U.S. takes halting steps toward a post-racial era

Today we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. On Tuesday, we will witness the inauguration of Barack Obama as president of the United States, the first person of African American descent elected to our nation’s highest office. The symbolism of both these events is obvious and powerful. Many political and media pundits have declared we are now living in a “post-racial” era, but this concept calls for examination and clarification.

“Post-racial” means the nation as a whole is willing to elect a president with qualifications rather than be preoccupied with his pigmentation. At the same time, a CNN national exit poll of the November election showed the majority of whites - men and women of all education and economic backgrounds - did not vote for Obama.

No one can definitively explain the reasons for these results, but it is interesting to note that the only white demographic that supported Obama was young people 18-29. This is a positive sign that perhaps the younger generation is now relatively free of the racial baggage of the past.

“Post-racial” means that the increasing number and profile of people of mixed-race heritage are serving to dismantle dominant racial ideology and group boundaries, and they are the leaders creating connections across separate communities into unified communities of humanity.

Yet, “post-racial” does not mean the disappearance of inequality based on race. The latest 2008 census data continues to show median family income for African Americans ($33,916) and Hispanics ($36,679) is still far lower than for whites ($54,920). Similarly, poverty rates for African Americans (24.5 percent) and Hispanics (21.5 percent) is dramatically higher compared with whites (8.2 percent). There is still much ground to make up here.

“Post-racial” means there are equal opportunities for people regardless of race, class or national origin. However, as the upcoming inauguration of Obama reshapes America’s debate on race, the California Board of Education also created an African American Advisory Committee to study the issues concerning the achievement gap that exists between African American students and their counterparts.

The 2008 Standardized Testing and Reporting program results showed that only 33 percent of African American students scored at proficient and above on the English-language arts section of the examination while only 28 percent of African American students scored at proficient or above in the mathematics section of the examination.

As a professor of ethnic studies, I am genuinely overjoyed at having to revise and reassess how I teach, think and talk about race and ethnic relations. I am clearly moved by the significance of Dr. King’s dream coming closer to reality. Nonetheless, I also recognize that changes in symbols must not overshadow the need for changes in substance.

Timothy P. Fong is a professor of ethnic studies at California State University, Sacramento.