

# CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

## Demography as Opportunity

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## Abstract

Compared with four-year colleges, community colleges serve a vastly disproportionate number of undergraduate students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and lower-income backgrounds. Yet the sector remains under-resourced—unable to compete against politically connected state four-year systems and flagship campuses for limited public funds. Worse yet, community colleges have been unfairly stigmatized as they struggle to redress the accumulated disadvantage experienced by much of their student body. What is an under-resourced and stigmatized higher education sector to do? One idea is to reshape words and deeds in ways intended to leverage the benefits of the nation’s changing demographics and dispel deficit orientations toward populations community colleges enroll.

*Demography as opportunity* is a simple idea grounded in a commitment to affirm the worth of the students who attend community colleges by being responsive to their life circumstances. As the demography of the nation changes—the United States is predicted to be majority minority by 2045—human capital investment in students from racial and ethnic groups, many of whom are first-generation college goers and low-income, is critical to the nation’s vitality. Demography as opportunity marries the racial and ethnic shifts underway in the country and in higher education with equity perspectives on historically disenfranchised populations. It is a constellation of policy and practice that abides by implementation principles common to well-executed change efforts. It attends to both people and place and aspires to strengthen communities and the nation by investing in the increasingly diverse population of college goers. Community colleges are the ideal venue for demography as opportunity not only because of who they serve but also because of what they do.

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## 1. Introduction

For far too long institutions and policies have operated as if racial and ethnic differences are problematic—in more recent decades while embracing diversity as a virtuous if somewhat amorphous concept. W. E. B. DuBois starkly captured this sentiment in *The Souls of Black Folk* at the turn of the twentieth century when he wrote of the Black experience, “How does it feel to be a problem?” He went on to articulate an aspirational vision for the future of his community and country, writing:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (pp. 45-46)

Blacks in present day America may no longer face the legally sanctioned, overt hostility DuBois references, but they and other racial and ethnic minorities continue to lack the “Opportunity” he argues is central to their ability to self-actualize, engage, contribute, and lead as citizens.

Equal access to a high-quality education has been at the center of the “Opportunity” debate. And the importance of community colleges in that debate has grown significantly. The nation’s 1,000 public two-year colleges provide low-cost postsecondary education and a viable pathway to economic security and mobility. Today, the sector enrolls the plurality of all postsecondary students and, critically, serves a majority of undergraduate students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups as well as lower-income students (Ma & Baum, 2016).

These features of the sector have not brought it the recognition and spoils it deserves. To the contrary, they have left the sector under-resourced—unable to compete against politically connected state four-year systems and flagship campuses for limited public funds. Worse yet, they have unfairly stigmatized the sector as institutions and systems struggle to redress the accumulated disadvantage experienced by much of their student body. Societal understandings of disadvantage are laden with value judgments

and oftentimes perceived as inherent individual and institutional failings rather than a reflection of the nation's history and its economic and social policy.

What is an under-resourced and stigmatized higher education sector to do? One idea is to reshape words and deeds in ways intended to leverage the benefits of the nation's changing demographics and dispel deficit orientations toward the populations community colleges enroll. *Demography as opportunity* is a simple idea grounded in a commitment to affirm the worth of the students who attend community colleges by being responsive to their life circumstances. As the demography of the nation changes—the United States is predicted to be majority minority by 2045 (Frey, 2018)—human capital investment in students from racial and ethnic groups, many of whom are first-generation college goers and low-income, is critical to the nation's vitality. This idea is optimistic in that it views diversity as an asset and community college graduates as central actors in equitable economic growth. But it is not Pollyannaish. Discrimination and prejudice continue to be prevalent and generate crippling effects. These realities must be confronted. Demography as opportunity attempts to do so with community colleges at the front lines of inclusivity and justice for generations to come.

## **2. The Underpinnings**

Demography as opportunity marries the racial and ethnic shifts underway in the country and in higher education with equity perspectives on historically disenfranchised populations. It is a constellation of policy and practice—not a plug and play model—and abides by implementation principles common to well-executed change efforts. It attends to both people and place and aspires to strengthen communities and the nation by investing in the increasingly diverse population of college goers. Community colleges are the ideal venue for demography as opportunity not only because of who they serve but also because of what they do.

### **2.1 An Increasingly Diverse United States**

There are several factors driving the United States' shift to a majority minority nation (Frey, 2018; Colby & Ortman, 2014). First, immigration by individuals from

Asian and African countries as well as from Mexico and South America significantly outpaces that of individuals from European countries. Roughly one million immigrants arrive in the U.S. each year (Colby & Ortman, 2015). In 2016, over 40 percent of the people who obtained permanent resident status immigrated from Asia and about 10 percent came from Africa. Immigrants from Mexico accounted for 16 percent of people obtaining permanent resident status. These figures were considerably higher than those for European countries, which cumulatively accounted for just under 9 percent of people who obtained permanent resident status in 2016 (United States Homeland Security Department, 2017).

Second, birthrates among the U.S. White population are lower than birthrates among non-White populations. The number of births for non-Hispanic White women was slightly down from 2014 to 2015, whereas the number of births for Hispanic women increased by one percent; the number of births to non-Hispanic Black women was essentially unchanged (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Mathews, 2017). Given low U.S. fertility rates overall, international migration is expected to drive U.S. population growth in the coming decades (Batalova & Alperin, 2018). Lastly, the demographic trend toward a majority minority has more recently been accelerated by an increase in death rates of White adults. A prime driver of this increase is the U.S. opioid crisis. The opioid overdose rates for the White population increased from 7.8 deaths per 100,000 people in 2007 to 17.5 deaths per 100,000 people in 2016 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018).

These broader demographic trends are, in turn, driving changes to the racial and ethnic composition of postsecondary education institutions. In fall 2015, roughly 44 percent of all undergraduate students were non-White: 19 percent were Hispanic, 14 percent were Black, and 7 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). Between 2015 and 2026, postsecondary enrollment rates of non-White Hispanic, Black, and Asian/Pacific Islander students are expected to increase by 26 percent, 20 percent, and 12 percent, respectively, compared to 1 percent for White students (Hussar & Bailey, 2018).

As low-cost institutions in proximity to home and family, community colleges have increasingly emerged as critical access points for students from racial and ethnic

groups historically underrepresented in higher education. Fifty-six percent of all Hispanic undergraduates attend community colleges; the comparable figure for Black undergraduates is 44 percent (Ma & Baum, 2016). Nearly four in ten community college students receive Pell grants, and 70 percent applied for some form of financial aid (Ma & Baum, 2016). Many of the Hispanic and Black students, in particular, are not traditional-age students coming directly from high school. Moreover, many have enrolled in college previously.

The increasing diversity of postsecondary education broadly and the community college space more specifically provides a unique opportunity for an entire higher education sector to contribute in very tangible ways to a more egalitarian society. To do so, systems and institutions must provide relevant educations and robust enough supports to counteract centuries of discrimination and neglect that was oftentimes codified in policy and law. In addition, institutional actors must adopt more equity-minded perspectives about these disenfranchised populations to ensure policy and practice does not simply maintain inequality.

## **2.2 The Effects of Discriminatory Policy**

The demographic shifts underway are all the more meaningful in light of historical policies that in many cases disadvantaged these very populations (Katznelson, 2005). For Black Americans, Jim Crow set up separate and unequal education systems and legalized discrimination in commerce and other dimensions of daily life (Woodward, 2001). Through the New Deal, Federal Housing Authority (FHA) resources were supposed to increase home ownership after the Great Depression. However, aspiring Black homeowners were essentially shut out of FHA mortgage guarantees due to restrictive covenants and redlining (Rothstein, 2017). The effects of these sanctioned forms of discrimination were crippling and functionally undermined the ability of Black families to build intergenerational wealth and accrue even modest political power (Baradaran, 2017). Critically, they blocked investment in human capital by starving whole communities of well-resourced educational institutions across generations—profoundly stunting social mobility.

When the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (commonly known as the G.I. Bill) was passed in 1944, it was lauded as the most egalitarian piece of bipartisan legislation ever



passed. In the midst of Jim Crow era discrimination, the G.I. Bill was notable for making no distinctions for eligibility for its wide range of benefits by race. Veterans Administration studies suggested White and non-White program participation rates were comparable. The G.I. Bill is even credited with helping to integrate select colleges and universities. It also drove significantly higher enrollments at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Despite the legislation's color-blind language and these positive developments on average, the actual administration of the G.I. Bill, particularly in the South, was less egalitarian. The legislation was intentionally designed to give states and localities discretion over how benefits were administered to returning servicemen. Absent this provision, the bill would not have gained support from southern legislators. As Katznelson (2005) describes, "To cultivate this support, [Washington officials] made clear that they were disinclined to challenge the region's race relations and enforce equal treatment for all veterans" (p. 123). The result was localities denying certain benefits, creating obstacles to eligibility, and generally discouraging Black servicemen from fully utilizing the programs of the G.I. Bill, including the higher education tuition and stipend benefits.

Underlying the exclusionary features of a lot of public policy is a deficit orientation to racial and ethnic minorities. Deficit orientations ascribe differences in outcomes for non-majority or disempowered groups to "inadequate socialization, or lack of motivation and initiative" (Bensimon, 2005). They rely on stereotypical characterizations of poverty and disadvantage. Policy and its administration reflect this deficit orientation by explicitly or tacitly excluding racial and ethnic minorities from benefits, creating barriers to eligibility, or by instituting compliance and accountability measures that are meant to shame or signal a lack of worthiness.

At its most dangerous, this kind of policy advances supremacist ideology that positions Whites as superior to racial and ethnic minorities and views any accommodation to minority groups as being on the losing end of a zero-sum game. For example, redlining assessed African American neighborhoods of lower homeownership value than White neighborhoods and attempted to maintain residential segregation. In instances when Blacks began to integrate neighborhoods, Whites fled—as such change reflected in their view a decline in property value and social order (Kruse, 2005).

Higher education funding is another example of discrimination. Private research universities, which enroll the lowest percentage of students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups, spend five times what community colleges do on per-student operating expenses (Kahlenberg, 2015). This dramatic difference in spending illustrates a disturbing value proposition: Institutions serving the most advantaged students (who could likely succeed with significantly less) are more worthy of public and private dollars than those serving more disadvantaged students (who need more). The U.S. has a long history of layering such policies one upon another over generations such that their negative impacts accumulate—deepening disadvantage and helping to further ingrain deficit perspectives.

Demography as opportunity seeks to strengthen the community college sector from the outside by building the political (and thus policy) influence of the emerging minority majority. To do so, it must attend to institutional policy and practice that will make community colleges more responsive to the needs of this demographic block. Equity-minded perspectives may help in that regard.

### **2.3 Moving Toward Equity Perspectives**

One of the fundamental challenges regarding demography as opportunity as a clarion call for change is the persistence of higher education attainment gaps by race, ethnicity, and income (Lumina Foundation, 2018). They are persistent and demoralizing. According to a National Student Clearinghouse report, Black undergraduates who begin their higher education at two-year public institutions earn baccalaureate degrees at rates more than 15 percentage points lower than their White peers (Shapiro et al., 2017). While college graduation rates have gone up nationally in recent decades, attainment gaps by race and ethnicity have continued and in some cases grown (Nichols, Eberle-Sudre, & Welch, 2016). It is easy to be discouraged in the face of these outcomes and to begin to view the disparities as inevitable. A growing body of higher education scholarship provides alternative perspectives, which can be the basis for the kind of constructive action demography as opportunity requires.

Bensimon (2005) uses organizational learning theory as the framework to explain why institutions struggle to achieve equitable outcomes across racial and ethnic groups (Argyris & Schon, 1996). She positions the responsibility for the current disparities

squarely with institutional actors—administrators, faculty, and staff—not students, writing:

... I (along with my colleagues at the Center for Urban Education) believe that institutional actors, as a consequence of their beliefs, expectations, values, and practices, create or perpetuate unequal outcomes and that the possibility for reversing inequalities depends on individual learning that holds the potential for bringing about self-change. That is, individuals—the ways in which they teach, think students learn, and connect with students, and the assumptions they make about students based on their race or ethnicity—can create the problem of unequal outcomes. Such individuals, if placed in situations where they learn the ways in which their own thinking creates or accentuates inequities, can also learn new ways of thinking that are more equity minded. (p. 100).

The opportunity for self-awareness of which Bensimon writes relies on the cognitive frame individuals bring to their work. Cognitive frames are the filters through which individuals make sense of their worlds. In higher education institutions seeking reconciliation with their histories of racial discrimination, “[c]ognitive frames represent conceptual maps and determine what questions may be asked, what information is collected, how problems are defined, and what action should be taken” (Bensimon, 2005). They determine what is seen and what goes unseen. Thus, in any serious change effort, they represent the place where the work must first begin to ensure inequity is not simply reproduced.

The cognitive frames to which Bensimon (1989) refers are shaped by everyday lived experiences and information resources (including scholarship on higher education and communities of color) that attribute deficits to the students, not institutions. Deficit orientations (or perspectives, as Bensimon calls them) are not benign. They are the basis of discriminatory treatment of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and have real-world negative implications for the self-efficacy and behaviors of students (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Harper (2010) provides an alternative—anti-deficit achievement—framework explicitly designed to learn from positive stories, such as students who successfully complete degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). He argues the

right policy and practice solutions will remain elusive if the focus is exclusively on the educational failure of disenfranchised groups. The anti-deficit achievement framework draws on a range of theories, including critical race theory, social and cultural capital theory, and theories of college retention, among others, to examine multiple dimensions of achievement (Harper, 2010).

Missing from the scholarship of Bensimon (2005), Harper (2010), and other like-minded academics are the zero-sum assessments of opportunity and access likely to undermine policy and practice. Moreover, these scholars welcome color-conscious conversations. Attempts to mute discussions of racial exclusion and discrimination, they argue, do nothing to advance equity of educational outcomes. Demography as opportunity likewise draws on this transparency and candor in service of its goals. Institutional leaders can consider the following principles as inspiration: know your students, understand the obstacles to their success, adopt and adapt responsive policy and practice, and scale and institutionalize continuous improvement. These principles draw from research and practice on institutional change efforts. They also are infused with insights from the lived experiences of leaders in the fight for racial equity and social justice. The next section discusses each of the principles.

### **3. The Principles**

Demography as opportunity is meaningful to the extent it is embraced by institutional leaders and infused in an institutional culture. It requires belief in students shadowed in doubt for generations and the rejection of ideologies of supremacy and skewed perceptions of worthiness. Principles alone will not offset entrenched bias. Therefore, community colleges must contextualize the implementation of the principles in the type of wholesale changes to culture and belief systems akin to the equity perspectives just discussed. Simultaneously, the field must aggressively challenge the systemic underinvestment in the sector and the students it serves.

### **3.1 Know Your Students**

Community colleges are organized and operate in ways similar to how they did so at their founding. Academic programs are largely segregated from workforce development. Likewise, student services operate independently from academic offerings. But it is not 1970 when two-year institutions served mostly White men who enrolled in college full-time (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). Therefore, an important first step in strengthening community colleges to serve an increasingly diverse group of students is to truly know those students.

Knowing your students entails capturing more and better information about students' backgrounds and college and career goals prior to and upon entry. Some of this information may be drawn from K-12 administrative datasets—to the extent K-12 and higher education data systems can be linked or data easily transferred. Because many community college students do not enroll immediately after high school, it is also important for community colleges to leverage their application systems to collect information beyond compulsory demographic characteristics. For example, a series of simple “yes/no” or multiple choice questions about students' English language proficiency may yield information that can be used to strengthen and target English language learning supports.

Similarly, colleges can use academic advising sessions and orientations to collect the kind of information perhaps less suited for an online application. For instance, in these venues, it makes sense to learn more about students' intended majors and career goals. Are they seeking a terminal associate degree? Would they like to transfer and do they know where? Additionally, in-person interactions provide an opportunity to explore more complicated phenomena, like academic confidence and sense of belonging, and connect students with supportive peer groups.

To know the students also requires colleges to know their communities. It is not always the case that community college faculty and staff live in the same neighborhoods as the students they serve. Oftentimes leadership is well integrated in the business and political communities but has limited ties to the diversity of neighborhoods where their students live. Therefore, demography as opportunity holds that administrators, faculty, and staff must proactively forge connections to the everyday lives of students. When

sustained and built from positions of mutual respect, connections through K-12 schools, religious institutions, civic organizations, nonprofit organizations, or direct one-on-one outreach will generate a wealth of information about the many strengths of communities of color as well as more nuanced understandings of the challenges students and families may face.

### **3.2 Understand the Obstacles to Their Success**

A bounty of research has highlighted a range of policies and practices that have undermined the success of community college students, particularly underrepresented minorities and low-income students. These include inaccurate placement systems (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014), late registration policies (Smith, Street, & Olivarez, 2002), and multi-course and multi-semester developmental education sequences (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010), among others. A majority of community colleges, nonetheless, maintain these policies and practices despite evidence of their negative effects. Why? Sometimes they have no alternatives, as is often cited as the case with assessment and placement. In many instances, financial considerations drive decision-making, such as in the case of late registration, which generates revenue in the short term. While these reasons are legitimate, maintaining practices that harm students is never justified and frankly would not be tolerated in settings where students (and parents) have more social capital, like highly selective elite institutions.

Demography as opportunity argues that maintaining harmful policies and practices is an untenable position. Community colleges must chip away at the cumulative disadvantage they create by dismantling the systems, small and large, that sustain it and by providing academic and nonacademic supports that are robust enough to offset its profound effects.

Colleges seeking to better understand the obstacles to student success must begin by investing in the examination of students' experiences across measures ranging from academic performance to sense of belonging to labor market outcomes. This will require data collection and analysis and is best initiated as a transparent and collaborative process. It is an even more powerful tactic when done as part of a multi-institution network. Eventually colleges should get to a place where data collection is built into the student experience and analysis and review of those data are embedded in professional

expectations and institutional strategy. To the extent analysis shows that the measures are low—relatively or in absolute terms—or that substantial disparities exist across different types of students for the same measure, colleges must prepare to intervene.

It is easy to get lost in the data and lose sight of the big picture. So change leaders must inquire beyond any particular metric and seek to understand the underlying causes of negative (or positive) outcomes. This may entail following up with students who have dropped out and inquiring about their college experiences and life circumstances. It may require confronting one's own biases and preconceived notions in service of genuine understanding. Undoubtedly, this process requires talking to students and assessing not just their difficulties but also their strengths.

### **3.3 Adopt and Adapt Responsive Policy and Practice**

Innovation abounds in the community college sector. Yet, as discussed, many policies and practices known to have negative effects on students are maintained. Efforts to change these policies and practices can be hampered by financial considerations, time constraints, complexity, a lack of will and ability, compliance requirements, and many other issues. Moreover, if change agents lack a complete and clear understanding of the underlying obstacle to success, there is a strong likelihood that any new policy or practice will be inadequate. Demography as opportunity views policy as guideposts and practice as tactics designed to publicly elevate the needs of underrepresented and low-income students.

The “best practice” marketplace provides empty assurances of quick fixes. In reality, meaningful institutional change is a strategic endeavor that requires college leaders to adopt and adapt or develop and adapt the kinds of policies and practices that are responsive to students' most critical needs (Edgecombe, Cormier, Bickerstaff, & Barragan, 2013). For historically underserved student populations, these needs may include deeper social and academic engagement (to offset isolation and build a sense of belonging and academic confidence), which colleges may try to facilitate through mentorship, culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, psychosocial supports, and access to programs that lead to high-wage employment. No matter the remedy, adaptation is essential given the unique contours and constraints of different contexts.

Additionally, college leaders must be on the lookout for unintended consequences: how new and existing policies and practices may interact in ways that adversely impact students. This inquiry can begin during the planning process, where various implementation scenarios are tested for interactions. Targeted interventions, like Black male initiatives, for example, typically operate across academic programs and must attend to known and unknown cultural or structural barriers within different majors that may mitigate the effects of the initiative.

Universal interventions, such as financial incentives designed to encourage full-time enrollment, may lead more working students to register for 15 credits, but practitioners should anticipate that students will need guidance regarding the time management implications. Once rolled out, new policies and practices must be evaluated, with an eye toward unintended consequences. These consequences may be identified through disaggregated data as well as qualitative inquiries into students' experiences and perceptions.

### **3.4 Scale and Institutionalize Continuous Improvement**

Yesterday's solution is always at risk of becoming today's problem. Developmental education is a case in point. Decades ago, practitioners realized that a lot of academically underprepared students were enrolling in open-access institutions, most notably community colleges, and instituted a seemingly rational system to assess and remediate their academic skills in advance of college-level coursework. The problem is that very system evolved into a multi-semester, multi-course sequence that the majority of students never complete. And the negative consequences of this system have disproportionately affected underrepresented minority and low-income students.

This cautionary tale suggests a reframing of traditional notions of scaling and institutionalization may be warranted to protect against good ideas going bad. Demography as opportunity offers a new perspective. It retains predominant elements of scale, that is, the expansion of effective policies and practices to serve all students who can benefit (Edgecombe et al., 2013). Institutionalization, however, is no longer simply about the allocation of institutional resources such that the policies and practices become normative core functions. It now incorporates continuous improvement as a check to



ensure the benefits of policies and practices continue to accrue to those who need them most.

Continuous improvement is a long-standing concept of organizational development (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). However, community colleges have struggled to seamlessly integrate it into their business model given the cultural shift (from individual to systems thinking) and the resource commitment required. Staff must assess new and ongoing initiatives and then convene the appropriate colleagues to review and reflect on the findings and plot corrections in policy and practice. In some instances, external support is required. The subsequent planning and implementation of these corrections, in turn, requires significant staff and other resources and must be subject to reassessment. Ideally, strategic planning has provided a systems orientation and positioned continuous improvement efforts within institutional priorities, including those tied to student diversity.

There is nothing revolutionary about the principles of knowing your students, understanding the obstacles to their success, adopting and adapting responsive policy and practice, and scaling and institutionalizing continuous improvement. Yet as an under-resourced sector, community colleges struggle to implement them consistently and in service of more equitable outcomes. The next section discusses ways similarly positioned institutions have adhered to these principles and in doing so have turned the tide for the historically disenfranchised students they proudly serve.

#### **4. The Inspiration**

Demography as opportunity has yet to shape community college policy and practice in ways that current trends suggest it should. As a result, gaps in credential attainment and other measures of achievement persist. This stagnation is attributable, at least in part, to the view that the sector's diversity is a weakness, not a strength. Such an orientation shapes attitudes and behaviors in ways that limit the range of solutions put forward and stall action. But there are historical and contemporary examples that portend the potential impact of demography as opportunity.

Institutions that have served disenfranchised populations have a history of industriousness from which demography as opportunity draws. Industriousness was a necessity given a lack of resources and prohibitions on certain activities and societal rights. Education, both formal and informal, is one such activity. Enslaved peoples of African descent, for example, surreptitiously pursued literacy and numeracy at great risk during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Williams, 2005). During Jim Crow, leaders of all-Black schools provided rigorous and affirming educational environments despite being intentionally starved for resources (Walker, 1996). In recent decades, certain minority-serving institutions have strategically invested in particular areas and earned strong reputations for producing disproportionate numbers of graduates in high-demand and advanced fields (Gasman & Conrad, 2013). While not widespread, the effects of carving out these kinds of niches have been profound on a handful of institutions and thousands of their graduates.

Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) chronicled this history for African Americans under legal segregation in the South in her book, *Their Highest Potential*. As she writes:

... [T]o remember segregated schools largely by recalling only their poor resources presents a historically incomplete picture. Although black schools were indeed commonly lacking in facilities and funding, some evidence suggests that the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from white school boards. Most notably, in one of the earliest accountings by Thomas Sowell, the schools are remembered as having atmospheres where “support, encouragement, and rigid standards” combined to enhance students’ self-worth and increase their aspirations to achieve. (p. 3)

In her historical account of Caswell County Training School (CCTS), Walker vividly describes a school community with active parents, engaged students, and committed teachers. She also describes how the county Board of Education undermined attempts to provide students with transportation to school and thwarted CCTS expansion initiatives, among other obstructionist tactics. Nonetheless, the CCTS family persevered,

preparing hundreds of students over many decades, including Walker, with the skills and dispositions required to contribute to society in productive ways.

Some 85 years later, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) is the leading producer of African American graduates who earn MD/PhDs in the nation and draws on the same traditions as CCTS. This program enrolled 19 African American male freshmen in its first cohort in 1989 and now serves undergraduate students of all backgrounds who intend to pursue doctoral degrees in the sciences and engineering and are committed to the success of underrepresented minorities in those fields. It provides a four-year merit scholarship and a range of academic supports and enrichment opportunities to academically prepared students interested in pursuing postgraduate degrees and research-based careers. The program culture emphasizes mutual support, high expectations, and accountability within a highly structured oversight model. Entering students participate in a six-week summer bridge program and study groups and engage in undergraduate research opportunities early on, including summer research internships. The program has yielded impressive results: Meyerhoff Scholars were 5.3 times more likely to enroll in or complete a doctoral program in STEM or a combination STEM PhD/MD program compared to a control group (University of Maryland Baltimore County, n.d.).

Georgia State University (GSU) has garnered considerable attention for eliminating racial and ethnic achievement gaps (Fausset, 2018; Quinton, 2013). In 2003, only about one third of all GSU students earned a bachelor's degree in six years. The rates for African Americans and Latinos were 29 percent and 22 percent, respectively. By 2017, the overall six-year graduation rate had increased to 54 percent; outpaced by the rates of African Americans and Latinos of 58 percent and 55 percent, respectively (Renick, 2017).

College officials attribute both the overall increase in graduation rates and the elimination of attainment gaps across races to a set of strategic initiatives, many of which are technology enabled, designed to create more personalized college experiences responsive to students' evolving needs. These initiatives have included the development of a data analytics-driven advising system, integration of peer tutors in high-failure introductory math courses, targeted deployment of retention grants, and the introduction

of meta-major-based first-year learning communities, among others. The development process for these initiatives was driven by in-depth assessment of the underlying obstacles to student success. And in some cases they have generated better outcomes at low to no cost. For example, the data analytics-driven advising cost \$200,000 in new technology and about \$2,000,000 per year in additional staffing. In its first year, year-to-year retention increased approximately four percentage points, generating over \$10,000,000 in annual tuition and fees (Drawdy & Renick, 2018).

Another notable higher education trailblazer has been Paul Quinn College in Dallas, Texas. Founded in 1872 by ministers from the African Methodist Episcopal Church to educate freed slaves and their children, Paul Quinn College is the nation's only federally authorized urban work college. Under the leadership of president Dr. Michael Sorrell, Paul Quinn adopted a student work program model in fall 2015, in which all residential, full-time students engage in on- or off-campus work experiences that underwrite a portion of their educational costs while helping them to develop the skills, habits, and work experience critical to success in the twenty-first century labor market. Students work between 300 and 400 hours each academic year in order to earn a \$5,000 tuition grant and a stipend of between \$1,000 and \$1,500 (Paul Quinn College, n.d.). Under this work program model, students can graduate from Paul Quinn with their degree and \$10,000 or less in student loan debt.

Consistent across these historical and contemporary examples of institutions and programs is an unwillingness to accept the status quo. There is no surrender within the Black community of Caswell County, North Carolina, in its pursuit of a high-quality primary and secondary education. Similarly, Freeman Hrabowski, the acclaimed president of UMBC, never questioned the ability of underrepresented minorities to excel in STEM and become the next generation of scholars and teachers in the field, so as to seed yet the next generation. He persevered and found philanthropists Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, who provided hope, opportunity, and a tangible path to prosperity—not just a scholarship. Georgia State, typical in many ways of the nation's broad-access urban universities, has been willing to upend institutional policy and practice in service of more personalized support to predominately minority and low-income students at the times when they are most in need. Lastly, the leadership of Paul Quinn College threw out the

rulebook of low-risk incrementalism that has governed change in higher education. In the work college, it found a business model that made college more affordable for students while providing them the practical employment experience that makes them better students and more successful graduates.

## **5. The Call to Action**

In a country as wealthy and ingenious as the United States, why are so many left behind? Why have community colleges, poised as potentially the most powerful vehicles of economic mobility and social change, been unable to consistently achieve their laudable missions for all students? On the one hand, the answers to these questions are complex. They require leaders to reconcile the nation's founding, premised on liberty and freedom for all but mired in enslavement and subjugation of African and native peoples as well as women. This reconciliation has never happened and therefore the insidious effects of this foundational hypocrisy have permeated the country's culture, norms, and institutions in ways that feel unalterable. On the other hand, the answers to these questions seem quite obvious. Eliminate discriminatory policies and practices and develop the compensatory measures to redress the effects of centuries of prejudice and bias. Fund community colleges at levels adequate to boost overall attainment while closing the achievement gap. Invest strategically and disproportionately in historically underserved communities until the wage and wealth gaps are eliminated. Unfortunately, such common sense solutions are untenable in the current zero-sum political culture. They would disrupt a social order that powerful interests work mighty hard to maintain.

But the country is changing. Within 30 years, people of non-White Hispanic, Asian, and African descent will represent the collective majority of U.S. residents. And community colleges are projected to enroll most of the postsecondary students from these racial and ethnic groups. Demography as opportunity posits it is neither plausible nor preferable to continue on the current path. Systems and policies must be directed toward expanding opportunity for this new majority, not toward consolidating power within a shrinking minority. Institutions and practices must be aggressively and unapologetically equity focused, not stalled by the inertia and incrementalism that discourages leaders

from rocking the higher education boat. The virtues and rewards of a robust pluralist society are many: diverse perspectives, collective responsibility, informed debate, health and well-being, civic engagement, economic prosperity, respect for institutions, among others. Will community college and other institutional and political leaders help break the current cycle and do what is necessary to reap these rewards?

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