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EDITORIAL

Minorities in Science

This issue of *Science* returns to a theme that was explored last year (*Science*, 13 November 1992): the status of, and opportunities for, minorities in research. This area has become so clouded by high emotion involving charges of racism, political correctness, and reverse discrimination that some calm objectivity is greatly needed. The ultimate goal in a democracy should be a color-free evaluation of ability in a profession and equal opportunity for all young people starting careers. Such a goal is essential to a society that must mobilize its best brains to compete in the global economy and maintain a decent environment and standard of living in an incredibly crowded world. This issue of *Science*, edited by Elizabeth Culotta with support from our news staff, helps provide an overview of advancements to that goal.

As de Tocqueville said long ago, "The public will believe a simple lie in preference to a complicated truth," and that, unfortunately, is frequently true in emotionally charged areas. Word usage is important for objectivity and the word "underrepresented" causes some ambiguity because it is used by different individuals in different ways. A precise usage requires relation to some base, such as percentage relative to (i) the population, (ii) those entering college, (iii) those getting good grades in college, (iv) those doing well in graduate school, or (v) those applying for jobs in the academic community or industry.

If a minority is underrepresented in category (i), there may be a pipeline problem where the solution requires encouragement of those individuals who have the talent to enter the profession and the message that discrimination is no longer tolerated. If a minority is underrepresented in category (iv), that may well reflect prejudice or a mentoring problem. All students going through the successive competitions of high school, college, graduate school, and job-seeking have fears and anxieties as the competition gets tougher. The failure of good mentoring for minorities, who frequently have fewer role models, can cause talented minority members to give up when they are being subjected to the normal hurdles of competition. As this issue of *Science* illustrates, mentors can span racial lines, but affirmative action programs correctly promote the view that diversity of faculty members is desirable to provide symbols of success and mentors for minority students who might otherwise be uncomfortable expressing their inner stresses.

There are increasing numbers of minority members on faculties and in industry. The process must continue, because there is a time delay before increasing opportunities become known in a community. To demand instant success is unfair and encourages some who cry "racism" much too quickly when the real problem is a pipeline problem and others who cite a failure to reach goals as evidence that a minority is unable or unwilling to live up to high standards. The effort has to be more of a marathon than a sprint, because there must be examples of success that then encourage those who need role models. The incredible success of Asian Americans in terms of their grades in school and acceptances to graduate school means that they are clearly underrepresented, at the moment, among faculty, but that gap is rapidly being closed and the future may provide good evidence that society genuinely wishes to broaden the base from which talent is solicited. Among blacks and Hispanic Americans the pipeline has been more of a problem, but there is evidence that an increasing number of talented individuals from these groups are adding their abilities to the science community. All scientists must aid in this process, encouraging those who have talent in science to go on in that area and guiding those who have talents in other fields to fulfill themselves in appropriate careers. For example, the job and grant situation in academic science is daunting at this time for all scientists. An able individual who does not quite have the knack for doing research might be an excellent M.D. or patent lawyer, both needed professions. Good mentoring will be a step to cure underrepresentation in all areas and will also produce more happy individuals who will in turn encourage the next generation. If we eventually get to a color-blind society, it is to be hoped that science will lead the way and provide the best program for how it can be done.

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.