The city of Charlotte, our state and our nation, are facing unusual storm patterns in race relations, education, demographics, politics and labor market outcomes. If left as they are, such patterns will most likely result in a calamity forcefully hitting us by 2030 – less than 20 years from now. It is one we can avoid, but only if we come to terms with the inconsistent ways in which people of color have been granted access to asset development, economic development strategies public policies.

If we start taking aggressive corrective actions now, we can avoid this perfect storm.

Here are the facts. According to the U.S. Census, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and bi-racial individuals will make up a majority in the U.S. by the middle of the century. The 2010 Census figures show this trend is already apparent and impacting us locally. In 2010, people of color made up 55 percent of the City of Charlotte’s population, up from 45 percent in 2000.

The trajectory of this transformation will be felt even sooner on college campuses and in our educational institutions. Less than a decade from now, in 2020, people of color will make up more than half of the nation’s college students. Already, today, two-thirds of the students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or bi-racial.

Much of this growth comes from increases in the Latino population. Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population in Mecklenburg County grew by nearly 150 percent compared to 111 percent in North Carolina and 43 percent nationally. But it’s not just the result of immigration. The Census Bureau estimates that U.S.- born Latinos will make up 13 percent of the population by 2025.

As I stressed earlier, these numbers alone are in no way alarming. But, for far too long, people of color as a minority have had limited access to human and social capital, entrepreneurial capacity and political power. This is what is alarming.

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An Overshadowed Dream

If America is to stay competitive in a shrinking and interconnected world, everyone in our nation will have to work more aggressively as “we the people” strive toward the “more perfect union” we so often dream about, where anyone with the drive, purpose and capacity may achieve. One way to move our nation in this direction is for people of color to not only work together on common issues, but to help each other succeed by sharing amongst ourselves our strengths, knowledge and wisdom.

There is nothing wrong with our country’s institutional vision. However, the challenge is to set priorities, to resource them, to manage them, and to measure the success of the priorities so that everyone has the opportunity to understand, to believe in and to realize the institutional vision.

Unfortunately, America’s current vision is overshadowed by lack of certainty, mistrust and perceptions of unfair risks that the new emerging majority, many of whom are presently living in turbulent and dysfunctional environments, often and rightly complain about.

Traditionally, those in power have used a variety of means to divide and distract minorities to keep them at odds with each other and fighting over a small piece of the pie, thereby preventing the powerless from uniting and discovering their power and strength.

African-Americans and Latinos Unite

But here in Charlotte, the African-American and Latino communities have recognized that there is more that unites us than separates us – and that we can learn and grow from each other. Perhaps what we do here can be the beginning of a new paradigm for living in a true multicultural America.

The process has already begun here in Charlotte. Back in 2000, Johnson C. Smith University partnered with the Latino community to launch a workforce development program called STEPPing Up. This first-of-a-kind program provided Latino job seekers and dislocated workers the leadership, team building, communication, decision making, problem solving and computer skills they needed to succeed in the workplace. Originally a pilot program, STEPPing Up continued for six years, thanks to a grant from the Urban League. Today, there are a dozen Latino leaders making a difference in our communities who graduated from the program.

But we can do more and have begun doing so. Given the history of African-Americans in this country, it is only appropriate for us to assist our Latino brothers and sisters as they seek to empower themselves and truly partake of their inalienable rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”
The centerpiece of our University, Biddle Hall, was lovingly built by the volunteer labor of freed slaves literally by candlelight, since they had day jobs in order to put food on the table. Yet it was financial, technical and spiritual support of the then all-white Presbyterian Church that made that labor possible and enabled generations of black men and women to receive the education they were denied elsewhere. They then leveraged that education to literally change the world for generations.

Johnson C. Smith has emerged 145 years later as an independent, close-knit, urban university with a growing national reputation for integrating the liberal arts with business, the sciences and technology in innovative, socially conscious ways to empower tomorrow’s diverse entrepreneurs, citizens and leaders. We are in a unique position to support Latino students by offering them access to a sound and quality higher education. Study after study has shown that education is still the major factor in driving progress up the economic ladder – to say nothing of what it does for one’s quality of life and personal development.

It is now JCSU’s turn to provide that kind of support, capacity-building and fellowship to the Latino community. There are many outstanding Latino students who are undocumented, having entered this country illegally with their parents as children. The U.S. is the only home they know. Yet, because of the current political climate, they are hit with a double whammy when they apply for college. Consequently, many of them do not continue their education – putting a serious damper on their opportunities for success and denying the country the benefits of their fully-realized skills and talents.

These students are ineligible for scholarships or financial aid from many state-run college systems. On top of that, they are also required to pay out-of-state tuition even if they have attended that state’s public schools.

As a private institution, Johnson C. Smith is not limited by such policies or the changing political winds. But for us, simply having an open door is not enough. We want it to be the way we live and operate our university.

Therefore, last May we began in conjunction with the Latin American Coalition’s College Access to actively recruit qualified Latino students from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System. As a result of those efforts, JCSU admitted 81 Latino students for the 2011-2012 school year.

We partnered with the Latin American Women’s Association and teachers from CMS to work with Latino students to prepare their senior exit projects. And, we sponsored English as a Second Language classes for parents and grandparents on basic English language speaking and interpretation skills.

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But it is not just the students whose lives have been enriched by their presence on campus. With their differing legacies, history and culture, they bring to the Smith campus a diversity that gives gravitas to the University’s vision of excellence in global education. Such an education enables students to acquire an appreciation for world cultures. I am looking forward to seeing additional programs that reach across campus and capture the imagination of students, faculty, staff, alumni and the surrounding community so they are engaged in the world house that JCSU is becoming.

One program that engages community business leaders in entrepreneurship is Innovo Laboratory, our new small business incubator and think tank located at Packard Place in uptown Charlotte. This new lab is not only designed to spur economic growth in the community but also to provide practical entrepreneurial experience to students. It is our belief that this next generation must be prepared to guide this economy and this city into a bright and prosperous future.

Another emerging program we are pleased to offer will provide 40 young men of color at West Charlotte High School the opportunity to become part of a technology mentoring program known as “Charlotte’s Web.”

We Must Not Wait

Despite making some positive strides, the time is right now for all concerned citizens to acknowledge that, although people of color are increasingly in the numerical majority, we are still considered and treated as minorities in many areas. Therefore, we in Charlotte’s African-American and Latino communities need to pool and combine our resources to ensure such programs are equitable and effective. We must not wait to ask after the fact: Are black and Latino-owned businesses getting their fair share of contracts from the city and county? Is the Democratic National Convention making sure minorities are well-represented among the vendors being hired? Are African-American and Latino children getting a quality education at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools? What is the city doing about affordable housing?

These are just some examples of how we all can do our part to help every community considered to be at a deficit. By working together at the city, county and national levels in partnerships as one rather than as antagonists, we can build and sustain all our assets for a better America across all races and socio-economic levels. What is true for the nation is also true for every community: divided we fall, united we stand.

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