Diversity: Not Just an Affirmative Action Debate

Universities can, and should, be engines for change, says Brown University President Ruth Simmons

By Sheri M. Whitten

You could be forgiven for wondering whether Brown University President Ruth Simmons has reached the point in her career where she could safely rest on her laurels. But Simmons, who has a formidable set of accomplishments to her name—including being the first African American president of a Seven Sisters college, first woman president of Brown and first African American president of an Ivy League school—has at least one more goal in sight. Universities, she says, have a duty to teach and model diversity as a core value of democracy.

And diversity isn’t simply a matter of quotas; its meaning changes as society evolves. “Whatever you think diversity is now,” she told a recent Columbia audience, “it’ll be something else in 50 years.”

Currently, she noted, educators have their work cut out for them in attempting to move the discussion beyond concerns over affirmative action and in encouraging their students to embrace diversity as part of the model for democratic citizenship. “Diversity in higher education has been a moving target since the ’60s,” she said. “After four decades of affirmative action, the question of diversity still lingers.”

Diversity in higher education has been a moving target since the ’60s, “after four decades of affirmative action, the question of diversity still lingers,” she said. “After four decades of affirmative action, the question of diversity still lingers.”

But Simmons delivered these remarks at the second of this term’s presidential lectures, held in the Low Rotunda on March 8.

Calling her his “dear colleague and friend,” Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger complemented Simmons for her tireless campaign on behalf of opening up higher education to disadvantaged minorities. “Her work at Brown University, in particular to address the complicated issues of diversity and their inextricable relationship to academic excellence,” he said in a written statement, “has been exceptional and has resonated at colleges and universities throughout the nation.”

A self-described fierce advocate of affirmative action, Simmons also

continued on page 12