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# Are Forced Communities Helping Students of Color?

Bryn Upton

*Brandeis University*

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## **Are Forced Communities Helping Students of Color?**

**Bryn Upton**

Brandeis University

**“These false communities that exist at a large number of schools have some advantages for their members, but for the most part the results are not beneficial for the students or the larger campus community.”**

What happens when a group of people with little or nothing in common becomes a community? What happens when that same group is forced into becoming a community? This is one of the pressing difficulties that can arise for people of color at predominantly white institutions. It has been the case that administrators of many institutions of higher learning, in their desire to diversify their campuses, have created communities out of the small numbers of students of color that attend their institutions. The students need not have anything in common other than their location and the color of their skin. In fact, they need not even have the same skin color as one another, as long as they are not white. These false communities that exist at a large number of schools have some advantages for their members, but for the most part the results are not beneficial for the students or the larger campus community.

When the student of color population at an institution comes together as a community, relationships can develop that might not have otherwise ever existed. Occasionally students from similar backgrounds will meet in a situation such as this and become fast friends. A black student from Brooklyn and a Korean student from Manhattan might never meet one another in New York. If they were to meet, they might not have become friends or even take note of each other. Take these same students out of the city and send them to a small, predominantly white, institution a thousand miles away, and they become roommates and best friends. These types of relationships are abundant in the students of color communities at predominantly white institutions all across the country.

On the other side of this issue there are negatives which should not be overlooked. When students of color are brought to predominantly white institutions there is, often times, an assumption of community on behalf of the administration. Deans and presidents see all students of color as a community. This is dangerous in that administrators will expect these students to speak with a common voice, share a common point of view, desire common activities, and have common problems. For those students who do not find comfort in the student of color community there is no voice. Administrators are uncomfortable when they hear several voices, sometimes in conflict, from what they see as a community. Administrators expect the community to support its members. When students of color do not receive support from the student of color community, where do they turn? This marginalization is not intentional in most cases, but it is equally detrimental when it is intended as when it is not intended.

For the students of color who become a part of the community, that community can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students begin to expect all of the students of color at

an institution to want the same things, and to have the same tastes. Those students who dare to be individuals and do not buy into the forced community are often shunned by that community. Students of color can become victims of their own racial categories when they begin to believe that community comes from skin color. As David Hollinger wrote in his book "Postethnic America": "The multiculturalism of our time has helped us to recognize and appreciate cultural diversity, but I believe this movement has too often left the impression that culture follows the lines of shape and color. There is no doubt that racist understandings of what shape and color mean have limited the kinds of culture choices and creativity people can achieve." Some students can actually become trapped within a community that would not exist outside of a particular institution. This community can affect a student's choice of major, social activities, extra-curricular activities and even choice of friends.

There are times when a person of color needs to be with other people of color, but community should be a choice. A black student who spent four years at an institution that was over 90 percent white, and spent much of his free time at the African American House, once said that the house was the only place on campus he "didn't have to be black." For students of color, as for all students, there is a need for a sense of community in order to feel comfortable. A community should not be forced on any student.

## **PRESENTER**

**Bryn Upton** arrived on the campus of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine in 1990. For four years he pursued a degree in history, concentrating on modern America and completing an honors thesis on the role of Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. He served on the Residential Life Staff for three years and was a member of the varsity track team for four years, earning All-New England honors in the decathlon in his junior and senior years. In the spring semester of his senior year, Upton worked as the campaign manager for State Representative Thomas M. Davidson Jr.'s first campaign. After graduating *Cum Laude* in 1994, Upton became the Coordinator for the Recruitment of Students of Color for the Bowdoin College Admissions Office. He spent three years overseeing numerous programs directed at further diversifying Bowdoin, rising to the rank of Assistant Dean of Admissions. During his tenure at Bowdoin he also served as the liaison to the New England Consortium of Black Admissions Counselors, an organization that Bowdoin was a charter member of in 1976. In 1996 he was elected Chairman of the Brunswick Democratic Town Committee. In 1997, Upton left Maine to pursue a doctorate in the American History Department at Brandeis University. Currently he is researching the desegregation of Boston Public Schools in the 1850's.