In the fall of 1997 two prospective white students, Jennifer Gratz and Barbara Grutter, challenged the use of affirmative action in the admission decisions of the University of Michigan Law School. At the time, I was vice president of university relations there, which plunged me into the most hectic eight months of my life, working as part of the leadership team that was defending the university.

The case meant a lot to me. Almost a decade before, I had written parts of the Michigan Mandate, the plan that had successfully helped provide access to thousands of students of color. I also had spent much of my life working for opportunities for all students, regardless of race or economic background, to attend and thrive at colleges and universities around the country.

These two cases ended up in the U.S. Supreme Court, where Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote a majority opinion that upheld the university’s admissions policy. It remains the law of the land, although the Supreme Court recently agreed to hear a major case involving race-conscious admissions at the University of Texas.

When I arrived at the University of Hartford in June 1998, I was pleasantly surprised to find that students of color made up 13 percent of the student body (almost twice the percentage of Michigan’s). I was happier still when Chuck Colarulli, associate provost and dean of undergraduate studies, and Rick Zeiser, dean of admission, told me that fall that they were working on plans to build our percentage of students of color. They were thinking not only about making the University a more lively educational institution but also about opening up potential markets in the fastest-growing segments of the college-age population.

Today, I am especially proud of what our team has accomplished without using any affirmative action: 25 percent of our student body are now American students of color. If you add to that the 4 percent of our students who are international, you see even more vividly what a diverse and interesting group of young people we have here. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that we are a model for how to become a diverse university.

In my view, this has been part of our mission since the University’s founding in 1957—providing access for students from all races and ethnic or religious groups, and providing an opportunity for a quality education regardless of students’ socioeconomic status. Dorothy Schiro, one of our founders, called the University of Hartford a “university of the people, by the people.”

Today, we face new challenges in improving our percentage of faculty of color. Only about 12 percent of our faculty are nonwhite, and many of those are internationally born. U.S.-born faculty of color are only about 5 percent of the total. We face significant hurdles in overcoming this obstacle: the numbers of students of color earning PhDs nationally are not keeping up with the demand, which means we encounter great...
competition for newly minted PhDs. We are trying new methods to attack this problem, and I believe we are on the right track.

When I first arrived at the University, I spent many hours listening to the late Jackie McLean and his wife, Dollie, describe what life was like for them when Jackie was the only full-time black faculty member at the University in the early 1970s. We have come a long way since then, but we still have some way to go. Our aspiration is to have our faculty numbers more closely match our student numbers in the years to come.

And although we have a fairly good percentage of staff of color, we must work hard to increase the number in our senior ranks. In the last few years we have made significant progress in this area with new hires. Now, we are working hard to provide professional-development opportunities that will enable our staff of color—and all of our staff—to advance in their careers and further enrich the University of Hartford.

My fervent hope is that 20 years from now, none of this will matter—that we will have achieved our goals and that, furthermore, differences based on race will no longer exist. But I am enough of a student of American history to know that racism is, alas, as American as apple pie, and we have much bigotry and intolerance to overcome.

Our nation and this university have made progress, not without struggle, of course. But stories of that struggle, some of them described elsewhere in this issue of the Observer, inspire me to redouble my efforts—and all of our hopes—to make this a model university and, thereby, to fulfill our founders’ dreams.

I keep a picture of the University’s first board of regents in a frame across from my desk. I look at that picture every day, hoping those people who led the University at its founding would be proud of what we have accomplished and supportive of the roads we have yet to travel.

Looking back is the best preparation for moving forward. Enjoy this issue.

Walter Harrison
President