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Why Higher Education Is Failing to Close the Racial Wealth Gap

For all too many Black students, a college degree isn't a ticket into the middle class.

By [Steven Mintz](#)

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Racial inequalities pervade higher education.

- Inequalities in access admissions.
- Inequalities in institutional resources.
- Inequalities in grading and access to high-demand majors.
- Inequalities in outcomes.
- Inequalities in student debt.

As our society engages in a historic reckoning over its persistent racial disparities -- in employment, income, healthcare, life span, on-time high school graduation, homeownership, incarceration, political representation, poverty rates, school suspensions and wealth -- we, in the academy need to take a close, critical look at our own house.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* headline says it all: "College Was Supposed to Close the Wealth Gap for Black Americans. The Opposite Happened." As the article shows with distressing detail, "Black college graduates in their 30s have lost ground over three decades, the result of student debt and sluggish income growth."

For many Americans, it's an article of faith that higher education offers the best way to reduce poverty and diminish inequality between the haves and have-nots. And it's certainly the case that increased education correlates, on average, with higher incomes.

Why, then, has increased access failed to shrink the racial wealth gap?

A new book by the *Atlantic* staff writer Adam Harris, entitled *The State Must Provide: Why America's Colleges Have Always Been Unequal -- And How to Set Them Right*, argues that "America's colleges and universities have a shameful secret." The secret: "From its inception, our higher education system was not built on equality or accessibility, but on educating -- and prioritizing -- white students."

Harris's book, with endorsements from luminaries like Ted Mitchell and star journalists like George Packer, is not based on the intensive archival research found in the scholarship of Eddie R. Cole, Anthony Abraham Jack and Matthew Johnson. It has, however, already received a kind of visibility that academic monographs do not. It is also likely to catapult the underfunding of HBCUs and community colleges and minority-serving regional and urban campuses into the national spotlight.

So what, then, explains higher education's failure to successfully address racial disparities?

A number of recent scholarly books and articles point to the answer.

1. Open access isn't equal access. It's not fresh news anymore, but it's remains true: the college aspirations of far too many high-achieving low-income students remain much too low. They typically apply to same institutions as their lower-achieving classmates, usually a nonselective public university or a local community college. Like their peers, these students are concentrated in unequally funded, often profit-driven institutions, from which many emerge without degrees and heavily indebted.

The reasons are straightforward: inadequate advising, failures in recruitment, insufficient financial aid and the perception, often accurate, that the more selective institutions are unwelcoming.

2. Merit isn't the opposite of inequality. For all their meritocratic pretensions, highly selective colleges and universities tend to reinforce rather than remediate class disparities. Paul Tough's 2019 study, *The Years That Matter Most*, lays bare the enrollment management strategies adopted by many private institutions that severely restrict the number of admittees with high financial need. As Matthew Johnson has demonstrated, many highly selective institutions treat diversity and inclusion as only one of a number of competing priorities, with reputation, rankings and precollege preparation discouraging these campuses from pursuing talented students from underresourced high schools.

The answer: aggressive outreach and active recruitment combined with levels of financial aid that will allow students from low-income backgrounds to compete successfully with their more financially privileged classmates.

3. History matters. In matters of race, no predominantly white institution has a clean slate. A campus's reputation precedes it. My own university's history includes the displacement of Black neighborhoods on the campus's west and east sides; [implementation of standardized testing](#), in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*, to restrict Black enrollment; [a school song with racist overtones](#); and [egregious acts by campus fraternities, as recently as 1990, involving racial epithets and racist caricatures](#).

Institutions must remember: integration and inclusion aren't an event; they're an ongoing process. Only by candidly acknowledging their history and demonstrating in tangible ways their commitment to student success can these institutions truly combat their unwelcoming past.

4. Prestige doesn't matter if you're male, wealthy and white. For everyone else, [it does matter](#). Greatly.

American higher education is highly stratified and exceedingly hierarchical. Colleges and universities differ radically in reputation, prestige, facilities, student preparation and the economic resources devoted to instruction, financial aid, support services and student life. Access to experiential learning opportunities -- to internships, study abroad and undergraduate research -- also differs markedly.

Perhaps the biggest benefits that the best-resourced institutions offer are not educational, but involve cultural capital, connections including access to an influential alumni network, accomplished peers, high expectations about completion and post-graduation opportunities, and the signaling effects of a prestigious degree.

Institutions must do much more to ensure that all students can take advantage of these resources.

5. Diversity isn't inclusion. As Anthony Abraham Jack demonstrates in his 2019 book, *The Privileged Poor*, simply admitting low-income students to elite universities does not, by itself, produce equal outcomes. Too often, university policies, institutional cultures and norms, and even campus jobs exacerbate pre-existing inequalities, widen class differences, reinforce feelings of difference and undercut a sense of belonging.

Many students from low-income backgrounds experience culture shock upon entering highly selective campuses, which is intensified by differences in possessions, social expectations and experiences during the fall, winter, spring and summer breaks. Many lack familiarity with the terminology, academic expectations and "hidden curriculum" found at highly selective institutions, and inadequate advising and mentoring fail to provide the guidance and direction needed to navigate an unfamiliar environment. A division between the "privileged poor" (who attended prep schools or other prestigious high schools) and the doubly disadvantaged (who attended troubled, underresourced public schools) undermines a sense of solidarity.

True inclusion requires involvement in all facets of campus life as well as entry into and success in the highest-demand majors.

6. Equality of outcomes requires more than entrée. Equal opportunity doesn't guarantee equality of outcomes. In their 2013 study of class dynamics on campus, *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton identify three paths through college:

- A professional path, which is most successfully pursued by highly prepared students, often from affluent families who can devote themselves full-time to their studies and take part in internships and research experiences in their quest to pursue careers in business, engineering, law and medicine.
- A mobility path, often followed by students from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds eager to acquire a marketable degree, who must combine their studies with substantial work responsibilities, and who do not consider graduate or professional education a realistic possibility.
- A "party" path for those who consider college an opportunity to socialize, participate in athletics and have fun, and who take "easy" majors that will not lead directly to a job.

In the absence of proactive efforts, including summer bridge programs for first-generation students, intensive academic and nonacademic advising, caring and compassionate mentoring, financial and academic support, supplemental instruction and robust student support services, and expanded access to experiential learning opportunities, students from underrepresented backgrounds are unlikely to pursue or succeed along the professional path.

7. Tuition isn't the only barrier to student success. Tuition is only one of many barriers to academic success. Living expenses (including food and housing insecurity) present another hurdle, as do competing work and caregiving responsibilities and what we might term the "hidden injuries of class and race" that produce a sense of difference and exclusion. Transfer policies represent yet another obstacle, especially delays in credit evaluation, the failure to count transferred courses toward majors, closed-out classes and limited financial aid for transfer students.

In these and many other ways, we see, once again, that while access matters, so too do outcomes, and our institutions are certainly not doing enough to ensure a level playing field.

There are good reasons for the outside success of HBCUs in preparing students for the sciences and professions, even though these institutions serve a disproportionate share of students from the lowest income quintile and have less money to spend per student. Their success begins with a firm commitment to teaching, mentoring and cultivating community.

The other 97 percent of higher educational institutions have a great deal to do to overcome the structural inequities and biased policies, practices and priorities that help explain why colleges and universities are failing to close the racial wealth gap.

The burden is on us.

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By [Steven Mintz](#)



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