

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HARD

TRUTHS:

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

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

It is within this context that policies designed to address racial inequalities continue to face strong opposition. This is especially true in the higher education sector, where there is strong resistance to efforts specifically designed to rectify racial discrimination (e.g., race-based affirmative action). In this report, however, we argue that only race-conscious policies can achieve racial equity in higher education. These are the policies that explicitly address race in their design and provide higher education access, opportunity, or support to students of color and the colleges and universities serving them.

For the purposes of this report, we focus our historical discussion and data analysis on Black students, as the data on Black students makes a strong case in particular for why policies that try to mask race by focusing on other factors, such as income, are not sufficient to close gaps for students of color. Black and White students, even with the same income, have vastly different experiences and circumstances that affect access to higher education and outcomes. Black students, compared with White students from the same socioeconomic backgrounds, enroll at less selective colleges, earn bachelor’s degrees at lower rates, and default on loans much more frequently. With regard to loan default, Black students from high-income families are nearly 7 times as likely to default on their student loans than their White peers from families of similar incomes. What’s alarming is that these are the students the current system is serving the best, i.e., enrolled full time at four-year colleges, from high-income families, and more likely to complete. And still, more than 1 in 3 default on their student loans.

Higher education is not the only system plagued with racial inequities. And there are many factors outside of

it that have a considerable influence on student access and outcomes. But the U.S. higher education system can play a critical role in eliminating racial inequality and injustice within *and beyond* education. By empowering students with the knowledge, motivation, and resources to dismantle inequality in all facets of their lives, higher education is one of the few mechanisms that can disrupt inequitable systems.

Advocates looking to push federal, state, and institutional leaders to enact race-conscious policies for college admissions and degree attainment, higher education funding, student debt relief, and campus climate can rely on the arguments and strategies presented in this report.

THREE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION ARE NECESSARY

1. Historically, higher education has used racist policies to exclude students. Therefore, race-conscious policies are necessary to achieve racial justice.
2. Racial inequalities remain and, in some cases, have worsened because race-conscious policies were cut short, limiting their effectiveness. One startling piece of evidence in the report is the generational **decline** in college degree attainment among younger Black adults, despite the increasing importance of higher education.
3. Policies that rely on substitutions (or proxies) for race, such as income, do not close gaps in opportunity and outcomes for students of color.

TEN STRATEGIES LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS CAN UTILIZE TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Institutions should adopt a renewed commitment to affirmative action.
2. Institutions should stop overrelying on traditional measures of “merit” and other admissions preferences that disadvantage students of color.
3. Institutions, states, and the federal government should provide more data that is disaggregated by race and ethnicity in higher education.
4. Remove state bans on affirmative action.
5. Design statewide race-conscious higher education attainment goals.
6. States should invest resources in colleges that provide high-quality opportunity for students of color.
7. Federal government should invest more in HBCUs, tribal colleges, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and make sure enrollment-driven MSIs are truly serving students of color.
8. Federal government should make states work toward closing racial equity gaps in spending.
9. Design loan forgiveness and other student debt policy solutions to benefit students of color and help close racial wealth gaps.
10. Require accreditors to examine a college’s campus racial climate.

1. J.M. Horowitz, A. Brown, and K. Cox, “Race in America 2019,” Pew Research Center, April 9, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/>
2. J.M. Horowitz, A. Brown, and K. Cox, “Race in America 2019.”