

POSTSECONDARY
VALUE COMMISSION

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION'S ROLE IN PROMOTING JUSTICE: CONFRONT THE MYTHS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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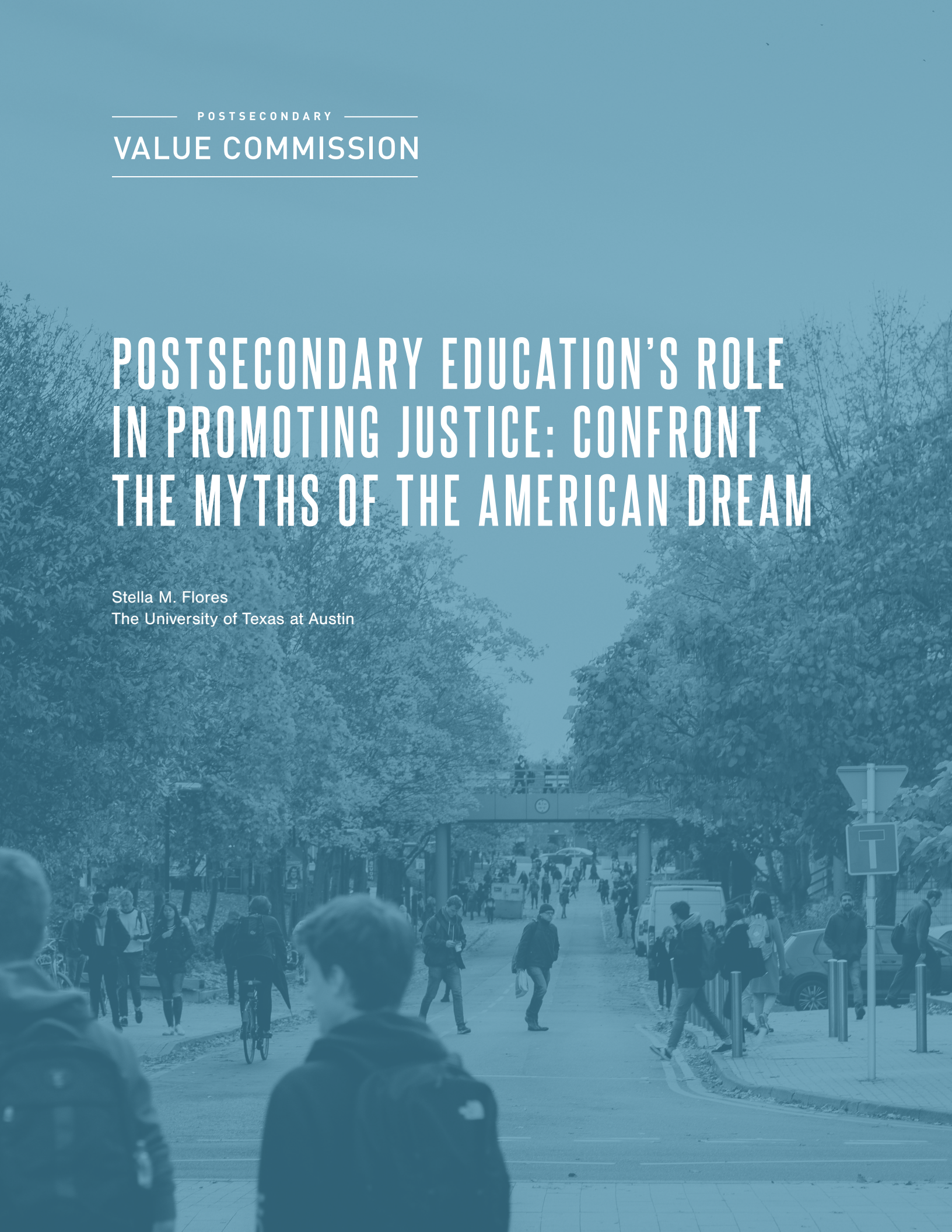


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This paper is one in a foundational research series for the Postsecondary Value Commission authored in summer 2019 by scholars with diverse backgrounds and expertise. The research presented in these papers applies an equity lens to the philosophical, measurement, and policy considerations and assumptions underlying key components of postsecondary value to students and society, including investment, economic and non-economic returns, mobility, and racial and socioeconomic justice.

The Postsecondary Value Commission consulted this foundational research as it developed a conceptual definition of postsecondary value, a framework for measuring how institutions and programs create value and ensure equitable outcomes, and an action agenda with recommendations for applying the definition and framework to change policies and practices. Through this breadth of scholarship, the commission was better able to define the value of postsecondary education and the role institutions can play in creating a more equitable and fair United States.

Following the May 2021 release of the commission’s findings, these foundational papers were prepared for publication. The views and opinions expressed in these papers do not necessarily reflect the positions of individual members of the Postsecondary Value Commission or the organizations they represent.

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to achieve socioeconomic and racial justice in the United States, and what role can the postsecondary education system play in achieving these aims? Unfortunately, justice is often an elusive concept as it relates to educational achievement. In quantitative higher education policy analysis, justice is often too strong and daring of a word as it implies past and current wrongdoing by some party. We have instead settled on the word “equity” and in some fields even this concept is too bold, as it confronts pockets of disparity and elicits questions about the distribution of resources. While equality in education represents the idea that goods and services are distributed evenly regardless of starting point or need in regard to resources, equity connotes the idea that the distribution of resources is purposely unequal so that students with higher need in regard to educational goods and services may receive these needed resources (National Academies, 2019). The goal of justice, from an educational perspective, is to address historical and current inequities in that it would seek to address laws, policies, and practices that have created the conditions under which inequity and discrimination have been allowed to function at the cost of a group or groups based on race, income, gender, or other key factors that often are associated with exclusion and segregation.

As a result of this language discomfort, educational and policy stakeholders have often engaged in the practice of changing the meanings of words to fit the context of power. The practice of changing language to fit different times and contexts is not new and is used intentionally to push a political message. In a number of cases throughout history, words initially used to promote justice have been appropriated to instead promote an opposing purpose, as discussed below.¹

Ultimately, equity should be a necessary concept in education of which justice is a paramount element. For the purposes of this essay, I will use the word “equity” as it is centered in a strong and growing research base across multiple disciplines. However, to understand equity, it is also critical to acknowledge the complex nature and power of *inequality*. Broadly defined, inequality represents the unequal distribution of both resources and opportunities across different social positions and statuses within a group or society. Carter and Reardon (2014) aptly describe the various dimensions of inequality, acknowledging that the research base behind this force in U.S. society has been more about describing its outcomes than understanding its causes and consequences.²

To make progress in the area of racial and socioeconomic justice, we need to acknowledge three key points. The first is the profound demographic changes throughout our nation, and especially in our K-12 schools. Secondly, and more profoundly, is how this robust demographic change is not translating into access and representation at our nation’s colleges and universities,³ particularly in certain types of college degree programs such as those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM). But thirdly, and perhaps even more critically, it is not translating into representation in university leadership, and policymaking circles at the state and federal levels. The lack of representation in leadership has long been an issue, not only representative of the educational benefits of diversity but also as a matter of national security.⁴ In various briefs to the Supreme Court across multiple cases regarding the use of race in college admissions, various corporate, military, and congressional groups have argued that diversity throughout the educational pipeline is key for achieving diversity in leadership positions in such critical sectors of American society.⁵

Equity is a solid and rational starting point at which to begin to understand the injustice at the root of our nation's inequalities. Achieving equity in educational environments requires calibrating need across population groups and providing the additional supports and resources that promote reliable and measurable educational opportunity. As noted, equitable opportunity differs distinctly from equality of opportunity, which involves the even distribution of resources regardless of individual needs or assets.⁶ Ironically, we have long called for equality in education and yet have little structure to bring that about, and lack a clear perspective on how to respond to a low-equity environment, an environment in which the needs of students with lower resources and historical and current low access to educational opportunities are not addressed.⁷ An environment could be equal in resources, but that does not mean that it is equitable; as students and families come to the table with different levels of resources and historical advantages and disadvantages regarding opportunities for wealth, employment, voting, and education.

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Furthermore, there is constant change in populations in need, the degree of need, and even the sustainability power of opportunity once resources are provided. For example, in the 1970s, our nation's schools were at their most desegregated, after many years of law and policy battles for integration efforts; but that time has come and gone. And, moreover, Latinx students were not yet a significant part of that earlier equation.⁸ The assessment of equity depends on your starting point of reference, whom you include in the denominator, and who is at the table to argue for which populations require policy attention. Indeed, we often are unclear about what a high-equity environment would even look like. Does it currently exist in the United States? Has it ever? If we do reach points of high equity, what plans are in place to sustain the investments it took to achieve them?

Recently, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine issued a report with recommendations for how to define, measure, and operationalize equity metrics from pre-K to college.⁹ I argue that, to understand the meaning of racial and socioeconomic justice and the role postsecondary systems play in achieving it, we must first understand the philosophical structure that underlies the key narrative of the American dream, the narrative that equal opportunity is available to all and that dreams and aspirations are achievable with hard work. In particular, this means that we must come to terms with the demographic reality of this nation and how we got here. Any policy or program put forth will not likely achieve its most effective version without acknowledging these facts.

In sum, I propose a system that confronts our love affair with the American dream, which is often caught up in notions of colorblindness and merit, so that we can deal effectively with the cumulative effects of past and ongoing inequality. The expansion and improvement of postsecondary education will only go so far without this kind of confrontation.

OUR DEMOGRAPHIC EVOLUTION

The United States hosts approximately one in five of the world's immigrants, who account for at least 13 percent of the U.S. population.¹⁰ In cities like New York, more than 60 percent of families are of mixed citizenship status. While most school-age children of immigrants in the U.S. are U.S.-born, their parents are likely to be either naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, or of undocumented status.¹¹ During the first decade of the 21st century alone, the number of U.S.-born children with at least one unauthorized parent nearly doubled, reaching approximately 4 million in 2009.¹² Immigrant population growth is greatest in 13 states that also rank in the top 20 for population.¹³ Whether this growth will be reflected in the population of our representative government is a key question of equity.

Moreover, White students in public schools in many of our largest cities are now the new minority and have been for some time. Some states' populations are likewise now "majority-minority"—new nomenclature, even if not settled, that describes an environment where racial minorities are the majority.¹⁴ This nomenclature includes immigration and English-learner status, ability status, various gender identities, and religious affiliation, among others. Indeed, it is predicted that, by 2040, no one identity will be in the majority.¹⁵

While it's old news that the country's population is changing and that it has significantly altered our public school population, there are few signs of this change in the education arena after the first few years of college. Indeed, with a few exceptions, our university faculties, institutional leadership, board of directors, and business leaders often still look like the student body of the mid-20th century. In short, we are in the midst of the biggest demographic mismatch between population and institutional leadership our nation has ever seen. And yet, we have not acquired an effective agenda for achieving equity and justice that reflect our nation's new demographics.

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CONFRONTING THE MYTHS OF OUR MERITOCRATIC AND COLORBLIND SOCIETY

Why is the nation obsessed with colorblind solutions when the history of our society has long been color-focused and color-restricted? Why do we emphasize policies and programs that are colorblind and merit-focused when law and policy specifically have prohibited people of color's entry into the spheres of influence, including education? Indeed, the words “colorblind” and “merit” have had various definitions throughout the course of history, and they likely will continue to do so until we situate their meaning in the contexts in which they are used.

This conflict regarding who belongs in our public institutions and with what rights and resources has been part of the U.S. legal and political fabric since at least the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision,

Plessy v. Ferguson,¹⁶ which legalized the separation of races in public transportation and thus in public spaces more broadly. Justice John Marshall Harlan, the lone dissenter in *Plessy*, argued that the Constitution is colorblind and therefore that no class of citizen should be excluded from the rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Although *Plessy* was overturned in 1954 by *Board v. Brown of Education*,¹⁷ the spirit of the colorblind approach was noted once again, although with the opposite intent, in the 2007 case *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (551 U.S. 701 (2007)),¹⁸ which barred the use of race in K-12 public school assignments when the purpose was desegregation. In *Parents*, Chief Justice John Roberts stated that the only way to stop discriminating on the basis of race was to stop discriminating on the basis of race. He argued against school assignment plans that took race into account for the purposes of desegregation, which illuminates one of the nation's most uncomfortable conflicts: its history of formal and informal racial exclusion and its long-held principles of equal opportunity. This highly debated and misunderstood dilemma about the equal treatment of all races and the realities of racial inequality remains at the core of the U.S. education system.¹⁹

The definition of, motivations for, and applications of the colorblind approach have changed over time. In particular, early concepts relating to the expression of civil rights have been appropriated by anti-civil rights groups to portray a new meaning of justice.²⁰ By the time the voices of the civil rights movement entered the debate, it was clear that the definition of the colorblind approach had been transformed into one in which race is ignored for the purposes of excluding people rather than to solidify the rights and opportunities from which minority groups were originally barred. There was no longer a path to an egalitarian effect.²¹ Civil rights advocates noted the weaknesses of this approach and called for the need to take race into account in education and employment in order to ensure that the legal definition of equal rights and privileges as stated in the Constitution was indeed applied.²²

Sociologists in the academic sphere have labeled this approach to race relations as colorblind racial ideology (CBRI) or the colorblind ideal. CBRI emphasizes the irrelevance of skin color and/or race, focusing instead on character, ability, and worth—and in many cases test scores.²³ This approach maintains that there can be no judgment of merit and fairness if skin color is taken into account. Like Chief Justice Roberts' interpretation of race in society, the colorblind approach argues that not acknowledging skin color is the most effective way to avoid racial discrimination. This is deceptively attractive, as it claims to free us from the nation's past and present patterns of discrimination and inequality and to focus instead on individual behavior and cultural patterns to explain the processes and outcomes of racial inequality.²⁴

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Multidisciplinary scholars critiquing the colorblind approach have argued that it helps the groups in power feel less responsible for their privilege and harms those not in power—specifically racial minorities and women—by creating distrust, stereotype threat, non-participation, and other negative outcomes.²⁵ When we choose to ignore race, we also choose to ignore the long-term and cumulative effects of inherited privilege and persistent inequality. The consequences of this approach extend to a systematic and organizational national education and policy culture. Neville et al. (2016)²⁶ and Block (2016)²⁷ refer to these strategies as the evasion of privilege, whereby people who do not acknowledge institutional racism also do not see the unfair advantages they have received because

of their group membership. Thus, if we do not include institutional and systemic discrimination in our diagnosis of why inequality and injustice are still so present in American culture, we will not achieve the most accurate and effective solutions for creating a more equitable and just society.

UNDERSTANDING WEALTH AS OPPOSED TO INCOME IN THE INEQUALITY DEBATE

Few spheres of American life encompass the notion of merit as much as the narrative of income and achievement. Like the colorblind ideology, merit is contextually defined. Karabel (2005) argues that merit is a fluid and socially constructed concept that is constantly redefined by those in power.²⁸ Others have argued similarly, often using outcomes of academic rigor and achievement as the ultimate signs of college readiness, even though educational opportunity is not equitably distributed. Disparities in educational opportunity include access to rigorous college-preparatory coursework, the information needed to apply to the colleges most likely to lead to well-supported employment networks, and knowledge about which graduate schools put students on a path to leadership in the nation's most influential professions and industries from the Academy to legal venues, science, technology, and business.

To unpack the inequality and injustice present in the concept of merit in the economic realm, we must uncover the myths that are blocking the road to socioeconomic justice. The first myth is that merit is a commodity that has been earned through hard work, innate ability, good decision-making across generations, and integrity.²⁹ Although this may be true for some, the myth is that all who participate in the system are treated and rewarded without discrimination through a logical and honorable process.

The second myth is that opportunity or lack thereof can be understood fully through the lens of income and socioeconomic status without regard to race and ethnicity. This of course presumes that the systems of assessment, reward, and accumulation of capital—including public education, housing, lending, labor markets, criminal justice, and health care—are without racial and ethnic bias. However, Massey (2007) documented in great detail the shameful and painful policy decisions in housing, lending, and voting that have specifically excluded racial minorities.³⁰ These decisions created a context in which particular populations were systematically barred from accumulating wealth. In this sense, cumulative advantages are as important as cumulative disadvantages.

Finally, the third myth focuses on institutional equity, which rests on the tenet that all states and colleges are created equal.³¹ This suggests that when a student from a low-income background enrolls in college their chances of later success in the labor market are equal to those of others who attend colleges with greater resources and reputations. This suggestion is inherently linked with the notion that all states invest equally in higher education, and that states invest in all student populations and the full voter base indiscriminately and with good intention. The reality is that like family wealth, some aspects of institutional wealth and privilege are also inherited, and their exclusionary history regarding the admission of women, people of color, and other populations still has effects on the opportunities of many generations of not only those families but also the economies in which these individuals work and live. Lower levels of college degrees translate into lower wages for communities.³²

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts to mitigate and eventually remedy the social ills caused by racial and socioeconomic injustice and inequity are to be lauded, especially when these efforts are multidisciplinary, multiorganizational, multijurisdictional, and have a sustained, evidence-based plan. However, an effective and deliberate reckoning with the profound inequalities still present in our U.S. education sector, among others, is needed.

To move the conversation forward, I recommend the following.

1. *Account for intersectional identities that represent the new demography from student achievement to leadership posts.* Adopt a positive and asset-based recognition that the new demography in our schools is the future of our nation. This will likely require an updated acknowledgement of race and social class that integrates the immigrant and second language learner experience as assets among other intersectional identities. Advances in data are allowing new insights into the experiences of these groups, and stakeholders should make room for these additional identities to produce more accurate evidence as well as solutions for the nation's underserved and high achieving populations, alike. Any innovations in data collection and use will require key protections for students and families. An honest discussion of benefits, harms, and unintended consequences should be part of this strategy. Looking to other scientific fields of inquiry on similar advancements with potential consequences could be beneficial.
2. *Commit to an understanding of the realities of wealth and the various metrics of advantage and disadvantage it brings to the pathway of educational opportunity.* As scholars and policymakers we should acknowledge our complex love affair with the idea of "equal opportunity." In doing so, we can add more focus to concepts of equity and justice for the purpose of effectively solving some of the nation's most intractable social problems, of which racism (and the effects of racial inequality) is perhaps our greatest sin as a nation.³³ However, the conversation on race is incomplete and insufficient without understanding that race and income alone are no longer sufficient. Ultimately, equity solutions will require an understanding of the intersectionality of race and wealth as they have evolved in the nation over time.
3. *Work with educators, communities, policymakers, and the private sector to build an equity skill set rooted in a multi-racial, multi-generational coalition for justice and economic development.* These recommendations will require a new skill set based on historical roots and current advances, incorporating new techniques of communication open to both new and older generations. The skill set should also be translational and teachable in various languages and other communication forms. While this task will require significant strategy, the returns on investing in increasing equity and reducing inequality are well documented – as there is ample evidence of the positive effects of increasing educational opportunity for a nation's most underserved populations.³⁴

Ultimately, the state of inequality is rising too fast and furiously for indirect approaches to our nation's most intractable problems of which racial and wealth inequality are its most harmful forms.

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Carter & Reardon, 2014.
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- 14 Shirley & Flores, 2019
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- 31 Carnevale & Strohl, 2013.
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