

White Flight Goes to College

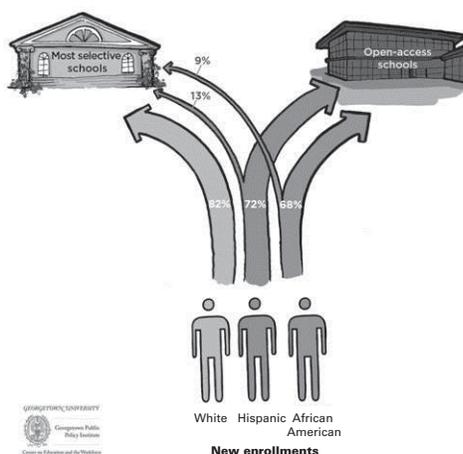
Anthony P. Carnevale & Jeff Strohl

White flight from the center city to better neighborhood schools in the leafy green suburbs has finally arrived on the nation's ivy-covered college campuses. The racial and ethnic stratification in educational opportunity entrenched in the nation's K-12 education system has faithfully reproduced itself across the full range of American colleges and universities.

African Americans' and Hispanics' access to postsecondary education over the past 15 years is a good news/bad news story. Though African Americans and Hispanics scored big gains in access to postsecondary education, both groups are losing ground in their move up to the most selective colleges relative to their growing population shares.

The absolute numbers of African Americans and Hispanics going on to postsecondary institutions have increased markedly, but whites, African Americans and Hispanics are on separate and unequal pathways.

- Between 1995 and 2009, more than 8 in 10 of net new white



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students have gone to the country's 468 most selective colleges, while more than 7 in 10 of net new African-American and Hispanic students have gone to the 3,250 two- and four-year open-access colleges.

Whites are abandoning the open-access institutions and moving up into the selective college tiers and gaining the advantages those schools provide.

- Between 1995 and 2009, the white share of enrollments in the two- and four-year open-access colleges declined from 69% to 57%.

Affluent white students, higher tuitions, and prestige-seeking four-year colleges are all moving to the top tiers of selectivity, while lower-income minority students are left with the less prestigious, lower-spending, poorly funded open-access institutions.

- While more than 140 institutions have moved up into the top three

tiers of selectivity since the mid-'90s, the number of four-year open-access colleges is declining. The result of this dynamic is increased spending per student at the most selective colleges and overcrowding and reduced resources per student in the open-access sector.

Similarly, the larger growth in college seats has been at schools now in the most selective tiers, as compared with open-access colleges.

- Enrollments at the most-selective and better-resourced colleges grew significantly (78%), reflecting increased demand for high-quality postsecondary education. The vast majority of the new seats at top schools went to

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white students. Among open-access, four-year colleges, growth has been significantly slower (just 21%), but the net increases in minority enrollments were concentrated at those schools, resulting in more crowding and fewer resources per student.

The most telling metrics of racial polarization in postsecondary education are comparisons of white, African-American and Hispanic enrollments to their respective shares of the college-age population. Whites have increased their enrollment share in the top 468 colleges relative to their share of the college-age population.

- In 1995, the white share of the college-age population was 68%, and the white share of enrollments at the top 468 colleges was 77%, a 9 percentage point advantage of enrollment share over population share.
- By 2009, the white share of the college-age population was 62% and the white share of enrollments at the top 468 colleges was 75%, a 13 percentage point advantage of enrollment over population share and a 4 percentage point increase within the college-age population.

Over the same period, the enrollment shares of African Americans and Hispanics in the top 468 colleges declined relative to their shares of the

college-age population.

- In 1995, the African-American and Hispanic share of the college-age population was 27%, and their share of enrollments at the top 468 colleges was 12%, a 15 percentage point deficit of enrollment compared with population share.
- By 2009, the African-American and Hispanic share of the college-age population was 33%, and their share of enrollment at

Whites, African Americans and Hispanics are on separate and unequal pathways.

the top 468 colleges was 15%, an 18 percentage point deficit of enrollment versus population share and a 3 percentage point drop within the college-age population.

The white share of enrollment in the 3,250 two- and four-year open-access colleges has declined relative to the white share of the college-age population.

- In 1995, the white share of the college-age population was 68% and the white share of enrollment at the 3,250 two- and four-year open-access colleges was 69%, reflecting a balance between enrollment and population shares.
- By 2009, the white share of the college-age population was 62% and the white share of enrollment at the 3,250 two- and four-year open-access colleges was 57%, a 5 percentage point deficit of enrollment relative to population share and a 6 percentage point decline within the college-age population.

Over the same 15 years, the African-American and Hispanic share of enrollment in the 3,250 open-access colleges increased relative to their share of the college-age population.

- In 1995, the African-American and Hispanic share of the college-age population was 27%,

and their share of enrollment at the 3,250 two- and four-year open-access colleges was 24%, a 3 percentage point deficit of enrollment relative to population share.

- By 2009, the African-American and Hispanic share of the college-age population was 33%, and their share of enrollment at the 3,250 two- and four-year open-access colleges was 37%, a 4 percentage point excess of enrollment relative to population share.

These trends show that the higher education system is more and more complicit as a passive agent in the systematic reproduction of white racial privilege across generations. The higher education system is colorblind—in theory—but in fact operates, at least in part, as a systematic barrier to opportunity for many African Americans and Hispanics, large numbers of whom are qualified but tracked into overcrowded and underfunded colleges, where they are less likely to develop fully or to graduate.

The tracking of white students into the top-tier colleges perpetuates greater rates of white college completion, especially at the elite colleges. Consequently, more college completion among white parents brings higher earnings that fuel the intergenerational reproduction of privilege by providing more highly educated parents the means to pass their educational advantages on to their children. Higher earnings buy more expensive housing in the suburbs with the best schools and peer support for educational attainment. The synergy between the growing economic value of education and the increased sorting by housing values makes parental education the strongest predictor of a child's educational attainment and future earnings. As a result, the country also has the least intergenerational educational and income mobility among advanced nations.

The American postsecondary system increasingly has become a dual

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opportunities and risks. Our job is to make sure they have all the information they need to make an informed choice, and the support to effectuate that choice if they decide to make the move. There is nothing like watching a mom who says she is tired of having to sit up all night to make sure no one breaks in her door, look at a map which shows her that she lives in an area (and in a housing unit often built by a federal low-income housing program) that the local police have designated as a crime “hot spot,” and then showing her places on that map where

she could move where she probably won't feel the need to do that. She knows that it may be a place where more white people live than she lives near now, and it may be a place she only has heard of. She may need to get her old clunker running, because there is no reliable public transportation, and her kids may struggle, at least initially, in a new and more demanding school. There will be other challenges, depending on personal and community circumstances. But until she looked at that map, and talked to a counselor, she didn't know that her voucher would buy her a unit in a non-crime hot spot, non-food desert, non-

low-performing school attendance zone. Because no one has told her. Not the Housing Authority, not the city, not the local “community leaders,” not her caseworker, not HUD, and certainly not anyone in the low-income housing development community. Sometimes, with that information, she chooses to stay, and sometimes she chooses to move, but whatever the choice, after she works with someone truly dedicated to making it real, she knows she had one. Given the unforgiving and unforgivable story that Sharkey's research tells, that is worth the effort. □

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system of racially separate pathways, even as overall minority access to the postsecondary system has grown dramatically. The dual pathways in postsecondary education are not only racially separate but they produce unequal results, even among equally qualified students. The authors find that preparation for higher education matters in allocating access and success at the most selective 468 colleges, but it's not the whole story. Differences in access, completion and earnings persist even among equally qualified whites, African Americans and Hispanics.

- More than 30% of African Americans and Hispanics with a high school grade point average (GPA) higher than 3.5 go to community colleges, compared with 22% of whites with the same GPA.
- Among students who score in the top half of test score distribution (that is, high-scoring students) in the nation's high schools and attend college, 51% of white students get a BA or higher, compared with 34% of African-American students and 32% of Hispanic students.

This polarization of the postsecondary system matters because resources matter. The 468 most selective colleges spend anywhere from

two to almost five times as much per student as the open-access schools. Higher spending in the most selective colleges leads to higher graduation rates, greater access to graduate and professional schools, and better economic outcomes in the labor market, even compared with white, African-American and Hispanic students who are equally qualified but attend less competitive schools.

- The completion rate for the 468 most selective four-year colleges is 82%, compared with 49% for two- and four-year open-access colleges;
- At top-tier colleges, students who enrolled with SAT scores over 1000 obtain a graduate degree at a rate of 15%, compared with 3% similarly qualified students who attended a four-year open-access college; and
- Thirty-five percent of students from top-tier schools obtain a graduate degree within 10 years of obtaining a Bachelor's degree, compared with 21% of students from the open-access schools
- Greater postsecondary resources and completion rates for white students concentrated in the 468 most selective colleges confer substantial labor market advantages, including more than \$2 million dollars per student in higher lifetime earnings, and

access to professional and managerial elites, and careers that bring personal and social empowerment.

Access to the most selective 468 four-year colleges—and their greater completion rates—is especially important to African Americans and Hispanics, in part because attaining a BA is an important threshold for racial equality in earnings.

- African Americans and Hispanics gain 21% earning advantages when they attend the more selective schools, compared to 15% for whites who attend the same colleges.
- African Americans and Latinos who attend one of the top 468 colleges graduate at a rate of 73%, compared with a rate of 40% for equally qualified minorities who attend open-access colleges.

College readiness is important in explaining low completion rates, but preparation is not the whole story. Virtually all of the increase in college dropouts and the slowdown in completions are concentrated in open-access colleges, in substantial part because they are too crowded and underfunded. This dynamic leads to significant loss of talent among both minorities and lower income students.

- More than 240,000 high-scoring students who come from the bottom half of the income dis-

tribution do not get a two- or four-year degree within eight years of graduation from high school. The data show that roughly one in four (62,000) of these high-scoring/low-income students are African-American or Hispanic.

- There are more than 111,000 high-scoring African Americans and Hispanics who do not achieve a two- or four-year degree within eight years. If these students had attended one of the top 468 colleges and graduated at similar rates, 73% would have graduated.

So, what can be done? In combination, both race- and class-based affirmative action can ensure that highly qualified African-American, Hispanic and lower-income students gain access to well-funded and selective colleges that lead to elite careers.

But affirmative action is not enough to make more than a dent in the larger systematic racial and class bias in the core economic and educational mechanisms. Affirmative action, whether it is race- or class-based or some combination of the two, can help out those who strive and overcome the odds, yet does relatively little to change the odds themselves.

There are always African-American, Hispanic and working-class strivers who beat the odds, but for the mass of disadvantaged people it is the odds that count. The odds are stacked against African-American, Latino and low-income students. Disadvantage, like privilege, comes from a complex network of mutually reinforcing economic and educational mechanisms that only can be dealt with through a multifaceted economic and educational policy response. These economic and educational mechanisms are colorblind and class-blind in theory but not in fact. They are nested together in ways that make their combined negative effects mutually reinforcing, resilient and superficially legitimate as racial and ethnic barriers to opportunity.

The education system is colorblind in theory. In fact, the education system operates, at least in part, as a systematic barrier to college for many minorities who finish high school unprepared for college. Polarization by race and ethnicity in the nation's postsecondary system has become the

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color, but it does mean that they are more willing to align with right-wing conservatives to work to weaken government in order to expand their prerogative. They are willing to use this strategy to generate and shape structures that will support their power and protect their wealth.

For this reason, it was important in the wake of the sub-prime crisis for the elites to assign the lion's share of blame onto the "racial other"—rather than their own greed and fraudulent practices—to support the position that banks should not be regulated and to fight federal efforts to generate foreclosure relief using principal modifications. Recall that the Tea Party was sparked by Rick Santelli's rant against the government's HAMP program, which he said would "subsidize losers' mortgages." This blame activated not only hostility from the Tea Party and others to efforts to support homeowners, but also to regulating the banks and, later, Obamacare. One consequence is that Democrats are much less likely to talk about race or to formally introduce solutions that would help hard-hit communities.

The result is that our response to the sub-prime credit crisis continues to create new, structurally racialized systems in place of the old. The re-

capstone for K-12 inequality and the complex economic and social mechanisms that create it. The postsecondary system mimics and magnifies the racial and ethnic inequality in educational preparation it inherits from the K-12 system and then projects this inequality into the labor market. □

trenchment of credit and of the expansion of homeownership will impact all of us. If this is to be changed, it will demand an understanding and recognition of the dynamics of structural racialization in a more complete way, which must also entail a race-conscious response.

We need to begin by recognizing that structural racialization does not require a racist actor, race-explicit consciousness or even racial disparities. If the depressed life outcomes are produced by structures, then ending conscious discrimination is of little consequence and might actually exacerbate the negative impact of these structural dynamics by insulating the status quo from intervention. In this situation, we might need positive or affirmative action to change and disrupt these patterns. We live in structures powered often by unconscious behavior and long-standing habits. The formation of habits and othering at some level is human, and unavoidable, but can be influenced.

While disparities may be an expression of structural inequalities, the absence of disparities does not mean a racially just society. While disparities may be diagnostic, they cannot be our focus. Rather, our goal must be to foster structures that support positive life outcomes untainted with racial resentment or anxiety. □

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