

Whom Should Berea College Serve

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WHOM SHOULD BEREA COLLEGE SERVE?

The question of whom Berea should serve is extremely important, especially in contemporary times when there is no more slavery and the number of Hispanics in the United States gradually constitutes a significant minority. To answer this important question, there has to be an understanding of why the college was founded and what its mission is. There has to be an objective study of what has already been said and done about whom Berea should serve. It is only then that the question of who is to be served can be reasonably answered. When the analysis is done, it is clear that Berea should have a specific focus of primarily serving promising young people, across the United States and the world at large; students who would otherwise not be able to afford a college education or have the opportunity to get a good college education anywhere else.

A study of Berea's history shows that the question of whom Berea should serve did not have a simple answer, even from the time the school was founded. Who to admit was one of the first problems that the college faced (Fairchild 15). This was during the time of slavery and the main issue was whether blacks should be admitted to the college or not. Finally, a decision was made that, "If anyone made in God's image comes to get knowledge which will enable him to understand the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, he can not be rejected [from the college]" (Fairchild 15).

This pronouncement was heavily criticized by the local people, a majority of whom were slave-owners. In addition to this criticism, there were several riots and negative propaganda against Berea and many of the founding fathers were

personally threatened. Some were mobbed while others like John G. Hanson had to run and hide in the mountains or neighboring states for fear of losing their lives (Fairchild 29 - 36). All this commotion was for one reason: Berea had chosen to serve every single person – including blacks.

Such was the all-encompassing nature of the school's mission till the tenure of President William G. Frost. According to Andrew Baskin, a Berea College graduate and current faculty member, "During Frost's tenure, Berea's primary mission became educating poor White Appalachians" (1). Once again, the question of whom Berea should serve was specifically defined even though it obviously contradicted the first mission of serving "all persons of good character" (Fairchild 18).

Soon afterwards, Berea became an all-white institution with the passing of the Day Law. The Law, approved by the United States Supreme Court, made it impossible for both African and White Americans to be educated on the same campus (Baskin 1). African American students therefore had to attend a separate institution, the Lincoln Institute – built with part of Berea's endowment, till 1950 when they could return to Berea (1). Fee was not happy with the developments at Berea and wrote, " 'Professor Frost is not true to the principles upon which Berea College was founded" (2).

Ever since the return of African Americans to Berea in 1950 there have been continuous discussions on the mission of Berea and whom it should serve. This led to the writing of the Great Commitments in 1969 and its revision in 1993. These Great Commitments were to be the mission statement of the school and to

act as guideline principles for Berea. The question of whom is to be served is currently answered by the first commitment; “To provide an educational opportunity primarily for students from Appalachia, black and white, who have great promise and limited economic resource” (GSTR 210 20).

The first Commitment thus seems to answer the question of whom Berea should serve by merging the idea of educating blacks and whites with Frost’s approach of “educating poor White Appalachians.” Why then should the topic of whom Berea should serve be explored again if there is a well defined answer? It is because the answer still has some ambiguities. Moreover, the world is changing at such a fast rate that Berea has to come up with new answers in the context of the modern world, its challenges and opportunities.

The first Commitment as it stands now affirms Frost’s vision of making Berea serve primarily students from the mountain region. Recent statistics from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) at Berea show that over the period between 1996 and 2005, 77% of the graduates were from In-territory¹, 17% from Out-of-territory and 6% international students (Mission Indicators Report 2005). Kentucky alone represents on average 42% of the student body from 1997 to 2006 (Institutional Research Factbook 2006). Over this same period, the average number of African American students has been an average of 16%, the same percentage during Frost’s administration (before the Day Law).

¹ In-Territory is defined by OIRA as students who come from much of the Appalachian region – West Virginia, parts of Ohio, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and North Carolina – and all of Kentucky.

There would not have been a problem with the geographical distribution of students if all applicants had the same chance of being admitted or if there was a tangible reason why students from the In-territory region should be given preference over those from other regions. Apart from the fact that it is only students within the In-territory region who are actively recruited by Berea, these students are those who have the relatively easiest chance of getting into Berea. The acceptance rates into Berea have many implications, one of which is that relatively lower standards may be offered for students from the In-territory region as compared to other peers. For example, an international student who only has a 6% chance of being admitted will obviously have to better fit Berea's requirement of a potential good student than an In-territory student who has a 41% chance of being admitted (Institutional Research Fact Book).

Therefore, there has to be a good reason why Berea's mission is to serve "primarily [for] students from Appalachia" ("Rewriting the Great Commitments" 210). As has already been discussed, this shift in focus of the school from interracial education to education of students from the mountain region occurred during the time of President Frost. The shift in emphasis occurred against the will of the founders, particularly Fee, who spoke openly against the changing the school's mission to serve whites primarily. Quite disappointed, Fee wrote in "a Negro newspaper in Lexington: 'I have no sympathy with the policy that would bring in from North or South a white majority. Such a policy would not meet the design of the founders of the institution' "(qtd in Nelson 72). It is therefore clear that the current policy of having white students as a majority at Berea does "not

meet the design of the founders of the institution.” That said, one has to look at the reason why the Appalachian region in particular was chosen to be the school's primary focus.

The founding of Berea in Kentucky was not of any particular design except that it was a strategic location to help in the fight against slavery. It turned out later that Berea was also in a strategic position for President Frost who was more interested in helping poor whites from the mountains than integrating whites and blacks. At this time, the mountain region that Frost described as Appalachian America was one of the poorest regions in the United States. Also, this was in the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century and so the transportation and communication systems were not as sophisticated as they are now. It therefore made sense that even though Berea was open to “all persons of good moral character” (Fairchild 37), it was limited to a certain geographic region due to circumstances at the time.

Even Frost, who limited the mission of this school to the Appalachian Region, is quoted as saying, “We have no diviner call than to gather the multitude that would otherwise be untaught ... and give each youth a bent in the upward direction” (qtd in Morgan 152). This sentiment was echoed by President Emeritus William J. Hutchins when he was asked after his tenure as president whom Berea should serve. His answer was that, “Berea should serve the poor but promising” (qtd in Morgan 157). The limitation therefore to a specific geographic area was never the original intent but a situation forced on the leaders of Berea due to circumstances. This is clearly stated by Elizabeth

Sinclair Peck when she wrote that, "There was no statement made in this document as to any specific area or region or group of people that this institution [Berea] was to serve" (13).

It is therefore troubling that in this era of advanced technology and relatively efficient transportation systems, the school will choose to limit itself to a specific geographic region. There would not have been a problem if Appalachia was the only poor region in the United States that needed the golden opportunities offered by Berea. Unfortunately, this is not true. The latest data from the website of the United States Census Bureau show that states such as Texas, New Mexico, Arkansas and Mississippi are among the poorest in the United States with about 15% to 19.3% of the population in poverty. These states are not included in Berea's In-territory while parts of Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia, states that have lower poverty levels, are counted as part of Berea's In-territory.

In fact, for the 2006/2007 academic year, only 8 students were admitted from Texas, 3 from Arkansas, 1 from Mississippi, and none from New Mexico. This compares with 63 students from Virginia (one of the states with the lowest poverty levels), 78 from North Carolina and 50 from Georgia. Meanwhile, North Carolina and Georgia are in the same category as Oklahoma and Arizona where no students were admitted for the 2006/2007 academic year. This is clearly an inequitable distribution, that could be said to border on injustice. The injustice is further deepened by the fact that technology has made it possible to recruit

students from these equally poor backgrounds but they are left out just because they do not fall within the In-territory region.

This problem of unequal representation and unequal opportunity to those who most need Berea is best reflected in the fact that even though minority groups, like the Hispanics, whose population in the United States is gradually growing, they are hardly ever mentioned in Berea's official statistics. The current data available shows that only 4% of the student body as at 2006-2007 year represents other minority groups in the United States apart from African-American.

Therefore, placing emphasis "primarily on students from the Appalachian region" does not follow the advice of President W. J. Hutchins who said that "Berea should serve the poor but promising" (qtd in Morgan 157). An implication of this focus is that standards could be lowered for students from the Appalachian region such that an In-territory student who is relatively less qualified than an Out-of-territory student will gain admission to Berea just because of the person's geographical location and not for the individual student's accomplishment, potential or promise.

Furthermore, one could argue that this policy of exclusively focusing on students from in-territory could be an incentive for people in the Appalachian region to remain poor. This is because one of the biggest expenses of a parent's life is his or her children's education. If the only condition therefore to get free education is to remain below a certain income level, what is the incentive for such a parent to earn more? Berea's mission of serving poor students and

focusing primarily on Appalachia implies that the region will continue to be poor and needs Berea to help it. Unfortunately, Berea seems to have unconsciously perpetuated this misconception and does not seem to have had any significant impact on the improvement of Appalachia's economic circumstances. It therefore should not be surprising that after 152 years of Berea's existence, the Appalachian region is still one of the poorest in the United States.

The solution therefore is to go back to Berea's original mission, which states that, "The object of this College shall be to furnish the facilities for a thorough education to all persons of good moral character, at the least possible expense" (Fairchild 18). Berea should be open for all and not give some students preference over other students. This means that that every poor student of outstanding promise should get the same opportunity to compete for a spot at Berea as anyone else irrespective of his or her geographic location. One of the best descriptions of the kind of student that Berea should serve is given by Charles Morgan when writing about the kind of students who were admitted to Berea during his time (1946), "If the applicant had the necessary character qualifications, the ability and desire to learn, and the willingness to work as he learned, he could be admitted" (148). It is worth noting once again that no geographic description was given.

From his observation and analysis, Morgan once again described the kind of student that Berea sought to serve in even more vivid details:

In the first place, the college is definitely looking for the student who has to work hard to maintain himself in an environment designed to give him

what is thought of as a formal education. It is looking for the self-reliant and the self sustaining student who knows what he wants and is willing to pay the price to get it. (Morgan 158)

Morgan goes on to write that, "It [Berea College] is seeking young men and women whom poverty and hardship do not deter. It is engaged in the business of helping them make their educational dollars stretch just as far as it is humanly possible to make them go" (158). He finally concludes that, "Berea College then is definitely seeking those who really need it from an economic point of view" (160). This means that Berea's primary objective should be to serve as many students as it possibly can who need it "from an economic point of view" without any limitation to geographic boundaries or race.

It would not be fair to conclude this paper without addressing potential problems that could arise with the opening up of Berea to everyone. The first problem that could arise is financial difficulty due to shortage of money as a result in the shift of the emphasis of the school from serving students primarily from Appalachia to serving poor students from all over the United States. This, however, would not be a problem since most of the sponsors of Berea do so because they understand the people of Appalachia are impoverished and need help. Expanding the scope of students to all poor students in America therefore should not be a problem. It could actually help the school raise more funds.

The other potential problem that could occur is with the issue of diversity and setting up of quota for certain students. A typical example is the question of what should be done if all those who qualify to enter Berea in a given year are

whites or blacks or even Hispanics. Even though this could be a real problem the possibility of having only one particular type of student group is almost negligible if Berea is well advertised so that students of every demographic type are made aware of the opportunities that Berea has to offer and are encouraged to apply.

That is why this paper does not limit the description of the kind of student that Berea should serve to quantitative terms such as having specific test scores or Grade Point Average (GPA). Berea should serve the most economically challenged student of great promise who would make the best of what Berea has to offer. This means that applications to Berea should be evaluated on an individual basis and the criteria of whether or not students have promise should be determined based on each individual student's background and how he or she has tackled challenges faced. This means that being poor is not the only criteria for admission. Therefore, if two students, both below the poverty level, apply to Berea and the one who is relatively richer has greater promise that student should be admitted even though he or she is relatively richer. That way, students will not feel a need to exploit their poverty but rather work hard to improve their situation.

If Berea is well advertised to the country and the world at large, there will not be any need to establish quotas because the sheer number of applicants to the school will make it possible to have every kind of student. The commitment to poor students will make sure that the minority in American society are well represented since they often constitute the poor in society.

The only exception to this rule has to do with international students. Even though it would be fair to include international students in the category of Berea being open to “all people of good moral character,” the mere fact that the United States is currently the richest country in the world in terms of GDP per capita means that the school has a big potential of having mostly international students within a short amount of time. The biggest problem that this brings is that donors could withdraw their support, thereby creating huge financial problems for the school. Moreover, the school was not built with the purpose of serving the international community but rather with the objective of dealing with issues of inequality within the American society.

Morgan, however, writes in his book that “Berea has been kindly disposed to have, as a matter of policy a few foreign students on its campus” (148). This tradition has continued up until now. The school currently has an international student population representing 8% of the total student body, which incidentally happens to be the average number of international students at Berea from 1994 to 2004 (Institutional Research). This number should definitely be maintained and improved upon if possible. That would mean that there should be a quota for international students. Within this quota, admission of international students should just be like the admission of a domestic student: an admitted student should be a poor student of promise who would make the best use of the opportunities that Berea has to offer and the chance for equal admission should be open to all.

In summary, evaluating the founding of the college and the purpose for which it was founded, examining the history of the college and whom it has served, and comparing the results of such an analysis with present day Berea shows that Berea as it stands today has strayed from its primary objective by focusing “primarily on students from Appalachia.” Berea should therefore have a specific focus of primarily serving promising young people, across the United States and the world at large; students who would otherwise not be able to afford a college education or have the opportunity to get a good college education anywhere else.

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