

Excerpt from Speech to the Faculty August 17, 2000

Last January we began our first significant initiative aimed at improving Rhodes with the appointment of the Diversity Task Force. The task force formally presented their findings and recommendations to me on June 21. They have offered a comprehensive report that offers some very thoughtful insights into the challenge of building a more diverse Rhodes College. I want to thank these individuals again for their work - Chair Michael Drompp, Anita Davis, Luther Ivory, Mel Richey, Dave Wottle, Trustee Beth Simpson, and students Midu Bagrodia, Naomi Long, and Bernard Quinn. You can find a full copy of their report including the forty-two recommendations on the Academic Volume. Today, we have for you copies of an executive summary of the report and a draft statement I have authored regarding a resolve to promote racial and ethnic diversity.

Today let me briefly summarize why I believe it is imperative that we make significant strides in promoting racial and ethnic diversity. Let me share a portion of my statement of resolve to promote racial and ethnic diversity. Promoting racial and ethnic diversity at Rhodes is important not simply for its own sake but because diversity is essential for the college to achieve its ideals of educational excellence, to uphold its commitment to serving the community, and to adhere to its belief in social justice.

Promoting diversity is essential for the college to achieve its ideals of educational excellence. Rhodes cannot achieve its ideals of educational excellence without promoting racial and ethnic diversity among its constituents. First, an institution arrives at excellence in education by bringing together the best and the brightest people for teaching and learning. The best and brightest come from many backgrounds and places and not just a few. Second, an institution arrives at educational excellence by promoting the thoughtful exchange of ideas and opinions from as broad a base of experience as possible. In American higher education, the promotion of racial and ethnic diversity is the most meaningful and effective means of ensuring challenging dialogue.

Promoting diversity is essential for the college to uphold its commitment to serving the community. Rhodes is distinctive for pursuing involvement with its neighborhood, its city, and its region. Rhodes has an obligation to serve its community. First, in exercising this obligation, the college must engage the resources in its community, which is historically remarkable, culturally distinctive, and ethnically diverse. To serve a community without engaging its members would be arrogant, and to serve a city and region without recruiting and preparing its future leaders from its entire population base would be foolish. Second, in exercising its obligation, the college must challenge the assumptions of its majority students. To receive an education without the benefit of crossing ideological or cultural boundaries will produce a sense that life in this country and this world will never and need never change. Rhodes students who have the benefit of learning at a diverse institution will question their assumptions, will gain new perspectives, and will serve their community.

Promoting diversity is essential for the college to adhere to its belief in social justice. The most compelling argument for promoting diversity at Rhodes is simply because it is right. Rhodes has a long history of individual faculty, staff, and student involvement in issues of social justice. Now is the time for Rhodes to build on these individual expressions of social justice with a corporate commitment to its church covenant that calls for the "effective recruitment of racial ethnic persons at every level of the college's life." For the sake of educational excellence, community service, and social justice, Rhodes must act decisively and immediately to ensure racial and ethnic diversity. Our students deserve our commitment to their future. Let the college resolve, therefore, to promote racial and ethnic diversity at all of its levels.

Let me also share with you the task force's top six recommendations and my response to each recommendation. Recommendation 1: To create a new full time staff position in the Office of Admissions with primary responsibility for recruiting qualified minority students. We want to begin this fall an effort to recruit an individual to fill this position with a goal of having this person on staff no later than July 1 when our next fiscal year begins. In the meantime, I have asked Dean Wottle to insure that we have several talented African-American students employed in this office to help meet this objective on an interim basis.

Recommendation 2: Commit more resources to financial aid for minority students. Next year's scholarship budget - the budget for the students we begin recruiting this fall- will include a significant increase in new dollars for minority student financial aid. This year I have asked that our Admissions Office meet with guidance counselors from every high school in Memphis assuring them that Rhodes will accept all valedictorians and salutatorians that meet Rhodes admission's criteria and that we have an aggressive effort under way to recruit students of color. We want to send the message that Rhodes is a welcoming place and is aggressively recruiting students of color.

Recommendation 3: That Rhodes hires a senior faculty member within the next two years preferably in the position of an endowed chair of African-American Studies. I have met with the Chairman of the Board of Trustees about this priority. We agree it is essential to begin this process immediately. We are putting the funds in place to make this happen. Following the recommendation of the Committee, this year will be a year for defining this position. Dean Llewellyn will be seeking your ideas and proposals. In year two, we will begin in earnest the recruitment process to bring a recognized senior scholar to this campus to fill an endowed chair of African-American Studies.

Recommendation 4: Develop a committee of the Board of Trustees whose function is to promote diversity at the college. The Chairman of the Board and I have discussed this as well. He has appointed a new Ad Hoc Committee on diversity that will get underway this fall. Even now, we are building this committee.

Recommendation 5: Facilitate exchanges with LeMoyne-Owen College, Rust College and other institutions in the Memphis area with significant minority populations. On Monday I met with Dr. George Johnson, the President of Le-Moyne Owen College. He shares with me a deep interest in getting some type of exchange underway. We will meet again next month.

Recommendation 6: Seek greater diversity in the college staff at all levels. I have met with our Director of Human Resources and charged her with coming up with strategies that will enable us to make a more aggressive response to diversifying the college staff at all levels. We are changing our advertising policies and beginning to look at our hiring processes overall to be sure we make progress in this area.

Acting on these top six initiatives is not the end. Acting on the forty-two recommendations is not the end. They are the beginning of a journey that over the next several years will lead to a more diverse Rhodes, a stronger Rhodes. I challenge all of us to give our very best to make this hope for a more diverse Rhodes a reality.