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Higher Education and Privilege: 21st Century Issues

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This literature review analysis revealed that governmental and non-profit foundations have promoted racial equity to enhance the life of people who live in poverty in the United States. These institutions intended to provide opportunities for low-income individuals, such as education. Despite improvements for historically underrepresented students in higher education, there are still gaps in college attainment between White non-Hispanics and minorities. This paper discusses how system policies in the workplace and schools create social economic disparities in society.

Keywords: academic privilege, college enrollment, minorities, non-profit organizations, U.S. higher education

During the last two decades, funders of community interventions such as the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (W. K. Kellogg), the Center for Assessment and Policy Development, MP Associates and World Trust Educational Services, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, have promoted racial equity as a way to provide opportunities to children, families and communities who are living with little resources (W. K. Kellogg, 2015). According to W. K. Kellogg (2015), the roots of racial disparity should be targeted in order to successfully create opportunity for vulnerable individuals and communities. W.K. Kellogg has found that laws and policies that regulate program interventions are often based on assumptions. However, assumptions of what is wrong or right often reflect the dominant culture or the dominant group of individuals. Moreover, “when those assumptions are codified into laws, system policies and organizational and community practices, they are part [of privilege], what creates persistent advantages for some groups and persistent disadvantages for others” (Leiderman, Potapchuk, & Butler, 2009, para. 3). When system policies provide opportunities in workplaces, schools, and communities, they create social economic disparities in the society. Consequently, people who benefit the most experience privilege. How does privilege create disparities between individuals and communities? This paper attempts to answer this question by defining privilege and providing a link between privilege and social inequalities. Above all, this paper discusses how the United States (U.S.) higher education system perpetuates privilege.

Definition of Privilege

Before any attempt to link privilege to social inequality, it is important that we understand the word itself. According to Johnson (2006), privilege can be a loaded word, and people with privilege do not feel they are privileged. They believe that they deserve everything they have (Johnson, 2006). Thus, The Law Dictionary (n.d.) defines privilege as:

A particular and peculiar benefit or advantage enjoyed by a person, company, or class, beyond the common advantages of other citizens. An exceptional or extraordinary power or exemption. A right, power, franchise, or immunity held by a person or class, against or beyond the course of the law. (para. 1)

This legal definition attests that privilege is not a right. Privilege is socially constructed and an internal belief, not based on any law. McIntosh's (1981) argument about White privilege and male privilege reveals that over time, an individual or a group of people have access to something often denied to others. For example, since the proclamation of the independence of the United States, it has been assumed only men could be president. This assertion highlights men as a privileged group because there is no constitutional rule excludes women from becoming president of the United States of America. Similarly, it is a privilege for White individuals to appear more credible than people of color. According to a study published by Hendrix (1998) in the *Journal of Black Studies*, the competence of Black professors was questioned more than that of White professors. When students assessed the credibility of their professors, they used more stringent standards toward the Black professors than they did towards their White counterparts.

McIntosh (1981) identified two types of privilege: *unearned advantages* and *conferred dominance*. According to McIntosh, unearned advantages refer to the acquisition of anything because of the group we belong to; conferred advantage would be the domination of a group based on their group characteristics. Both unearned advantages and conferred dominance create social disparities and widen existing gaps between groups.

Privilege, Racial Disparities

According to Wendland (2011), U.S. society imitates “structural inequalities, bolstered by current incarnations of White supremacist or male supremacist ideologies” (para. 2). In other words, the U.S. society shows inherent disparities between male and female. Also, it shows disparities between White individuals and other ethnic groups including African American, Asian Pacific Islander, Latino/a, and American Indian and Alaskan Native. These ethnic groups are recognized as people of color or minorities. The U.S. nation, however, has begun to become a multicultural population. “The increasing demographic diversity in the U.S. population begun in the past century continues in this century” (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2011, p. 41). The latest U.S. Census data showed that by the end of 2020, White non-Hispanics will become the minority in the population. According to the U.S. Census data, White non-Hispanics accounted for 74% of the total population in 1990. Twenty years later, in the latest Census data, the proportion of White

non-Hispanic dropped to nearly 64 percent and is expected to reach 60.9 percent by the year 2017 (ESRI, 2012).

The diversity in labor force makes up one of the determinants of social diversity. In fact, according to Toossi (2002), “the labor force, the number of people working or looking for work, is a dynamic concept that demonstrates the net impact of all demographic, social, political, and historical forces affecting a population” (p. 15). The diversity in today’s labor force reflects the culturally diverse workplace. The transformation of the U.S. society is mainly due to immigration and the higher fertility rate of non-White populations. In 1970, the share of the foreign-born population in the United States that was only 4.7% was 13.1% in 2013 (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Not only is there an immigration growth but also these populations, mostly those of non-White, have a higher total fertility rate. Though the fertility rate for all ethnicities decreased in the last 25 years (Mather, 2012), the fertility rates for non-Whites populations remain higher. Data from Pew Research Center shows fertility rates of 2.4, 2.1, and 1.8 for Hispanics, Black, and White (Passel, Livingston, & Cohn, 2012). Similarly, the number of women in the workplace has increased exponentially in the last 50 years. In 2002, the Monthly Labor Report published that the proportion of women in the labor force increased from 34% in 1950 to 60 percent in 2000 (Toossi, 2002). Despite diversity changing today’s population, White individuals and males are still the dominant groups. To illustrate, Robinson, Frost, Buccigrossi, and Pfefferin (2003) mentioned “the social order of things, men are the dominant group and women are the subordinated group in our society” (p. 2).

Race, Gender, and Power

Data from the report of the Federal Glass Ceiling (1995) revealed that while White men are only 40 percent of the workforce, 97 percent of them are “senior managers of Fortune 1000 Industrial and Fortune 500 companies... in the Fortune 2000 industrial and service companies, only 5% of senior managers are women, and almost all of them are White” (p. 9).

Ten years worth of data of median weekly earnings shows that despite a decline in men’s earnings, women have always earned less than men. On average, the median weekly earnings of \$643 for women fulfill 81% of the \$795 median for the average male earnings from 2004 to 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b). The last economic decline widened the gap between people of color and White non-Hispanics. Between 2005 and 2010, Asian, Black, and Hispanic people lost about 60% of their median household net worth. According to Luhby (2012), this economic downturn placed the median household net worth of White non-Hispanics fifteen times and twenty-two times that of Hispanics and Blacks, respectively.

As a result of their dominance, the White race and men seem to define the standard by which the other groups, minorities and women, must be judged in society. To access power or to gain privilege and have an influence on the dominant group, multiracial individuals must conform to the rule of Whites as well as women must conform to the values set by men. However, “the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and now the Women Liberation’s movement have all added greatly to the

demands for social justice and through access to higher education” (Kerr, Gade, & Kawaoka, 1994, p. 196).

Education is the Key

For many, education represents the key to close the door on social economic disparity. While having a college degree or having access to higher education may not be the end goal, the objectives are to increase public access to a better lifestyle and gain abilities to fully contribute to society. Although higher education does not guarantee a well-paid job, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, show that individuals with higher education have a higher lifetime earning potential. On the opposite side, individuals with lower education are more likely to be unemployed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a). More than ever, educated workers have become more valuable and necessary for the U.S. workplace. Many of the jobs that require lower skills are being shipped overseas and the remaining jobs become sophisticated because of the rising technology. Similarly Carnevale, Gainger, and Meltzer (1990) said "a new kind of American worker is being ordered up, a worker who will be expected to have a broad set of skills that were previously required only of supervisors and managers" (p. 4). In addition, people with a higher education will be more likely to read to their children and prepare them for a better future. To close the gap on social disparity, economists such as Reich (2014) and Sutter (2013) have provided multiple solutions among which education appeared to be an important remedy. According to Reich, the gap between the poor and the rich can be decreased with affordable and equally distributed education to everyone, which is essential in the preparation of poor and minorities in K-12 education.

College Enrollment Growth for Underrepresented

It cannot be refuted that U.S. history has shown a progress in minority education. With the Civil Rights movements, people from all different races gained the opportunity to advocate for their rights for education. Years of organizations protesting and expressing injustice and embracing U.S. Jim Crow practices led to policies that have supported minority’s claims and enabled their access to education. Since 1960, institutional and federal regulations such as entitlement and discrimination laws which protect against discrimination in education on the basis of race, national origin, sex, and disability have depicted government effort to provide education (Lattuca & Stark, 2011). Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was amended in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), provides federal funding to improve education access. Despite the documented failure of the NCLB (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Hursh, 2007), this funding serves for: high poverty schools and schools that have students with limited English, children with disabilities, and other children in need of assistance. As a result of governmental efforts, minority education was greatly improved.

A report from *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* illustrates this improvement. Data from 2009 to 2011 shows that the rate of Black and Latino students who entered four-year colleges and universities, increased and outpaced that of Whites (Roach, 2013). Also, the report noted that “between 2009 and 2011, the nation’s Black undergraduate

population jumped by 8.5 percent and Latino undergraduates rose 22 percent” (Roach, 2013, para. 3).

For many educators, the growth in English as a Second Language (ESL), especially the growth of immigrants who enroll for postsecondary education reflects the growth in diversity enrollments in college (Lattuca & Stark, 2011, p. 108). Varghese and Kanno (2010) predicted that in ten to fifteen years, ESL students will represent about 20 to 25% of all students in the United States. The increase of Black and Latino enrollments in college and the increase of ESL enrollments indicate a diversity increase in U.S. higher education. Despite the improvement of the historically underrepresented students in higher education, there are still gaps in college attainment between White non-Hispanics and minorities. The education system of the United States, as it is currently regulated, appears to perpetuate privilege by creating opportunities to individuals of rich families and maintaining the existing gap between people of color and White non-Hispanics.

Elite College versus Open Access Schools

Affordability

For many people, in particular college students and their parents, college signifies an opportunity to graduate with job security and a better paycheck (Selingo, 2013). However, the cost of elite colleges and universities does not provide alternatives for individuals from low- income families to fulfill that dream. By definition and mission, elite colleges are founded in the premise to produce wealth. In an interview with *Democracy Now*, Craig Steven Wilder (2013), author of the book *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, said that “universities such as Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, and Rutgers were established in the 18th century rose as the financial and intellectual backers of new culture of the colonies.”

Today, those schools have not changed. According to the Griffin Financial Aid Office (2015), the annual tuition and fees at Harvard University cost \$43,938 compared to \$11,000 for community college such as Grand Rapids Community College (2015). High prices are often justified by the fact that elite institutions promise the best education. They hire the best teachers and provide the best educational infrastructures to meet the fast development of the technology and sciences with the goal of providing the best possible education. Like any profitable business, the price of goods rises with the rise of demand (Li, 2013). Most universities can only enroll a limited number of students. Therefore, the demand for a college education in elite schools overshadows the available supply. Higher education institutions, particularly elite institutions respond to this demand by raising the already high tuition cost. Examining this phenomenon, Selingo (2013) notes, “higher education is too expensive” (p. 70). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014-2015) shows that from 2011 to 2012, tuition rates at elite institutions rose at least 28 percent, after adjustment for inflation. Thus tuition growth outstripped growth in median family income. The argument is not that elite schools have the obligation to educate the mass. Rather, I argue that their prestigious education is used by socially and economically stable families to perpetuate their supremacy. As Reich (2015) notes, “Parents who can afford it are paying grotesque sums

to give their kids an edge” (para. 7). As a result, only students with rich families, mostly White families, can afford a college degree that guarantees a job and a better paycheck. For example, Suro and Fry (2005) wrote that “Latinos go to less selective institutions than their White peers, and even when they do enroll at the same kind of schools as White youths, they are less likely than their White peers to graduate” (p. 177). One primary reason that prevents Latino students from graduating is funding, as mentioned by Suro and Fry. According to the authors, when funding exists for Latino students, they have a larger rate of graduation success.

Accessibility

Many issues, other than affordability, prevent students from low income families to pursue education in elite colleges. Accessibility remains a bigger issue for low-income, minorities, and first-generation students. Factors such as advanced placement courses, standardized tests, and high grade point averages play a major role to access elite institutions. Standardized tests are not an accurate measure for assessing abilities of minority students. Two major arguments related to this dilemma will be discussed.

First, under the NCLB, standardized test scores influence the funding that the government disburses to a school (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Therefore, low performance schools, mostly those in poor and minority neighborhoods, run the risk of not receiving the resources they need. Often the state takes over their operations (if they do not close their doors) and does not provide them the opportunity to make the decisions that are most appropriate to their students. School leaders, teachers, parents, and students are frightened under the pressure, rather than focusing on creativity and discovery.

Second, critics argue that standardized tests include cultural biases and depict the culture and environment of advantaged families rather than being an accurate assessment for students who are racially, culturally, ethnically or linguistically diverse. Freedle’s (2003) controversial article in the Harvard Educational Review indicated that the SAT test for college admission is biased against African American students. A recent study by Santelices and Wilson (2010) confirms Freedle’s work. Replicating Freedle’s work with recent SAT data, the authors found that the test “functions differently for African American and White subgroups” (Santelices & Wilson, 2010, p. 106). Because of the unequal treatment of the most influential tests in the U.S., critics acknowledged that standardized tests do not promote a fair access to higher education for different ethnic groups.

A Broken K-12 Education System

Many factors contribute to a K-12 education system that does not prepare minorities for higher education. However, this paper focuses on the fact that the education system is unable to ensure that each child can attend a quality public school. A quality public school requires adequate funding for resources. Unfortunately, current public schools are funded by community tax that is low in poor communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Consequently, those schools are assigned with low-performing teachers, run-down facilities and have very little opportunities for creativity.

A system that provides adequate funding for all children regardless of their zip code will be what prepares them for a higher education.

Minority Enrollment in College

As a result of the issues associated with college affordability and accessibility, very few minority students and students from low-income families have access to colleges and universities that may guaranty them a better future. Since 1995, the proportion of minority enrollments in college has seen a considerable ascendance. A report from Georgetown University shows that African American enrollment increased by 73% and by 107% for Hispanic students. At the same time, enrollment for White students had increased only by 15 percent (McDermott, 2013). However, the same report showed that minority and White students do not have the same pathway. While most students from minority groups enrolled in open-access institutions, most of the White students access the most elite schools in the U.S. Between 1995 and 2009, the report says, 82% of all new White enrollments went to elite schools, while 68 percent of African American and 72 percent of Hispanic students went to open access schools. The results of the report align with Wathington's (2005) notion that selective elite schools constricted the access of ethnic minorities, an "unequal access" (p. 187).

Data from the NCES and Georgetown's report revealed two main outcomes resulting from attending the most prestigious schools. First, White students have the highest rate of degree attainment. Data from the NCES (2012) attests that in 2010, 73% of White students graduated from college, compared to 27% of students of color. Even the graduation rates for the high-achieving minority students who go to open-access colleges stands at about half of those who attend more-selective institutions (McDermott, 2013). Second, students who attend more selective institutions have a better chance of higher earnings, even among students with the same degree and qualifications. In other words, where you graduate from has a lot to do with how much you earn. The institutions' reputation or quality has an impact on the earnings of their graduates. An earlier study by Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg (1999) used data on thousands students who went to college between 1970 and 1980. The authors grouped the schools of the participants by reputation and quality and compared their earnings after graduation. The result showed that students who attended top private institutions earned 39% more than those who attend bottom public institutions. In addition, those who attend middle private schools earned six percent more than those who attended bottom public institutions (Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999). This is not surprising that White people, those who have the privilege to attend the more selective institutions, continue to dominate the minority, essentially African Americans and Hispanics. The selective elite institutions must provide more opportunities for minorities to enroll. Also, the institutions must provide support for those who already enrolled to successfully achieve their goals.

Minorities at Elite Selective Schools

According to Wathington (2005), "Inequality of educational opportunities continues to affect students of color profoundly" (p. 186). Even when minority students

are enrolled in the highly selective elite schools, they face critical issues. The low-income, minorities, and first generation students feel lonely. This was discussed through a recent radio program on February 16, 2015 by Jennifer Guerra, a reporter for Michigan Radio. A low-income and first-generation student at the University of Michigan, Chris Reynolds, stated "Just to have someone from the university come up and say, 'You belong here' and 'We're so excited to have you here'... that would have changed everything for me" (as cited in Guerra, 2015, para. 24). Some low-income, first-generation, and minority students are sensitive and they would like to feel welcomed at the college. According to Anyon (2006), crossing "class boundaries" for minorities in elite schools continues to be difficult (p. 274). To illustrate, Anyon reported that a low-income, minority student who shares a classroom with privileged students will not have the same view of the life. These students will resent the privileged students talking about opportunities they had in their life that reflect their wealth. A low-income geology student, Boshers, shared that she had a professor who told her to be "a real geologist," she needed to travel all over the world. In her class, Boshers was frustrated when her wealthy classmates shared that they went to Europe during the summer while the summer for Boshers was just full-time work at a gas station (as cited in Guerra, 2015).

The stories of minority students in elite schools not only describe feelings of these students, but reflect critical issues of today's higher education institutions. Wathington (2005) reported that "Thomas Jefferson believed that the virtues of higher learning were vital to the preservation of a free and democratic society" (p. 186). In other words, higher education institutions need to enhance strategies of school's accessibility for minorities and to promote equity among students and faculty. Unfortunately, many of today's colleges and universities "eliminated special programs of underrepresented students of color" (Wathington, 2005, p. 188).

According to Gregorian (2005), through liberal arts education we understand "where we are and where we are going" (p. 81). Similarly, Umbach and Kuh (2003) in their study about diversity and liberal arts colleges argued that liberal arts colleges "create distinctive learning environments for students in terms of diversity experiences" (p. 17). However, their studies indicated that many liberal arts colleges lack diversity. For example, only three percent of African American students attend Kenyon College, a liberal arts college, in Ohio (Gerson, 2014). Opportunities to facilitate enrollment of underrepresented students in liberal arts colleges are important to enhance inclusion and diversity.

Conclusion

Racial disparity should be targeted in order to successfully create opportunity for poor individuals and communities. This paper analyzed how racial disparities exist in K-12 schools and how it does not prepare minorities for the higher education system. The U.S. higher education system provides more opportunities for high-income individuals, White-non Hispanics, but not for minorities and low-income families. In other words, the U.S. education system perpetuates privilege. Since the abolition of slavery and the racial segregation in the United States, many scholars such as Thomas Jefferson have believed in education to close the gap that exists between people. Nearly a century later there has

been an increase in minorities, principally African Americans and Hispanics in politics and education. In the 2012 presidential election, the African American and Hispanic voters' turnout rates surpassed that of Whites. In terms of education, African American and Hispanic first-year student enrollments increase more than that of White first-year students (McDermott, 2013). A great effort in terms of educational inclusion currently exists. The road, however, to a society where all individuals have the same opportunity for education continues to be a long one. Work still remains to be done as minority groups are not offered all of the opportunities to succeed in schools and society, despite the leaps in the right direction from the days of the racial segregation.

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