accreditation is granted or withheld on a case-by-case basis. "I know that sounds hard to understand," he admitted, "but that's how they do it. The team decides differently for each school." There are "so many factors involved" that there can be "no quantitative standards" for evaluating a college. So much for the objective criteria of accreditation.

What is particularly bizarre about Simmon's line of reasoning is the fact that students at Baruch, regardless of racial and ethnic identity, generally have a much better chance of graduating than elsewhere. Of white freshmen at Baruch, 48 percent graduate in four years, compared to a national average of 40 percent; 37 percent of black freshmen graduate in four years, compared to 25 percent nationwide; of Asian freshmen, 49 percent graduate in four years, compared to 42 percent nationwide.⁴ (Only "Hispanics," a particularly heterogeneous group

whose actual composition varies greatly by region, do slightly less well—31 percent at Baruch and 35 percent nationwide.)

Apparently, not only have the criteria for “minority retention” been invented for the occasion by Middle States headquarters, but the true numbers have been ignored. It is likely that the criteria are kept deliberately vague in order to increase the arbitrary power of the accreditors. The use of an unstated but *de facto* racial graduation quota puts university administrators in a vulnerable position, since there is no way to tell whether Middle States will charge them with not having satisfied the goal of graduating sufficient numbers of designated minority groups. The lack of precision permits Middle States to deny that they are seeking any exact outcome, thereby avoiding legal action. At the same time, when it suits them they can use the “outcomes-based approach” as a potential threat to colleges seeking accreditation. Knowing that they will be held to an inexact but real racial graduation quota, residents and deans will be inclined to design programs to increase graduation prospects for protected groups.

Middle States can thus obtain the desired outcome without ever having to invoke the threat explicitly, and all the while remain protected from public scrutiny. Simmons admits having adopted the same tactic with many other institutions, but because of the secrecy involved in the accreditation process, he has not had to be held publicly accountable. However, in this he may have violated federal regulations. The Department of Education has criteria for recognition of accrediting agencies, one being that an agency “not mislead the public” regarding an “institution’s or program’s educational effectiveness.”⁵

Can Whites Teach Blacks, and Vice Versa?

The other criticism leveled against Baruch is that it does not employ enough “minorities.” In reality, this argument is absurd, since many Baruch professors are Jewish and non-white Asians. But in education-speak, such individuals are not defined as “minorities.” Middle States is actually arguing that Baruch’s faculty has too many non-Hispanic whites and not enough blacks for a student body that includes many blacks and Hispanics. Thus, the broader question at issue is whether or not white instructors can adequately teach “minority” students. The “diversity” of a student body, according to Middle States, must be matched by a corresponding “diversity” of faculty and administrators. This belief is so widespread amongst academic administrative *cognoscenti* that few question it. When the logic of such a concept is challenged, the usual response is that a white professor cannot be as good a “role model” for a black student as a black professor.

In fact, there is little or no systematic evidence for this argument. In social psychology, the notion of “role model” is correctly applied to the basic socialization of children, when explaining how in childhood we “identify” with others, particularly parents, siblings, and peers, and choose certain persons

(particularly those of the same sex) on whom to model ourselves. But this is a complex process, and a child may be as likely to “de-identify” or want to be the opposite of a peer or a sibling or a parent. It is also highly questionable whether this process takes place after puberty. At most, therefore, while one may suggest that professors can serve as inspirational mentors to college students, no evidence exists that such individuals must be of the same sex, race, or cultural background. The idea of “role model,” in short, is fraudulently applied in the field of higher education.

Indeed, if such a concept did make sense, it would have exactly the opposite results of what Middle States ostensibly desires. It would mean not only that black students should be counseled to take courses only from black professors, but also that white students should not take courses from black professors. If black students need black professors as role models to spur them to greater levels of achievement, white students require and deserve the same kind of encouragement. Taken to its logical conclusion, the “role model” argument is actually a strong justification for racial segregation in higher education. If black students respond best to black professors, they ought to maximize their chances by enrolling at all-black colleges. The same would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to white students.

Another justification for the use of racial quotas in hiring is the suggestion that white professors are somehow harder on black students. As closet, or unconscious, racists, white faculty are, according to this argument, responsible for the higher dropout rate of blacks. In point of fact, there is no evidence for greater white professorial bias against black students. Dr. June O’Neill, a former member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights and professor at Baruch’s Center for Business and Government, has done extensive research on the determinants of black and white high school students’ achievements when they are young adults. Black students who have black teachers tend to do *less* well in terms of verbal aptitude, but this is because black faculty tend to be less well prepared. By itself, a teacher’s race has no effect on a student’s success. It is doubtful, however, that Simmons and his allies are inspired by evidence or logic. There is no reason to believe that much reflection was done on the scientific basis for their criticisms and suggestions. Rather than call for measures that will actually improve the quality of education at the institutions they investigate, they seek symbolic moves that produce positive media images.

Future Implications of Accreditation Quotas

In the classic accreditation process, institutions are evaluated on the basis of the stringency or laxity of their educational standards. In the past, if a college was found to be too lax, accreditation was withheld, or perhaps conditionally granted pending correction of certain deficiencies. But now, for the first time, a college’s accreditation has been “deferred,” not because its standards are too

low, but because *they are too high*. An institution of higher learning is being directed to arrange its faculty, administration, and curriculum so that a *de facto* racial graduation quota can be filled. Aside from some serious issues of law, this initiative represents the latest step in the abolition of institutional autonomy and faculty control over the hiring process.

It is no coincidence that this new and arbitrary direction has been taken by a private accrediting agency. In 1989 the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions that seriously undermined the ability of government to require institutions to use racial and sexual quotas in hiring and promotions. Though this was a serious setback for those who would like to see a political system governed by racial and sexual entitlement, they have evidently regrouped.

For example, under the sponsorship of Senators Kennedy and Hawkins, the Civil Rights Bill of 1990 currently being argued in Congress would reimpose on employers the burden of proving that they did not discriminate against minorities in hiring. Since it is virtually impossible to prove that something has *not* occurred, the result will be that employers (including colleges and universities) will be obliged to adopt quotas in hiring in order to forestall potential lawsuits. This is particularly likely because the same legislation will require employers to pay the cost of employees' litigation, thus encouraging plaintiffs to make complaints of discrimination free of charge.

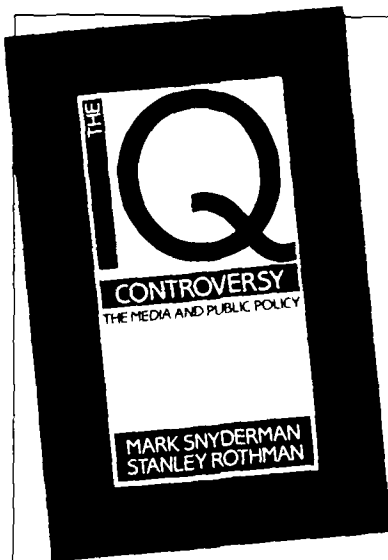
On the level of academic rhetoric, the tactic has been to substitute "diversity" for the now-tainted "affirmative action," since it is widely recognized that the latter has produced discriminatory preferential hiring. Surveys show that most blacks, as well as most whites, are opposed to preferential treatment for blacks. Using "diversity" sounds better because the term is vague and it is hard to say one is against it. But the Baruch case shows what "diversity" truly means; it is simply old wine in new bottles.

That there is no logical or empirical justification for racial quotas in hiring or graduation should not need saying. But Simmons and his allies are not governed by logic or facts; they are driven by a sense of moral righteousness that is impervious to any argument. Rather than conforming to consistent and objective standards of excellence, Simmons makes up the rules as he goes along. Rather than appealing to the intellect, Simmons tugs at people's basest emotions in order to impose his political agenda on higher education.

Notes

1. See, Ed Wiley III, "More Institutions May Be Held Accountable for Diversity through New Accrediting Emphasis," *Black Issues in Higher Education* (10 May 1990).
2. Howard L. Simmons, telephone interview with author, May 1990.
3. John H. Bunzel, "Minority Faculty Hiring: Problems and Prospects," *American Scholar* 59 (Winter 1990): 39-52.

4. The figure for blacks comprises non-SEEK students. Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge is a City University of New York program for "economically and educationally disadvantaged students." Even including SEEK students, though, Baruch's black dropout rate is still below the national average.
5. U.S. Department of Education, *Secretary's Procedures and Criteria for Recognition of Accrediting Agencies; Final Regulations*, Federal Register, vol. 53, no. 27, 1 July 1988, parts 602 and 603, para. 602.18.



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