What Can Academia Contribute to a Postapartheid South Africa?

by John A. Marcum

South Africa confronts American academia with a multidimensional challenge. Most dramatically, this challenge has taken the form of student, faculty, and societal antiapartheid pressure to persuade U.S. colleges and universities to divest financial holdings in U.S. firms with investments in South Africa. Debate and protest have centered on the fiduciary, political, and moral issues involved and have induced some major divestment decisions — as high as $3 billion in the case of the University of California. So long as South Africa remains under white rule, these issues threaten to continue, at least episodically, to galvanize and polarize students, faculty, administration, and trustees on U.S. campuses.

Where divestment policies have been adopted, university officials may find themselves confronting demands to extend coverage to include firms that have disinvested but continue to "do business" in the form of sales, franchises, and licensing arrangements. While the Sullivan Code has heretofore served as a "good citizenship" guide to selective South African investment or divestment policy, the Reverend Leon Sullivan's despairing abandonment in 1987 of his fair employment code as insufficient to lever significant and timely change in South Africa may render that policy harder to defend. Given the unpredictable ebbs and flows of student activism, however, it is impossible to know whether divestment pressures have peaked or will force a more expansive definition of what should constitute grounds for divestment.

Whatever one's views about the efficacy or morality of divestment, disinvestment, and other sanctions, one calculation seems safe. South Africa is likely to remain gripped by racial turmoil and political crisis for years to come. The shortsightedness of the country's ruling leadership and the balance of contending political and armed forces point to protracted stalemate. So long as those in power continue to believe that they can remain so by imposing wishfully limited notions of "reform" on a five-to-one African majority, and so long as resistance groups continue to think that militant struggle will lead in reasonable time to a total collapse of the apartheid system, genuine negotiations for the creation of an inclusive political order will be deferred. Defying U.S. preference for get-to-it problem solving as contrasted to long-term strategic
planning and action, South African reality suggests that a humanly costly stalemate will prolong the nation's tragedy.

This projection of the South African crisis into an indeterminate future may also provide an opportunity. It may offer the "time and space" in which to build societal prerequisites for a relatively open and prosperous postapartheid society. Herein lies the principal South African challenge to American higher education. Mindless coercion, fear, anger, and violence may so consume this time and space as to leave South Africa isolated, fragmented, and much diminished. But it is also possible that a perilous course of political suasion, pressure, bargaining, and adjustment, marred by intermittent violence, may lead to a more rational and humanly accommodating social order. In this case, expanded educational opportunity will constitute one of the necessary keys to that new order.

The centrality of education to the character of tomorrow's South Africa helps to explain why it has been at the core of political controversy, protest — and change. The downgrading of quantitative skills, science, and English literacy under Bantu education as imposed in the 1950s left a bitter and passionate black awareness of the linkage between education and sociopolitical order.

The plight of neighboring Angola and Mozambique provides sobering evidence of just how socially disabling an inadequate educational system can be. Without underestimating other factors such as externally catalyzed and assisted insurgency and withering drought, it is safe to say that the absence of educated indigenous cadres left those largely illiterate (80 to 90 percent) Portuguese territories weak, vulnerable, and utterly dependent upon external economic and military support as they assumed formal independence. The disastrous, chaotic experiences of Angola and Mozambique since then underscore the point that, however or by whatever means basic change comes to South Africa, hopes for meaningful political independence and economic well-being will depend upon the development of strong internal human resources. This is all the more true for South Africa, given the sophisticated, technologically advanced nature of the sector of its economy that must serve as the motor force for the construction of an inclusively prosperous postapartheid society.

Bowing both to the necessity for skilled manpower and to black clamor for quality education, the government has moved formally from its earlier imposition of parochial ethnic education to a policy of "equal but separate." This leaves African education under a separate, white-led Department of Education and Training (DET) and leaves African students and educators unconvinced of the government's pledge to move toward racial parity in education.

Increasingly, blacks have been taking the initiative, creating voluntary associations, mounting community projects, setting their own educational agendas. As argued in a widely circulated paperback, Right to Learn (Johannesburg: SACHED/Ravan Press, 1985), they conclude that, for education to further the cause of liberative social change, it must foster questioning and independent thought. It must "ask questions about different ways of understanding society, and therefore about different ways of seeing education." It must ask "What's Education About?" and how does it fit in with or serve as a tool to resolve problems in society at large.

Those of us in higher education who would respond to the commanding social challenge of South Africa in terms consistent with our primary purpose and capabilities must similarly ask ourselves searching questions about how, under what conditions, and for what specific purposes our actions ought to be fashioned. We must effectively inform these actions by posing tough questions about what may be feasible, catalytic, and appropriate within the context of social and political realities in South Africa. We must listen carefully to South African voices and be responsive to needs articulated by people living in conditions of extreme social duress and yet, somehow, remain true to our own commitments to academic values.

In order to understand what we are about, we might usefully address three points: the historical relationship of U.S. higher education in South Africa; the forms that relationship is taking today; and some of the issues destined to confront that relationship as it evolves. We might thereby more effectively channel our collective energies.

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The Era of Laissez-faire Complicity
Over the decades, a passive, open-door policy afforded some thousands of white South Africans access to U.S. higher education. Private industry was not alone in infusing advanced technology and organizational skills into the political economy of South Africa. Inadvertently but systematically, U.S. higher education helped to reinforce an inequitable social order. Affirmative action did not, and does not now, apply to admissions policy for foreign students. In the absence of compensatory measures, South African access to U.S. universities was limited to those who could afford to pay. White, but not black, South Africans enjoyed access to the best in U.S. nuclear physics, medical research, business management, mining engineering, and other advanced scientific and technological education.

In the 1970-1980 decade, some 1,200 South Africans (most of them white) were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. At any given time, a dozen South African graduate students could be found pursuing advanced studies at just the Berkeley campus of the University of California. The number of successful Harvard Business School graduates came to justify creation of an alumni organization in South Africa. Arguably, such exposure to U.S. curricula and society may have had a modestly liberalizing impact on such students. But the crucial point is that the U.S. educational experience was available disproportionately to white (as compared with black) South Africans.

Over time, however, this imbalance gradually changed. With the outbreak of insurgency in colonial Angola in the 1960s, a Southern African Scholarship Program (SASP) for refugee students largely funded by the U.S. government and administered by the African-American Institute (AAI) opened the way for the first significant cohort of black South Africans to enroll in American colleges and universities. During the years that followed, this opportunity was extended to several hundred young people whose aspirations for education and sociopolitical change had brought them into conflict with governmental authority. Appropriately, other such refugee students enrolled under AAI auspices at African, not U.S., universities — a development consistent with a widely shared view that experiencing U.S. higher education represents only one of a variety of enriching educational opportunities to be sought.

It was only in 1979-1980 that a joint initiative of the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Educational Opportunities Council (EOC) of South Africa organized a program designed to bring a substantial number of blacks directly from South Africa to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States. Thirty-six students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 1981-1982. Known as the South African Education Program (SAEP), the program was initially built upon tuition and fee waivers and board and room grants from educational institutions supplemented by foundation and corporate funds. It was later substantially augmented by bipartisan, congressional appropriations that more than matched private funds and resulted in a program that has an ongoing enrollment of some 250 to 300 students attending more than 100 U.S. institutions.

The success rate of SAEP students, enrolled principally in the sciences, mathematics, and other fields that were emasculated or eliminated by Bantu education, has been high. And the rate of return home upon completion of studies testifies to a sustained commitment to family and community. So far, it belies concerns about a possible brain drain. Illustrative of achievement within the program, more degrees in civil engineering have been earned by Africans under SAEP than have been earned by Africans in the entire history of South African education. Program research to date suggests that the liberative experience of studying in a supportive environment where expectations are for success rather than failure has fostered self-confidence and academic competence. Similarly benefiting from this U.S. experience are: (1) participants in a student Fulbright program that annually brings as many as 50 mostly black South Africans to the United States for advanced studies in the humanities and social sciences; and (2) an undocumented number of students, black and white, who have independently found their way across the Atlantic and whose return to South Africa may depend upon the course of events in that country.

Initiatives in an Era of Sanctions
It can be argued that U.S. higher education ought to be motivated principally by an obligation to compensate for a long, racially-skewed relationship with South Africa. It is probable, however, that the prod of divestment pressure had more to do with heightened interest in and dedication to efforts to increase educational opportunities for black South Africans. Complicating matters, desires within the American academic community to expand initiatives beyond the SAEP and other U.S.-based scholarship programs to projects within South Africa have given and will continue to give rise to difficult questions about what to do, how to do it, and with whom to do it.

In attempting to assess the South African educational scene, American academia must contend with four distinct sectors:

The first is the formal or official education system, with Africans-only schools administered under the DET and homeland administrations. This sector has included universities initially created as racially and ethnically ascriptive institutions. Within it, the government has mounted programs for educational improvement — for instance, Operation Salvage to raise the educational level of teachers. Some U.S. corporations have participated in upgrading initiatives within this sector (e.g., “adopt a school” and computer literacy programs and the establishment of the highly visible PACE vocational school in Soweto). Over time, however, massive student boycotts and unrest within an official sector that operates under what is called “own affairs”
law (segregation) have discouraged U.S. educational institutions and, increasingly, corporations from direct involvement with that sector. The closure of the PACE school by student protest action in 1986 stands as a symbol of this not altogether voluntary distancing.

The second sector may be described as the liberal alternative. It includes private multiracial schools, both religious and secular, "open" universities whose enrollments now typically are 15 to 20 percent "black" (in fact, less than half are African, the majority being Coloured [mixed race] or Asian), and a range of associated, predominantly white but multiracial organizations involved in educational uplift and reform. Among the liberal, or nongovernmental, upgrading programs that have received private and public U.S. support are the Teacher Opportunities Programs (TOPS) to improve the quality of instruction and READ, which focuses on developing reading skills among black school children. Representatives from this sector have enjoyed relatively easy access to and empathy within the United States. Their fund-raising has been facilitated by corporate contacts, the creation of private foundations and outreach offices, and linkages forged with U.S. higher education. Most notably, the New England Board of Higher Education has undertaken to raise scholarship funds to enable black students to attend five "open" universities in South Africa — the Universities of Cape Town (UCT), Natal, Rhodes, Western Cape (UWC), and Witwatersrand. This effort, the Open Society Scholars Fund, is dedicated to furthering the integration of South African universities. It costs participating U.S. institutions only $2,800 to support a student for one year, or $8,400 for a degree. Using the office of the New York-based University of Cape Town Fund, this New England venture is now seeking support across the United States. Its goal is to provide scholarships for approximately 400 students at a time.

A third sector in South African education, the community sector, has found expression in the growth of predominantly black educational associations and programs that seek both opportunity and community control in education. It has taken specific institutional form in organizations such as the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), the Educational Opportunities Council (EOC), the Trust for Christian Outreach and Education, and the recently established (with a financial grant from Coca-Cola) Equal Opportunity Foundation (EOF). The most politically active of these voluntary associations, notably a National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) that has attempted to promote and organize alternative "people's education" programs, have been the object of government harassment. Although most of the NECC's top leadership has been incarcerated, the work of the less rhetorical goes on — focusing on remedial education, correspondence school curricula, and provision of internal and external scholarships.

Without seasoned linkages or financing comparable to that available to those organizations in the liberal sector, these groups stood at an initial disadvantage in competing for American attention and support. This has been substantially corrected by the imaginative response of U.S. foundations, especially Ford, Rockefeller, and the Carnegie Corporation, as well as by the U.S. government's Agency for International Development (AID), which recently added its support to an internal university scholarship program administered by the EOC and the South African Institute of Race Relations.

Of increasing relevance is a fourth or external educational sector. It is represented by South African students in voluntary and involuntary exile and by the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO) organized by the African National Congress (ANC) in Tanzania. Modest U.S. and United Nations assistance for this sector allows for some U.S. university placements through AAI and the Phelps Stokes Fund. Its very modesty, however, represents a divisive factor within the black South African student community, some 500 strong, in the United States. American student activists, among others, have expressed concern that the needs of displaced students whose plight puts them at particular disadvantage not be neglected. Whether this concern will result in significant support or not remains to be seen.

Changing Options and Issues

How is U.S. higher education responding in the wake of sanctions legislation and the exodus from South Africa of a growing list of U.S. corporations? To place all hope and resources in one educational sector or one educational program would be imprudent in these changing circumstances. An undue concentration on programming within South Africa, for example, would leave U.S. undertakings vulnerable to denials by an increasingly alienated South African government of access for persons and funds. Similarly, to limit programming to study in the United States would be to restrict severely U.S. educational outreach. Given the volatility and complexity of the South African scene and the differing capacities of U.S. institutions, a variety of approaches offers the best hope for at least some achievements.

Some Suggested Readings


Peter Berger and Bobby Godsell, "Fantasies about South Africa," Commentary, July 1987, pp. 35-40.

To learn about the full range of South Africa-related educational programs, one may now turn to a newly
established information exchange service at the Institute of International Education in New York. Hopefully, the diverse initiatives that this exchange service tracks will reveal unity among educational institutions on one count, namely recognition of the need to act so as to be and be seen to be enabling of black South Africans and the associations through which they are struggling internally to erect the basic building blocks of a postapartheid society. Hopefully, too, those designing and administering particular educational programs will view them as part of a larger, collaborative effort and will eschew dysfunctional competition.

Illustrative of avenues open, in addition to programs already cited, are the following:

- The University of Missouri is developing a bilateral, institution-to-institution relationship with the newly autonomous, community-oriented University of Western Cape (UWC).
- Indiana University is pursuing a catalytic and accrediting relationship with a developing, experimental (Khanya) college that might, if all goes well, eventually become South Africa's first private university.
- Michigan State University has taken a leading role in promoting national discussion of U.S. initiatives for education and training of South Africans and Namibians and is exploring possibilities for collaboration with Front-Line states in providing educational opportunities for South Africans.
- Together, the University of Illinois and Northwestern University have launched a program joined by other U.S. universities to host and facilitate the research of black South African academics on sabbatical leave.
- The University of California, pursuant to extensive consultations with black South Africans, decided to respond to a strongly perceived need for educational programming that would provide flexible, quick-turnaround, individually tailored external instruction and experience for black community-based professionals slated to assume increasing responsibilities and salience within vital social and economic sectors of the country. Jointly, the University and the EOC designed a nondegree Career Development Fellowship Program that will provide opportunities for faculty-mentored study, internships, research, and skills acquisition. Scheduled to begin with a pilot cohort of some 30 fellows at campuses of the University of California and associated institutions (Stanford, University of Washington, University of Southern California) and under IIE auspices at Princeton, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, Brown, and University of Michigan, it will offer mid-career educational opportunities to persons who were shortchanged by Bantu education. These will be in a wide variety of fields ranging from fiscal management, rural development, public health, and university administration to preschool education and agriculture. Fellows are being chosen by the EOC through a network of regional selection committees. Campus visits by EOC staff to inventory what U.S. universities are realistically able to offer or provide access to (e.g., public and private sector internships) and a program coordinator to facilitate the matching of participant needs and university capabilities constitute special features of this experimental program.

All of these undertakings, it should be noted, confront a daunting reality. The deterioration in United States-South African relations at the governmental level and the pace and extent of U.S. disinvestment have created a new conjuncture. It is a conjuncture within which black South Africans may have drawn unrealistic conclusions about what to expect in the way of educational assistance. The Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act enacted by Congress in October 1986 has not led to an anticipated increase in federal funding. A number of U.S. corporations are turning their backs on South Africa and cutting their assistance to educational programs such as the SAEP. Some Americans who rejoiced in the “symbolic victory” of divestment and sanctions have turned dismissively to other arenas.

In sum, U.S. higher education faces a test of its resolve. While we attempt to be sensitive to the articulated aspirations of black South Africans and the appropriate limits to our involvements, we must also generate new sources of funding to sustain our efforts. We must accept that South Africa’s stalemated crisis will make long-term demands on us, will confront us with complicated and intimidating issues, will inevitably entail disappointments. Yet we must persist. We must work together, creatively and consistently. Such is the moral imperative of the South African challenge to U.S. higher education.
