The Color of Money

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Meet this Hispanic student. She has a name, but for right now, we won’t use it. Instead, let’s call her a Quota because that’s how she’s felt at times here at Iowa State University. Iowa State University was the only school to offer her, out of high school, an education without tuition. A full ride. And not for her intellect, although she’s intelligent.

A full ride just for being Hispanic.

Iowa State “wasn’t my top choice in schools,” she says — that would have been those closer to her Na LeMoore, Calif. home — “but with the scholarship, it made it kind of hard to pass up.”

This happens a lot. Full-tuition scholarships are offered to minority students — who may or may not see themselves as quotas — at least 200 times per year at Iowa State University, where the student population is 93 percent white — the same as the statewide population, but different than the University of Iowa, where minorities make up 16 percent.

ISU President Gregory Geoffroy wants a diverse campus. So he offers scholarships. But are minorities coming only for the tuition they don’t have to pay? Is Geoffrey buying diversity? Is it bad if he is?
After students told her “You've been imported,” Tisha Simpson, the junior in child and family services from Nas LeMoore, California, wondered for the first time, if she was here to fill a quota.

She applied to Iowa State because her high school boyfriend was coming.

They broke up before she graduated. Then Iowa State offered its full ride. At first, Simpson says, she wasn't embarrassed to tell her classmates and teachers why Iowa State offered the scholarship. “It wasn't something that concerned me,” she says. “I was just like, 'Wow, they're willing to pay for me to go there.' I was trying to avoid the fact that it was because I'm a minority. So I didn't think about it at first.”

She wasn't expecting a melting pot, but she never expected the “imported” line. “I was offended. I was like, 'Imported? How?'... I wouldn’t say it’s hard to be a minority at Iowa State, but it’s a culture shock for sure.”

About 30 percent of Iowa State's full-tuition academic scholarship recipients are minorities, according to student financial aid records. Iowa State would have a much more difficult time competing for the top minority students without the full-tuition scholarship programs, says Earl Dowling, director of financial aid.

There are hundreds of minority-specific scholarship funds throughout the country that offer academic financial aid to minority students. The two full-tuition funds operated by Iowa State — the George Washington Carver Scholarship and the Multicultural Vision Program Award — have different academic standards. But they share a dominant prerequisite: The applicant's skin cannot be white.

The Carver Scholarship is awarded annually to 100 minority freshmen entering college directly out of high schools across the United States. The students must graduate in the top quarter of their class, file a financial aid application and maintain a 2.5 cumulative grade point average with 24 credits a year in order to renew the scholarship.

The Multicultural Vision Program Award is a four-year, full-tuition grant based on financial need. Each year, 100 awards are given to Iowa high school graduates “who demonstrate potential in ways that go beyond class rankings of test scores,” according to the program’s Web site. The scholars must have faced challenges of personal or financial hardship to be eligible, and they must maintain a 2.0 cumulative grade point average after four semesters to be able to renew the scholarship.

Though the Multicultural Vision Program doesn’t have the more stringent academic standards the Carver scholarship has, MVP scholar Ryan Hulleman, who was born in South Korea, says people who argue the program is throwing money and privileges at unqualified students are wrong.

“A lot of people come from backgrounds where going to a state school is not a feasible option,” says Hulleman, a freshman in industrial engineering from Pella. “These programs help reach out and support those students. Without these programs, the campus would be monocultural. There’s so much out there, that to only get a point of view from one angle doesn’t really serve the people here.”

The scholarship funds come from tuition revenue and private donations, Dowling says. The university budget cuts haven’t affected the scholarship programs, he adds, keeping Iowa State competitive when pursuing the country's minority students. “The students that we attract to Iowa State have choices. The George Washington Carver scholars we recruited this year were being recruited by schools like Duke
and Cornell and Princeton. They literally could have gone anywhere they chose. Iowa State University was able to show them — through various on-campus visitation programs and student financial aid — their good decision in coming to Iowa State.

But being a minority on campus isn’t easy. It took Tisha Simpson more than a year to convince a white friend that she’s not a foreign student. “She thought all minorities are from other countries,” Simpson says. “For the longest time, she just didn’t get it.”

Simpson thinks some students are more ignorant than racist. Either way, it’s not limited to white students.

“At one point in time, I tried to join an organization where the membership is mostly people of Hispanic origin, but I was treated differently because I’m only half-Spanish,” she says. “I thought that was rude.

“I’ve also been told that I don’t deserve the George Washington Carver scholarship because I’m only half-Hispanic, and it was meant to help full minorities in the United States,” she continues. “My response to that: Then why did the university offer it to me in the first place? The answer: Because I know how to work hard.”

Simpson doesn’t regret her decision to attend Iowa State, and she appreciates the money. But she’s ready to head back West after graduation to be closer to her family and find a job coordinating family services for a corporation.

“People ask me all the time what I’m doing here, being from California,” she says. “I got a scholarship. That’s the answer I usually give people. But I don’t regret it — the education was well worth it.”

Despite Simpson’s experiences, President Geoffroy will continue, vehemently, to campaign for diversity. “For a vibrant educational commu-
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nity to exist, we need it to be diverse and intellectually stimulating," he says. "Many employers of Iowa State graduates expect that our students will have a solid understanding and comfort and familiarity working and interacting with people who are from different religious, social, racial and ethnic backgrounds."

The cost of a few hundred full-tuition scholarships is an investment in quality, Geoffroy says. Minority scholarships, he explains, are a small but important way for a mid-sized school in the Midwest, like Iowa State, to attract top minority students.

Although the number of minorities living in Iowa continues to climb, the scholarship programs aren’t enough to ensure diversity here. So last year Geoffroy established the President’s Committee on Diversity Matters. Its 21 members keep him aware of diversity issues at Iowa State and develop ways to boost campus diversity.

Attracting minority students is the same as attracting any top student, Geoffroy says. One needs excellence in education, diversity among the staff and, well, money. Scholarship money.

Becca Nielsen is a first-year George Washington Carver Scholar, a second-generation Iowa Stater, and an Asian student. Nobody was surprised when she chose Iowa State, but she says she never expected Iowa State to choose her.

“I got a letter in the mail that told me I was going to get this scholarship, and that I could accept it or decline it. Of course I accepted it,” she says. “But I never applied for it, so I was really surprised.”

Nielsen is from Oskaloosa, a nearly all-white city in southern Iowa, and the relative diversity of Ames and Iowa State is new to her.

“It’s kind of fun to be around so many ethnic
people," she says. "With the scholarship, you have mentor meetings, and there are university studies classes that make sure you feel comfortable. There are so many resources out there, so many activities, and that helps a lot."

Alissa Carney wants to be a professional volunteer. Spend her life traveling to parts of the world that are underdeveloped and overcrowded, places where people need help. For now, though, she is a Carver scholar, a member of the Gamma Phi Beta sorority and a freshman trying to pick a course of study at Iowa State. In high school, she considered other colleges, such as Loyola, Butler, Michigan and Iowa.

"I got scholarship money to go to schools out of state, but not enough, compared to this," says Carney, who came to Iowa from South Korea when she was five months old to be adopted by her Des Moines parents. "The money was my deciding factor, and I think it's a good idea that they're trying to diversify the school."

As an adopted child, Carney was used to growing up around people of different color and different backgrounds. Her childhood defined her. "You learn more about everyone around you, and you learn more about yourself when you're around people of different backgrounds," she says. "It makes you a better person."

Batza himself, a black student from Chicago, came to Iowa State on a minority scholarship through the College of Agriculture. While his scholarship isn't full-tuition, he says the money was a major draw.

"But I think, for the most part, it took me a while to decide even after the scholarship," says Batza, a sophomore in public service and administration in agriculture. "If you're from a city, you kind of want to stay in a city. But the scholarship gave me some incentive to come here. It's bad if a student comes here just for the money and then hates it, because that's a waste of resources," Batza says.

Still, he admits, "the incentives are what bring a lot of people here."

Romibelle Castaneda is a junior from Illinois. She is working toward a career in apparel merchandising, production and design. Iowa State pays more than $18,000 a year to keep her at Iowa State because she's Phillipino.

She didn't even have to apply for the scholarship. "It's not something I take pride on, taking a scholarship just because of my skin color," she says. "But in other ways, the scholarships kind of make sense. Because no one would come here if they didn't have them."

"It's really interesting, being Phillipino, hearing other people's stories and telling them mine," she continues. "It's really interesting to know what people do differently, and that would be something we would all miss out on in college if there was no diversity.

"When I told people at home I was coming here, they said, 'What? You weren't even considering that.' I told them that I had the full ride, but I did not want to say that I had it because I'm a minority. It's kind of embarrassing."