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Policy Issues in the Postsecondary
Education of African Americans

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Few goods and services are as important to socioeconomic outcomes as education. Participation rates of African Americans in postsecondary education are much lower than those for whites. The disparities in college attendance and graduation rates have potentially grave consequences for African Americans and for the larger society. This article addresses some of the policy influences that determine educational outcomes for this population subgroup and raises some of the issues that should be addressed if proportionate participation rates are to be generated.

The forward march of American society has been challenged more by issues of race than any single set of considerations other than those associated with resource constraints. At the same time, no set of issues so illustrates the promise and problems of America as those involved in education.

This seems a particularly apt period to raise the issues of the impact of race on American higher education and the impact of higher education on the economic level and aspirations of African Americans. It seems appropriate during this period, when several books about race relations in America are selling well. These include: Stephen Carter’s Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby; Andrew Hacker’s Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal; and Studs Terkel’s Race: How Blacks & Whites Think & Feel about the American Obsession. It seems appropriate during this period, when the Supreme Court has essentially extended the coverage of Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education by ruling in the
Ayers case that the state of Mississippi is guilty of illegally operating separate postsecondary education systems for African Americans and whites.¹ (It might be noted that the ruling seems to usher in the beginning of a trend in the southern states because a federal judge issued a similar ruling for the state of Louisiana on December 23, 1992.) It seems appropriate to raise these issues during this period, when racial incidents and racial isolation on the college campuses have proliferated to such an extent that the question is seriously raised as to the feasibility of continued efforts to desegregate postsecondary institutions, i.e., whether the Supreme Court was more nearly right in Plessy vs. Ferguson or Brown vs. the Board of Education. This article reviews three major issues in the postsecondary education of African Americans. These issues are:

1) The characteristics of postsecondary education as an economic good,
2) Enrollment trends of African Americans in postsecondary education, and
3) The effects of campus climate and the professorate pool on the postsecondary education of African Americans.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

The American model for delivery of higher education is rare. Few other countries attempt to make access to postsecondary education available to the extent that it is made available in the United States. This model is rooted in the implicit, if not explicit, acknowledgment that education empowers (to use a current buzz-word) people in ways that no alternative activity can empower them. The postsecondary education delivery system also reflects the affluence of this society as well as the widely accepted notion that education is the great leveler in the society.

The value of education to individuals is well known to all of us. Many in my generation of African Americans can recall very clearly the admonitions of a relative who insisted that we get as much education as possible. Many of our parents and grandparents who did not have much education themselves understood what an important insurance policy education was against the perils of being black in the United States. Education as an investment in human capital, consistently pays dividends in excess of those that could be reaped from any comparable investment.

Education not only pays benefits to those who receive it. It pays external benefits to the larger society. It ensures an informed electorate and