Structural Inequalities and Racial Barriers to Education Attainment in U.S. Higher Education: Challenges and Policy Interventions

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ABSTRACT

Structural inequalities and racial barriers significantly impact educational attainment in U.S. higher education, particularly for minority students like Black and Hispanic populations, despite legal progress from cases such as Brown v. Board of Education. Ongoing disparities based on socioeconomic status, racial biases, and institutional policies limit access to and success in higher education. This paper examines how racial identity, and socioeconomic factors intersect to influence educational outcomes among different racial groups, using historical context, theories like Conflict Theory and Critical Race Theory, and evidence from various colleges. The analysis finds that structural inequalities exist in college admissions, where standardized testing and legacy preferences favor White, wealthy applicants, as well as in pre-college education influenced by residential segregation and unequal school funding. The paper further finds that Minority-serving institutions, while important, cannot fully address these barriers alone. Acknowledging persistent inequities and implementing comprehensive reforms beyond financial aid are crucial to addressing racial gaps in higher education. Policy recommendations to reduce disparities include adopting race-conscious and need-based admissions, revising assessment criteria to lessen reliance on standardized tests, and creating fair school funding models for low-income and minority students. Other suggestions involve enhancing anti-racist education and teacher training, diversifying educators, supporting Minority Serving Institutions, and establishing partnerships for free community college access. These strategies aim to break down racial barriers, advance equity, and improve socioeconomic mobility for marginalized students in the U.S. higher education system.

INTRODUCTION

The United States has an increasingly diverse population that expects to grow exponentially in coming years. However, the increasing growth of minority groups throughout the United States has not led to an increase in equal status and treatment of these individuals. One of the areas with significant disparities in treatment and opportunities for minorities is the nation's education system. While the gap in higher education completion rate has narrowed over time, the percentage of Black and Hispanic graduates is still significantly less than that of their White counterparts. Throughout the nation, minority students experience disparities in their educational experience that directly impact their long-term learning and success. The consequences of educational disparities among these minorities include continued poverty, decreased college enrollment and performance, long-term professional disparities, etc. Espenshade, T. J., & Radford, A. W. (2009)

Moreover, preparation for college education begins long before the student can enroll. The disparities in enrollment, achievement, attainment, and completion rate indicate that students of color do not have the same opportunities to succeed at each level along the way as compared to their counterpart white students. Despite the promise of education as an equalizer, several barriers continue to hinder its role in giving equal access to minority groups to excel in higher education. Economic, cultural, geographical, ethnic, racial, structural, institutional barriers, etc. are among the most noticeable affecting higher educational attainment in the United States among diverse groups, Ballard Brief. (2024).

Recent Supreme Court decisions have further complicated the struggle for equity in higher education. In 2023, the Court ruled against race-conscious admissions policies in higher education, arguing that such practices

violated the Equal Protection Clause. This decision is expected to significantly reduce enrollment of underrepresented students in selective colleges and universities, further widening the educational gap. Institutions may be forced to adopt race-neutral alternatives, which research shows are often less effective in promoting diversity. These political and legal developments underscore the urgency of examining structural barriers from both historical and current perspectives.

Building on the points mentioned above, the paper examines the research question: How does racial identity and socioeconomic status influence education attainment among different racial groups in the US? By examining both historical background and current body of evidence, the paper analyses the intersections of race and class in shipping higher education outcomes and recommends key policy interventions aimed at closing these gaps.

Brief historical background

The Brown v. Board of Education, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case declaring racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional is great focus that rings memory how serious racial barriers have long been an issue in the US education system. In the immediate years after the Brown ruling, the effort to integrate schools faced many difficult challenges and progress was limited. But the passage of the l964 Civil Rights Act as well as a series of Supreme Court decisions in the l960s and early 1970s produced momentum towards increased desegregation for black students that lasted until the late l980s, as districts across much of the United States worked to achieve the promise of Brown--integrated schools for all children (Patterson, 2001).

Additionally, the foundation of structural inequalities in U.S. education can be traced back to the era of slavery and the subsequent suppression of equal civil rights for minority races, with educational systems designed to maintain existing wealth and social standing for Whites, while marginalizing minorities. According to Duncheon, J.C., et al.1964, The U.S. Supreme Court passed Title VI of the Civ-il Rights Act, which ruled that schools receiv-ing fed-er-al fund-ing could not dis-crim-i-nate against stu-dents accord-ing to their race.

Based on analyses from The Century Foundation (2022), although over 70 years have passed since the U.S. Supreme Court pro-hib-it-ed seg-re-ga-tion, many of America's pub-lic schools are still racial-ly and eth-ni-cal-ly isolate, and this can be seen at higher education levels as well. Historically, the U.S. higher education landscape includes several types of minority-serving institutions (MSIs), each designated based on their mission, student demographics, and/or historical context to support specific racial or ethnic groups, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), etc. They were founded or designated in direct response to entrenched racial inequality and systemic disparities in educational attainment among historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, Wang, M. T., & Nguyen, H. T. (2015).

From these establishments, the reality of racial barriers can be noticed with the establishment of these minority serving higher education institutions. While policymakers have tried to solve the problem of racial barriers and structural inequality at the college level, this has only led education to reproduce and even exacerbate racial inequality and segregation in higher education to satisfy these minority groups and students of color.

Conceptual clarifications

From the above historical perspectives, it is clearly indicated that structural inequalities in U.S. higher education refer to a deeply rooted and systemic disparities in resources, opportunities, and outcomes, often resulting from laws, policies, and institutional practices that favor certain groups over others. These inequalities are reflected in differences in school funding, access to quality education, support services, and representation within colleges and universities. In addition to the wider societal benefits of postsecondary education, participation in higher education improves individual social capital and mobility. Today, more than ever, college graduates earn more over a lifetime, tend to be more civically engaged, and can contribute to their family's intergenerational wealth in ways that are less likely without a college education. One factor for racial/ethnic attainment gaps is between-group differences in socioeconomic status (SES), particularly exposure to poverty.

Moreover, other factors contributing to racial and ethnic attainment gaps include bias, cultural insensitivity, stereotypes, and individual and systemic racism, Hu, and Morgan (2024). Access to quality higher education is key to socioeconomic mobility. The other side of the coin is equally true: when such access is limited by financial constraints, information barriers, and lack of academic preparedness, socioeconomic mobility is also limited. While more students are going to college than ever before, only about half of those who begin college obtain a degree within six years. College dropout rates are particularly high among Black, Latinx, and first-generation students (Kirp 2019).

The issue of racial barriers and structural inequality cannot only be bridged by financial aid alone as some playmakers in various universities have focused on it because there are other barriers that have impact on education attainment rates in United States higher education thus making financial aid alone   insufficient as a policy response. A refocusing on the pre-college years, tracing the unequal outcomes of college back to earlier fault lines of race and class, is needed. Many of the barriers impeding improvements in college graduation rates are rooted in the ways that parental wealth purchases access to high-quality schools during the K–12 years, influencing whether students successfully graduate from high school prepared for college-level coursework. Unfortunately, these patterns are not just economic; they are a byproduct of the resegregation of K–12 public schools over the past 25 years (Johnson 2019; Frankenberg et al. 2019).

Main models/theories of the concept

The conflict Theory

One of the most relevant theoretical frameworks for understanding racial and structural inequalities in higher education is The conflict Theory: According to Sadovnik (2016, pp. 6–19), Conflict Theory is rooted in the works of Karl Marx, and sees society as a battleground of competing interests, primarily divided along class lines. It suggests that social structures, including education, are designed to benefit the powerful while keeping the less powerful in a subordinate position. According to this theory, education is not about promoting equal opportunity but about perpetuating inequality by training individuals to accept their place in a system that favors the wealthy and powerful. The theory emphasizes the role of institutions, like schools, in maintaining social stratification. One of the core ideas of Conflict Theory is that the dominant class controls societal institutions to ensure its continued dominance. In the case of education, this means that schools and universities often reflect the values and interests of the ruling class, those with the economic and political power to influence policy and culture. As such, education becomes a means of reproducing the existing social order, rather than challenging it. The idea here is that students from higher social classes are more likely to succeed in the education system, while those from lower classes are more likely to struggle and fail. This is not due to any inherent lack of ability but because the educational system is structured in ways that favor the children of the wealthy.

Critical Theory:

Critical Theory is a philosophical and sociological approach to understanding power and inequality in society. The theory aims to identify, challenge, and eventually change oppressive power structures in society. A core principle is that social hierarchies are not natural but created and maintained through oppression and domination. Critical theory's core focus of inquiry is power and how it produces social inequality. It believes that power is unfairly distributed and is wielded by the powerful to maintain their power while oppressing the marginalized. It aims to call into question dominant cultural narratives by promoting marginalized voices and highlighting their oppression.It believes that power structures need to be upended for justice and equality to be achieved. Critical theory is primarily associated with the Marxist-oriented Frankfurt School of Social Theory and Philosophy, Gottesman (2016).

Critical Race Theory (CRT): Critical Race Theory (CRT) in sociology of education serves as a framework to understand, expose, and challenge the deep-seated structural inequalities and racial barriers that impact educational attainment, particularly in U.S.higher education. CRT posits that these barriers are not isolated incidents, but systemic features embedded in laws, institutional policies, and cultural practices. The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional

civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious, (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), Ladson-Billings (1998).

Critical Theory provides the philosophical and methodological foundation for analyzing power and domination broadly across society, while Critical Race Theory narrows this focus to issues of race, racism, and racial justice, using and adapting tools from Critical Theory to challenge institutionalized racism, particularly in the U.S. context. Both aim for social change, but CRT is specifically concerned with exposing and overcoming racism and its consequences, (Celikates & Flynn, 2023), (Bronner, 2011).

Main body of evidence of the topic

The body of evidence focuses on Selective colleges which comprise of the 530 most selective colleges in the United States and the median SAT scores of students admitted to these colleges range between 1150 and 1600. About 170 of these institutions are public and the Open-access colleges which comprise 3,100 two- and four-year colleges that admit students who demonstrate evidence of high school graduation or its equivalent. About 1,100 of these institutions are public, according to Carnevale et al. (2018). According to research, the fact is that Selective public colleges do not overtly discriminate by race, but college admissions officials have created policies that, in effect, favor White applicants by creating standards that are exclusionary. Primarily, admissions standards over-rely on scores on standardized admissions tests. However, the tests by themselves do little to predict merit or college success. What they reflect is the quality of schooling and the level of parental education of the test taker, factors that overwhelmingly favor Whites. Therefore, these statistics are used in this paper to provide evidence on how structural inequalities and racial barriers to educational attainment in the US higher education are noticeable.

Public higher education is increasingly racially and financially stratified

Test scores are used as a rationale for sorting through applicants, but they are used more as a barrier to keep some students out. The fact is that there are more than enough Black and Latino students who score above average on standardized tests to fill the seats that would be required to secure equal representation by race and ethnicity at selective public colleges and universities. These students would succeed: when given a chance to attend, Black and Latino students graduate from selective colleges at the same rate (81%) as White students (86%) (Figure) below.

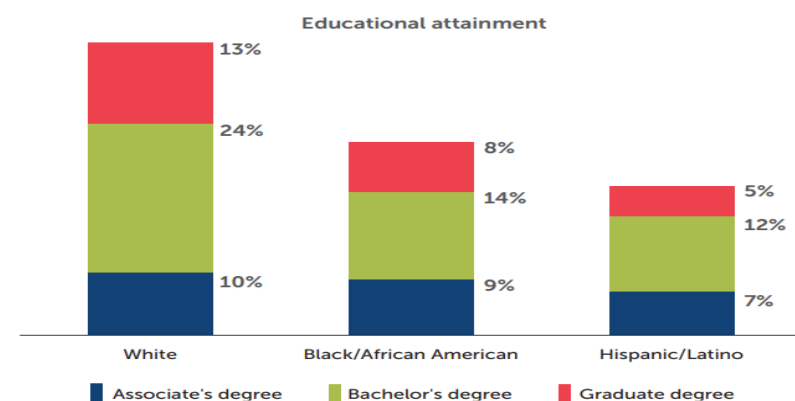**Figure 1. Blacks and Latinos graduate at comparable rates to Whites at selective colleges.**
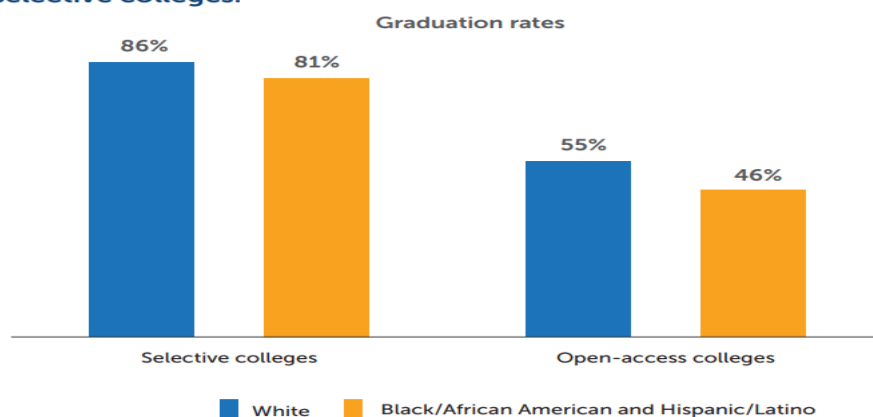
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, 2012.*

While enrollment disparities continue as indicated above, the divide between the selective public colleges and open-access public colleges is getting wider due to spending disparities and growing inequality. According to Carnevale et al. (2018**),** Whites are not only getting more seats in selective public colleges, but they are also getting a more expensive education at taxpayer-funded institutions. Selective public colleges now spend, on average, almost three times as much per full-time equivalent student on instructional and academic support as

open-access public colleges. Consequently, selective colleges have more full-time faculty members and better student outcomes.

Growing inequality due to racial barriers. The gap in instructional and academic support spending grew by 20 percent between 2005 and 2015, even as states were cutting funding to selective public colleges. Selective colleges have increased their tuition to make up for the lost state appropriations. Wealthy families, most of them White, pay the higher tuitions so their children can have access to the selective public colleges. These colleges are getting more expensive but are still a bargain compared to private colleges and universities

Figure 4. Whites are much more likely than Blacks or Latinos to have a college degree.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau's *American Community Survey*, 2015.

According to the Figure above, the fact that devoting more public resources to the colleges where Whites are highly concentrated while underfunding open-access public colleges where minority students are more likely to enroll is of great consequence. Since Whites are disproportionately attending the colleges that produce the highest graduation rates, the result is a continued widening of the already yawning gaps in college degrees among Whites, Blacks, and Latinos. In the United States, 37 percent of Whites have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 22 percent of Blacks and 17 percent of Latinos in 2015 as indicated above.

In most recent trends, for instance, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023), the graduation rate for Black students at four-year institutions remains about 40%, compared to 64% for White students. Hispanic students also lag at around 54%. These statistics show persistent disparities that have not significantly improved in the past decade.

Summary of Challenges of education attainment faced by minority groups

Critical perspectives

Structural inequalities in U.S. higher education have deep historical roots, stemming from explicit policies of segregation, underfunding of schools serving students of color, and institutionalized racism as demonstrated in this paper. Despite efforts made to improve the system like the landmark legal and policy changes such as Brown v. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Act, these challenges are still visible in schools and campuses that are still racially and economically segregated, and students of color often attend under founded institutions and in most cases the results have been a high dropout rates and a decrease in education attainment. I believe that it may even get worse under this current United States Administration when according to (Associated Press, 2025), the Department of Education escalated its attack against Harvard University, announcing an investigation of the university over what it claims are discriminatory practices at the university, resulting into the freezing of $2.2 billion in grants to Harvard.

 Conflict Theory and Critical Race Theory offer vital frameworks for analyzing how educational systems maintain inequality. For example, the reliance on standardized testing in college admissions often disadvantages students from low-income and minority backgrounds due to unequal access to test prep resources, reflecting the Conflict Theory perspective of power maintenance by the elite. Similarly, legacy admissions predominantly

benefit White applicants, preserving historical privilege and aligning with Critical Race Theory's emphasis on the embedded nature of racism within institutional practices. These frameworks help explain how structural mechanisms reproduce inequality, even under the guise of meritocracy.

On May 5, 2025, I visited a public institution and saw restrooms labeled as "Unisex" where these restrooms were previously labeled as "Men and Women" depicting different genders as a way of diversity and inclusion. If care is not taking, the provision in the Federal/National Budget that are meant to support diversity, Equity and Inclusion for different programs including education for students of color may be curtained.

Moreover, and consistent with the facts presented in this paper, low socioeconomic status, racial discrimination, persistent wealth gaps, etc., have resulted in limited access to college resources and readiness, and decreased opportunity among students of color. School segregation and bias persist even at equal income/education, minorities amass less wealth, undermining gains especially for students of color.

Research recommendation and policy implications

The fight against structural inequalities and racial barriers to education attainment in the U.S faces major headwinds in today's political and social environment, as well as the resistance that inevitably comes when segments of the population that have benefitted from inequities fear that their advantage is threatened. But at least society should be honest with itself about the problems it faces and the consequences of ignoring them.

There is a need of a vigorous reform agenda focused on providing equal education access to build more capacity to unite people from different backgrounds and with different political views, because race-conscious admissions has become a wedge issue not only in education but also in the US political system, (Carnevale et al., 2023). There has been call by some leaders of higher education nationwide to provide more access to people from all racial and economic backgrounds to align the interests of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, with the interests of those white and Asian/Asian American people who have felt shut out from selective colleges and the political, economic, and social elite especially in recent development in the country. It seems to me that at the very least, the Supreme Court likely to force colleges to drastically curtail their race-conscious admissions practices, perhaps to the point where enrollments of underrepresented students would be nearly as threatened as under an outright ban which may be resulting into the already low education attainment rates among students of color. The shift in the Supreme Court's composition under President Trump certainly has improved the odds of it firmly rejecting any use of race-conscious admissions this time around, where conservative justices now hold a 6–3 majority of court seats.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While these policy recommendations offer promising pathways toward equity, their implementation is not without challenges. Political resistance to race-conscious policies, backlash against anti-racist curricula, and limitations in state and federal funding all pose significant barriers. For example, proposals to revise school funding formulas often meet resistance from wealthier districts. Similarly, anti-racist teacher training may be undermined by political efforts to ban discussions of race and systemic inequality. To address these obstacles, it is essential to build strategic coalitions among educators, community leaders, and policymakers, and to emphasize the long-term social and economic benefits of equitable education.

Promote Race-conscious and need-based admissions

Race-based affirmative action in college admission was established to increase the presence of racial minorities historically underrepresented in higher education and improve campus diversity and upward mobility for Black and other minority groups, though the policy landscape is evolving with recent legal changes. I believe concrete steps such as partnership with racial equity/equality organizations, policy reform within schools, creation of equity teams for data analysis, equitable school budgeting, and efforts to counteract housing segregation in school zoning illustrate how districts can operationalize equity-focused policy.

Reform Admission and Assessment Policies

Eliminate or reduce the weight of standardized test scores and legacy admissions, which often reinforce racial and SES disparities, moving toward more holistic and fair admissions criteria. For example, SAT does not predict success in college for students from low-income backgrounds as well as it does for those from affluent ones.

Equitable Funding Formulas for Schools:

Founding allocations should be focused on colleges serving high proportions of low-income and racially minoritized students, addressing resource gaps rooted in property tax-based funding.

Promote Anti-Racist Curriculum and Teacher Training:

Although there are uphill movements in this area at current but there have been efforts in the courts by civil society groups and educational practitioners and continued efforts may just have a breakthrough.

Recruitment and Retention of Diverse Educators: Promoting hiring and retention of teachers, faculty, and administrators from underrepresented racial and linguistic backgrounds to better reflect and support the student body. This includes being careful, there are professors who may be of color, but their principles and beliefs speak opposite of diversity and vice versa from what I have observed as student.

Invest in Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs): Directing significant funding to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, etc., to strengthen their capacity to support low-wealth and first-generation students is very important for college education attainment.

Partnership with States for Free Community College

Without the burden of having to pay for community college tuition, students could focus their Pell grants (federal finacial aid program) and state grant aid on living expenses. Free community college would lead to more students attending college and increase a student's expectations that they would receive an associate degree or higher, particularly for low-income students and students of color.

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