Culture in Higher Education: Understanding the Dimensions of Educational Inequality

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Abstract

By connecting historical context and a statistical review of the present-day consequences of White hegemony within higher education, I argue that the exclusion of students of color in higher education by means of cultural isolation is a verifiable issue today. The distinctive habits, customs, and norms of White, Anglo-Saxon, protestant (WASP) cultural practices function as a system of gatekeeping, limiting access to higher education for communities of color that cannot conform to these cultural practices. While the barriers that disproportionately block students of color from accessing higher education were initially a formal institution of segregation—which was since outlawed—universities still contain vestiges of this system, continuing to extend cultural barriers that inhibit minority students seeking access to higher education. Statistical analysis of the discrepancies in success rates of students of color and White students demonstrates the material outcomes of unequal access within higher education. While some scholars point strictly to economic factors or different individual aspirations or values to explain these discrepancies, these theories fail to address the root causes of the inequalities that minority students face—namely, that historically segregated systems remain ineffective at fostering diverse and representative student bodies. By actively recognizing these systems as fundamentally unjust by design, the conversation regarding how to fix or approach racial inequality in higher education can be effectively begun.

1. Introduction

While students of color in the United States are no longer legally limited in opportunity, vestiges of cultural segregation still pervade American education. Higher education in the United States, as a system, remains bound to the behaviors, beliefs, and norms that the White, Anglo-Saxon, protestant (WASP) culture encompasses. In this essay, I conceptualize American colleges as part of a power structure that restricts minority students looking to access and succeed in higher education. First, I explore the historical context behind how culture has functioned to restrict minority students; I then discuss modern-day cultural developments. Next, I conduct a statistical review to show the disparity between WASP and minority students in higher education. Finally, I debunk the scholarly counterargument to my own that most or all educational disparities can be explained by economic inequality. I conclude with the implications of my research and potential next steps forward for educational inequality discourse.

2. Historical Context

WASP culture, the dominant racial culture in America, maintains institutional control over higher education today. Minority cultures have, as a byproduct of exclusion, come to view higher

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education as something foreign and hostile. There exists a power imbalance between WASP and minority students within higher education, and the lack of influence that minority cultures exert within higher education has created an environment wherein minority students do not have the same resources or opportunities to access and succeed within universities. Thus, through their systemic exclusion of minorities from higher education, universities further perpetuate the economic inequality that minority communities in the face in the United States.

In analyzing how pervasive cultural exclusion limits equal educational opportunity, an understanding of the historical racial dynamics in the United States is essential. The dynamic between the various cultures of minority communities today and the American educational system must be understood through the context of the racism and prejudice that these communities have faced throughout history. Historically, I argue, barriers to educational opportunity for minorities in the United States were built upon racist and nativist foundations. Within the United States, race has consistently existed not as a biological reality, but as a tool with which those with social power can exclude those they deem as the "other." For instance, Irish immigrants who would now be socially considered "White" faced substantial xenophobia for much of the 19th century (Williams, 1996). Eastern European immigrants faced violent hostility when arriving in the United States in the early 1900s. Concepts of race and "Whiteness" within America are not a fixed reality, but social descriptors that reflect the dominant cultural norms of the era. For much of the United States' existence as a nation, these norms were that people of color—and people of any culture that was not aligned with WASP culture—did not deserve equal opportunity. Thus, certain people were deemed not "White" enough to be allowed to access education. WASP culture emphasized a strong Christian affiliation, accruing wealth, succeeding in academia, exclusivity, and

superiority. Soft spokenness, mild manners, and a reverence for the norm were the foundational social attributes. Educational systems within America upheld these social expectations, tacitly ensuring that its "best and brightest" would conform to the valuations of the governing WASP culture (Kaufmann, 2004). Non-White groups that have historically been able to conform to these expectations have been gradually accepted into certain folds of "White" culture (Zhang, 2016). Those that did not were legally and socially restricted from accessing higher education.

Black communities in particular were targeted by the exclusionary policies of WASP society. Up until 1954, Black students were fully segregated from White students and placed into less desirable school districts, given less funding, and deprived of resources to access higher education (Dawkins and Braddock, 1994). As a result, most Black communities remained almost entirely unable to gain formal education and thus remained amongst the poorest economic groups in America. Until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) remained one of the only ways for Black students to reach higher education. These universities served as a lifeline for economic opportunity, but while they were extremely valuable to the communities they served, they remained woefully underfunded, understaffed, and limited in the resources they could provide in relation to more established, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Even after PWIs were legally desegregated, Black students struggled to be accepted into PWIs, as Black communities lacked a strong educational foundation by means of well-funded schools. To this day, "[t]he majority of Black and Hispanic youth attend high-poverty schools while the majority of White youth attend low-poverty schools" (Majors, 2019).

Within underfunded districts, college remained an unattainable goal due to an overall lack of opportunity. While the direct legal discrimination against racial minoritieshas since been reduced, cultural discrimination against

these groups pervades. The WASP culture that has maintained dominance within institutions of higher education still poses a barrier to minority success in the United States by perpetuating existing economic and educational disparities within minority communities. Thus, the lack of a platform for minority cultures in higher education has effectively limited minority communities' use of higher education as a tool for economic mobility.

3. Cultural Developments

Throughout the historical development of legal—and later, cultural—segregation within education, a distinct culture has maintained power. This culture emphasizes WASP ideals and minimizes the ability of other cultures to have influence within universities. There exist two key reasons why WASP culture maintains dominance in university.

The first is that a disproportionately large percentage of the faculty employed by most universities is White. A 2020 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics concluded that 74 percent of all American college faculty was White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Along with a predominantly White faculty comes, naturally, a predominantly White culture. While the majority of White students can take advantage of the fact that university culture caters to their success, students of color tend to feel alienated and disconnected from faculty (ASHE, 2007). Amongst Black students, there is a belief that even Black faculty members are uninterested in helping them succeed (ASHE, 2007).

The second reason that WASP culture has maintained hegemony can be attributed to university demographics: a disproportionately low percentage of minority students attend universities, especially at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples, 2022). PWIs are typically the most "elite," selective universities, exercising historical

advantages in financial support, scholarships, research opportunities, and prestige. PWIs, while no longer capable of legal discrimination, perpetuate White cultural hegemony in university culture through selective admissions. The main way that college admissions restrict minorities is through their use of "college readiness" as a metric for admission. "College readiness" applies the same basic set of standards to all students and "does not address racial gaps or the college readiness of any specific racial groups" (Majors, 2019). Instead of accounting for the racial inequality of prior educational experiences amongst students, it applies the same blanket requirements to all of them; by default, White students, because of their (on average) socioeconomic and educational advantages, will be more capable of meeting them. Because minority students often do not have access to the resources or support systems that White students tend to have—both socially and economically—they are not admitted into these schools as frequently. This disparity is evinced by the fact that, while Latinos comprise 19 percent of the national population in the United States, they constitute only 9 percent of the student body in the 28 most elite universities in the country (Rivas-Drake and Mooney, 2008).

By enrolling a disproportionate number of White students, PWIs perpetuate White cultural hegemony in higher education. Even when students of color are accepted by these universities, they are more prone to struggling academically and socially than White students. Many minority students may feel as though they are choosing between a more prestigious PWI or a school that will be more accommodating of their culture or race. This dichotomy may be, on a more abstract level, interpreted as a minority student's choice between preserving their own culture and assimilating to WASP culture. A study by the Association for the Study for Higher Education concluded that first-generation immigrant students, being of a different national origin, struggle to navigate the cultural

differences between American university environments and those they had grown up with (ASHE, 2007). When students chose to prioritize their cultural identities through, for example, an HBCU, students tended to be more successful because the institutions were not as susceptible to White cultural influence and were instead able to prioritize Black students' needs (Kugelmass and Ready, 2007). Nonetheless, graduates of these minority-focused universities lack the respect and prestige that attending a prominent PWI would entail. Essentially, many students of color feel pressured to decide between a school that offers more cultural security and inclusivity, or one that promises greater social standing and economic opportunity upon graduation.

4. Disparities Today

The perpetuation of WASP culture in higher education and the simultaneous exclusion of minority ones has led to disastrous impacts on minority communities. While the majority of White students maintain the ability to access higher education as a means to social mobility, minority communities have fallen further behind (Rothwell, 2015). Though WASP students are able to more smoothly assimilate into the demands and culture of higher education, accessing tools and systems that benefit their future, minority students often lack the resources to succeed. One of the most effective ways that WASP culture limits minority opportunity and success in universities is by outcompeting non-White candidates through the metric of "college worthiness." College worthiness is defined as "the sum of three requisite components, college awareness (parent/guardian and student knowledge of the procedural and planning aspects of college attendance), college eligibility (completing the coursework necessary for college admission), and college preparation (students' ability to put their college awareness skills into action)" (Convertino and Graboski-Bauer, 2017). College awareness, the first aspect of college

readiness, is something that minority students lack at a much higher rate than White students; this can be attributed to a historical lack of opportunity for minorities to reach and graduate from universities. Psychological evidence shows that students are more likely to reach the university level when they consistently report having had college-planning conversations with their parents as children (Jessard and Juvonen, 2022). I theorize that such conversations are more likely to take place in White households because the parents are far more likely, and will continue to be far more likely, to have gone to and *graduated* from university. The rate of White students reaching the university level is 42 percent, with Black students at 38 percent and Hispanic students at 39 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019); furthermore, White students have a 5-year graduation rate of 62.2 percent, Hispanic students of 41.5 percent, and Black students of 40.5 percent (Hansen, 2022). Thus, even those Hispanic and Black students that do reach university have a far lower chance of graduating. These disparities carry down to the next generation, resulting in lower chances for minority families to have the conversations about education that are so critical to allowing their children to reach and succeed in universities.

A lack of college eligibility, the second aspect of college readiness, can be traced to a lack of support systems within school districts that have predominantly minority students. Minority communities tend to have less educational opportunities and support structures than White communities, lacking rigorous frameworks such as gifted programs (Peters and Carter, 2022). This absence of structure leads to students of color having a much more difficult time finding opportunities to succeed in school.

A lack of college preparation—defined as possessing an understanding of the strategies that are required to succeed in universities—can be explained by the lack of both college awareness and eligibility. Many students of color are never

even given the chance to reach a college preparation stage because they lack the tools and support to arrive at that part of the process.

5. Economic Perspective

When analyzing the argument that universities do not foster a culture that allows for the success of minority students, a counterargument worth addressing is the idea that financial restrictions are the sole reason that many students do not see attending university as achievable. To reach the economic conclusion, one would begin with the question *Why do students in predominantly minority communities not see college as a possibility?* From an economic perspective, a logical next step would be to state that minority communities tend to be lower-income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), and as such, a variety of other outcomes would become clear. In lower-income neighborhoods, the quality of education tends to be worse (Quillian, 2017), leading to lower levels of achievement for students. This may directly cause a reduction in the number of students from these schools pursuing higher education, in turn making the next generation of students doubtful of the possibility of reaching university due to lack of parental experience. Outside of school, low-income households cannot provide the same opportunities that higher-income communities can because they cannot afford it. Parents have less disposable income with which to send their children to tutoring programs or other educational enrichment opportunities, leading to less academic achievement. Low-income communities have higher crime rates, with poor neighborhoods having a violent victimization rate of over double that of high income neighborhoods (Harrell et al., 2014), leading, I argue, to a lack of stability for students and less ability to focus. The financial factors that contribute to a lack of educational success in low-income communities are endless.

The general argument regarding economic limitations as the sole factor inhibiting higher education concludes that minority students do not lack the ability to reach university because they are racial and cultural minorities, but solely because they are low-income. One of the most popular ideas supporting this argument is that of the model minority. For instance, Asian success in higher education is used as an example that minorities who work hard, fulfill the American Dream, and succeed financially can help their children gain academic success to the same level that the rest of the country enjoys. Statistically, people of Asian descent do make more money than other minorities, and Asian students do generally succeed more academically than other minority students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Given these statistics, Asian students are used as a reference group for other minority students to show that minorities who work hard and focus on providing for their families have the exact same opportunities that White people have. By following the example of the Asian community, other minority communities would be able to attain success in higher education. Thus, the idea of the model minority develops the notion that minority students do not lack success because they are minorities, but because they come from lower-income families. However, this argument is problematic because it oversimplifies a multidimensional issue into the single dimension of economics, claiming that the issue of a lack of educational success for students of color can be solved by minority communities making more money.

To address the problem with the economic argument, the idea of Asians as a model minority must be deconstructed. While, statistically, Asians do tend to attain greater academic success than other minority groups, the truth is far more complicated. When adjusting for socioeconomic status, Asians students face the same barriers that other minorities do (Wong et al., 1998). While money solves some of the issues, it cannot address anywhere near all of them. While Asian students do reach university more often than

other minority students, they struggle with the same cultural barriers that other minority students do (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Tan, 2023). The reason that Asian students reach the university level at a higher rate than other minority groups tends to be attributed to economic factors *and* preexisting cultural and family expectations (Wong et al., 1998). Other minority communities do not hold the advantage of the pre-existing cultural value of university, and, as such, achieve less highly in education. The fact remains that minority students struggle far more to assimilate to the culture at university *because* the culture of university maintains WASP values. The overarching issue is far larger than an economic one, and while understanding the economic aspect is pertinent, it is important to not overvalue it.

The economic argument neglects the nuance of the situation and effectively removes the barriers caused by race, religion, and culture from the debate. It reduces a vast, complicated, and difficult conversation to one that can be solved with financial help alone. While economic limitations are certainly a major part of why minority students see college as an option less often, they remain only one aspect of a problem that is multifaceted and deeply ingrained into American society. To reduce the issue to one of a purely economic nature is reductive and naive. The reality of the situation is that there exist far more than financial limitations to student success. This is demonstrated through consistent research showing that even in higher-income, well-educated minority communities, there remains a discrepancy in minority student success in universities (Roderick, 2009). Research shows that parents' education level is a major factor in determining whether children would reach university in all races except for Latino (ASHE, 2007). This finding fundamentally opposes the belief that, with more educated and higher-income minority communities, university enrollment and success rates would increase.

The argument that economic equality alone would solve the issue of inequality in higher education is only further broken by the fact that Black university students regularly interpret the environments of their universities as hostile. While White students fit into the culture of higher education, minority students tend to feel at odds with the culture at universities (ASHE, 2007). This hostility is prevalent within every facet of the system. Another example is the ways in which universities' use of "college readiness" as an admissions tool results in the exclusion of minorities from prestigious institutions (Majors, 2019). These are problems that must be understood for what they are: as systems that, while perhaps not intending to do so, fundamentally segregate non-White cultures from higher education.

6. Conclusion

Due directly to the White cultural hegemony that is maintained within higher education in the United States, minority students continue to suffer from inequality of access and success within university settings. The systemic racism and segregation that the United States was built upon continue to hurt minority success in the field of higher education. Only by first recognizing these historical, culturally exclusive practices can we begin to address the disparity between the success rates of students of color and White students. While this article is far from providing a direct solution to this complex issue, it is an attempt at beginning to change the discourse surrounding minority success in higher education. By addressing the problem as what it really is—a cultural one—and not simply as an issue that can be fixed economically, we can begin to work towards a permanent solution.

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