CHAPTER TWO

VIEWS FROM MINORITIES IN ACADEME

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE, DEALING WITH THE PRESENT

This was the title of a panel discussion at Harvard, sponsored by the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Speakers were current graduate students and PhD’s who were asked to share their experiences as minorities in academe. They represented different stages in graduate study or an academic career, different paths into graduate study, and different fields of intellectual interests: history of science, philosophy, romance languages, and government.

A number of important points were made during the session:

- Because of the intense and prolonged nature of graduate study, it is important for students to be clear about what they want to do. One speaker advised seniors who are uncertain about their goals to try to clarify them before applying to graduate programs. He observed that his own uncertainty and a desire not to feel left out led him to law school after college. It was like a strong gravitational pull for those who were undecided. When he got to law school, he discovered that he did not know why he was there and that there were too many bright talented people in law school who did not belong there and were unhappy. In his own case, he enjoyed his law education. He then entered a doctoral program in philosophy at Harvard, and still remains interested in the philosophy of law and public law.

  His experience in the doctoral program includes both negatives and positives. In the former, there is very little structure, so that a student must be very clear on goals. This can be harder for minorities to do, since there are fewer people with whom to identify. Thus, the typical problem of graduate school becomes more acute for minority students — once again, making it more important for minorities to be sure what they want to get out of the program and why they are there. On the positive side, graduate study is stimulating and rewarding. It is a luxury to spend one’s time studying a subject that one really cares about as a principal and legitimate activity. He noted that professionals such as lawyers or doctors often think of their undergraduate education as an oasis in their lives, where they could pursue their interests. He added that graduate school offers an extension of that opportunity.

  Looking at the decision from still another angle, the speaker also stressed that it is important for more minorities to become scholars and role models. Having models in educational institutions is crucial, since education exercises the most profound influence on people’s lives. If faculties are not integrated, then they cannot serve the goal of helping to create a more integrated society. At the same time, he added that a deficient pool for faculty positions is not the only problem, nor will increasing the pool be the sole solution. Instead it should be thought of as an important first step that is part of a long and historical struggle.

- A second speaker also emphasized the importance of clarifying goals. She had entered a doctoral program in science at MIT, but soon realized that she was not happy in that program. She got her M.A. and then went to work for a few years in computer consulting. She then decided to finish her PhD, but chose to do it in the history of science rather than science and entered the doctoral program at Harvard in this field. This decision was based on her realization that she would be less happy working in a science laboratory, and more fulfilled in teaching and working with people.

- A third speaker focused still further on the issue of minority representation. In regard to the Latino
population in academe, the statistics are somewhat misleading, and are actually even more distressing than they seem. She noted that the Latino population keeps growing, but the number going to college or beyond does not reflect that growth proportionally. Other groups, and especially Black males, have actually lost ground.

On the intellectual side, there is also an exciting challenge for minorities — a need to re-examine the canons, perhaps to retell history. Her advisors tried to discourage her from specializing in minority issues too soon, warned her that she would be labeled exclusively as a minority specialist, that it would be disadvantageous to her career, and that it was best to wait. She nevertheless went through an intellectual evolution in her field of romance languages, from studying the literature of the Golden Age of Cervantes, to Latin American literature, to Central American and Caribbean literature, and finally, to U.S. Latino literature. The warnings against doing the dangerous “Chicano stuff” only whetted her appetite. She said that a dissertation must be about what really moves you. Minorities also need to learn about themselves, to appreciate themselves, to have ethnic studies and courses about themselves, and to have mentors. In dealing with the present, where there are still few minority role models, she said that minority students must take a role and work with one another for improvement, which in turn makes graduate school even more demanding and challenging for minorities. The university can be used for support and to facilitate action by minorities. Fellowships and financial support are particularly important, since there are so many extra demands and pressures on minority students. She considers the challenges enormous, but exciting.

- With a view to the future, the fourth speaker offered a preview of what it is like to become a minority faculty member. As might be expected, she noted that it compared very favorably to her experience as a minority graduate student, and that it provided far more personal autonomy. She added to the discussion on choosing a dissertation topic related to race, and observed that in her experience it did not hurt her career. In fact, in her application essay to graduate school she wrote that she would study Blacks. She was admitted to the school of her choice, but she too was warned that her study might be too “narrow.”

Some of her difficulties in graduate school also involved her family, since they had very little education and had difficulty understanding what she was doing. In the end, she kept in very close touch with her family, and found them an important support. She stressed that it is very important to develop friends and support outside the department, outside the University — especially since there are so few minorities within the University. She noted that among Black PhD’s there has been a tendency to teach at historically Black colleges. Because of the absence of minorities in greater number outside of Black colleges, she finds the issue of visibility a problem — there is a constant feeling of having to meet someone else’s standards. Minority students have described to her a feeling of having to learn a new way of communicating, a new way of thinking, and yet be expected to produce their own original scholarly ideas. It involves extra efforts, extra steps, that other students might not have to make. On a positive note, she concluded that teaching offers an enormous joy of sharing with students, and that this is a compelling reason for entering academe.

- Some further comments came from the audience. Another minority faculty member, teaching at MIT, offered encouraging news. In her experience, minorities are greatly sought after (she has had two job offers in one year), and that colleges and universities are greatly concerned about the under-representation of minorities on faculties. She also had encouraging news about faculty salaries. Academics may still be underpaid, but junior faculty are making considerably more than in the past. Also, as people move through the academic system, they get annual raises. Senior faculty receive very decent salaries. The overall picture thus is one with reasonable financial rewards.
A college senior in the audience, who is applying to graduate school and intends to study minority communities, pressed the issue further of whether she risked being labeled exclusively as a scholar on minority issues. Despite the many warnings speakers had received, there was a general feeling that she should do the best work possible in the field of her choice. The issue of minority topics will not go away—even when minorities choose not to focus on minority issues, it is always assumed that they are specialists in that area. They must therefore be strong in areas in the political mainstream and in minority concerns. The speaker on the Harvard faculty said that when she interviewed for jobs—and her topic was on minority issues—she did not find her specialization harmful to her career. Speaking philosophically, one panelist noted that the new is always resisted, so there is always some risk. At the same time, she emphasized that there is a desperate need for people who can teach about minority issues. The challenge and the difficulties cannot be denied, but that only makes the whole enterprise important and exciting.