RESPONSE TO DIANA SLAUGHTER-DEFOE'S "WHAT SHALL I TELL MY CHILDREN WHO ARE BLACK?": A FOCUS ON RESEARCH

MaryBeth Gasman, Ph.D.
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania

I was asked to comment on this Clayton lecture from the perspective of someone doing research in the field of higher education. In listening to Dr. Slaughter-Defoe, I am reminded of the power of research. Her understanding and interpretation of past research, especially the Moynihan Report, are very telling and should make us stop and think about what we as researchers (including student researchers) do and how we interpret and use the research of others. We must ask ourselves about the background and purpose of the research: "Who is putting it forth?" "What is their background and experience?" "Who is publishing it?" and "How is it being used to inform policy and policy makers?" In the case of Daniel P. Moynihan (1965), a report that might have been well-meaning was dangerous to the African American community and served to undermine the structure of the African American family. Not only did Moynihan's work blame the victim rather than the oppressor for the black families in situations of poverty, it also vilified black women and pitted them against black men. If Moynihan had consulted members of African American families and been familiar with African American history and culture, he might have crafted a richer study that was less susceptible to misinterpretation and misuse. In addition, his research might have been not only more accurate but also more useful to the very community he claimed to want to help.

I'd like to talk about a parallel incident of the dangerous consequences of research in the realm of higher education. In 1967, two esteemed Harvard sociologists, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, published an article in the *Harvard Educational Review* entitled "The American Negro College". Because of the prestige of the journal and the institutional affiliation of the authors, their work received much attention in both the academic community and in the popular press including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Jencks' and Riesman's article severely criticized Black colleges, describing them as "academic disaster areas" and labeling their presidents as "cowardly and tyrannical".

Among Black Americans there was a sense of shock, dismay, and betrayal. Although the Black college community came together to formally respond to the Jencks and Riesman article - critiquing its method and tone of racial superiority - they could not erase the national stigma that the article placed on these post-Bellum, once legally segregated, institutions (Wright et al., 1967). Although there are those who would say that the Black community would not have been accepting of any kind of critique, it was the particular approach of Jencks' and Riesman's research that was most objectionable. The Harvard sociologists visited only a few Black colleges and relied primarily on the work of others and hearsay to generate their conclusions. Their lack of knowledge of black culture and history, in particular the history of black education, led to certain mistaken assumptions. For example, rather than comparing Black colleges to the whole spectrum of higher education and in particular to predominantly White institutions belonging to the same category, they measured all of these colleges against the standard of the elite northeastern institution - such as the colleges of the Ivy League. In fact there were many White institutions that were failing according to the measures used by Jencks and Riesman, but this was not mentioned in their research.

The *Brown v. Board* decision combined with the Jencks and Riesman' article has created a tendency by policy makers, media, and the government to lump all Black colleges together, or to view race as their defining characteristic and ignore the diversity among them. Closer attention to African American research on Black colleges and consultation with those working within the Black college community would have shown the varied missions, student populations, and leadership of these institutions. The Jencks and Riesman article caused the media to denigrate every aspect of Black colleges' performance; it was the reason several funding agencies and foundations decided to support predominantly white institutions trying to attract Black students instead of Black colleges; and it provided the impetus for several decades of continued government scrutiny over these institutions (Gasman, 2003).

Significantly, Columbia University professor Earl J. McGrath (1965) conducted a study one year prior to that of Jencks and Riesman's which, although critical in its portrayal of Black colleges was a collaborative effort with Black college presidents. The findings of McGrath's study were more nuanced and its comparisons considered more valid by the Black community. Had McGrath's findings received as much media attention as Jencks and Riesman's, they would have had a more helpful impact on policy formulation. Moreover, McGrath's research might have opened people's eyes to the complexity of issues surrounding black colleges, rather than inviting them to see the black college question as simply "Should black colleges continue to exist?" However, McGrath did not have the national name recognition of sociologist David Riesman nor were his findings what policymakers wanted to hear. In thinking of this study by McGrath, I am reminded of the Bush study mentioned by Dr. Slaughter-

Defoe. As you can recall, Bush, when trying to answer the question, "Can Black mothers raise our sons?" went to the source - interviewing Black mothers to gain their perspectives. The results were surprising, and didn't fit into any predictable discourse about what black mothers are or are not. Again, I wonder if policymakers really want to hear this perspective.

Looking at a broad cross section of studies on African American education gives us reason to ponder both the positive and negative potential of research. Although some positive results came out of both the Moynihan and Jencks and Riesman studies (for example, African Americans created their own body of research to refute both Jencks and Riesman and Moynihan), these uninformed examinations of African Americans emphasize the need to have an understanding of the history and culture of those we study. In the case of Black colleges, Harvard professor Charles V. Willie provided scholars and policy makers with a comprehensive and historically rooted study of Black colleges in 1978. He stated, "This study was an overt response to the poor scholarship of Jencks and Riesman" (personal communication, September 2, 2003). In the case of African American children and families, scholars like Asa G. Hilliard and Dr. Slaughter-Defoe herself have shown us how scholarship that begins with the perspective of the African Americans involved is most effective and long lasting in its transformation to meaningful policy.

Recently, I read a newspaper article by Black conservative scholar Thomas Sowell of Stanford's Hoover Institute. He pointed to the Moynihan report and the work of Jencks and Riesman as "the last honest assessments of African Americans" (Sowell, 2003) suggesting that work that has been done in more collaborative ways is less than candid about the situation for blacks in the United States. I want to be clear that I am not calling for covering up or softening research results that pertain to "sensitive" topics. Instead, I am saying that the problem lies in the research method. By planning our studies with knowledge of history and culture and by structuring them with an opportunity for collaboration and input from those who would be affected by the study, we are, in the words of Dr. Slaughter-Defoe, "considering the social and political ramifications that the ethical researcher is duty-bound to respect."

References

Gasman, M. (2003). *Salvaging 'academic disaster areas': The Black college response to Christopher Jencks' and David Reisman's 1967 Harvard Educational Review article*. Paper Presented at the annual meeting of the History of Education Society, Chicago, Illinois.

Jencks, C. & Reisman, D. (1967, Winter). The American Negro college. *Harvard Educational Review*, 37 (1), pp. 3-60.

McGrath. E. (1965). *The predominantly Negro colleges and universities in transition*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Moynihan, D. (1967). The Negro family: The case for national action. In L. Rainwater & W. Yancey. (Eds.), *The Moynihan report and the politics of controversy*. Boston, MA: M.I.T. Press.

Sowell, T. (2003, October 3). On racial censorship and Rush Limbaugh. *Jewish World Review*. Retrieved from www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/sowell.asp.

Wright, S., Mays, B., Gloster, H., Dent, A., Jencks, C., & Reisman, D. (1967, Spring). 'The American Negro college': Four responses and a reply. *Harvard Educational Review*, 37 (3), 451-468.