

On Access and “Success”:

The Reparative Role of Higher Education in Shaping a Just Future

Arianna Chen

Fordham University at Rose Hill

In my curricular development role for a literacy nonprofit, I have had the wonderful opportunity to work with hundreds of students in over 20 New York City Title I schools to integrate culturally salient literature into their courses. Entitled to additional federal support and grants, Title I schools are defined by the U.S. Department of Education as those in which “children from low-income families make up at least 40 percent of enrollment.”¹ This means that on the day-to-day, I am working with individualized curricula that introduces K-12 students to authors that *look* like them and *speak* to their positionality in their cultural dialects. Whether it be exploring the intersections between cuisine and culture in *Fry Bread* by Kevin Noble Maillard with second graders to Harlem grassroots community activism in *Vicki and A Summer of Change! ¡Vicki y un verano de cambio!* by Raquel Ortiz, we explore a variety of perspectives that engage their lived experiences as urban students.

After shifting my route to work one day—all thanks to the infamous New York City morning commute traffic—I was rushing by another local school and could not help but notice the institution had its slogan plastered on a banner outside its doors. In bright red, all title-case letters, the school touted “self-control” as one of its three core pillars for ensuring student success. This deeply struck a chord in me: why are we, as a society, telling *children* that they cannot be academically successful without controlling or restricting their true selves? What are the cultural implications of this message within an urban public school predominantly populated by historically underrepresented students?

Although the U.S. education system commonly serves as a conduit in developing advantageous professional and personal skills for socioeconomic mobility, such institutions bear a long history of foundationally discriminatory practices which marred “equality of opportunity

¹ *Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies*, U.S. Department of Education (2018).

for excluded peoples.”² From segregationist policies in “separate but equal” classrooms to institutional funding for higher education intimately linked to the slave trade, these so-called beacons of wisdom have been inextricably entangled in practices that have actively upheld racial injustice.³ And this legacy continues today: Black and Hispanic students are more likely to attend institutions with less educational funding than their white counterparts and remain disproportionately underrepresented in four-year public or nonprofit institutions.⁴ In fact, according to the Education Trust, most of the 101 prestigious and best-funded public colleges and universities are not enrolling representative numbers of Black and Latine students.⁵

And yet, the presence of higher education as a staple in American life continues to grow year-by-year. Not only are more students than ever planning on attending university, but the “wage premium for a college degree has skyrocketed in recent decades... produc[ing] an increase in [career] earnings of nearly \$600,000.”⁶ Through this scope, it is clear that institutions of higher education are increasingly central to any movement toward a more just world. Especially for institutions at the most prestigious level, by strategically increasing access to enrollment, degree completion, and career placement, universities can help bridge broader racial gaps in socioeconomic status and access to upward mobility.

Outside the socioeconomic scope, expanded access to higher education for historically underrepresented students supplements the dire need for diverse representation in academic scholarship. Colleges and universities hold a unique prerogative in shaping innovation, cultural

² See Philo Hutcheson, et. al, *Race and Equality in the Academy: Rethinking Higher Education Actors and the Struggle for Equality in Post-World War II Period*, 82 *The Journal of Higher Education* 122 (2011).

³ Marc Tucker, *Separate But Equal: It Wasn't Then, It Isn't Now*, *Education Week* (October 2016); see also Leslie Harris, *The Long, Ugly History of Racism at American Universities*, *The New Republic* (March 2015).

⁴ CJ Libassi, *The Neglected College Race Gap: Racial Disparities Among College Completers*, *Center for American Progress* (May 2018).

⁵ Andrew Nichols, *Segregation Forever?*, *Education Trust* (July 2020).

⁶ Isabel Sawhill, *Higher Education and the Opportunity Gap*, *Brookings* (October 2013).

norms, and practices through scholarship. However, we as a nation have personally seen the detrimental impact that a lack of representation in research can wield through the history of eugenics. Concluding that intelligence and other desirable qualities were genetic factors, the concept of eugenics was founded by Francis Galton and weaponized globally as a means to forward the racist narrative that white people were a “more suitable race” and Black people were “descendants of moral monsters.”⁷ In practice, this pseudo-science ideology was extremely harmful and held legal implications: in 1927, the Supreme Court upheld the right to sterilize any individual deemed “unfit to procreate” through *Buck v. Bell*.⁸ NPR estimates that approximately 70,000 Americans were sterilized following this decision.⁹

And universities across the globe—especially prestigious colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford—were pioneers of this pseudo-science eugenics movement that ruined so many lives: they forwarded research, lobbied the government, and hosted conferences in support of eugenic sterilization.¹⁰ In fact, Harvard alumni founded the Immigration Restriction League in 1894 with the expressed purpose of restricting “what races shall dominate in the country.”¹¹ Although later discredited, the dark precedent of eugenics continues to influence rhetoric and practices of today. Therefore, expanded access to higher education for historically underrepresented students not only falls in line with the anti-racist strategic plans released by many universities, but also the moral responsibility to take reparative action for the immeasurable damage these institutions inflicted upon minorities through discriminatory practices and pseudo-scholarship. After forwarding actively racist ideologies under the guise of

⁷ Adam Cohen, *Harvard's Eugenics Era*, Harvard Magazine (March 2016).

⁸ *The Supreme Court Ruling That Led to 70,000 Forced Sterilizations*, NPR (March 2016).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *supra* 7.

¹¹ *Id.*

science, colleges and universities are ethically implicated in exposing these realities and diversifying scholarship to ensure these historical traumas cannot repeat themselves.

Being that American reformist Horace Mann coined education as the “great equalizer of the conditions of men,” movement toward a more just world demands a reversal of racialized historical barriers to access and success in higher education. However, this reparative action does not merely exist in the realm of admissions practices—equitable outreach, programmatic diversity, financial aid practices—which allow access to enrollment at colleges and universities. True movement toward justice simultaneously requires a holistic shift in the pedagogical framework of academic success. While access to enrollment in universities is a critical factor in remedying de facto segregation in higher education, the approaches used to educate these students upon matriculation delineates the difference between a *not racist* and an *actively anti-racist* institution.

The earlier story regarding the NYC school’s “self-control” motto offers a poignant example of the dire need for educational reform outlined above. The model of academic success set forth by such a mission statement enshrines a harsh distinction between *good students* and *bad students*. Whereas *bad students* demonstrate qualities deemed unruly, *good students* have self-control: they sit still, do not speak unless called upon, and on the occasions which they are, express themselves in highly particularized language. For a NYC school heavily populated by historically underrepresented students, this pedagogy holds deep cultural implications: whether it be the use of slang or specific physical responses, many of the practices associated with *bad students* are linked to cultural socialization. Christopher Emdin refers to this effect as a “failed experiment” in socializing “Black folks... to behave in ways that are acceptable to white social

norms.”¹² In other words, the binary dichotomy within traditional education structures, so reliant upon (oftentimes racialized) power dynamics, severely limits access to academic success to a select group of students who can conform to these highly particularized behaviors.

And this particular school I stumbled upon is not an isolated example of culturally dismissive pedagogy: self-control is a central tenet in current traditionalized models of academic success across the board. Because I was subject to this academic structure throughout my schooling in a predominantly white institution, I knew no other semblance of success other than rigidity until I stepped into my first non-traditional classroom as an intern. In this classroom, there was so distinction between the *community knowledge* (slang, pop culture, ethics, etc.) and *curricular knowledge*. From centralizing community guidelines around a “one-mic” approach to integrating call-and-responses derived from popular rap music, the students were holistically committed to the classroom environment as a cogenerative space. This seamless integration of cultural norms into classroom policies and practices not only made students more motivated, but to me, represented the possibility for success to be intertwined with culture instead of separate.

Especially considering the ways in which K-12 schools shape the academic rigor, attitudes and practices of students entering the realm of higher education, it is pertinent to analyze the evaluative models embedded in these institutions as highly interrelated to the overall goal of justice. In the same way that my job with K-12 students seeks to shift the literary canon as a means of “accepting the genius of young people in whatever form it comes,” schools have an obligation to enact a strategic pedagogical reversal.¹³ Instead of clinging to culturally dismissive pedagogy which creates monolithic scholars, institutions must forward a culturally

¹² See Christopher Emdin, *Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success* (2021).

¹³ *Id.*

sustaining framework of radical self-love and celebration that affirms students in their unique scholarship. Through my perspective, this shift from “self-control” to “self-love” is a necessary step in any future where education lives its purpose as a conduit for justice and opportunity for equitable upward mobility.