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Invited Commentary

A Difficult Conversation: Are We Serious About Confronting Inequality and Building an Inclusive Democracy?

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Introduction

Apart from all the legal semantics, the recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action and student debt, when considered together, are, in effect, an attack on economic justice. The social brunt of both decisions likely will impact student access, affordability, and educational attainment significantly, particularly for those at the perimeters of the American economy. In the name of increasing opportunity, the Supreme Court's "originalist" majority opinion claims that a "race-free" approach eliminates discrimination in college admissions. The minority opinion of Judge Jackson refuted this ahistorical claim by restating that the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, most definitely a race-specific one, addressed the racial foundations of a formal bondage system of legalized slavery in the United States. The Fourteenth clearly acknowledges the need to rebalance the legal playing field to establish a realistic "equality of opportunity." A century later, the policy of affirmative action aimed at continuing that process after years of the Jim Crow practice of "separate but equal" that was established in the Court's 1896 decision in Plessy v Ferguson. By 2023, it is clear that racial inequality remains embedded in the American educational system and throughout its economy and society.

One only need to recall the damning facts: according to a report for the U.S. Department of the Treasury in July, 2022, racial inequality, as measured by the unequal distribution of resources, power, and economic opportunity, is evidenced by significant and persistent racial disparities in income, wealth, education, employment, housing, mobility, health, and rates of incarceration

(Bowdler & Harris, 2022). It is the reality of intractable systemic inequality that sets the civic mission for colleges and universities. Higher education was promoted at the outset of the American Republic by the likes of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as the necessary but not sufficient pathway for the fortification of a tenuous experiment in human self-governance. To them, and so many others since democracies require an educated and civically engaged citizenry. They also require fairness before the law and equality of opportunity in the economic and social realms if they are to be experienced as legitimate, stable, and just. Here lies the historic civic and educational imperative for higher education. The current Supreme Court rulings challenge colleges and universities to recommit to the goal of an inclusive democracy and equitable economy in new and innovative approaches to student access, educational success, and civic engagement.

The Civic Imperative

Clearly, the elimination of affirmative action on campuses will require new admissions strategies if we are to maintain and increase campus diversity. These likely will commence with the greater accent on social class as a category for addressing inequality and, in this way, continue the positive impact on reducing racial and ethnic disparities. Beyond admissions and student access, colleges might better align their respective diversity work with their civic engagement programs. With an integrated strategy, they arrive at a more dedicated design for achieving the goal of an inclusive democracy.

In the current milieu of reactionary political movements devoted to maintaining racial disparities by erecting harsh barriers to diversity and inclusion programs in higher education and throughout American institutions, college and university leaders will need a vibrant vision, a clear public narrative, and sustainable pathways for realizing our fundamental civic obligations. To be clear, they will be costly. They will be fragile. The essential questions for the academy and its public, particularly its senior leadership, will be deciding whether these commitments are affordable, sustainable, and of major priority. Or are they merely options or even luxuries to be addressed in a more fiscally manageable era? This is the fundamental leadership challenge for this moment. The commitment to an educational agenda in support of an inclusive democracy will require courage and resiliency, particularly by those who are at the leadership helm.

It is my decided opinion that the fate of inclusive democracy and the fiscal viability of colleges and universities are, in fact, tied together in an educational and civic symbiosis. The pathway to institutional viability lies with the alliance between neighborhoods of need and colleges with unstable revenue and enrollment. The economic reality of a demographically vulnerable educational sector necessitates growing enrollment and increasing net tuition revenue. While public university funding and private college net revenue are proving to be inadequate, the only growing part of the American population with the potential for enrollment growth lies within

communities of low college-preparedness and low-income communities, mostly black and brown. And these economically depressed neighborhoods desperately need new allies. They are notoriously eclipsed politically and largely disempowered by state and local governments. All too often, they don't deliver enough votes to command power because of gerrymandered electoral systems, designed barriers to voting, or political withdrawal borne of historical exploitation. Their expected political partners are unable or unwilling to change this political equation.

Universities and colleges are in need of more students, while black, brown, and white working-class neighborhoods need resourced partners. The rise of the anchor institution movement has created a number of serious partnerships across the country. In my book, Neighborhood Democracy: Building Anchor Partnerships Between Colleges & Their Communities, I chronicle a number of these partnerships, which include critical K-16 pipelines that specifically build hope and opportunity beyond the most credentialed students., These pipelines need to include a large number of creative and talented youngsters with initially mediocre achievement credentials but with largely untapped potential. This approach would broaden the impact of higher education on reducing inequality and increasing civic competency and political participation (Bowdler & Harris, 2022).

Born of mutual self-interest, neighborhood democratic partnerships formed around K-16 pipelines hold important benefits for colleges and universities as well as neighborhood civic and economic prosperity. The former gets to identify, prepare, and support future generations of successful college students. Starting with elementary schools and continuing into middle and high schools, college partnerships help to reverse the cycle of the school/ prison pipeline. For instance, by providing significant added assets for local teachers and their aids with tutoring in reading alone, children's school success dramatically increases. Without such partners, these schools are witness to the realities of inadequate resources, professional support, and appropriate facilities. The results are most dramatically illustrated by the tragic fact that black boys below the fourth-grade reading level by the end of that school year are 80% more likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime. In fact, the plurality of incarcerated men in the United States are functionally illiterate. In and of itself, literacy becomes destiny (Guarasci, 2022).

I have found that pipeline programs that combine academic enhancement, leadership training, and civic engagement begin to build what I have identified as the "arts of democracy," specifically the activation of student voice, listening skills, social empathy, communal reciprocity, mediation skills, coalition building, and civic and political engagement. Both the K-16 students and their college mentors grow together in these ways.

Even beyond the educational pipelines, neighborhoods gain powerful allies who align key campus resources with community needs. Examples from a number of neighborhood

partnerships demonstrate a variety of approaches that are specific to the local setting. To be sure, though, universities and colleges can align many of their curricular assets, such as community needs in health care, education, small business development, social services, housing , environmental research, and criminal justice, to name but a few. The vast majority of our disciplines are amenable to civic, clinical, and experiential learning engagements. College learning is enhanced through the application of curricular subjects in real settings when cultivated through thorough processes of written and oral reflection. As a result, student learning, persistence, and completion increase. So does net tuition revenue.

All of this comes at a cost. Beyond the expenses for staff and programming, universities can expect lower net tuition revenue per capita for lower-income students. As opposed to the all-elusive, full-paying students, pipeline students can afford less of the tuition bill. Alternatively, they bring some significant net tuition dollars via governmental and non-profit funding. While not a full replacement for lost revenue due to the demographic decline from the traditional markets, these outside assets moderate this deficit. One strategy to further add to the overall enrollment revenue would be to increase the volume of pipeline schools to make up for those revenues lost to declining student markets.

Educational "Luxury" or Institutional Strategy

Is any of this type of diversity and civic programming affordable in an era of fiscal threat? Are we so fragile economically that it is hard to think beyond austerity and annual budgeting? Is the higher education sector capable of seizing its long-term self-interest while continuing to support the ideal of a diverse, inclusive, and dynamic democracy in the United States?

While colleges and universities face difficult decisions in the face of escalating costs and, at best, stagnant revenue, any additional programs appear as laudable but unaffordable burdens that require more staff, scholarships, and program funds. But here is the rub. The long-term viability of so many colleges and universities cannot be held hostage to short-term exigencies. Austerity is not a plan for future success. It only buys short-term relief. Leadership is the ability to frame a clear pathway to a sustainable future in the face of seemingly immediate threats. This requires courageous initiatives that turn liabilities into assets. Increasing college enrollment in communities long neglected and fearful of the promise of campuses becomes a necessary strategy in a nation facing serious demographic decline from populations traditionally served. Realigning campus resources to meet this need is obvious on its face. The neighborhood democracy model is fiscally sound, and, of course, it directly meets the civic mission of higher education at a moment of democracy's fragility.

Once these pipeline programs launch, colleges have the potential to experience fiscal gains from their existing students who become fully engaged in the local community partnerships as

mentors, tutors, researchers, and volunteers. Research supports that their retention, persistence, and college completion increase significantly. This means greater net tuition revenue to the host college. My professional experience demonstrates that these dollars grow faster as a percentage than returns on annual funds and some new endowment gifts. Finally, a fully identified civic effort addressing social inequality through neighborhood partnerships that include K-16 partnerships usually increases both public and private funding. Alumni, local foundations, and elected officials join the effort through increased commitments to colleges and universities that focus on solutions to important local problems. Elected officials and local government agencies are more collaborative with colleges that have become allies with their local communities and non-profit partners.

As importantly, the alignment of the appropriate portions of the curriculum with neighborhood partner organizations increases student learning in colleges and within the K-16 schools. Experiential learning engages students more fully. They begin to realize their own agency in the learning process, particularly when working in structured and supervised groups. As John Dewey so brilliantly identified a century ago, learning is best served by combining "ideas with experience and then reflection."

Going Forward

This is a difficult conversation. The political economy of American higher education is in a bruised state. Its fiscal crisis impact is widespread in every one of the campus constituencies. Leaders of colleges and universities are challenged every day with vexing fiscal choices. None of them are resolved without material pain for one constituency or another. The fate of American democracy can seem beyond their daily choices. The realities of racial and economic inequality are not absent from their immediate concerns, but they present themselves within the smaller envelope of the campus milieux. And some leaders might argue that these questions are not part of the job description. They may argue that solutions must be fashioned by the broader political actors located beyond the campus gates.

But these realities circumscribe the entire higher education sector. They are inescapable. So much of the future of higher education will be framed by the sector's response to economic inequality and the deteriorating foundations of American democracy. Without the freedoms embedded within democracy's architecture, namely, the freedom to learn, to research and to teach, higher learning lies naked before the whims of would-be autocrats and politicians ill-equipped to protect its institutions of learning. There is no academic freedom without democratic protocols. And in the face of declining demographics, higher education will shrink. It has a model to restore its civic mission and, with it, save its place within American society. It will take remarkable leaders to rise to this moment.

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