

## Some Thoughts on the situation at the University of Missouri – Ten Things

1. The recent problems and issues at Mizzou, though perhaps more severe there than on some other campuses, are reflective of issues and conditions that are commonplace on predominantly white public university campuses. As I discussed extensively in my book *Majority-Minority Relations* and in my 2001 Midwest Sociological Society Presidential Address, numerous studies have shown consistently and repeatedly that African American students do not experience such campuses as supportive, welcoming places conducive to learning. Sometimes there are incidents of flagrant expressions of racism, as has clearly been the case on a number of occasions recently at Mizzou, but more commonplace are subtler forms of exclusion, snubs, and differential treatment. These come from some fellow students, some professors, and some other university employees such as police and administrators. This does not just occur in the case of African American students, but also in the case of other students of color, working-class and first-generation college students regardless of race, and in the case of women in predominantly male majors and institutions.

2. These processes make it more difficult for students in the aforementioned categories to complete their educations successfully and graduate. There are many reasons for the lower graduation rates of students of color, first generation college students, and working-class students. These include the issues noted in item 1, as well as greater financial difficulties, time conflicts between work, family, and studies, and in some cases lesser academic preparation prior to entering college. But putting the academic part aside, the social issues noted in item 1, combined with the other factors noted here, result in lower graduation rates and longer times to graduation regardless of academic preparation.

3. These are not insurmountable issues. There are many things that universities can do to address these problems. These include increasing the diversity of the faculty, administration, and staff, so that students of color feel less isolated and see role models that look like themselves. They also include strong programs of diversity training for faculty, staff, and students to prevent the kinds of behavior that make campuses unwelcoming places. These behaviors are sometimes unrecognized and unintentional by the people who engage in them, but their consequences are real. Also important is having a mechanism to forcefully deal with problematic incidents when they occur. The failure to do this appears to have been a major exacerbating factor in the problems at Mizzou. Finally, support programs and mentoring for students in groups at risk for the problems noted in items 1 and 2 above can substantially improve graduation rates and let students who may feel isolated and unwanted know that someone cares that they succeed. There are many models for such programs, but among the important factors are communicating to students that they can succeed and are expected to do so, providing effective mentoring and/or intensive advising, and having such programs in the department of the students' majors so that those supporting and encouraging them are faculty in their own department with whom they take regular courses.

4. It appears that at Mizzou, there was a substantial and long-term failure to deal with these issues. Mizzou apparently did not even have diversity officer until this week, after the issues had come to a head and the President and Chancellor resigned. Numerous other universities had such positions two

decades ago. Additionally, the failure of the Mizzou administration to speak out forcefully against racism and to act in support of the students affected by it was a major focal point in the protests that led to the President and Chancellors' resignation.

5. Racism has been a long-standing problem at the University of Missouri. Missouri is a former slave state, and its higher-education system was for decades racially segregated by law. It took a Supreme Court ruling and more to get the first African American student admitted to the Columbia campus. In 1938, in *Missouri ex rel Gaines vs. Canada*, the Supreme Court ruled against the University's refusal to admit Lloyd Gaines, an African American student, to its law school. The court found that because the state operated no other comparable law school, the refusal violated the Equal Protection clause, but remanded the case back to the Missouri Supreme Court. Unfortunately, in the face of continuing legal procedures and the stress of being in the public limelight, Gaines gave up and subsequently disappeared under unknown circumstances and was never seen again. It would be twelve more years, in 1950, before the University of Missouri finally admitted its first African American student. Since then, African American enrollment at the Columbia campus has remained well below the proportion of African Americans in the state, and many African Americans have continued to view the predominantly white Mizzou campus and Columbia community as places where African Americans are not particularly welcome.

6. It is undoubtedly true that the past year's events in Ferguson and elsewhere contributed to the tensions that gave rise to this event. Repeated police killings of African Americans have given rise to a broad-based Black Lives Matter movement that is about more than just police actions. At the same time, the violent incidents in Ferguson generated fear and anger in segments of the white population. When you combine this with the fact that Missouri is a very segregated state, the potential for tensions is compounded. Rural Missouri is very conservative and culturally different from urban centers such as St. Louis and Kansas city, and it is virtually all white. Even within the urban areas, very high levels of housing segregation often lead to segregated schools. Most whites and many African Americans come from schools and communities where everyone is of their same race, and opportunities for interracial communication are few and far between. For many, the University marks the first experience of interracial communication, and the first chance to learn how the experiences of people in other racial and cultural groups can be very different from one's own. Unfortunately, by then, racial isolation and public conflicts such as Ferguson have led many black and white students to see racial issues from completely opposite viewpoints, often influenced by fears and stereotypes. This is difficult to change in the context of extreme segregation found in Missouri, and further underlines the need for a strong diversity education program at the University.

7. The current problems at Mizzou go well beyond race and seem to reflect an administration that does not care much about the welfare of its students. Two incidents earlier in the fall semester illustrate this. First, just before the start of classes, the University abruptly eliminated health-care benefits for graduate students, claiming incorrectly that they had to do so because of the Affordable Care Act. Later, when this reason was shown to be invalid and after widespread grad student protests, they reversed the decision and restored the benefits. They also tried to reduce tuition waivers for graduate students, a

decision that was also reversed after student protests. In the second incident, the University responded to the political controversy about Planned Parenthood by revoking a Planned Parenthood doctor's admitting privileges to its hospital, and cancelled an agreement that allowed Mizzou medical and nursing students to complete clinical hours at Planned Parenthood clinics. Over 2,500 students signed petitions opposing these moves, which were widely seen as placing politics ahead of student's health care needs and educational opportunities.

8. It is an encouraging fact that the protests at Mizzou have been broad-based and diverse. Not only African American students, but many students and university employees of all racial and ethnic backgrounds have been involved in the protest. The student government, the faculty assembly, some academic departments, a group of nine academic deans, and the football coach and numerous members of the football team all went on record in criticism of the administration's failure to address issues of importance to students. It is critical to social change in general that people from a wide variety of backgrounds and positions take the position that "an injury to one is an injury to all," and this broad-based unity has been crucial to the changes that now appear to be under way.

9. While it was essential for the President and Chancellor to go, their resignations alone do not resolve the issues that gave rise to their departures. It is important to address the racial issues that gave rise to this situation through permanent institutional reforms along the lines of what were discussed in item 3 above, and for the administration in general to operate in ways that demonstrate its true commitment to opportunity and success for the University's students.

10. We can expect similar controversies and issues to arise on other campuses around the country. Indeed, this is already happening. While it does appear that the Mizzou administration was particularly inept and uncaring, and that the proximity to Ferguson may have exacerbated racial tensions at Mizzou, the fundamental issues that gave rise to the Mizzou protests exist to greater or lesser degrees on many campuses around the country. With the role model of successful protest at Mizzou, we can expect similar uprisings on other campuses where campus leadership does not act forcefully to address racial incidents and issues of unequal opportunity on their campuses.

John E. Farley  
Professor Emeritus of Sociology  
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville