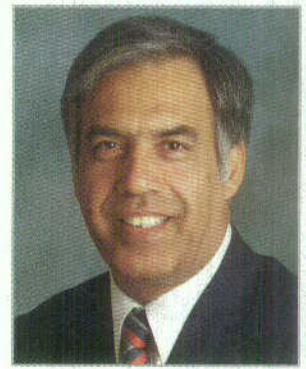


Look to Diversity for America's Re-emergence

The key to America's success is to educate its increasingly diverse population.

BY MOHAMMAD H. QAYOUMI



From my childhood in Afghanistan to my current role as an American university president, I have been blessed with many opportunities to explore different cultures. These experiences have helped me define my cultural identity and my appreciation for societies that embrace and value the individual as well as the diversity of their people.

Based on this experience, it is apparent to me that the United States is facing demographic shifts that are unique in our history. Moreover, the globalization of the world economy has created new challenges and opportunities for our country. The ability to capitalize on our nation's rich diversity, particularly among underrepresented groups, by building our human capital via higher education will drive our re-emergence as a healthy, sustainable, secure and economically strong world power.

In his first address to Congress and the nation, President Barack Obama challenged Americans to unite to help the country overcome today's hard times and observed that "in our hands lies the ability to shape our world for good or ill." That challenge is the central mission of America's public universities, which are uniquely placed to become change agents in a multicultural society.

Still, universities must vigorously ramp up their efforts. If the present gap between demand and supply of an educated and prepared work force continues, by 2020 the United States could face a shortage of 14 million college graduates, according to the 2008 Human Capital Report by the Bay Area Council in San Francisco. The need for significant investment in human capital cannot be overemphasized. The key to this investment is the social mobility and economic prosperity that emerges when educational opportunities are made available to underrepresented groups.

Even as the current economic crisis continues to dampen efforts to meet this difficult challenge, universities have to step up aggressively to engage and motivate young

people — particularly those from underserved communities — to reach for higher education. Closing the educational achievement gap for underserved students will be strongly correlated to future economic activity in our states, regions and nation. Failure to do so ensures perpetual economic stagnation and recession. The centrality of education as a vehicle of social and economic mobility is now a widely accepted phenomenon.

The California State University system, the largest university system in the country, has for several years worked to bridge this educational achievement gap by reaching out to underrepresented communities with creative activities to reach young students where they live. This outreach includes a series of "Super Sunday" events, where university presidents and the chancellor appear in the pulpits of Black churches to encourage congregations to get their sons and daughters, and nieces and nephews on track to a college education.

Outreach efforts to Hispanics include the CSU's partnership in the Parent Institute for Quality Education program, which gives parents nine weeks of training in approaches to improve their children's performance in the classroom, motivate their children to stay in school and identify steps to help children eventually attend a college or university.

At California State University, East Bay, where no ethnic group makes up more than 29 percent of the student population, we offer annual educational summits, one targeted at Black families and another at Hispanic families. These programs are designed to help build a college-going culture throughout California's San Francisco East

Bay region. In April, we hosted a fair that featured representatives from more than 100 colleges and we provided funds to 15 urban high schools so they could rent buses to come to our campus. We also offer summer "algebra academies" at several community locations, including faith-based organizations and churches.

These efforts are not only about university outreach to groups that have traditionally been underserved in higher education; they are a critical element of our stewardship to a region that introduced the world to the personal computer, the silicon chip, the iPod and countless breakthroughs in the health and environmental sciences. In order to meet Cal State East Bay's pledge to become a leader in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, we are working with industries, K-12 school districts, county offices of education and community college partners to provide seamless pathways to a university degree.

Universities, by their very nature, are cradles of hope to the families they serve and to a society that depends on the optimism and entrepreneurial spirit of college graduates to provide solutions to the problems and challenges facing our nation and the world. The most powerful stimulus package that could be provided to this country would be for our universities to continue to send tens of thousands of innovative and technologically fluent graduates into the work force, representing the whole spectrum of American ethnicity. The future of our nation depends on it. We must act now!

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