THE MINORITY EXPERIENCE

When the class of '70 was growing up, Plessy v. Ferguson — the Supreme Court's 1896 decision that established a framework of "separate but equal" segregation — was the law of the land.

Sixty-eight years later, the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It prohibited the unequal application of voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools, employment, and public accommodations. The 1965 Voting Rights Act prohibited racial discrimination in voting and secured the right to vote for racial minorities throughout the country, especially the South.

Carleton’s class of '70 had a handful of African-American students, one on the faculty, and none on the administrative staff. Granted there were many persons of good will campus-wide who supported integration, but there were still some who had difficulty facing the new reality. This translated into a unique series of challenges for African-American students and their supporters at that time, e.g. in student housing.

There were other minorities affected by the turbulent sixties, such as LGBTQ. While the class of '70 was at Carleton, the Stonewall Riots of 1969 occurred. These riots were widely considered "to constitute the most important event leading to the gay liberation movement and the modern fight for LGBT rights in the United States" (Wikipedia). The class of '70 became sensitized to on-campus examples of the struggles of the resident LGBTQ community, but the contrast between the stigma of the 1960s and today’s attitudes is dramatic.

Although less politically salient, other minorities from our class — Asian-Americans, Hispanics, students from small towns and farms, international students — may likewise be able to reflect on their experiences.

The Carleton of today is different. For example, the percentage of minorities has increased, and diversity is an explicit goal for faculty and administrative staff. The school has spent money and time developing a Multi-Cultural Center with a mission of inclusiveness for all. But the challenges of our minority experience of 50 years ago may still have resonance as we look at Carleton and the wider society in 2020.

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