



lastword

The Token Commitment

BY DONALD EARL COLLINS

Since August, there have been close to 100 student-led protests, sit-ins and boycotts at colleges and universities across the United States. Sparked primarily by racist incidents and indifference (although sexism and other campus climate issues are also involved), from elite private colleges to state institutions, these protests indicate that decades of efforts toward diversity have failed. Not just in terms of demographics.

It was clear more than a generation ago that the shift toward a business-oriented approach in running higher education institutions — with an emphasis on fundraising and hiring mostly adjunct faculty for teaching positions to save money — would mean achieving more diversity among faculty and students would no longer be a priority.

With the Supreme Court's *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* decisions in 2003 and its willingness to hear more arguments via *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* recently, any systemic efforts to tackle diversity and campus climate in higher education have been whittled to the size of a thumbtack. But really there has been little leadership in higher education dedicated to creating a safe and welcoming environment for students of color, not to mention for women and LGBT students.

Incidents like the smearing of feces on the wall of a campus dorm bathroom in the form of a swastika and the exclusion of Black and Latino women from a "White Girls Only" party at Yale University are well documented. So, too, have been responses from leadership on most of these campuses, mostly in the form of silence and inaction.

This was the case with University of Missouri System President Tim Wolfe, who resigned from his post in the wake of protests, a hunger strike and a threatened boycott by the University of Missouri football

team. In other cases, university leaders may not have the authority to respond on their own with new policies to address student grievances, which has been the case with Yale College Dean Jonathan Holloway.

Still others have chosen to shame student activists into silence. Oklahoma Wesleyan University President Everett Piper said in a blog post, "Our culture has actually taught our kids to be this self-absorbed and narcissistic," adding, "this is a place where you will quickly learn that you need to grow up. This is not a day care. This is a university."

All of this is indicative of higher education institutions in which intellectual enlightenment and personal development has been sidelined in favor of capital campaigns. As a result, leadership at many higher education institutions finds itself ill-equipped to address dissent and protests over campuses that may admit underrepresented students but hardly make them feel welcome.

Most importantly, though, students of color and other underrepresented students may well believe that their higher education institution sees them as mere tokens. Though institutions may confess a firm belief in diversity and tolerance, that practice often begins and ends with the admissions process. Once universities admit students of different ethnicities and backgrounds, their job is done.

There is no need to make campuses welcoming of different ideas, for new names for old buildings; to develop courses that reflect a diversity of experiences; or to hire more than a handful of faculty who may reflect the same diversity as possibly reflected in their student bodies. In fact, the idea here is that students of color should be grateful that any university saved a slot for them, especially an elite state or private institution.

This is where leadership in higher education with the authority to change the

climate and exclusionary policies beyond admissions can have the most impact. Presidents, vice presidents, and provosts at colleges and universities should take on the responsibility of leading by walking around. They should be present at student protests, take seriously the idea that their campuses should embrace new perspectives, new ideas and the underrepresented students from whom these perspectives and ideas come from.

Mostly, higher education leaders should take steps to acknowledge and address both the microaggressions that make their campuses less welcoming of students of color and the token efforts at diversity that have failed to curtail persistent racism and sexism on their campuses.

In May 2000, the American Council on Education and the American Association of University Professors produced the report *Does Diversity Make a Difference?* Among their findings was that, in "the debate about who should have the 'right' to be admitted to selective colleges and universities, the historic commitment of liberal arts colleges to create communities that support their educational communities — both academic and social — has been lost or minimized."

The student protests over the past months reflect this reality, one that has been with higher education for half a century. It is beyond time that higher education leaders spend more time among their students and faculty in actually helping to transform their institutions into ones that embrace diversity beyond bodies, into places that don't steal from students the joy of a higher education. □

— Donald Earl Collins is an associate professor of history at the University of Maryland University College. He has written for more than 15 years on topics such as multiculturalism, education reform and African-American identity.