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Reverse Racism via Favoritism

In the course of American history, there is probably no greater time than the 1960s marked: by free love and flower power, standing up against the “man”. Through protests and rallies, Americans had the chance to re-write the wrongs. But most importantly, the 1960s was the greatest time for great and reformation that to this day, these changes continue to shape the face of America. These changes include: going to the moon, giving birth to rock and roll, and for the first time a Black man’s voice has had the power to change minds and to cause action.

In spite of all these changes perhaps the greatest change of all took place in 1968 when the University of Illinois sent a shock wave through mainstream America. The University created an unheard of a program that would admit 500 African American students to the University, unheard of in those days. The project was deemed the *Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP)*, and it helped minority students to advance in education. Today, all minority programs can trace their lineage back to the *Special Educational Opportunities Program*. However back then there was a need for programs like these but today, in 2009 it is a far cry from the racial environment of the 1960s because these programs do not uphold the foundations of the *Special Educational Opportunities Program*. Since then the programs have become detrimental as many students feel like the

university is exhibiting reverse racism or favoritism. Thus, the programs created for the advancement of minorities should be either discontinued or reconstructed, because these programs are not helping students rather they are poisoning the environment they live in.

In an attempt to understand the programs that arose from the ashes of *Project 500*, it is necessary to understand the projects roots. The program was named *Special Educational Opportunities Program* but after years and years the program today is affectionately called *Project 500*. It was created in 1968 with the purpose to “the initiative aimed to bring more than 500 low-income black students to the University in an effort to increase racial diversity” (Cisneros). The mission statement of *Project 500* reads;

- (1) To provide an educational opportunity for students who may not otherwise have had the opportunity to attend college;
- (2) to increase the number of minority students on the campus;
- (3) to develop educational programs and practices to aid disadvantaged students in their academic careers;
- (4) to expose non-SEOP students to the cultural and social experiences necessary in understanding different cultures;
- (5) to develop information to deal successfully with educational and sociological problems affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds (“The center point of an area is usually the starting point”).

In 1968, because of its intentions this program was both revolutionary and controversial. The program’s first director was Clarence Shelley and in its initial steps Shelly sent out recruiters across the nation looking for under privileged African Americans students “a team of student recruiters, which Shelley said was largely unprepared, spent the summer of 1968 traveling the country in search of students who, under normal circumstances, would not have been able to attend the University” (Cisneros). The team

found and admitted 580 African American students who entered the University. A former student Nathaniel Banks recalls the university's atmosphere at the time: "This campus was a lot different in 1968," he said, "It was very homogenous, mostly affluent white students from northern Illinois, so there was a degree of hostility in that time"(Cisneros).

The tension was to be expected due to the time period. It was the peak of the Civil Rights movement and a few short months after the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination. At first, the students were pleased with the housing accommodations, financial aid packages, and other benefits they received. However, the students quickly began to realize that these luxuries were all for the cameras, because the day before classes began the parade of gifts ended as the students, were moved and the financial aid seemed to dwindle. The students began to develop a bad taste in their mouth and over the coming months the taste only grew more potent. In an effort to remedy the situation, the students decided to plan a protest where they met on the patio of the lounge of the Illini Union, demanding to speak with Chancellor Peltason. When the Union closed, the students refused to leave. Peltason never showed and the police were called. After that night, Peltason received a lot of public scrutiny for not discontinuing the program, but he stood firm in his decision. The mass of students were arrested, and there was so much over crowding in the jails that the police had to use make-shift jails in the west hall of the football stadium. The students were later released and most students did not face charges. Today, Shelly admits that "the university at that time was not prepared... Oh lord it was awful, it was just awful but we learned a lot and that's the other part of it that's the other thing that happened when we had not planned properly we made so many mistakes that with every mistake we learned something and I thinks that was saved us I think" (Magda). Today Shelly feels that progress had been made.

With the foundation of the first minority advancement program laid, *Project 500* gave birth to all minority programs for years to come.

The two major minority advancement groups on campus are the *Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA)* and the *Central Black Student Union (CBSU)*. These programs have gone through a lot of changes over the years. For instance the Central Black Student Union used to be an incredibly militant group, resembling almost to a tee the Black Panthers. However, today the program is incredibly docile. And the *Office of Minority Student Affairs* that used to only cater to African Americans is now based around helping all minorities (African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, etc...). The fourth postulate of *Project 500*'s mission statement reads "to expose non-SEOP students to the cultural and social experiences necessary in understanding different cultures" ("The center point of an area is usually the starting point"). In my opinion, this postulate is the most important of the five because just bringing minority students to the university but no assimilating them goes under the category of separate but still unequal.

"You can't cause change unless you change something" (anonymous 4). The *Office of Minority Student Affairs* and the *Central Black Student Union*, both in their mission talk about the advancement of minorities and contributing to the minorities overall sense of community. No where in these two mission statements does it say that anything about non-minority students (that's what is meant by "non-SEOP students"); instead the primary focus of these two groups is everything involving minority student life. But in just focusing on the small minority group the student/university funded organizations is not contributing to the overall global knowledge of students. Is what college is supposed to do, to create world savvy students? Before this year my roommate had never even met an

African American person before the two of us lived together. And there are aspects of African American culture that I want to share with her but she is afraid that if I take her to a club meeting of some sort that she feels if she came then she would be excluded, or made to feel uncomfortable because of her different cultural background. I later found that her feelings about the exclusion weren't completely off the base. In a survey conducted, Anonymous 2 a Caucasian student, left the message "It's the University's job to make us more cultured and global individuals but with clubs and their names. Like the Central Black Student Union, with a name like that you know who is and who is not welcomed." Nikki a Latina American student further backed the statement made by Anonymous 2, "if a White kid ever showed up at OMSA (Office of Minority Student Affairs) I'm sure no one official like the directors would turn them away but I can guarantee there would be a lot of looks and staring".

With such a detailed, elaborate past it is hard to completely comprehend the struggle that those who came before experienced. But this is not the 60s and the need for these programs is not evident in today's eyes. Students alike feel that these programs do not encourage campus wide diversity but rather take away from over all unity. The unity in their opinion is destroyed because of the tension from racial favoritism the University is exhibiting. In an effort to remedy this situation it is widely felt that these programs be disbanded or reconstructed to encompass a more diverse student body.

To understand where the University has failed in its commitment to students it is best to evaluate the initial goals of the institution. It then becomes necessary to evaluate the mission statement of that institution. On the University of Illinois' webpage I selected the link to the "mission statement" and after reading it found the mission statement to be very

irreverent. As it, outlines the great work of Abraham Lincoln and past university presidents, having very little to do with academic and student growth/development. The only part of that mission statement was the last few lines reading; “Illinois is proud of its land grant heritage and continues to strive toward continued realization of the mission mandated with Lincoln's signature: excellence in education, research, and public engagement” (“University Mission”). However, on the website I also found another statement that seems more dedicated to informing the public about the University’s mission in regards to student development and overall growth. And for the purpose of this essay the statement chosen was more appropriate to use as the University’s mission statement and named it the University’s mini mission statement.

In the university’s mini mission’s statement it reads “We serve the state, the nation, and the world by creating knowledge, preparing students for lives of impact, and addressing critical societal needs through the transfer and application of knowledge” (“Who We Are”). So in creating knowledge and preparing students, the idea of preparing globally aware students is harbored under the mindset of “addressing critical societal needs through the transfer and application of knowledge” (“Who We Are”). However based on student responses, it is clear that the “minority advancing” programs that the University permits, do not uphold the ideology of creating globally aware students. Instead it is creating a separation amongst cultural groups and thus perpetuating the idea of racial privileges. It is these privileges that take away from cultural immersion and integration of students on the University campus, making the programs created for the advancement of minorities is unnecessary as they are detrimental to the diverse environment in which students live.

With such strong missions statements it is hard to where the University is not upholding its commitment to making more globally aware students. However, that is when it becomes necessary to examine the student's point of view. From surveying 100 students it is pretty clear to see that even though we are a united student body on the issue of racial favoritism, we divide and fall.

In a survey of 100 students, all from varying racial backgrounds, the students in what seemed to be an equally split decision. The students feel that these programs do exhibit racial favoritism and that nearly the same results were gathered in students' feelings toward racial tensions on campus, many feeling that the tension was fueled by these programs. At this point with a fifty-fifty margin it becomes necessary to look deeper within the distribution. The distribution of those that felt that the programs exhibited a form of racial favoritism was more than seventy percent of the African Americans surveyed and about seventy-five percent of the Latinos surveyed felt that the programs did not display favoritism. Certainly, these numbers made sense, because the African Americans and Latinos are the minorities being helped by these programs. Several of the African American students surveyed included comments along the lines amending past discrepancies (meaning slavery) (anonymous 4-15). Which as an African American myself just makes me mad that even after the end of slavery, people still bring it up as if the "white man owes them something".

Of the students who said yes, the distribution was more than half of the Caucasian people surveyed and the Asian students felt that the programs do exhibit favoritism. From both answers obtained, I can definitively conclude that the programs do create favoritism and that contributes to racial tension on campus. This claim holds true because if we think

about it, say, I am given 20 dollars for looking cute and my dad doesn't give my brother 20 dollars. My brother would say that's not fair and I would say that it is simply because I am cute and you are not, in a sense that African Americans and Latinos are me and the Caucasians and Asians are my brother. Several Caucasian students who answered yes for favoritism wrote comments something along the lines of "minorities can have special cultural groups but if there was a Caucasian group then they would just look like racists"(anonymous 1). In my opinion, this is a great point because if there was a "Caucasian only group" then all hell would break loose and everyone would be criticizing the University for letting such "racist" actions take place. However, when the minority students create a club for minorities only, everything is justified in the eyes of society. I feel that this justification comes from the idea of the debt of past mistakes, and the need to re-write the wrong. In fact, many students who are considered the "majority" said something along the lines of "we understand the need for these programs but we pay tuition too, and sometime I feel like my race as a whole is neglected, so yeah I'm jealous"(anonymous 3). With these programs exhibiting racial favoritism and reverse racism, it's no wonder that there is tension between certain races on campus. This tension is over all a product of the programs created for the advancement of minorities, because these programs are not helping students rather they are furthering the "Great Cultural Divide" and thereby poisoning the environment.

The University has made great strides in campus diversity, since the 1960s. After careful examination, it is not hard to see that the University gives a "United but still unequal front." This is seen through; analysis of the roots of the minority student programs, in evaluating mission statement of prominent clubs/programs and the University itself, and

even conducting field research. All of these contribute to the ideology that the University exhibits a form of reverse racism via favoritism, which create racial tension and overall, takes away from campus unity. Thus, taking away the unity and the lack of need make minority advancement programs out dated and obsolete and therefore these programs should be should be either discontinued or reconstructed, because these programs are not helping students rather they are poisoning the environment they live in.