

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION'S ROLE IN PROMOTING JUSTICE: ADOPT CAMPUS- LEVEL RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES

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In her former capacity with The Education Trust

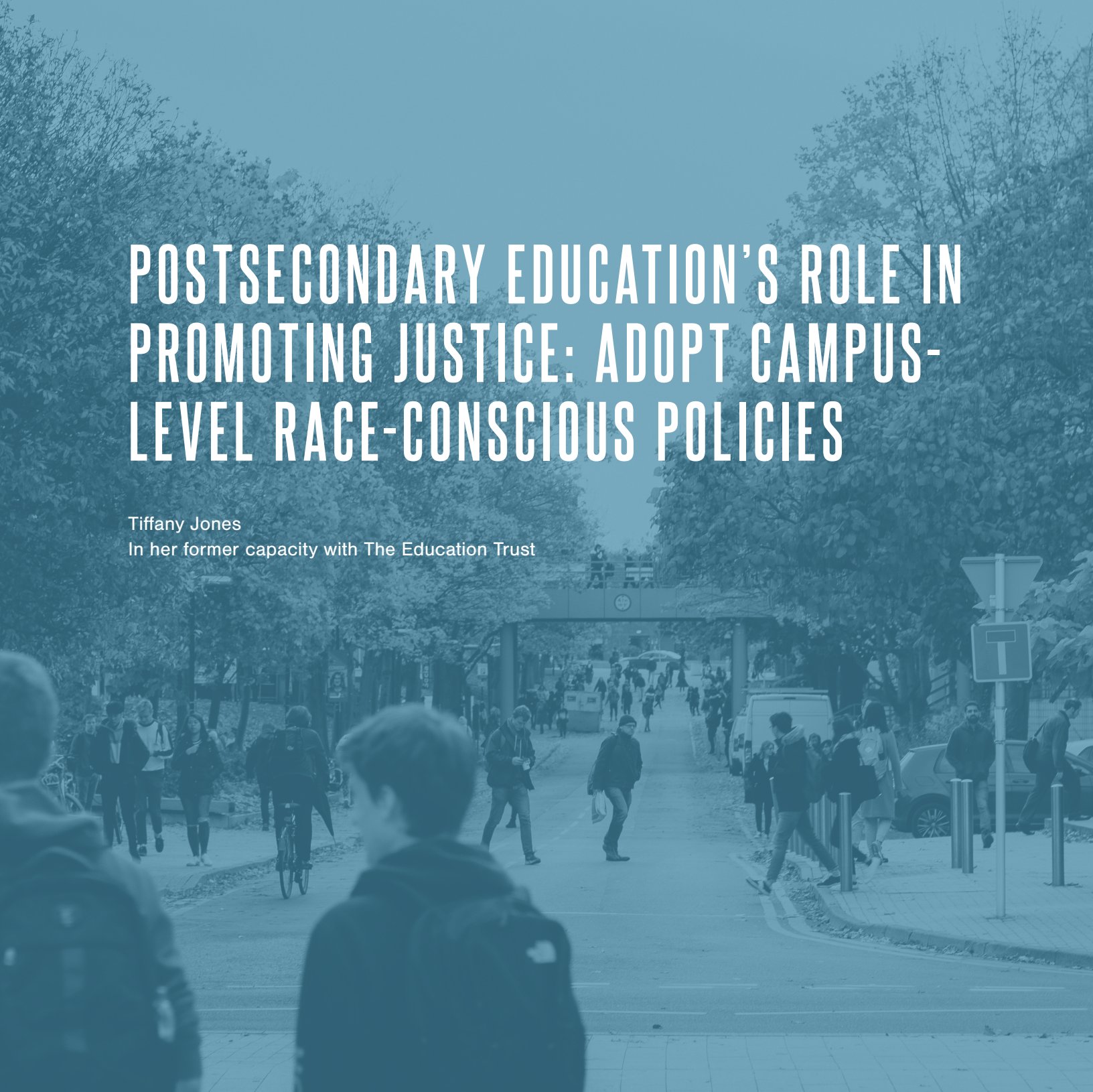


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This paper is one in a foundational research series for the Postsecondary Value Commission authored in summer 2019 by scholars with diverse backgrounds and expertise. The research presented in these papers applies an equity lens to the philosophical, 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.

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The value of higher education is complex. There are the economic payoffs for individuals as indicated by higher wages and opportunities in the job market and for society in creating a stronger tax base and greater prosperity for a state or region. But there are also social benefits like the opportunity to foster civic engagement, personal development, and better cooperation among diverse groups. The problem is, neither the social nor economic benefits of higher education are equitably distributed to people of different racial groups. In 1905, W.E.B. DuBois said when advocating for educational opportunity for Black people, “Either America will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States.” Over a century after Dubois spoke these words, the United States continues to sit at the nexus of destruction and opportunity, with many members of its society remaining ignorant, indifferent, unwilling, or unable to address the inequality that persists among the diversifying population.

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It's easy to assume that although it is slow, we are making progress nonetheless. But that assumption is not always true, especially for Black students. Degree attainment for Black adults bucks the trend of progression over time and has gotten worse.¹ Specifically, there has been very little intergenerational improvement in degree attainment among Black adults: Only 30 percent of younger Black adults (ages 25-34) have earned a degree compared with 35 percent of older Black adults (ages 35-44). Declines in attainment like these should motivate the public and policymakers to take aggressive action.

At the same time, more than 150 years after the 13th amendment was ratified, nearly three out of four Black adults and more than half of White adults describe race relations as “bad,” and the legacy of slavery still has a considerable impact on Black people in American society.² While there is some agreement that racism is still an issue, there is less consensus about policy solutions, with more than three out of four Black adults and yet only one in three White adults believing that the United States has not “gone far enough in giving Blacks equal rights with Whites.”³

It is within this context that policies designed to address racial inequality continue to be challenged. Sharing the belief that racial inequality is a problem isn't enough—what policymakers and many of members of its society do about it matters the most. One reason why degree attainment rates have decreased for younger Black adults is that the use of race-conscious policies like affirmative action were short lived, with only about a decade between the adoption of affirmative action and its first Supreme Court challenge. These policies gave a boost to the generations that were able to benefit, but legal challenges have limited their continued use. Therefore, what the courts decide in the ongoing challenges to affirmative action and the use of race-conscious policy will impact issues of race in higher education and influence how explicitly policymakers at local, state, and federal levels tackle issues of race.

Higher education is one of the few tools that has the potential to disrupt inequitable systems by providing opportunity to those who have been excluded and by educating, motivating, and preparing individuals to address inequality. For higher education to truly benefit our ever-growing, diverse society, the system must provide opportunity to and serve all students well. Research demonstrates that higher education has yet to meet this goal, with disparities especially persistent for students from

low-income families, students of color, students who are first in their family to attend college, and students who work full-time or are parents.⁴ Too often, participating in higher education comes at personal, financial, and emotional costs that are too high for disadvantaged students. The good news is that there is growing political will to provide financial, academic, and social supports to meet the needs of today's students. The challenge is the reluctance to address racial inequality specifically and explicitly.

When it comes to racial inequality in higher education, there is vast information highlighting and measuring disparities. In almost every state, Black students remain underrepresented in public higher education.⁵ Even with the advantage that attending college can provide, Black students who make it to college face additional barriers, including limited opportunities to interact with faculty, curricula that are not reflective of their cultural background and experience, greater struggles identifying resources to pay for living expenses, books, and fees while in college, and not being able to talk to a counselor of color after experiencing racial discrimination and isolation, and more.⁶ These issues translate into differences in outcomes and success for students of color and White students.

The research suggests that income or first-generation status alone does not explain all of the differences in opportunity between students of color and White students. This means that securing support for these communities will require addressing racial disparities directly, an approach that generates substantial resistance from many constituencies. That's because there is real policy and political opposition to explicitly using race in identifying problems and designing solutions. This paper first examines how removing barriers to using race conscious policies in higher education, specifically affirmative action, will help achieve true racial justice in higher education. It then explores several different strategies that will help move the needle closer to racial justice, including not relying on proxies for race, acknowledging the inequities baked into current admissions criteria, accepting that racial inequities are a systemic problem, and measuring both the economic and non-economic outcomes of postsecondary education. Addressing these issues are key to making sure higher education pays off for everyone, but especially for students of color.

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HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY HAS ALWAYS BEEN RACE-CONSCIOUS

Postsecondary education lies at the intersection of so many issues such as healthcare, business, science, and the criminal legal system that shape our lives. Since the leaders of these systems are educated and trained at colleges and universities, higher education is positioned to disrupt and transform inequality or reinforcing it. However, the return on the public's investments in higher education will remain limited if people of color—half of the school age population—do not have equitable opportunities to earn a high-quality degree and the leaders of those systems are not trained to challenge inequality. Leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for rights and resources for “America's poor of all races”⁷ but also advocated for intentional policy aimed at righting

the wrongs of racial injustice, suggesting African Americans should be compensated through “a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures, which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law.” He added that “such measures would certainly be less expensive than any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest.”⁸ The influence of the civil rights and other social movements of the 1950s and 1960s translated into legislation aimed at addressing this racial and social inequality. Dr. King spoke of through the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and an Executive Order that encouraged affirmative action in 1965.

At that time, higher education was in need of change, as a result of a long history of excluding students who were not White, male, or affluent. The states and federal government operated separate and unequal systems of higher education and provided support to colleges and universities that explicitly discriminated against students based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The 1960s and 70s were a period of rapid change in higher education, in which numerous critical incidents that continue to shape equity and opportunity in higher education took place. Chief among these was the Higher Education Act of 1965, passed to support college opportunity for underserved students by ensuring access to higher education for women, establishing the federal financial aid program, and supporting colleges already committed to access and equity like the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In addition, there were court cases like the *United States v. Adams* that resulted in 19 states being required to submit plans for addressing the fact that they had been unfairly giving resources and advantages to White colleges and universities that excluded students based on race and that disadvantaged Black colleges.

The pushback in response to this momentum toward creating a more equitable higher education system was almost immediate. In the 1978 *University of California v. Bakke* case, affirmative action saw its first of many Supreme Court challenges, and while the decision upheld the use of race as one of many factors in college admissions, the use of quotas was banned. What’s more, the decision had a chilling effect on many college campuses, as threat of a lawsuit became a fear for those uncertain about addressing race, and an excuse for those who were not committed. During the following decades the courts heard more cases on affirmative action and several states implemented state-level affirmative action bans. On the other hand, the consequences for states that spent more on White colleges and students than Black ones almost never materialized into new and robust resources for Black colleges and universities, despite court decisions emphasizing the need for states to address racial inequity. This means Black students were not yet provided access to White colleges, and that Black colleges were historically and continually underfunded despite the courts’ decisions that underfunding Black colleges and maintaining segregated systems of higher education was unconstitutional.

These trends toward race-conscious policies in the 1960s and retreat in the late 1970s and beyond matter for students’ opportunities and outcomes. Today, it’s legal for colleges to use race as a factor in admissions, yet only three percent of institutions report using race in admissions decisions.⁹ In states like California, where affirmative action is prohibited, there has been a significant drop in the college enrollment of Black and Latinx students. For example, at UC Berkeley, eight percent of the students enrolled in 1990 were Black. After the 1998 ban on affirmative action, Black enrollment dropped to four percent, then all the way down to two percent in 2016, despite the state of California’s college aged Black population remaining at about nine percent during that time.¹⁰

Black adults born after this retreat from race-conscious policy have degree attainment that is five percentage points lower than the generation before them. Meanwhile, degree attainment among younger White adults born in this time frame is nearly 10 percentage points higher than it is for older White adults.¹¹ This means race-conscious policies are necessary, and gains in higher education equity that were made through affirmative action in prior decades have already been lost.

STRATEGIES FOR MEASURING AND ACHIEVING RACIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Do Not Rely on Proxies for Race

One strategy used for increasing college opportunity and outcomes for students who have been put at a disadvantage because of their race is to offer supports to students based on family income. This practice is common, especially in states that have bans on using race as a factor in college admissions. Unfortunately, this approach does not support students of color nearly as well as using race explicitly. Every single state with an affirmative action ban in place—even if they adopted alternative approaches—has experienced declines in their enrollment of Black students at selective public colleges after the ban. Using proxies like high school attended have not ensured that opportunities are provided equitably to students of color.¹² Research¹³ shows that income-based affirmative action policies do not yield nearly as much racial diversity as race-based policies.

Some states have tried to incentivize equity by giving resources to colleges and universities based on the enrollment and/or outcomes of underserved students, such as low-income students and older adults. Using this approach, colleges in Tennessee increased enrollment of students from low-income backgrounds after the states implemented financial rewards for doing so; however, enrollment of Black students in particular does not increase at the same rate and can even decrease.¹⁴ This means that using income or other measures of socioeconomic status are helpful, but doing so without an explicit focus on racial equity will not result in racial justice. Policymakers should reward colleges based on their service of students of color, as well as students from low-income backgrounds, without making the focus on race optional.

Acknowledge Racial Inequalities Baked into Measures of “Merit”

One critique of affirmative action says that while it’s unfortunate that fewer students of color are getting access to higher education, if they cannot get admitted to college without affirmative action or other incentives to enroll more students of color then perhaps they don’t belong there. However, Educational Testing Service (ETS) research reports¹⁵ little evidence that affirmative action policies produce an actual academic mismatch, nor do affirmative action policies expand access to students of color at colleges for which they are academically unqualified. In

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contrast, affirmative action policies can help correct for inequities baked into the current admissions criteria that disadvantage students of color. These criteria aren't¹⁶ necessarily reliable measures of student ability or potential, and disadvantage students of color. For example, colleges reward students for high grades in advanced placement courses, but students of color are more likely to attend schools that don't offer these courses. What's more, grade inflation is reported to be most problematic at schools with students who are mostly White and wealthy.¹⁷ This demonstrates that the differences in who gets access to what in higher education are driven by criteria that are described as "fair," "neutral," or "merit based"—but in reality, they are not.

Racial Disparities Are a Systemic—Not Only an Individual—Problem

Racial disparities in student outcomes exist because of inequities in the systems in which students are educated. If policymakers provide more resources to White students than Black students, over time the result of these funding differences is lower college completion rates for Black students and other students of color. These patterns in systemic racial gaps don't start in college. P-12 schools serving students of color receive fewer resources, the teaching profession lacks racial diversity resulting in most students being taught by mostly White women, and more frequent and harsher discipline practices are applied to students of color than their White peers.¹⁸

These same issues continue in higher education, with fewer resources provided to the colleges where students of color are most likely to attend, a lack of racial diversity among the professoriate, and the lack of social and cultural supports on campus. What's more, nearly 90 percent of tenured, full professors are White.¹⁹

Once in college, Black undergraduates are more likely to attend community colleges and for-profit colleges than their White peers (46 percent and 35 percent, respectively), which impacts their likelihood of completing.²⁰ These colleges have lower completion rates²¹ and higher default rates,²² suggesting that their students do not realize the economic benefits typically associated with going to college and earning a degree.²³ In particular, community colleges also have fewer resources per student, which means Black undergraduates are less likely to attend colleges that could provide much-needed financial aid, or to provide adequate resources for instructional spending and academic and student support services. These funding disparities compound existing racial disparities in wealth: the result is Black students attend schools where they are often asked to pay more after accounting for financial aid, despite racial wealth gaps that suggest they are less likely to have the resources to do so.²⁴ In defining the value of higher education, closing the racial equity gaps that exist within systems, especially measured by the resources and conditions provided to students of color as compared to their White peers, is critical.

Measure Both the Economic and Non-Economic Value of Higher Education for Racial Justice

The economic benefits of a college degree matter for all students, but especially for students of color. Issues like housing segregation and the devaluing of Black homes²⁵ and wealth lost from the housing crisis after the 2012 recession mean that Black students—and their families—have fewer resources to pay for college.²⁶ Not only do these students have less to pay for college, racism and labor market discrimination limit their ability to make sure their degree pays off. Employers

discriminate against people of color in hiring, in assigning more precarious employment prospects to Black workers than White workers, and in requiring more education of Black workers for the same job as White workers.²⁷ In response to this discrimination, students of color are often required to pursue expensive graduate degrees to be competitive for good jobs.²⁸ In doing so, they end up taking on more debt without realizing the same economic returns as their peers. Higher education can help minimize some of the impact of economic racial inequality by making high quality and affordable credentials more accessible to students of color. It is important to measure which degrees have the biggest economic payoffs for students of color, to track the impact of student debt far beyond default, and to assess overall economic wellbeing and participation in wealth generation (i.e., home buying, etc.).

While the economic benefits of higher education are incredibly important, so too are the non-economic outcomes (Sidebox 1). Systems beyond higher education—including criminal justice, business, healthcare, and housing—are led by people with a postsecondary education. If those leaders leave higher education better equipped to tackle issues of race, these leaders can begin to transform our society into a more just, equitable, and inclusive one—and that contribution demonstrates the value of higher education.

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Sidebox 1. The Non-Economic Value of Higher Education for Racial Justice

The growth of mass incarceration has had impacts on all communities but has disproportionately impacted Black and Latino communities. Although fixing higher education policy doesn't automatically dismantle the prison industrial complex, there are issues at the intersections such as prison education, which is one of few strategies that has effectively reduced the likelihood that someone will return to prison and improve the environment inside of prisons. The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison reports that many prison education programs are “ill-equipped to support faculty and staff in reflecting on how race, class, gender, ability, sexuality and other identity or status markers might impact their interest in, or approach to, teaching in prison, as well as their experiences while doing so.” Therefore, higher education for students who are incarcerated, who are disproportionately Black and Brown, could be strengthened if higher education was designed to not only increase the number of students who can participate in prison education programs through financial aid, but also to increase the number and support for faculty and higher education leaders of color and encourage supportive campus racial climates and use of culturally responsive teaching.

Higher education can better prepare its students to address issues of race, on-campus and in the roles they will take after graduation, using strategies like requiring diversity courses, hiring diverse faculty, tracking who gets access to which academic programs by race, and equipping all faculty to re-design curricula and practices that reflect today's diverse students. Strategies for measuring how successful higher education institutions are in creating a healthy racial climate and educating students on issues of race include curricula/syllabi reviews, climate surveys, surveys of student engagement, surveys of academic self-concept and interactions with mentorship and faculty, and studies on the impact of diversity courses.²⁹ While, these measures may be helpful, the benefits of medical doctors, lenders, and judges making decisions based less on fear and stereotypes about people of color could have impact for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

In a climate in which affirmative action continues to be challenged and racial tensions at colleges and within society are heightened, there is a great sense of urgency to develop and implement race-conscious policies. In addition, clarity with respect to the ways higher education policy can address racial equity issues can open the door for reform. Most importantly, an understanding of the value of higher education should be grounded in opportunity for racially minoritized students and preparation for all students to advance racial justice in higher education and beyond.

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