

# Equal opportunity is not enough

By Myles Brand

One common theme woven through many of our history lessons is that America has thrived as a nation of immigrants. No informed person can

## Commentary

deny the contribution of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants to American culture and society.

Thus, it is all the more ironic to realize that, contrary to some popular thinking, many immigrants have not been warmly welcomed.

There is a strain of hostility and intolerance that runs deep in American society which cannot be overlooked. American Indians, almost from the arrival of white people, were systematically exterminated, and then those few who remained were confined to reservations.

The Chinese, Japanese and Jews fleeing Nazi Europe were all denied admission to our country. And of course, we cannot forget the bitter story of the Africans who came soon after the Pilgrims, unwilling and angry, captives on the slave ships. The great story of the United States cannot be told without these unpleasant chapters.

We are currently experiencing a new wave of immigration — Russians in New York; Nicaraguans in Miami; Hmong in Seattle and Portland; Vietnamese in Texas and Oregon — over 600,000 new Americans per year, according to one estimate. This rate is almost as high as that of the period between 1900-1910.

As in the past, many, including our neighbors in Latin America, must fight a hard battle to convince the government that the United States should open its doors to them.

All around us we see many different people of various heritages. We abound in diversity. The once-favored theory of the melting pot; the image of Americans boiled down to one happy and satisfying brew, no longer applies — it probably never did. There are many different Americans who have all

made a unique contribution to American culture.

Some observers now describe the United States as a "symphony," with many distinct and easily identified instruments performing in harmony. It is true, that if the United States is to successfully face the social and economic challenges of the late twentieth century, we must all work together.

But equally true is that too often the American symphony is out of key. Racism and other negative attitudes and stereotypes continue to confound relations in this country.

Our own state, in particular, has an ambivalent history. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was illegal for a Black person to take up residence here. Hawaiians were forced to leave, and Chinese were loudly condemned. American Indians succumbed to first disease, then to federal troops.

More recently, in Portland, a city otherwise known to be progressive, a Black man was murdered by white hoodlums because his skin was the wrong color. We dare not cast stones at the people of the Bensonhurst section of New York City when the problem is a lot closer than that.

There is a part for all to play, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or physical ability. All members of our society must receive the respect, the opportunity, and the education to reach their full potential, to accomplish their goals, and to contribute to the well-being of this country.

We in higher education cannot sit idly by and expect society to magically transform. Equal opportunity is not enough. Mere exhortations to respect diversity are not enough. We must act aggressively. That is affirmative action.

I am pleased to be at a university with a historically strong commitment to women and minorities. Women were in the University's first graduating class, and during World War II we tried to stand with at least one Japanese-American student whose rights were be-

ing violated by the federal government.

Today many good programs, policies and procedures are in place here, thanks to our affirmative action policy. Let me name a few of our successes: The Office of Admissions offers tuition waivers to attract minority students. The Office of Student Affairs, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and Academic Learning Services all offer programs to help make the University a responsive institution.

We have a formal plan to make this campus accessible to the disabled; and as state funds become available, we are set to make the necessary improvements. The student conduct code is explicitly worded to forbid verbal or physical harassment or assault.

There is a great deal more to be done, however. We need to retain more of our minority students. We need to increase the total number of women administrators and faculty. Our record for hiring Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian faculty and administrators is unacceptable. We also need to hire more women and minorities in classified and management service positions.

Affirmative action is a moral issue. It is simply wrong to discount some peoples and some nations. For those of us in higher education, however, a strong affirmative action policy is also good education policy. The students of this University know this better than any administrator. Learning does not stop in the classroom. It happens in the dorm, in the locker room, and over at the EMU. Students learn from other students.

This University must make the full effort, therefore, to bring together the most diverse group of students possible to make learning complete. In this way, the University will be a microcosm of the best in the real world. Our students will graduate wiser for knowing that a better world — a world without barriers — can be realized. No legacy is more important.

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