POSTSECONDARY

VALUE COMMISSION

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION'S ROLE IN PROMOTING JUSTICE: EMBRACE INSTITUTIONS AS PLACE-BASED COMMUNITY ASSETS

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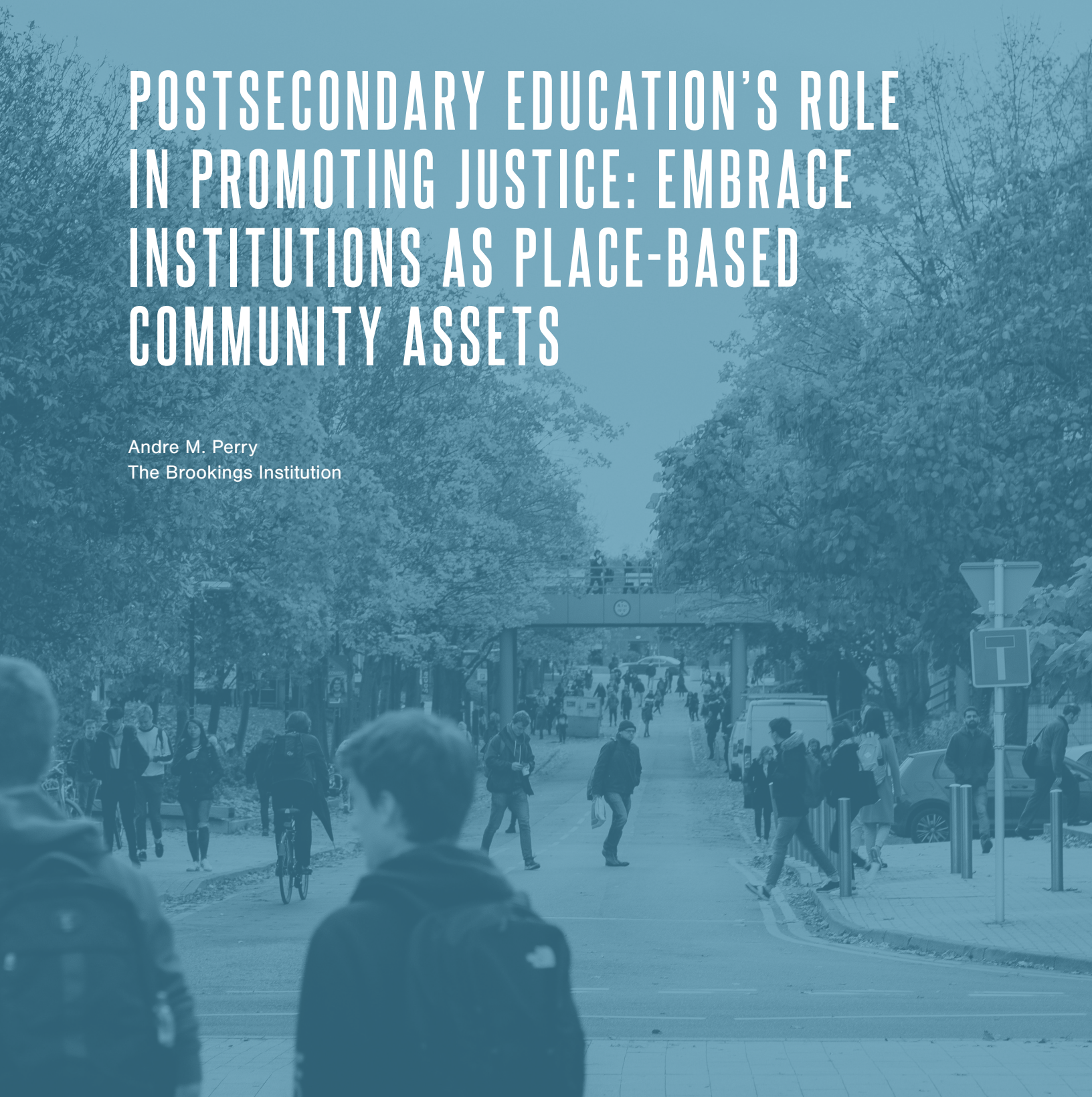

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This paper is one in a foundational research series for the Postsecondary Value Commission authored in summer 2019 by scholars with diverse backgrounds and expertise. The research presented in these papers applies an equity lens to the philosophical, 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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VISION FOR HOW POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS CAN EMBARK ON A MORE EQUITABLE PATH

Before embarking on a path toward a more equitable postsecondary education system in the United States, we need to have a clear vision of how we want colleges and universities to serve the neighborhoods and communities we are in. In this regard, theorists MacIver and Page wrote in 1949 in their book *Society* that "[t]he mark of a community is that one's life may be lived wholly within it. One cannot live wholly within a business organization or a church; one can live wholly within a tribe or city."[1] And while one can live inside a university, those institutions are part of a neighborhood, city, state, and country. And to improve them, we need a vision of how colleges and universities should contribute to the broader community goals.

A United States that has realized complete racial and socioeconomic justice would sever the link between an individual's income or wealth and racial/ethnic background, such that all levels of the income distribution would include equal proportions of each race and ethnic group. Likewise, zip codes would not be stratified by race or class but would reflect the racial and socioeconomic demographics in a region. All residents, regardless of race or class, would live in a geographic community that contains the physical infrastructure that is necessary to facilitate access to jobs, food, shelter, and schools—including access to centrally located postsecondary institutions that support economic and social growth. Situated as community hubs, postsecondary institutions would be an essential component of communities' infrastructure and social fabric, working alongside government and civil services that provide public, citywide services like broadband access and affordable housing. Port authorities would provide free transportation services to and from colleges.

A student's choice to attend college would not be throttled or qualified by debt considerations. Residents from low-income backgrounds would have access to free tuition at public institutions and quality, paid, work-based learning opportunities. Free transit between the postsecondary institutions and students' neighborhoods and new physical infrastructure would help to facilitate educational opportunity, by removing financial and physical barriers that inhibit college accessibility. These infrastructure projects would also offer construction jobs and training opportunities for local residents. Through research grants, faculty would be incentivized to engage in place-based research that sought to improve the overall infrastructure and connectivity at the local or national level.

Quality of the postsecondary institution would be measured as a function of how well an institution supports the local and regional economies, demonstrating positive economic value for those who live in proximity. Intergenerational economic mobility among low-income and underrepresented populations would also signify quality. In a world in which racial and socioeconomic justice prevailed, postsecondary institutions would benefit the entire community, actively working against stratification, rather than catering to and automatically rewarding those with wealth, privilege, and status. Consequently, local residents (including those who are not students) would demonstrate higher levels of employment, income, and education.

"In a world in which racial and socioeconomic justice prevailed, postsecondary institutions would benefit the entire community, actively working against stratification, rather than catering to and automatically rewarding those with wealth, privilege, and status.

To turn this vision into reality, city planners and university leaders must work together to address some key considerations, including: demographic shifts, employment and earnings, wealth, housing, and infrastructure. Organized across these categories, this vision offers a place-based approach toward community change with postsecondary education institutions as a central pillar.

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A PLACE-BASED ASSET

Demographic Shifts

A just United States is one with a thriving, diverse population, in terms of race and socioeconomic status. In 2018, the total population in the United States was 60 percent White (not Hispanic or Latino),[2] but by 2045, White Americans will form the minority (Table 1).[3] Much of this growing diversity will be driven by those born after 1990. The most diverse generation in the country's history, millennials are now 44 percent minority.[4]

Table 1. Demographic Shifts in the United States between 2018 and 2045

Race/Ethnicity	2018	2045
White	60.4%	49.7%
Hispanic/Latino	18.3%	24.6%
Black	13.4%	13.1%
Asian	5.9%	7.9%
American Indian and Alaskan Native	1.3%	-
Multiracial	-	3.8%

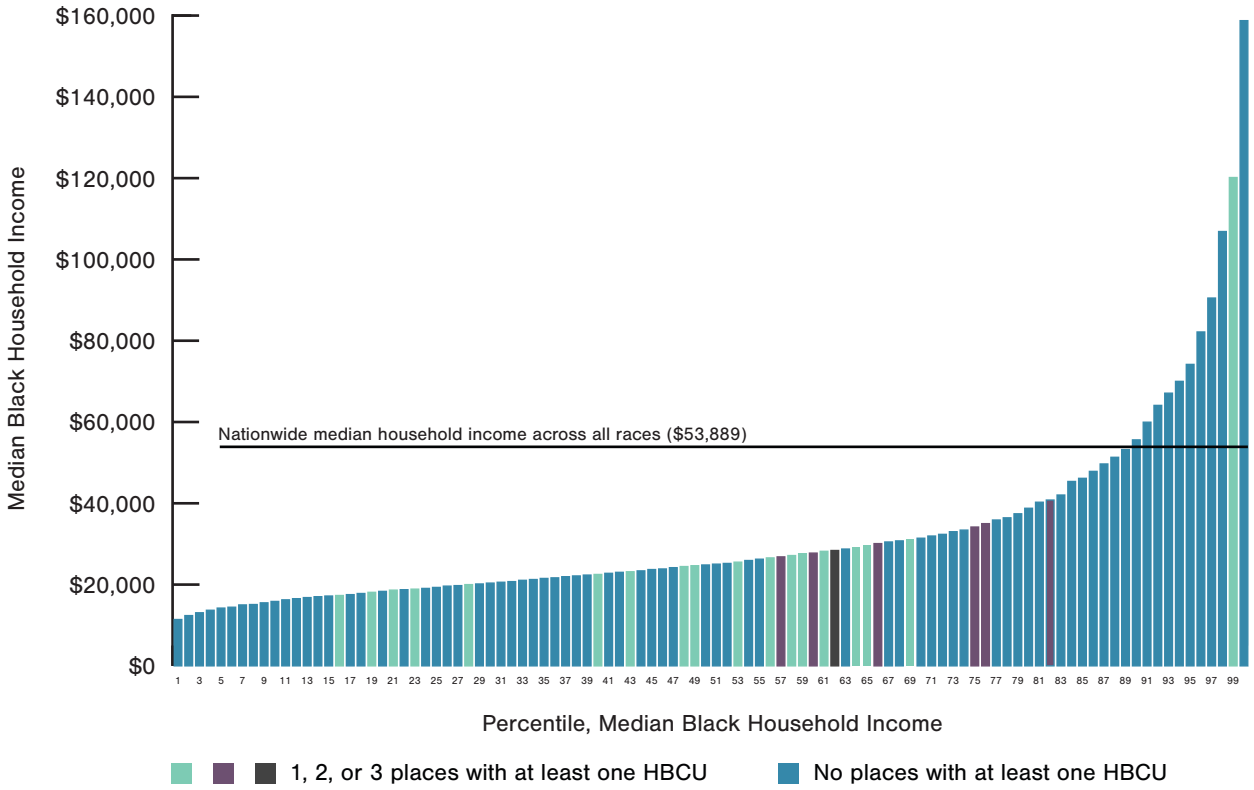
Note: The race/ethnicity categories reflect the terms used by Census.

Source: Frey, H. (2018). The US will become 'minority white' in 2045, Census projects: Youthful minorities are engine of future growth. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/.

However, even while the U.S. is diversifying, we are increasingly living more segregated lives. To mitigate the negative consequences of racial stratification in neighborhoods, primary and secondary schools, and colleges and universities, postsecondary education must begin to serve underrepresented groups where they reside. Black-majority cities[a] numbered 460 at the 1970 census, and 1,148 by the 2010 census. And as of 2017, there were 1,262 Black-majority cities, an increase of more than 100 such cities in less than a decade. But the Black share of the U.S. population rose only slightly over this period, from 11 percent in 1970 to 13 percent in 2010. Therefore, the emergence of Black-majority cities reflects a changing demographic landscape *between* and *within* cities more than anything else. A new great migration and intra-metropolitan movement have reshaped urban, suburban, and rural communities, facilitating the rise of today's Black-majority cities.

a The term cities as used here includes cities, towns, and other census-designated places.

Figure 1. Median Black Household Income for all Black-majority Cities (By percentile, 2015)



Note: Figure 1 shows the median income of Black households in more than 1,200 Black-majority cities relative to the nationwide median household income across all races. Additionally, cities containing one or more historically Black college or university (HBCU) are highlighted in green, purple, and black.

Source: Brookings analysis of 5-year ACS estimates.

About half the nation's HBCUs reside in Black-majority cities.[5] Places with at least one HBCU tend to have Black populations with higher incomes relative to other Black cities (Figure 1). Unfortunately, this is clearly not enough to push incomes for Black residents in these areas above national averages. However, a case can certainly be made that HBCUs are competitive assets,[6] especially for small- and medium-sized Black cities. However, all universities, particularly public flagships should show a positive association with Black income, educational levels and neighborhoods.

Compounding matters, as postsecondary institutions are increasingly becoming economically stratified. A 2019 report by the Pell Institute and Penn AHEAD found that among students who graduated from high school in 2013, students from the highest socioeconomic quintiles were eight times as likely to attend a "most selective" or "highly selective" college as those from the lower economic quintiles (33 percent versus 4 percent). Moreover, students who attended four-year institutions were more likely to graduate, giving them more opportunities than their peers who attended two-year colleges.[7]

In the coming decades, supporting a diverse and healthy middle class will be integral for creating equitable economic growth. The Pew Research Group defines middle-class as a family making 67-200 percent of the median household income, or between $41,119 and $122,744 in 2017.[8] Alarmingly, the share of middle-class families in metropolitan areas has decreased substantially since the 20th century, shrinking from 61 percent in 1971 to 50 percent in 2015.[9] This decrease can be attributed to more families moving out of the middle class on both ends of the spectrum. This divergence is racialized with a disproportionate number of people of color, and particularly Black men, falling out of the middle-class.[10]

The expanding gap between socioeconomic classes signals increasing income inequality, and that colleges and universities have an obligation to be part of the solution. A broad and inclusive middle class supports the development of human capital, entrepreneurship, and economic growth.[11] In contrast, we stifle overall economic and social growth with a segregated or narrow middle-class. Access to a college degree as well as the outcomes derived from it, such as significantly increased income levels, cannot be relegated along class and racial lines if we are to have economic justice. In addition, people who contribute to colleges and universities through city, state, and federal taxes should also expect benefits in return, particularly from the institutions located in their community. If funding for higher education was allocated based on equity models, more resources would be dedicated to supporting and elevating underrepresented populations in host communities and nearby neighborhoods.

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Americans of all races must be represented in and served by all public institutions, particularly public schools and postsecondary institutions. This representation includes diversity in admissions, staffing, and curricula. Research has shown that students in integrated schools are less likely to drop out and are more likely to enroll in college.[12] At a minimum, colleges should strive to look like the regions they serve. And federal and state financial incentives should be used to encourage this transformation. Likewise, there should be penalties or disincentives for public campuses that are starkly dissimilar to their surrounding communities. Public flagships should represent and reflect state demographics.

Colleges can thwart our segregated lifestyles catalyzed by stubborn residential patterns, but our society has not yet adequately invested in this vision. Therefore, we must not only consider higher education as an enterprise charged with building human capital; we must conceptualize it as part of a city and region’s desegregation strategy.

Employment and Earnings

Income is a significant component of economic security. The racial employment and earnings divides are too stark and depressing for postsecondary institutions to take a passive posture. For instance, before the pandemic, some economists asked if we had reached “full-employment”,[13] but in many Black-majority cities around the country, Black residents faced Great Recession-level unemployment rates.[14] Unemployment doesn’t tell the full story: workers may also be underemployed. Underemployment includes being forced into part-time jobs as well as having to accept positions for

which they are overqualified (potentially due to hiring/promotion discrimination). As of 2013, roughly one in five Black and Latinx workers were underemployed.[15]

The income divide impacts future opportunities too, as there is a high correlation between educational attainment and family income.[16] Families in which parents are part of the workforce are more likely to send their children to college than parents who are unemployed. Consequently, postsecondary institutions must see themselves as an enterprise that can create an inclusive economy in the present and the future. For instance, building a new college campus offers economic and educational opportunities through training and jobs to people without a postsecondary degree as part of an infrastructure plan designed to spark economic mobility. When it comes to university construction, institutional leaders must be deliberate about incorporating work agreements into the building contracts that prioritize hiring local residents from low-income backgrounds. In so doing, institutions are helping to drive a more equitable economy and also potentially increasing the educational attainment of workers' children.

These construction projects also present economic and educational opportunities to students themselves. As one example, Clemson University is turning construction sites into classrooms for civil engineering and architecture students.[17] The new construction gives current and future students real-world opportunities to learn while also earning money. Yes, one of the major reasons why students go to college is to get a job. But sometimes school and work are the same place. What people need are opportunities; school construction offers opportunities in the short and long term.

As employers themselves, the more than 5,000 colleges across the country can encourage inclusive economic growth by example, through conscious and comprehensive attention to increasing diversity and representation among their own faculty and staff. In other words, colleges and universities in a United States that realize complete racial and economic justice would not see themselves as passive suppliers of diverse talent. They would instead actively seek racial equity among faculty, staff, and procurement practices.

Wealth

In a just society, Americans of all racial and socioeconomic groups must have access to wealth-building opportunities. According to the Federal Reserve's 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances, White families had the highest median family wealth at $188,200, compared to Black and Hispanic or Latino families, which had $24,100 and $36,100, respectively.[18] Financial security goes beyond measures of employment and income only. We must ensure that Americans are able to build wealth[b] that can be passed down to future generations, used to invest in higher education, or used to start small businesses. Moreover, those with wealth are better equipped to deal with the inevitable shocks of life including recessions, job changes, deaths, and marriage.

> **"In a just society, Americans of all racial and socioeconomic groups must have access to wealth-building opportunities.**

b Wealth is measured as the total value of all financial and property assets owned minus financial debts like credit card debt and student loans.

While most wealth in the top quintile consists of real estate, business equity, stocks, and bonds, 60 percent of the middle class' assets come from housing. Thus, homeownership is a major driver of wealth.[19] Creating first-time homeownership opportunities near colleges and universities that offer free tuition can help reduce debt and increase wealth among families from low-income backgrounds.

Further, disparities in wealth impact postsecondary success well before a student reaches college. Because wealth is strongly correlated with outcomes on standardized tests used throughout K-12 education, the results of these tests can perpetuate economic divisions by restricting opportunities for students from low-wealth families.[20] There are several reasons for these disparities.[21] For one, wealthy students attend schools with more financial resources.[22] Wealthier families can also afford more tutoring, test preparation classes and materials, and other enrichment activities. Therefore, these students perform better on college admission exams and are more prepared for college courses. Consequently, if we want to increase access to institutions that provide economic mobility, we must create admissions criteria that incorporate parents' wealth as opposed to using only income. Likewise, colleges must minimize the use of standardized tests.

Housing

Housing, from the unit itself to the surrounding community, drives many aspects of community and personal wellbeing. Safe and equitable housing leads to positive changes in an individual's physical, mental, and financial health. Much of the unevenness in other areas of life follow existing housing patterns. Therefore, in a just society, postsecondary institutions should own a role in encouraging integrated housing. To ensure an equitable future for all citizens and potential citizens, we must consider housing costs, housing quality, and neighborhood quality.

> **"Right now, housing is the single largest expenditure in most family budgets, and lower- and middle-income families spend a larger share of income on housing costs than their higher income peers.**

First, housing must be universally affordable. Right now, housing is the single largest expenditure in most family budgets, and lower- and middle-income families spend a larger share of income on housing costs than their higher income peers.[23] The second quintile of household income spends approximately 40 percent of income on housing, while the lowest income group spends more than 60 percent.[24] This trend is consistent among homeowners and renters and means that housing costs put substantial pressure on the budgets of those with fewer financial resources.

The practical results of a lack of affordable housing can be disastrous. For instance, one out of every ten New York City public school students lived in temporary housing in 2017, according to a sobering October 15 article by *The New York Times*.[25] That amounts to 114,659 students sleeping in hotels, motels, others' couches, temporary shelters, and the unsheltered streets of New York City. At the time, the total number of homeless students was more than the entire population of Albany, the state capital.[26] Homelessness is most profound in urban districts where people of color live in high concentrations.[27] According to a 2017 National Center for Education Statistics report, "In 2014-15, the rate of homelessness among U.S. public school students was highest in city school districts at 3.7 percent, but was also 2.0 percent or higher in suburban, town, and rural districts."[28]

Housing insecurity and homelessness affect postsecondary students as well. The Wisconsin Hope Lab surveyed 43,000 students at 66 institutions in 20 states and the District of Columbia in 2018, including 20,000 students at 35 four-year institutions.[29] The study found that 46 percent of community college students and 36 percent of university students reported difficulty paying rent or under-paying the amount owed on utilities within one year of being surveyed, both indicators of housing insecurity. More serious housing problems were also common, with 12 percent of community college and 9 percent of university students reporting they were homeless within a year of being surveyed.[30]

Students cannot achieve academically if they don't have a bed to sleep in. To create a fair and equitable society, colleges should guarantee housing for the most vulnerable students, reducing the financial burden of housing on our country's poorest families. Public universities with residential campuses in particular have a responsibility to admit and provide housing for students that is both affordable and flexible (e.g. for single, married, and students with dependents).

Infrastructure

America's infrastructure consists of the structures and services that support daily life and mobility. When considering infrastructure as a factor in achieving racial and socioeconomic justice in the U.S., providing access, reliability, and affordability are three chief concerns. At a minimum, colleges and universities should not contribute to the development of uneven infrastructure, which can be considered the very definition and literal manifestation of structural inequality. Universities that are segregated or distant from their host communities aid and abet in the ghettoization of society. Colleges must support and help integrate various infrastructure systems in ways that increase access, reliability, and affordability of basic needs to all neighboring residents.

Currently, access to various types and forms of infrastructure varies greatly across the country. Only 92 percent of households report safe drinking water supply in their homes, with all non-White groups disproportionally affected. Over one million households lack plumbing facilities.[31] Clean and accessible water would not be a privilege in a just America.

Universal access to broadband—which is currently unavailable to 27 percent of rural residents—is also an important infrastructure feature of an equitable nation.[32] Broadband expansion could help close the growing education divide between rural and urban areas.[33] Further, with the increasing digitalization of economic activity, access to digitally integrated and mobile banking is essential.

Transportation and land use systems would also have to change to create a completely just society. Today, more than 10 percent of non-interstate roads are in an unacceptable condition according to the Federal Highway Administration.[34] Many urban residents lack access to a full-service bus route, with mobility restricted to less-than-hourly service or specific days of the week.[35]

Colleges and universities have a role to play in closing these gaps. For instance, informational technology experts from Tribal institutions worked with the University of Wisconsin-Extension's (UWEX) Center for Community Technology Solutions to expand broadband for local Tribal residents.[36] The initiative provided opportunities for Tribal members to develop basic and advanced computer skills. Deliberate planning led to an increased demand from the Tribal community, eventually resulting in a new technology center to provide additional educational services and technological access.

The entire planning process helped develop a roadmap for other Tribal communities to partner with universities in pursuit of infrastructure improvements. The Wisconsin effort resulted in a brand new 10,000 square-foot facility, along with upgrades in broadband capacity, to serve the Menominee Tribe of more than 5,000 members. Such creative and inclusive approaches represent ways colleges and universities can help dismantle structural inequality, which is reified in imbalanced and unequal infrastructure.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In an equitable America, universities do not aim to serve individuals at the expense of community growth. Students do not live at colleges; they live in communities. To realize this vision, postsecondary institutions must principally help create an infrastructure of equality that serves local communities. Institutions as well as local, state, and federal governments can do so by taking the following steps:

- Develop new indicators of postsecondary institutional quality and impact to include measures of inclusive regional economic growth, such as change in median income for White people/people of color; change in the relative poverty gap for White people/people of color; change in the employment gap for White people/people of color; and institutional measures of community racial inclusion.
- Have university representatives sit on municipal planning boards and ensure that university infrastructure projects demonstrably benefit the local community.
- Create regulations requiring colleges and universities to demonstrate how significant capital improvement on campuses contribute to infrastructure improvements in nearby neighborhoods.
- Anchor broadband expansion, particularly public universities in rural areas and other tech deserts.
- Create place-based scholarships to public flagships to encourage inclusivity among all sections of the state.
- Dedicate dormitory space to populations that are housing insecure (e.g., children timed out of foster care).
- Prioritize high quality work-study and paid internship opportunities for every person demonstrating low wealth.

If colleges were to implement the approaches outlined in this paper, they would better ensure they are serving current students while also providing opportunities and services to local residents.

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