HARD TRUTHS:

WHY ONLY RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES CAN FIX RACISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Education Trust

The main reason income, the most commonly used substitute for race in policies, does not result in achieving racial justice is because Black and White students and families with the same income often have vastly different experiences and circumstances that can affect educational and financial outcomes.

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MORE THAN 150 YEARS AFTER THE 13TH AMENDMENT was ratified to end slavery, nearly 3 out of 4 Black adults and more than half of White adults describe race relations as "bad," and that the legacy of slavery still has a considerable impact on Black people in American society.[1] While there is some shared agreement that racism is still an issue, there is less consensus about policy solutions: More than 3 out of 4 Black adults believe that the United States hasn't gone far enough in giving Blacks equal rights with Whites, while the same is true for only 1 in 3 White adults.[2]

It is within this context that policies designed to address racial inequalities continue to face strong opposition. Consider the most recent challenge to race-based affirmative action in college admissions — *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard.* Although a federal court upheld Harvard's approach to ensuring racial diversity on its campus, the case is still expected to make its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The high court's decision will profoundly influence how institutional leaders go about rectifying racial inequalities, which persist throughout the higher education

sector. Despite the popular belief that affirmative action gives Black and Latino students an unfair advantage, these students are still underrepresented at the nation's selective colleges.[3] They are also underrepresented at two- and four-year public colleges and universities in the vast majority of states.[4]

The truth is, it isn't enough to just believe that racial inequality is a problem; what policymakers, advocates, and citizens do about it matters most. Therefore, in our work at The Education Trust, we both reveal the racial disparities that exist in higher education and promote policy solutions that address racial inequality specifically and explicitly. And we work closely with advocates who don't just believe racism exists in higher education — they are fighting to end it. They often ask us: How can they respond to opponents who prefer not to focus on race? Why can't they just focus on income (or socioeconomic status) since people of color are more likely to be low income? And perhaps most

important, how can they advance race-conscious policies in their institutions and their states?

In this report, we answer these questions. We provide arguments for why race-conscious policies that are designed to eliminate racism are necessary. We share data that explains why a focus on income alone may not close gaps in opportunity and outcomes for students of color, particularly Black students and families. And we offer strategies on how leaders and policymakers can design and implement race-conscious policies in higher education.

We also discuss the unique role the U.S. higher education system can play in eliminating racial inequality and injustice within and beyond education. Higher education is one of the few mechanisms that can provide opportunities to the disenfranchised and empower students with the knowledge, motivation, and resources to dismantle inequality in all facets of their lives.

WHAT ARE
RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES?

FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS REPORT, race-conscious policies in higher education include policies that explicitly address race in the design and provide higher education access, opportunity, or support to students of color and their colleges and universities serving them. While using race-conscious policies can help achieve racial justice in higher education for all students of color, for the purposes of this report, we will focus our data and discussion on Black students, as the data on Black students makes a strong case for why race-conscious policies are necessary.

THREE ARGUMENTS
FOR RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ARGUMENT 1: **Historically, higher education has used racist policies to exclude students. Therefore, race-conscious policies are necessary to achieve racial justice.**

Higher education has had a long history of excluding and underserving students who are not White, male, or affluent. After the Civil War and the end of slavery, states and the federal government operated separate and unequal systems of higher education and provided support to colleges and universities that explicitly discriminated against students based on race and other characteristics. This discrimination was documented in court cases like *United States v. Adams*, which ordered 19 states to submit plans to address their history of disadvantaging Black colleges while unfairly giving resources to White colleges and universities that excluded students based on race.

In 1965, Congress passed legislation seeking to create a more equitable system of higher education. The Higher Education Act (HEA) granted access to women, established the federal financial aid program, and provided financial support to colleges already committed to access and equity like the nation's historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). HEA represented a national recognition that higher education opportunity had not been provided to all students and required federal intervention. It was among several pieces of legislation that were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and other social movements of the 1950s and 1960s and explicitly aimed at addressing racial and social inequality — the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and an Executive Order that encouraged affirmative action in 1965.

It's important to note that although Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for poor people regardless of race, they also fought for policy to specifically right the wrongs of racial injustice. While some of Dr. King's most popular quotes have been used to justify using race-neutral or colorblind policies, he in fact supported race-conscious policies such as reparations, which, even when paid, he argued, would amount to far less than "any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest."[5]

ARGUMENT 2: **Racial inequalities remain, and, in some cases, have worsened because race-conscious policies were cut short, limiting their effectiveness.**

The momentum toward creating a more equitable higher education system was short lived — the pushback almost immediate. Just 13 years after HEA was signed into law, the 1978 *University of California v. Bakke* case challenged affirmative action, the first of many court cases to do so. While the decision upheld the use of race as one of many factors in college admissions, it banned the use of quotas that limit the number of applicants who can be admitted based on race. Also, those who were uncertain about how to use race in admissions now feared legal action. And those in leadership positions who were not committed to an equitable system now had an excuse not to act. Since *Bakke*, the Supreme Court has made five rulings that have outlined the constitutional parameters of race-conscious admissions policies in higher education at the federal level, while eight states (CA, WA, MI, NE, AZ, OK, FL, and NH) have implemented a ban on affirmative action at the state level.

At the same time, the outcomes of court decisions like the *Adams* case, which proved states spent more on White colleges and students than Black ones, rarely led to new and robust resources for HBCUs. Black students continued to be excluded from White colleges, and HBCUs continued to be inadequately funded, despite the courts' decisions that maintaining racially segregated systems of higher education was unconstitutional.

These trends toward race-conscious policies in the 1960s and subsequent retreat in the late 1970s matter for students' opportunity and outcomes. Today, while it's legal for colleges to use race as a factor in admissions, approximately 2% and 13% of institutions report that race has either a "considerable" or "moderate" influence, respectively, on their college admissions decisions for first-time students. These numbers are even lower for transfer students.[6] And in states that have bans on affirmative action, every single one saw declines in their enrollment of Black students at selective public colleges after the ban. In California, for example, at UC Berkeley 8% of the students enrolled in 1990 were Black. After the state's 1998 ban on affirmative action, Black student enrollment dropped to 4%, then to 2% in 2015 despite the Black population in California being 9%.[7]

When we look at trends in degree attainment for Black adults after the retreat from race-conscious policies, we also see evidence of regression. Among Black adults ages 35-44, 35% have a college degree. That's higher than 27%, the degree attainment rate for Black adults ages 55-64. Perhaps, most worrying, for the youngest group of Black adults, ages 25-34, the percentage with a college degree has declined to 30%, bucking the trend of younger generations building on gains made by previous generations. For White adults, however, progressive

trends still stand. Degree attainment among younger White adults is nearly 10 percentage points higher than it is for older White adults.[8]

ARGUMENT 3: Policies that rely on substitutions (or proxies) for race, such as income, have not closed gaps in opportunity and outcomes for students of color.

In many states, especially those that have bans on using race as a factor in college admissions and beyond, policymakers often turn to using income as a substitution for race in policies that target resources and opportunity to students who have been disadvantaged. But do approaches that use income, geography, or other proxies for race help students of color? Not nearly as much as using race explicitly.

As mentioned earlier, states with affirmative action bans saw a decline in Black student enrollment at selective public colleges after the ban. And using proxies like giving preference based on geography has not done enough to make up for these losses.[9] Additional studies use simulations to show that income-based affirmative action policies do not yield nearly as much racial diversity as race-based policies.[10]

States have also tried to incentivize equity by giving resources to colleges and universities based on their enrollment and/or outcomes for underserved students. However, studies show that when states like Texas and Tennessee reward colleges based on serving students from low-income backgrounds, their enrollment of these students can increase while their enrollment of Black students can stay the same, or, worse, can decrease.[11]

SAME INCOME, DIFFERENT OUTCOME:

## WHY INCOME-BASED POLICIES ARE INADEQUATE FOR ACHIEVING RACIAL EQUITY

THE MAIN REASON INCOME, THE MOST COMMONLY used substitute for race in policies, does not result in achieving racial justice is because Black and White students and families with the same income often have vastly different experiences and circumstances that can affect educational and financial outcomes.

Where students enroll in college explains some of these differences. Black undergraduates are more likely to attend community colleges and for-profit colleges than their White peers (46.2% vs. 35.4%).[12] These colleges have lower completion rates[13] and higher loan default rates[14] than other colleges, which limits students' ability to enjoy the economic benefits of going to college and earning a bachelor's degree. These racial differences can't simply be explained by differences in income across race. **Among peers with similar incomes, Black students also are less likely to attend highly selective colleges than their White peers of similar and sometimes fewer means.**

As shown in **Figure 1**, Black and White students enroll at highly selective four-year colleges at different rates, even when accounting for family socioeconomic status (SES). The difference is minimal at the lower end of the distribution but quite large in the two highest SES groups. Black students from upper middle SES are nearly half as likely to attend highly selective colleges than their White peers from similar family backgrounds (10.8% vs. 18.8%). This enrollment gap is even larger among students from the highest SES group, where White students attend highly selective colleges at a rate that is 25.6 percentage points higher than their Black peers (39.9% vs. 14.3%). Stated differently, White students from high SES backgrounds are nearly 2.8 times more likely to attend selective colleges than Black students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

Figure 1: Percentage of Black and White Traditionally Aged College Students Who Enroll at Highly Selective Colleges by Family Socioeconomic Status (SES)
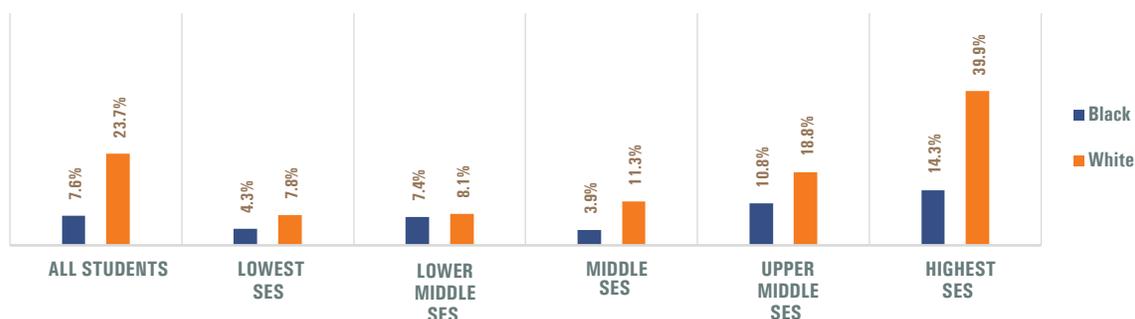
	ALL STUDENTS	LOWEST SES	LOWER MIDDLE SES	MIDDLE SES	UPPER MIDDLE SES	HIGHEST SES
Black	7.6%	4.3%	7.4%	3.9%	10.8%	14.3%
White	23.7%	7.8%	8.1%	11.3%	18.8%	39.9%

Source: Ed Trust analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS:09).
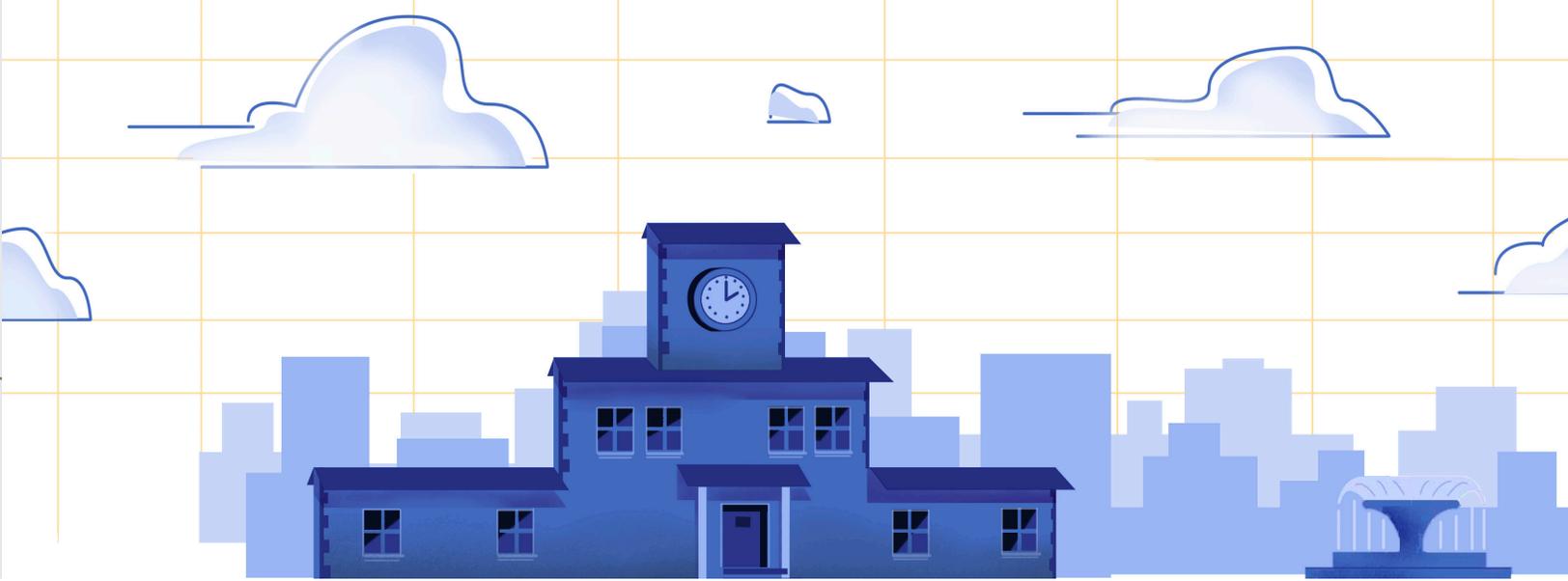
In addition to having better outcomes for the students they serve, the most selective public and private colleges tend to have the most financial resources, which enables these institutions to provide more comprehensive support services to the students they enroll.[15] On the other hand, colleges and universities with fewer financial resources often struggle to provide their students — who are disproportionately people of color — with the supports they need to be successful. Black students attending colleges that are unable to provide the financial aid they need are often forced to take on more debt, stop out of college to work, or try to work additional hours while enrolled.[16]

The chance of completing college also differs for White and Black students, even within the same income group. In all four income groups, White students are at least 11 percentage points more likely to complete a college degree than Black students at four-year institutions **(Table 1)**. The completion gaps are the largest in the low, lower middle, and upper middle income groups, but in the lower middle income group, this discrepancy was the largest. White students were 17 percentage points more likely to graduate than their Black counterparts (67% vs. 50%). Among students from families with the highest incomes, the completion gap was still considerable but a bit smaller (11 percentage points).

TABLE 1 Six-Year Bachelor's Completion Rates and Average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) by Race/Ethnicity for Dependent Full-Time, First-Time Students at Four-Year Institutions

Family Income	Black Completion	White Completion	Completion Gap	Black AGI	White AGI
Low	37%	51%	14 pts	$14,140	$14,034
Lower middle	50%	67%	17 pts	$39,707	$42,119
Upper middle	59%	73%	15 pts	$78,110	$84,559
High	74%	84%	11 pts	$152,131	$165,451
Overall	**49%**	**74%**	**25 pts**	**$49,845.03**	**$101,807.09**

Note: Family Income: Low < $28,000, Low middle ≥ $28,000 & < $61,000, High middle ≥ $61,000 & < $104,823, High ≥ $104,823 (Numbers may not add up due to rounding.)

Source: Ed Trust analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012-13 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:12/17)

In addition to differences in completion, we also see differences between Black and White students' (at four-year institutions) ability to pay back federal student loans. Students who default on their loans face severe consequences, including wage garnishment, withheld tax refunds, denial of federal student aid, and more. And as shown in **Table 2**, these differences in default rates can't be fully explained by income status. In the low-income group, the default rate gap between Black and White students was 25 percentage points (48% vs. 23%). This is similar to the gap at the lower middle income group. But, as family income increases, the gap grows. The default rate gap between Black and White students from upper middle income families is 27 percentage points (36% and 9%), and the gap in the highest income group is even larger. **Black students from the highest income families default at nearly seven times the rate of their White peers (34% vs. 5%), a default rate gap of 29 percentage points.**

What is particularly alarming is that even among those Black students the current system is serving the best, there are still challenges. Black students from families earning over $92,000 (or an average adjusted gross income of $129,000) are more likely to graduate than their less affluent peers. Yet, 1 in 3 of them defaults on their student loans.

TABLE 2 — Twelve-Year Default Rates and Average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) by Race/Ethnicity for Dependent Full-Time, First-Time Students at Four-Year Institutions

Family Income	Black Default Rates	White Default Rates	Black AGI	White AGI
Low	48%	23%	$14,250	$15,761
Lower middle	40%	15%	$41,920	$41,940
Upper middle	36%	9%	$69,228	$70,449
High	34%	5%	$129,291	$132,348
Overall	**42%**	**11%**	**$38,168**	**$71,367**

Note: Family Income: Low < $32,000, Low middle ≥ $32,000 & < $60,000, High middle ≥ $60,000 & < $92,000, High ≥ $92,000

Source: Ed Trust analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09).

HOW DO DIFFERENCES IN

ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND FAMILY WEALTH INFLUENCE STUDENT OUTCOMES?

FACTORS OUTSIDE OF EDUCATION, SUCH AS ONE'S ability to move to a higher income bracket or family wealth, have a considerable influence on student outcomes. The capacity to move from one income bracket to another, also known as economic mobility, has a significant influence on one's ability to pay for a college education or support the P-12 or college education of their children. It also influences one's ability to build wealth and pass it on to future generations. White college-educated families, for example, are three times as likely as Black families to get an inheritance (or one-time gift) of $10,000 or more.[17]

As with other factors, there are differences in mobility between Black and White adults that income alone

cannot explain. As shown in **Figure 2**, achieving upward economic mobility is much more difficult for Black adults who are born into poor families. Only 2.5% of Black children from low-income backgrounds reach the top 20% of the income distribution as adults, compared with 10.6% of White children from low-income backgrounds. Less than 10% of Black children who are born into poor families make it to the top 40% and slightly fewer than 1 in 4 make it to middle class status or higher (top 60%). Upward mobility rates are much higher for White children from low-income backgrounds. They make it to the top 40% of the income distribution nearly 27% of the time and to the middle-class status or higher roughly 46% of the time.

Figure 2: Upward and Downward Economic Mobility for Black and White Children
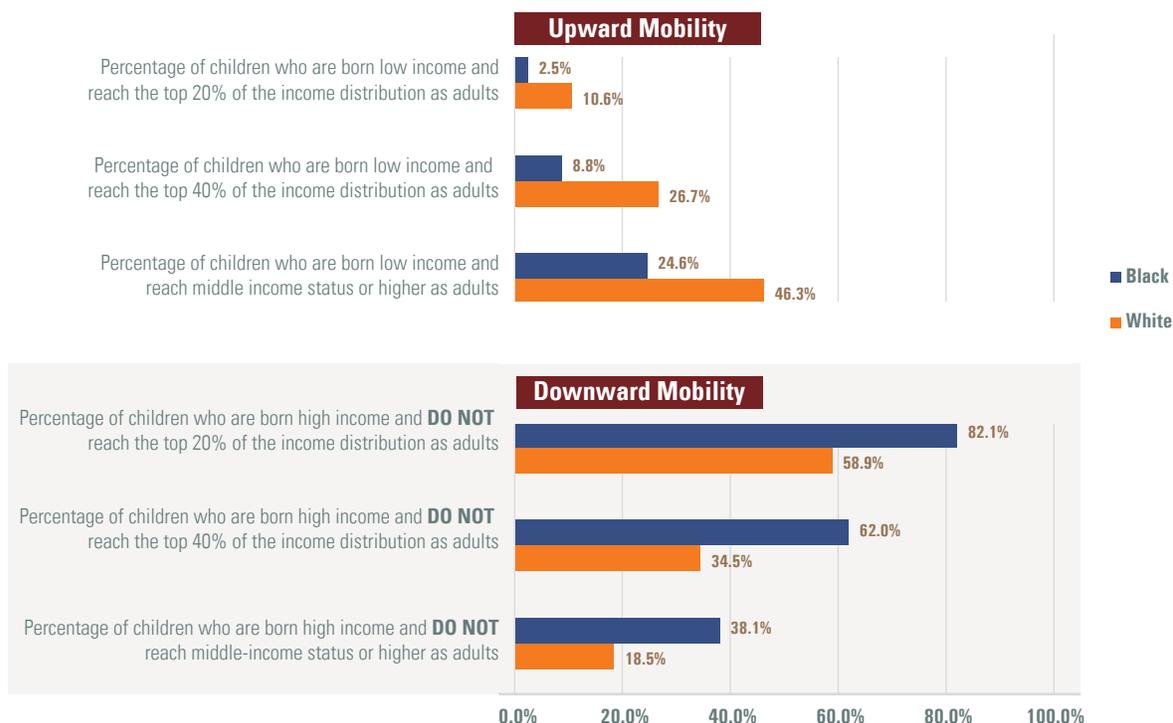
Source: Ed Trust analysis of data from Opportunity Insights, Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective.

The rates of downward economic mobility are also quite informative. Compared with White children, Black children born to families in the top 20th percentile of household income are less likely to maintain that high-income status into adulthood. For example, while only 18.5% of White children from high-income families *do not* reach middle-income status, nearly 4 in 10 Black high-income children are unable to do the same.

Differences in wealth between Black and White families is another factor that influences educational opportunity and outcomes. A recent study found that middle-income White households, for example, have four times the financial assets of Black middle-income households.[18] These discrepancies in wealth between White and Black families are not trivial. For example, accumulated wealth could be the difference in the ability to fully pay back federal student loans versus defaulting or making small payments and accruing

more debt. Another study found that while the typical White male borrower has paid off 44% of his loan balance 12 years after starting college, the typical Black female borrower's balance has increased by an additional 13%.[19]

Wealth disparities exist between Black and White adults at every level of educational attainment. Black adults with a college education have less than a third of the wealth of White adults (**Table 3**). This holds true for Black adults with undergraduate and graduate degrees. In fact, **Black adults with a college degree actually have less wealth than White adults who haven't even completed high school.** While Black adults with a college degree have a net worth of $70,219, White adults without a high school diploma have a net worth of $82,968.

TABLE 3   Median Household Net Worth by Race and Education

Educational Attainment	White	Black
Graduate or Professional Degree	$455,212	$141,115
College Degree	$268,028	$70,219
Some College	$135,415	$18,200
High School	$118,580	$6,660
Less Than High School	$ 82,968	$2,775

Source: William Darity Jr., Darrick Hamilton, Mark Paul, Alan Aja, Anne Price, Antonio Moore, and Caterina Chiopris. "What We Get Wrong About Closing theRacial Wealth Gap." (Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity Insight Center for Community Economic Development, April 2018), https://socialequity.duke.edu/sites/socialequity.duke.edu/files/site-images/FINAL%20COMPLETE%20REPORT_.pdf

The differences in opportunity and outcomes for students from families of similar incomes but different races are the result of inequities within education and the broader society. The racial inequities in the education system don't start with postsecondary education but rather with the P-12 education system, which provides fewer resources to students of color, lacks racial diversity in the teaching profession, and doles out more frequent and harsher disciplinary actions to students of color than their White peers.[20] These same issues persist in higher education, with fewer resources being provided to the colleges where students of color are most likely to attend, a dearth of racial diversity among the professoriate, and the lack of social and cultural supports on campus.[21]

In systems beyond higher education, it's important to note that increases in the prison population through mass incarceration also happened during the period after the Civil Rights Movement and the retreat from race-conscious policies.[22] There are also the challenges with housing segregation, the devaluation of Black homes, and wealth lost from the housing crisis after the 2008 recession that contribute to these problems.[23] These issues have made it harder for Black students and families to afford college.

Not only do Black students have less money to pay for college, issues of racism impact their ability to make sure their degree pays off. Racism in the workforce means employers discriminate against people of color in hiring, in assigning less stable employment prospects to Black workers than to White workers, and in requiring more education of Black workers for the same job as White workers.[24] Black workers often need graduate degrees to have as much success (salary and labor force participation) as White workers with bachelor's degrees.[25] As such, they end up taking on more debt without necessarily the same economic returns as their peers.
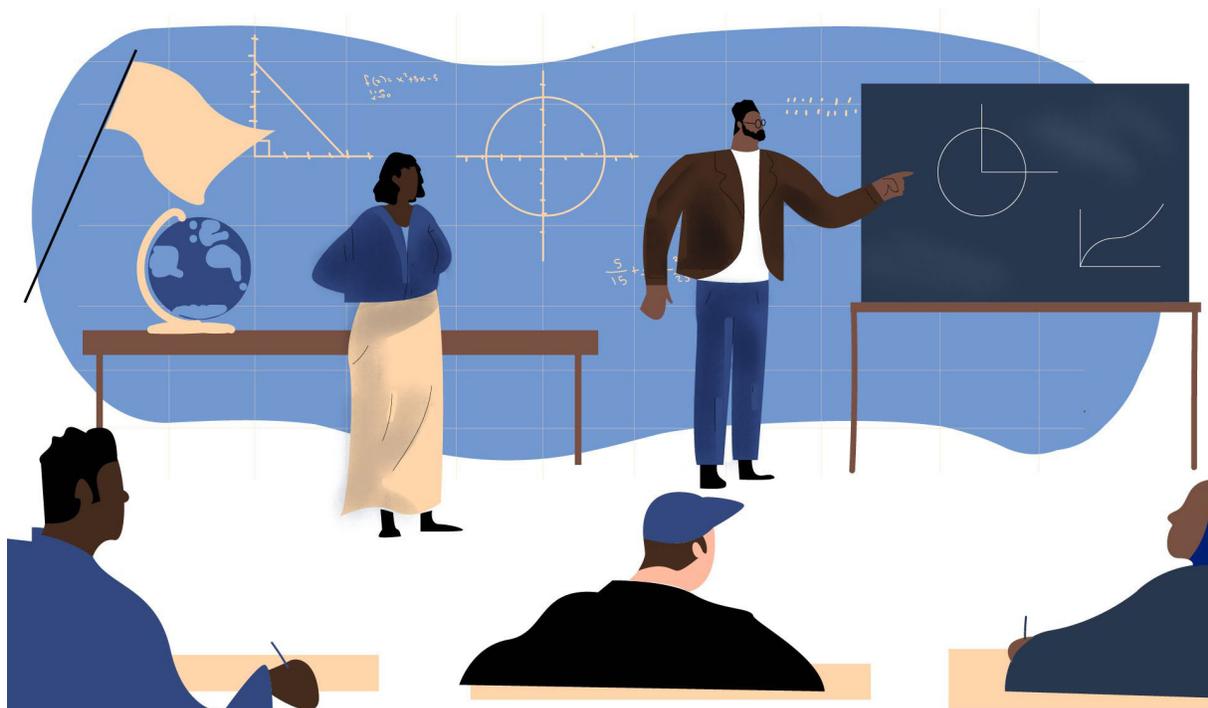
THE PATH FORWARD
TO RACE-CONSCIOUS HIGHER ED POLICIES

THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS WIDESPREAD. There are the economic payoffs for individuals as indicated by higher wages and opportunities in the job market and for society in creating a stronger tax base and greater prosperity for a state or region.[26] But there are also social benefits like the opportunity to foster civic engagement, personal development, and better cooperation among diverse groups. The problem is, these social and economic benefits of higher education are not equitably distributed to people of different racial groups. That has to change.

Here are 10 strategies for advancing race-conscious policies that are designed to lead to racial equity in higher education:

1. **Institutions should adopt a renewed commitment to affirmative action in higher education and use holistic admissions that include race as a factor.**[27] America's most selective colleges produce a disproportionate percentage of the "powerful,"[28] those who have influence in business,[29] politics, and other aspects of society. And the overwhelming majority of these individuals are White. It is critical that Black and Latino students are granted access, and future leaders should have educational experiences that expose them to people who come from different backgrounds. One fallacy is that students of color do not belong in higher education if they need affirmative action to gain access. However, even the Educational Testing Service (ETS) research reports that there is little evidence that affirmative action policies produce an actual academic mismatch and that affirmative action policies *do not* sort students of color into colleges for which they are academically unqualified.[30]

2. **Institutions should stop over-relying on traditional measures of "merit" and other admissions preferences that disadvantage students of color.** This is one of the chief impediments restricting access to higher education for students of color. For example, colleges reward students for high grades in Advanced Placement courses, but students of color are more likely to attend schools that don't offer these courses.[31] What's more, grade inflation is reported to be most problematic at schools with students who are mostly White and wealthy.[32] Institutions should also taper their use of donor, legacy, and sports preferences that have been shown to disproportionately benefit White and wealthy students.[33] These examples, along with the continued overreliance on standardized tests as an admissions gateway standard[34] that disadvantages[35] students of color and exhibits racial bias, make it difficult for some students of color to access well-resourced postsecondary institutions. These inequities make it clear that the differences in who gets adequate access to higher education is driven by anything but "fair," "neutral," or "merit-based" criteria. With this in mind, advocates must call for institutions to abandon the pervasive use of standardized testing in higher education. Instead, a larger emphasis should be placed on high school grades, which are better predictors of college success than standardized tests.[36] Additionally, institutions should put a greater emphasis on nontraditional academic factors, such as work experience while in high school or family responsibilities.

3. **Institutions, states, and the federal government should provide more data that is disaggregated by race and ethnicity in higher education.** As colleges and universities continue to face more pressure to improve student success, there has been an equally strong push for better data that tracks student retention, graduation, debt, and employment outcomes, such as earnings. However, current collection methods do not provide enough timely insights into how critical student outcomes vary by race and ethnicity. For example, gaps in our collection of national-level data often fail to provide up-to-date information on how completion rates of low-income students differ by race and ethnicity.[37] Worse yet, the newest national-level data that tracks comprehensive completion rates for various cohorts of students (i.e., the outcomes measures) is only disaggregated by income and not race or ethnicity. A federal student-level data network, like one proposed in the College Transparency Act of 2019, would go a long way to providing some of these key data points, and advocates should support it. Advocates should also press states — many of which have spent the past decade building statewide longitudinal data systems that connect P-12, higher education, and workforce data — to publish key student outcomes by race and ethnicity via public dashboards and other media. But even this isn't enough. Advocates must also pressure federal policymakers to collect better and more timely national data on college cost, debt, post-collegiate earnings, loan repayment, and loan default by race and ethnicity. Currently, these key data points are not reported annually in the U.S. Department of Education's premier consumer information tool, the College Scorecard, and are unavailable elsewhere.

4. **Remove state bans on affirmative action**.[38] Despite the rhetoric, the data shows that there is still significant underrepresentation of students of color on college campuses. Race-based affirmative action is the best means to achieve more racial diversity on campus. Instead of arguing whether affirmative action is still necessary, we need to be having conversations about how race can be used more heavily in admissions decisions, because everybody benefits from diversity on campus.[39] Further, statewide bans can signal to college leaders that their efforts to target support and improve the success of students of color are prohibited. Advocates should aggressively seek to overturn the bans on affirmative action in the following eight states: California, Washington, Michigan, Nebraska, Arizona, Oklahoma, Florida, and New Hampshire.

5. **Design statewide race-conscious higher education attainment goals**.[40] Advocates should push state leaders to identify benchmarks and timelines for improving college degree attainment for various racial and ethnic groups in their states. Overall state goals are not enough. This is possible even in states with bans on affirmative action.[41] States like Oklahoma and Washington have statewide bans on affirmative action, but have also developed attainment goals that explicitly discuss race, include data on the size of racial gaps, set a racial equity goal, support the racial equity goal with data analysis, and include strategies for addressing racial equity.

6. **States should invest resources in colleges that provide high-quality opportunity for students of color, as opposed to race-neutral higher education funding formulas.**[42] Even after the *Adams vs. United States* case, states continue to underfund colleges that students of color are more likely to attend, like HBCUs and community colleges, compared with state flagships where White students are overrepresented.[43] States spend $1,000 less on Black and Latino students than they do on White students, amounting to a $5 billion gap annually.[44]

7. **Federal government should invest more in HBCUs, tribal colleges, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and make sure enrollment-driven MSIs are truly serving students of color**.[45] Race-conscious policy is about more than using affirmative action in selective admissions. It's about strategic investments in the colleges that are currently committed to serving students of color. Defining excellence and prestige in higher education has to include how well institutions are closing racial equity gaps and providing resources and opportunities to students of color. Advocates should demand that the federal government provide the necessary resources and conditions to support success for students of color at the colleges already committed to educating them.

8. **Federal government should require states to work toward closing racial equity gaps in spending both in higher education and K-12 in order to participate in state/federal partnerships.**[46] When state policymakers provide more resources to White students than to Black students over time, it creates a systemic gap in funding that needs to be eliminated — just like the gap in college completion that exists between Black students and White students. Therefore, any new resources provided to states in the form of a state/federal partnership should be contingent on states closing these funding gaps. Advocates should continue to amplify racial inequities in higher education funding, especially the impact on students' educational opportunities, and demand that states improve as a requirement for new federal investments.

9. **Design loan forgiveness and other student debt policy solutions to benefit students of color and help close racial wealth gaps**.[47] Discussions about the best way to provide borrowers relief from the $1.4 trillion in student loan debt looming over their heads must include a focus on the borrowers who struggle the most. This means debt forgiveness and other debt management policies can't simply focus on income to appropriately target debt relief. Race and other factors that are more closely connected must be taken into account. For example, policymakers could consider a debt forgiveness policy that identifies eligible students under a particular income threshold, but allow a higher income threshold for Black students who can demonstrate limited wealth. Research has shown that using race-neutral strategies alone to address college affordability will not eliminate racial inequality. For example, researchers at The Center for American Progress used an economic stimulator to estimate the impact of different race-neutral strategies on the racial wealth gap.[48] They found that after 40 years, if free college policies were adopted, Black families would still only have about one-fifth of the wealth of White families. They also conclude that reparations that directly target African Americans are likely the only way to eliminate the racial wealth gap. This is another example that — within and outside of higher education — policy strategies that aim to close racial gaps must include a specific focus on race.

10. **Require accreditors to examine a college's campus racial climate**.[49] Poor racial climates can negatively influence students' academic and social engagement, sense of belonging, and chances of completing a degree. One aspect of a healthy racial climate is the appropriate representation of students, staff, and faculty of color. Ed Trust's work has highlighted in great detail the underrepresentation of Black and Latino students in higher education,[50] but the lack of diversity in the professoriate is equally — if not more — egregious. For every one White faculty member, there are 16 White students; for every Black faculty member, there are 49 Black students; and for every Latino faculty member, there are 89 Latino students. What's more, nearly 90% of tenured, full professors are White.[51] Other factors that accreditors should examine include, but are not limited to the following: how students of color feel about the campus racial climate, if diverse perspectives and materials are included in the curricula, the prevalence and response to racist incidents, and whether all students have the social, cultural, academic, and financial support they need to be successful.

CONCLUSION

Achieving racial justice in higher education is not just about numerical outcomes for people of color. It's about how well college education prepares students to advance racial justice in all facets of their lives after college. That starts with making sure students have a strong historical and contemporary understanding of race in this country. College graduates must be taught about systemic racism and how the work they do after college can disrupt these systems. Doing this requires a commitment from higher education leaders to infuse a racial equity agenda into their curricula, so that students can learn how to be, as author Ibram X. Kendi argues, "antiracist."[52] Being antiracist means supporting ideas and policies that lead to and promote practices that yield racial equity, not just declaring that one doesn't have racist views.

A true antiracist agenda must focus on aspects of a postsecondary education outside of just access and completion. Are all students required to take courses on the history of race? Does the faculty and staff reflect our diverse nation? Is the campus environment safe, welcoming, and affirming for students of color? Are data and information on race and equity issues available to the public? These are the type of questions racial justice advocates should adopt as key organizational priorities, as they work to advance racial equity on college and university campuses and ultimately help prepare students to disrupt inequality once they graduate.

Students leave college and go on to lead the very systems in our country that create, sustain, and exacerbate racial inequity: criminal justice, business, health care, and housing, among others. If their postsecondary experience does not better equip them to tackle issues of race within those systems, then the higher education community has missed an incredible opportunity to advance racial justice. It's an opportunity to ensure that future leaders and influencers, doctors, lenders, judges, and the like, are more likely to be people of color and more likely to make decisions based less on fear and stereotypes about people of color. It's hard to underestimate the impact this would have for generations to come. Our hope is that beginning with race-conscious higher education policies and addressing racial inequity explicitly will create the momentum and change needed to make this our reality.

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