

# Diversity is an issue of quality for all

Reading the new book *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968*, the final installment of Taylor Branch's outstanding trilogy about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., offers cause for both inspiration and concern. It reminds one of the power, courage and vision of the civil rights leader and his followers, and it also leads one to wonder about the future.

Shortly after the book's release, Coretta Scott King passed away. Her funeral brought thousands—including three past presidents and a sitting U.S. president—to Atlanta to honor her influence through a lifetime of work to continue the mission begun by her husband. The *New York Times* observed that the ceremony marked the end of an era. I prefer to think of this as the start of a new era in which our society will learn to appreciate all that diversity contributes to the richness of our lives, particularly in education. There is much left to be done.

My colleague Mary Sue Coleman, president of the University of Michigan, is leading an effort to protect the ability of colleges and universities to consider race in undergraduate admissions in her state. Those who seek to bar the use of race as a factor in college admissions, as approved by the U.S.



Supreme Court, say that majority students are harmed when racial background is included as one factor among many in the admission process. To my mind, this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the true value of diversity in educational institutions.

The recruitment of faculty and students of color into our colleges and universities is not simply a matter of social justice for some, but rather an issue of quality for all. A growing body of evidence demonstrates the importance of diverse backgrounds and different perspectives in teaching and learning. We know also that young people learn more deeply from difference than from similarity, and as much from each other outside the classroom as we teach them in it. The many corporations that filed friend-of-the-court briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court in support of considering race in undergraduate admission testified to the ways in which society benefits from diversity.

The power of equality can be seen in Wheaton's very history. The late Betty Friedan, who passed away just days after Coretta Scott King, wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*, "Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves." Wheaton alumnae offer thousands of answers. The college's graduates have excelled in virtually every field—from pioneering new approaches in medical care and serving as leaders in government to becoming successful entrepreneurs and best-selling authors. Clearly, this college has



helped society reap the benefits that come when women are free to apply their skills where their passions lead them.

Today, Wheaton has broadened its focus, offering a transformative education to men as well as women, and to recruiting students from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. The college's success rests in part on its commitment to recruiting faculty from diverse backgrounds. It also has benefited from strategic partnerships, such as our relationship with the Posse Foundation, which brings student leaders from New York City public schools to our campus. Indeed, I have had discussions with several major corporations that are interested in the steps the college has taken to become more diverse as a path toward institutional and organizational improvement.

Meanwhile, Wheaton must think deeply and creatively about how to ensure that we use our diversity in ways that add value to our students' educational experience. I like to describe this goal as making excellence inclusive, a recogni-

tion that we cannot be a truly excellent liberal arts institution unless the college community encompasses a broad range of perspectives, backgrounds and experiences. Toward that end, I named a group of faculty, students, staff and alumnae/i last fall to begin an in-depth study of how Wheaton could achieve the goal of making excellence inclusive. The group has spent the first semester organizing itself, and is now reaching out to faculty, staff, students and alumnae/i to engage them in ongoing discussions on how Wheaton can further enhance the diversity of the community and benefit from the myriad perspectives and experiences of its members.

I am under no illusions about the ease with which we can make excellence inclusive. It will be difficult and will include uncomfortable moments. The benefit, however, will bring us closer to a time where we more fully realize the dream envisioned by Dr. King and to which so many people—Coretta Scott King, Betty Friedan and many members of the Wheaton community—have dedicated their lives. □