

POSTSECONDARY
VALUE COMMISSION

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION'S ROLE IN PROMOTING JUSTICE: INSTITUTIONS MUST CONSIDER RACE AND CLASS

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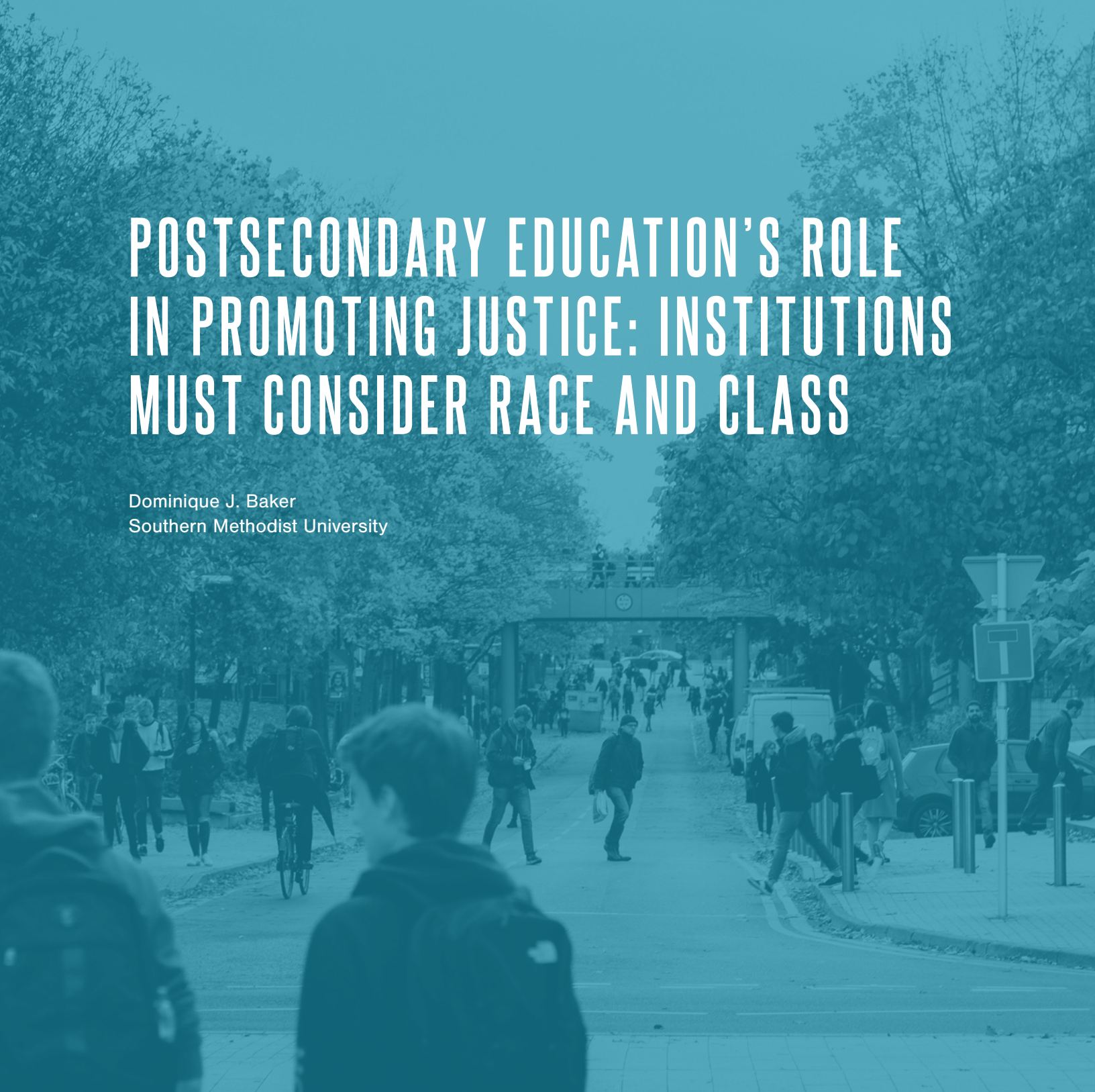


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This paper is one in a foundational research series for the Postsecondary Value Commission authored in summer 2019 by scholars with diverse backgrounds and expertise. The research presented in these papers applies an equity lens to the philosophical, measurement, and policy considerations and assumptions underlying key components of postsecondary value to students and society, including investment, economic and non-economic returns, mobility, and racial and socioeconomic justice.

The Postsecondary Value Commission consulted this foundational research as it developed a conceptual definition of postsecondary value, a framework for measuring how institutions and programs create value and ensure equitable outcomes, and an action agenda with recommendations for applying the definition and framework to change policies and practices. Through this breadth of scholarship, the commission was better able to define the value of postsecondary education and the role institutions can play in creating a more equitable and fair United States.

Following the May 2021 release of the commission’s findings, these foundational papers were prepared for publication. The views and opinions expressed in these papers do not necessarily reflect the positions of individual members of the Postsecondary Value Commission or the organizations they represent.

The Postsecondary Value Commission along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Institute for Higher Education Policy are deeply grateful to the authors of this series. The authors’ extensive expertise and thoughtful engagement in this work provided the foundation for the commission to develop an informed, innovative, and equity-driven framework. They also thank Deborah Seymour for editing the written products and the team at GMMB for their creative design and layout.

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INTRODUCTION

True racial and socioeconomic justice requires a United States in which individuals of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds have equitable economic opportunities and outcomes.^a In other words, our nation will have reached economic justice when the race or socioeconomic status of an individual is not probabilistic of their future. It is difficult to envision any sector of the United States economy single-handedly meeting this goal. However, policies and practices at the federal, state, local, and institutional level can work together to improve the lives of individuals from historically and contemporarily marginalized groups, while reducing disparities in quality of life across groups. The higher education sector is uniquely positioned to make a difference on these fronts because it intersects with so many other aspects of our lives (for example, through the training of K-12 teachers) and is a key gatekeeping mechanism for systems of power (and thus has the potential to be a key site for empowerment). And because there is a causal relationship between postsecondary education and many outcomes of interest, such as occupational choice, education can be a significant intervention point to increase economic equity (Hout, 2012).

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Achieving economic justice would require, as outlined below, equitable and affordable access to quality education for historically marginalized students and sufficient structures to support their persistence, graduation, and post-collegiate success. In more measurable terms, this would mean that public institutions' student populations, including the state's public flagship, would be reflective of the state's racial and socioeconomic composition. Further, race and socioeconomic status would not predict the retention or graduation rates at postsecondary education institutions, nor would they predict the wealth or financial security of individuals. The federal government, states, and localities would fund institutions at levels that would allow for quality learning to occur for all students (whether full- or part-time). Quality learning would be defined and assessed for institutions across the United States. Institutions that were, at best, not serving students well and, at worst, taking advantage of students, would be held accountable and provided support and opportunities to improve or denied future access to federal financial aid.

Achieving this vision of justice requires breaking the intergenerational relationship between economic resources and postsecondary education, for which there is longstanding evidence. Scholars have found that the income and socioeconomic status of parents are strongly correlated with children's postsecondary education decisions and outcomes, including whether to enroll (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011), where to enroll (Perna, 2006), and whether to persist and complete (Wapole, 2003). Similarly, when parents lose their job, their children are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education, an effect that is posited to be due to increased academic and mental health struggles (Ananant, Gassman-Pines, Francis, & Gibson-Davis, 2017).

a For the purpose of this paper, the economic value of postsecondary education extends beyond the income or wages of individuals. It also includes other forms of compensation and benefits from their work, such as health care, retirement contributions, and self-reported job satisfaction, and their wealth and financial stability, including long-term and short-term savings, investments, and self-reported measures of financial well-being.

Wealth, often incorporating such measures as savings, investments, retirement funds vested, and real estate, can play an even more substantial role (Feiveson & Sabelhaus, 2018). Jez (2014) analyzed a nationally representative sample and found that wealth has a larger role than income in students' decisions about whether to enroll in college or which type of institution to attend (e.g., two-year, four-year), and that wealth is a particularly important determinant of enrollment at selective four-year institutions. These are just a few examples of the countless ways parental economic stability and prosperity shape the economic trajectories of their children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Without purposeful intervention to disrupt intergenerational wealth transfer and consolidation, it becomes difficult to see how justice can be reached.

Postsecondary education can play a key role in breaking the strong link between economic outcomes across generations but doing so requires policy and power shifts to support the success of postsecondary students. In developing such shifts, it is important to consider two disparate constructs that intersect and mediate the experiences and opportunities of individuals: race and socioeconomic status.^{b, c} This paper outlines the state of postsecondary access and success that would be required to achieve justice, details two primary roles of postsecondary education in achieving justice, and highlights considerations that should be taken into account for any measures of postsecondary education value.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS WITHIN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE

Racial and socioeconomic justice requires: 1) equitable and affordable access to quality education for historically marginalized students; and 2) sufficient structures to support their persistence, graduation, and post-collegiate success (e.g., earnings, financial well-being, savings). Focusing on equitable access is critical as, in recent decades, the significant increases in the share of individuals attending and completing college were primarily driven by students from high-income backgrounds (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Barriers to equitable postsecondary access can include racial and socioeconomic disparities in:

1. college entrance examinations, including students' ability to pay, access to preparation materials, and performance on the actual tests (e.g., Hyman, 2017),
2. access to advanced coursework at the secondary level (e.g., Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005),
3. distance to quality education (e.g., Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman 2016),
4. ability to afford an education (e.g., Baker, 2019), and
5. ability and willingness of postsecondary institutions to transparently structure institutional practice so that all students can prosper at their campus (e.g., Baker & Britton, 2020; Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, & Owen, 2018).

b For this paper, race and ethnicity are used interchangeably based on their use in the cited literature but the author acknowledges that they are not the same.

c The majority of prior research focuses on racial identity and socioeconomic status in isolation, which means they will often be discussed similarly in this paper, although the author acknowledges their interrelated nature.

However, it is not enough to focus on equitable access to higher education. For example, even if there were equality in college access for students of all income backgrounds, there would still be unequal rates of college completion due to disparities in persistence (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). These economic and racial disparities in attainment are partially due to systemic sorting based on race and socioeconomic status across postsecondary institutions (e.g., Flores, Park, & Baker, 2017). For example, students of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds disproportionately attend for-profit institutions where students are less likely to complete an associate's or bachelor's degree (Cottom, 2017). Further, beyond these sorting issues, the majority of institutions do not focus on serving the needs of these students, resulting in structural barriers to their collegiate success.

A commitment to justice requires that institutions provide students with the structures necessary to aid them in successfully navigating postsecondary education and receiving a high-quality education. A non-exhaustive list of these structures includes constructive classroom environments (e.g., Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015), communication channels for students to share their concerns (e.g., Blissett, Baker, & Fields, 2020), actually addressing those concerns, and sufficient funding (Deming & Walters, 2017). All of these examples contribute to the overarching campus climate, which has been shown to affect students' likelihood of persistence and graduation (e.g., Destin, 2021; Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Milem, 1998; Johnson et al., 2007; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2018).

Also, there are significant disparities in the affordability of postsecondary education. While affordability is traditionally thought of as relating to the cost of attendance (tuition and fees, room and board, books, other supplies), it also includes other elements of individuals' lives (e.g., the cost of transportation, childcare). When these costs are covered or subsidized, students are more likely to be full-time students, to earn more credits, and to graduate at a higher rate (e.g., Sommo & Ratledge, 2016). Therefore, a lack of affordable education hampers efforts to improve both access and success at the postsecondary level, which will block the ability of the United States to reach economic justice. Debt-based financing also has serious implications with respect to wealth accumulation, and as such the disproportionate reliance on student loans to finance postsecondary education for students of color, particularly Black students, exacerbates the racial wealth gap (e.g., Houle & Addo, 2018; Seamster & Charron-Chénier, 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2018).

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Finally, quality education is not a phrase to be taken for granted. The current federal, state, and local postsecondary education accountability measures do not necessarily ensure that the postsecondary education provided in the United States is of sufficient quality (Kelchen, 2018). For example, the U.S. Department of Education has argued that transparency (e.g., presenting information to students and families) is the “best” accountability for higher education (Green, 2019). However, research shows that one of the primary methods the federal government uses to present information to students, the College Scorecard, while providing critical data for policy analysis, rarely affects student behavior (Hurwitz & Smith, 2018). In fact, the only information on the College Scorecard that predicts student behavior is earnings information. This is concerning since the earnings reported in the College Scorecard are based on students who received federal financial aid, and are not adjusted for demographic makeup of students, which means that institutions with more women or students of

color can have lower earnings averages due to labor market discrimination. This is not an isolated effect, as several scholars have found that existing postsecondary education accountability measures for institutions unintentionally assess institutions with larger shares of students of color or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds negatively (e.g., Jones et al., 2017).

TWO ROLES OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN ACHIEVING JUSTICE

Postsecondary institutions can help the United States achieve economic justice in the following two ways: first, ensure all students receive equitable benefits of postsecondary education regardless of income or race, and second, equip students with the ability to advocate for and enact justice. These are not the sole methods for postsecondary institutions to advance toward economic justice. However, they represent large-scale approaches with the potential to help the United States achieve economic justice for students from a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. One focuses on equitable accrual of the benefits of postsecondary education and the other highlights the ways that postsecondary education can increase the ability of individuals to advocate for and enact justice.

Ensure all students receive equitable benefits of postsecondary education regardless of income or race. In the absence of intentional reforms, postsecondary education can act as a sorting mechanism that primarily rewards those who were already likely to economically thrive due to other circumstances (Domina, Penner, & Penner, 2017). These rewards can include political power that self-perpetuates systems of oppression. However, while recognizing that postsecondary education cannot control all facets of life while students are enrolled or after they leave, there are still ways that postsecondary education can help improve the odds that all students succeed.

In fact, Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) have a demonstrated history of succeeding in this regard. MSIs are institutions that were either founded with a specific mission focused on educating students of color or meet certain thresholds for enrolling students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. For students of color, these institutions can provide additional sources of academic and social support that help the students succeed while enrolled and after leaving postsecondary education (most research compares these students to students of color at non-MSIs, e.g., Kim & Conrad, 2006; NSF, 2017; Núñez, Hurtado, & Galdeano, 2015; Teranishi, Maramba, & Ta, 2013). As an example, MSIs often incorporate more wraparound services that can aid students in their academic success, such as childcare services (Center for MSIs, 2015).

In addition, Espinosa and colleagues (2018) found that MSIs moved students from the lowest income quintile to the top quintile at higher rates than at non-MSIs. This relationship holds true even when examining institutions with similar expenditures. Among four-year institutions with low

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expenditures (at most \$25,000 per FTE), MSIs still helped students achieve economic mobility at a higher rate than non-MSIs. Future research could investigate whether these differences hold when controlling for characteristics that make students more or less likely to attend an MSI. If these findings are robust to these types of sensitivity analyses, then MSIs would appear to be a source of valuable information on ways to structure campus environments that help students achieve collegiate and post-collegiate success.

While there is wide variation in the “servingness” of these institutions, or institutional focus on educating and supporting, for their intended racial group (e.g., Garcia, Núñez, & Sansone, 2019), a significant portion of MSIs have a mission, and commensurate policies, focused on educating students of color and students with fewer economic resources. An integral component of their mission is to help break down structural barriers for students, and other institutions could benefit from strategies identified at successful MSIs (including the power structure within the institutions).

For economic justice to be reached, students must be able to attend institutions with supportive structures in place that allow them to thrive and succeed once they leave school. Research shows that a significant share of MSIs better support students even with fewer resources than non-MSIs (e.g., Espinosa et al., 2018). MSIs rely on public funding more than non-MSIs and are often funded at a disproportionately lower rate (Gasman, 2010; Nellum & Valle, 2015; Nelson & Frye, 2016). Therefore, since these institutions are able to make positive change with fewer resources, it should be possible for other institutions to be able to incorporate these types of structures to increase the success of students regardless of their income or race. Further, adequately funding MSIs would allow these institutions to continue their necessary, and effective, work.

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Equip students with the ability to advocate for and enact justice. Racism and classism can, and do, play a role in the daily interactions between individuals. However, they also play a role in the economic prosperity of the entire country. Economic justice for all would require individuals to shift and change social and political structures throughout the United States. This paper focuses primarily on racism and classism’s economic effects, though injustice, structural oppression, and discrimination are abhorrent for many more reasons, including moral concerns.

Racism and classism influence individuals’ access to affordable quality health care, ability to own a home and determine where that home can be located, interactions with the criminal justice system, and more. All these structural inequities also have direct and indirect impacts on the economic well-being of individuals of color and individuals from low-income backgrounds, their states, and the country. For example, research has linked racism to health disparities (e.g., Kugelmass, 2016; Roeder, 2019; Shavers et al., 2012) and those health disparities have been linked to real economic costs. One study found that racial disparities led to approximately \$230 billion in direct costs and \$1 trillion in indirect costs, generated through factors such as higher rates of illness (LaVeist, Gaskin & Richard, 2011). Similarly, scholars have found significant racial and socioeconomic disparities in the criminal justice system (e.g., Ayres & Waldfoegel, 1993; Mustard, 2001). A 2016 report from the U.S. Council of Economic Advisers found that the criminal justice system costs approximately \$270 billion, with incarceration alone costing \$80 billion. Similar economic costs are associated with

individuals being denied jobs and housing based on their race or class. Though, it is necessary to note, these estimates pale in comparison to the inherent, non-monetary value of human life.

Postsecondary education can help shape the abilities of individuals to interact with and combat injustice. Postsecondary education positively affects myriad outcomes for students, including social capital, family formation and stability, health, civic participation, and more (e.g., Arum et al., 2021; Carnevale et al., 2021; Dee, 2004; Doyle & Skinner, 2017; Hout, 2012). For example, Doyle and Skinner (2017) found that an additional year of schooling, regardless of earning a credential, increased the likelihood of individuals' voting, volunteering, and donating to nonprofits. These are all behaviors that can be associated with creating justice in the United States (Bowman, 2011).

In addition, postsecondary education can teach individuals about injustice, its causes and history. For example, San Francisco Unified School District teachers, alongside instructors at San Francisco State University, created a curriculum including "themes of social justice, discrimination, stereotypes, and social movements from U.S. history" (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 135). Teachers placed pedagogical emphasis on equity and integrating the strengths of students' experiences into the classroom.

Research on these changes found that the new curriculum increased attendance, grade point average, and the amount of credits earned (Dee & Penner, 2017). These findings show that teaching about justice can not only change students' understanding of the world but can also help students perform better while enrolled.

This type of course is more specific than some of the diversity or "non-Western perspectives" courses that are often required for undergraduate students across the United States, which do not have to specifically engage justice or equity issues. Still, scholars have found that students who take college diversity courses generally show gains in cognitive development and self-efficacy (see Bowman (2010, 2011) for an overview). Of note, several scholars (e.g., Pascarella et al., 2016) have found that students who take diversity coursework also show gains in moral development. Overhauling curriculum and programmatic requirements for students at the institutional level to create a more consistent justice coursework, modeled on the one in San Francisco and at exemplary postsecondary institutions, would likely aid in improving students' ability to engage with and combat inequity. Even if this type of change is not widely adopted, it is likely that institutions that include some type of required justice course (not a generalized non-Western requirement) may provide information about the commitment of an institution to aiding students in promoting justice.

Further, throughout an individual's postsecondary education, there are countless spaces, in addition to the curriculum, for teaching students how to work toward justice. Bowman (2011) conducted a review of the literature and found that students' experiences with diversity are associated with increased civic engagement, particularly through interpersonal experiences not directly tied to a classroom. Significant interaction occurring outside the classroom is one of several reasons that a focus solely on the curriculum is not enough for institutions to equip

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students with the abilities to advocate for and enact justice. The entire climate of an institution, including the structures of support highlighted above, must focus on promoting justice through justice-conscious policymaking. Institutions can also interact with their local community and find ways to help educate and equip individuals to enact justice even if they are not students at the institution. While these types of opportunities also exist outside of postsecondary education, higher education can be a key intervention point in the lives of adults throughout the United States. Moreover, postsecondary education has the opportunity to help individuals working within or maybe even in charge of these other sectors to see the power and necessity of justice.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION VALUE METRIC

How could measures of the economic value of postsecondary education incorporate principles associated with this vision for racial and socioeconomic justice? First and foremost, in order to ensure an equity focus, definitions of the costs and benefits of postsecondary education must explicitly take into consideration race and socioeconomic background. It would also be useful, if the data will allow, to consider gender, since there is clear gender discrimination in labor market and earnings.

Second, measures of economic prosperity can vary. While income is the more readily available measure, scholars strongly advocate for the use of wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). This distinction is due to the strong financial protections that wealth can provide. For example, when researchers looked across the income distribution, they found that Black students and their families borrowed at a higher rate than all of their peers (e.g., Addo, Houle, & Simon, 2016; Chingos, 2019). This disparity remained, regardless of the income of the family. This is likely due to the vast differences in wealth between Black families and other families in the United States resulting from social and political disinvestment and discrimination across generations, which means they have less available funding to finance postsecondary education. Therefore, when considering the economic value of postsecondary education, an ideal measure would use the wealth of an individual's family. This means that economic justice can be measured using indicators such as earnings, retirement funds or contributions, property ownership, savings, health care coverage, and self-reported assessments of financial well-being (e.g., the measures used by Gallup).

Third, higher education's role in achieving justice will likely focus on the economic mobility of individuals (Chetty et al., 2017). Focusing on mobility, by construction, means that some individuals must be in the lowest percentiles of income or wealth. However, racial and socioeconomic justice is not simply about moving individuals in lower income brackets to the upper income brackets. There also needs to be a measure of absolute economic stability, or a minimum income level at which individuals in the United States would be able to survive and even thrive on. A bare-minimum standard could be measured using a metric created from data from Dr. Amy Glasmeier's Living Wage Calculator housed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Glasmeier, 2019) or based on the definition of a "good job" created by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevale, Strohl, Ridley, & Gulish, 2018). Higher education must help to create a country where even those with the fewest resources are able to live a life of dignity and respect.

Fourth, a measurement framework focused on the value of postsecondary education must take into consideration selection bias resulting from demographic differences in who chooses which

institutions, while also considering the disparities in resources at institutions where historically marginalized students primarily enroll. Too often, raw comparisons can be used to create a negative portrayal of the institutions most committed to educating students of color and those from low-income or low-wealth families. A significant body of research shows that, when disbursing state funding to postsecondary institutions based on outcomes (such as graduation rates), institutions like MSIs may be disproportionately penalized due to differences in the enrolling student composition (e.g., Jones et al., 2017). In addition, the median debt burden of students, measured using a ratio of cumulative undergraduate debt to first-year earnings post-college in Texas is highest at institutions enrolling significant shares of Black and Latinx students due in large part, to the borrowing and earnings patterns of those students (Baker, 2019). Comparing the debt burden, or even earnings, of students attending institutions with large shares of students of color or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to institutions serving predominately white or upper-income students creates a false equivalency that will often cast the institutions with the large shares in a negative light. The consensus view in the literature is that institutional value assessments that do not adjust for known racial and socioeconomic disparities unduly punish those institutions willing to put in the work to resist and transform systems that have created barriers for marginalized students.

Finally, achieving justice requires changes in a number of other sectors of American life. For example, systematic change in education must be coupled with changes in policies that eliminate discrimination in the labor market (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Darity & Mason, 1998; Pager & Shepherd, 2008), health care (e.g., Kugelmass, 2016; Shavers et al., 2012), housing (Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Rugh & Massey, 2010; Yinger, 1986), and criminal justice (Ayres & Waldfoegel, 1993; Mustard, 2001) in order to create effective and enduring economic justice. Postsecondary education can have spillover effects into these other areas, but real, lasting justice will require shifts in more than postsecondary education. The structural issues facing people of color and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were purposefully created through public and institutional policy and must be ameliorated in the same way (see Katzenelson (2005) for examples of the systematic ways that public policy helped created the current state of injustice).

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CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the many roles that postsecondary education can and should play in working towards true racial and socioeconomic justice. To be clear, even if all institutions implemented these policies and structures immediately, true racial and socioeconomic justice would still take time. As scholars have posited, it likely would take at least a generation to see results, and likely longer to see true justice realized (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014).

Postsecondary education has an incredible opportunity to help reduce, instead of exacerbate, economic and racial stratification. However, this will require a country-wide agreement that there are serious inequities in American society that need to be fixed and that postsecondary education, along with the other areas of public life, must structurally change to serve those who could benefit the most from higher education.

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