



Urban & Environmental Policy Institute

OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE

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## RECONNECTING CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

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### **OCCIDENTAL'S CORE MISSION OF RESEARCH WITH A PROBLEM-SOLVING FOCUS MUST BE THE GOAL FOR THE NEXT GENERATION.**

By PETER DREIER, ROBERT GOTTLIEB. Los Angeles Times. Aug 14, 1998. pg. 9

The current crisis in higher education mirrors America's ambivalence about whether colleges and universities should serve society as a whole or only the elite. The evolution of Occidental College during the past three decades, most recently under President John Slaughter (who has announced that he will leave Occidental next spring), from a cloistered and privileged environment to an institution that connects the campus and the community, reflects the opportunities and challenges facing our schools.

Colleges should be engaged in helping resolve society's problems. In particular, four crucial, overlapping trends pose special challenges: widening economic and racial inequality; growing divisions between cities, suburbs and rural areas; persistent threats to our environment and public health; and the loss of community identities due to increasing globalization of economics and culture.

Major universities raise millions of dollars to study these problems, but there is a growing danger that the emphasis on research has undermined their mission to teach undergraduates. Research dollars also are rarely focused on helping communities solve problems from the bottom up.

Compounding this problem of the research/community divide are the widening economic inequalities and declining family incomes that have made college inaccessible to many qualified students from low-income and even middle-class families. Public universities, especially in California, once served as the "great equalizer," but rising costs and increased tuition have changed the equation. While this trend cuts across all racial lines, it has particularly affected blacks and Latinos.

Helping to buck these trends was John Slaughter, who arrived at Occidental in 1988. As an African American who broke many barriers in his field of electrical engineering before turning to academic administration, Slaughter had considerable experience as a pacesetter and innovator. During his presidency, Occidental--a 1,600-student private liberal arts institution located in Eagle Rock--has increasingly placed strong emphasis on giving undergraduate students experience in doing research with a problem-solving focus.

Like most private liberal arts colleges, Occidental College had for most of its history been defined by a core constituency of upper-middle class white students. This history began to bother its faculty in the early 1970s and by 1988, its trustee leadership had come to share a concern that Occidental needed to reflect the ethnic and class diversity of the surrounding region. Slaughter came to Occidental with a mandate to implement what he called a mission of "equity and excellence," a commitment to improve the academic quality of the college while diversifying its curriculum, faculty and student body.

In less than a decade, Occidental has been transformed into a college that reflects the social and economic mosaic of greater Los Angeles. More than 40% of the student body is now Latino, black or Asian, with a mix of students from inner-city neighborhoods and wealthy suburbs. Students from diverse backgrounds have opportunities to learn from one another and outside the classroom. Moreover, the college has made these changes without the serious racial tensions, political confrontations or academic culture wars that often accompany such changes.

Meanwhile, all the key indicators of academic excellence point to a sharper, smarter, more engaged student body. Its students have won a disproportionate number of prestigious national awards for a small college, including three who were named Rhodes scholars. Last year, U.S. News & World Report ranked Occidental first among liberal arts colleges in its commitment to diversity, while also consistently placing it in the top two or three dozen liberal arts colleges in the nation.

In the past, the college sought to wall itself off from its surroundings, but today it has embraced Los Angeles. As part of this shift, Slaughter himself became the engaged college president, serving on the Christopher Commission on police reform, the California Commission on Higher Education and a number of corporate and civic boards. Nearly half the student body is involved in community service projects.

At Occidental and elsewhere, some trustees, alumni and many educational leaders initially considered the idea of combining diversity and academic achievement as tilting at windmills. This expanded vision required colleges to raise additional funds for scholarships, research projects and community involvement--a daunting task at a time of uncertainty about both public dollars and private philanthropy.

The end of the Slaughter era at Occidental serves as a reminder that "equity and excellence" needs to become a core mission of the new generation of college presidents. To achieve that goal requires reshaping the curriculum to better integrate research, teaching and community engagement; recruiting faculty committed to this mission; attracting an economically and socially diverse student body; building bridges with leaders in the private, public and civic sectors; and raising the funds to accomplish these goals. Connecting the campus to the community is not simply a service or an abstract proposition, but lies at the heart of the choices facing higher education.

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