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The Invisible Tax: Exploring Black Student Engagement at Historically White Institutions

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Abstract

Given the upsurge of political demonstrations by Black students in response to the highly publicized killings of unarmed Black people, this paper explores student engagement theory through the racialized experiences of Black students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Employing autoethnography and analyzing secondary literature on historical and contemporary experiences of Black students in higher education, this paper argues that traditional readings of student engagement theory fail to capture the complexities of Black student engagement. In confronting anti-Blackness, these students pay an invisible tax that manifests in the mental, physical, and emotional resources that could be allocated to promote success in the campus environment but are instead utilized to merely survive as students. Black students experience a set of inherent dilemmas; they are both invested in higher education for social uplift, and they simultaneously employ Black nationalist ideals through their student organizing—these challenges are present within the broader trajectory of Black education.

Keywords: student engagement, black students, Historically White Institutions, the invisible tax

The Invisible Tax

There has been a recent upsurge in political demonstrations by Black students around the country, calling attention to the lack of justice in the U.S. legal system for Black people and exposing its relationship to the anti-Blackness that manifests within collegiate experiences. The nation was fixated on events at the University of Missouri in the fall of 2015, when 32 Black football players refused to play until the university president resigned. The president of the university had been publicly criticized by students for his lack of attention to racial issues on campus and the institution's lack of attention to racial injustice in Missouri more broadly. Black students around the country protested and stood in solidarity with the students at the University of Missouri because of their shared experiences.

Similarly, on December 4, 2014, Black undergraduate students at UC Berkeley staged an occupation of the Golden Bear Café, the main eatery in the heart of campus. As a Black graduate student, I stood in solidarity on the sidelines. These students, wearing all black, blocked the entrances and lounge area of the café for four and a half hours, an amount of time that symbolically represented how long Michael Brown's body laid out in

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the open after he was gunned down, while unarmed, by a White police officer in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Over the megaphone, Black students shouted about their frustration and rage regarding the failure of systems of the state to protect and value the lives of Black people as equally human. They also shared personal testimonies of how they themselves continue to experience racial hostility from the police and on campus as students enrolled at one of the country's top universities. For instance, one Black female student shouted over the megaphone, "People refuse to include us in study groups because they don't see us as smart, no matter how hard we work." In short, the students recognized their experiences of alienation on campus as part and parcel of the broader, systemic condemnation of Black life.

The ways in which Black students experience their campuses must be analyzed for a deeper understanding of how race continues to shape involvement within learning communities. To address this concern, I explore the following question: How do Black students' racialized experiences impact their campus engagement and identities as learners? This question offers an opportunity to think critically about how student engagement takes form in Black students' experiences at Historically White Institutions (HWIs)[2].

The student demonstrations recounted in the opening of this essay are reminiscent of my own experience as an undergraduate; however, the puzzled reactions from non-Black students on campus and university administrators were what forced me to explore deeper questions about Black student engagement on Berkeley's campus and beyond. These puzzled reactions are documented by recent reports from a campus climate survey, on which non-Black undergraduate students overestimated the quality of Black students' experiences (UC Berkeley Division of Equity & Inclusion, 2014). The survey data showed that 87% of White students and 89% of Asian students reported that the campus was "respectful/very respectful" for African American students, while 73% of Chicano/Latino students and only 47% of African American students reported the same. These data demonstrate a disparity between how the broader campus community perceives the experience of Black students and how Black students perceive their own reality. These findings are consistent with the results of a 2010 Berkeley campus survey, on which Black students constituted the highest percentage of students who felt "disrespected" or valued less than their peers by the institution and other students (UC Berkeley Office of Planning & Analysis, 2010). Based on recent campus climate reports across the UC campuses, this trend persists (UC Regents, 2015).

While student engagement theorists have demonstrated the importance of student involvement in their campus communities and institutional action to support student development and persistence, these theories do not capture the inherent dilemmas that continue to exist within Black student engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2008; Kuh, 2009). Black student engagement has historically been characterized by resistance to Black

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[2] I use the term Historically White Institutions because it denotes a history in which these universities were created for the betterment of White students while explicitly excluding other racial groups; furthermore, while some institutions (such as UC Berkeley), are no longer "predominantly White" given the increase in the Asian student community, using HWI still acknowledges the White hegemonic culture that characterizes student experiences.

exclusion, institutional neglect, and racial issues that exist off campus but also inform Black identities. A close analysis of Black student engagement also reveals how Black students continue to hold a belief in education as a tool for social uplift that at times conflicts with pragmatic Black nationalist leanings—a dilemma that is inherent in the broader trajectory of Black educational history. I rely on secondary literature and autoethnography from my 10 years of experiences as a UC Berkeley student (undergraduate and graduate) to substantiate the theoretical argument of this paper.

In the section that follows, I review literature on student engagement and the work of Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars, who identify the significance of centering the socio-historical context of race and anti-Blackness for deeper understandings of Black student experiences at HWIs. The remainder of the paper will explore my conceptualization of *the invisible tax*, which presents a more complex analysis of Black student engagement. It complicates how Black students' time and energy is disproportionately used to mitigate their experiences with anti-Blackness on campus through various forms of oppositional campus involvement.

Black Student Engagement

Kuh (2009) proposed that "student engagement represents the time and efforts students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). Scholars of higher education have demonstrated that strong student engagement can be a critical predictor of student persistence and graduation from college (Bean, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2000). Astin (1984/1999) asserts that students' involvement in their collegiate environment supports learning and positive development, and he defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). In short, student engagement, which includes students' active involvement in their collegiate environment and the cultivation of that involvement by the institutions themselves, supports student persistence (college completion). Student engagement is two-fold: it requires both institutional action and student time and energy (Kuh, 2009).

Relatedly, Harper and Quaye (2008) have forwarded that student engagement leads to a number of measurable outcomes, including: "cognitive and intellectual skills development; college adjustment; moral and ethical development; practical competence and skills transferability; the accrual of social capital; and psychosocial development, productive racial and gender identity formation, and positive images of self" (p. 3). They encouraged universities to "move beyond sameness and customize educational practices" (p. 12) in order to achieve positive engagement and outcomes for all.

Conventional readings of student engagement theory, however, fail to capture the complexity of the ways in which Black student-leaders at HWIs are forced to allocate their involvement. The central claim of this essay is that Black student engagement at HWIs has largely been shaped by resistance to White hegemonic educational spaces that exclude Black students, their experiences, and their cultures. In this way, Black student leaders work to counteract the experiences of exclusion that largely characterize their existence. Black student engagement is by and large oppositional to institutional climate as opposed to being supported or cultivated by it (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

While Black student engagement manifests within the physical and social boundaries of collegiate spaces, it continues to be driven by an ethos of critique of the university and its institutional climate, which many Black students find to be unwelcoming and racially hostile (Harper, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000).

Critical Race Theory and Black Student Engagement

Nimako's (2014) notion of "parallel lives and intertwined belonging" (p. 59) characterizes the relationship between Black students and their broader campus communities. While Black students and their peers share the same university campus, they have different experiences and historical ties to these institutions. In other words, Black students occupy their university campus alongside other racial peer groups (intertwined belongings), yet they exist on these campuses with different relationships to the institutions themselves (parallel lives). The complexities of Black students' parallel lived experiences must be acknowledged when raising questions about their campus engagement.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars have demonstrated the need to center race when interrogating educational structures, policies, and discourse (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). This body of work significantly informs the analytical lens of this paper. More pointedly, Patton (2016) demonstrated the specific need to "disrupt postsecondary prose, or the ordinary, predictable, and taken for granted ways in which the academy functions as a bastion of racism/White Supremacy" (p. 317). Taking it further, Dumas and ross (2016) demonstrate the importance of studying the schooling experiences of Black people from a CRT lens that further engages the complex social and historical particularities of Blackness, which they refer to as *BlackCrit*. Their framework pushes scholars concerned with the schooling experiences of Black people to "pointedly address how anti-Blackness, which is something different than White supremacy, informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice" (p. 3). While White supremacy suggests that all other racial groups are distinctly inferior, anti-Blackness is an inverted understanding of this "racial contract," whereby Blackness is the antithesis of the White, modern, *human* subject (Dumas & ross, 2016; Mills, 1997). Thus, my interrogation of Black student engagement is informed by the socio-historical understanding of how the misrecognition of Black humanity (anti-Blackness) continues to be articulated in and through institutions of higher education (Wilder, 2013; Woodson, 1933/2008; Wynter, 1984). This anti-Blackness manifests through microaggressions, skewed admissions policies that result in disproportionately low numbers of Black students, scarce numbers of Black faculty, and academic disciplines that continue to distort the lived experiences of Black people.

In analyzing the hidden costs and conflicts that come with being a Black student on the campuses of HWIs, I wish to present Black student leaders with a language to critically analyze their experiences. Furthermore, I implore school administrators, faculty, and staff who are working to support Black students to be more vigilant in addressing the peculiar positionality of these students in their university environments. The lived experiences of Black students are heavily informed by the functionality of anti-Blackness within the metanarrative of America; therefore, race, and Blackness in particular, must be

centered when theorizing about the ways in which Black students navigate their collegiate experiences.

An Unanticipated Autoethnography

I will explore the concept of the invisible tax using autoethnography (Alexander, 1999) and secondary literature. More specifically, I use historical and contemporary scholarship on Black students in higher education and my ten years as a participant in the Black student community at UC Berkeley. These sources are collectively used to inaugurate the invisible tax as an apt descriptor of Black student engagement at HWIs.

Alexander (1999) has offered a useful model that distinguishes autobiography, or the review and organized narration of one's biographic past, from autoethnography. As he asserts, "The critical move of making sense of the *autobiographic past* is the project of autoethnography" (p. 309). It is the picking apart of distinct lived experiences "within a specified cultural context which combines the self-reflection of autobiography and the intense scrutiny of 'other' as found in ethnography" (p. 309). It affords an opportunity to use theory as a sense-making tool to develop "critical understanding of self and other and those places where we intersect and overlap" (p. 310). The conceptual understandings that emerge from this picking apart, or critical investigative reflection, can lead to grounded theories that expose the interworkings of cultural politics in particular cultural sites. Within this essay, I analyze personal experiences, the encounters of students whom I closely mentored, along with relevant secondary literature, to generate understandings of where these narratives intersect. In this case, the invisible tax offers language to unpack how the racialized experiences of Black students at HWIs shape how they engage their college campus. While employing this method, I am "acutely aware of…the shifting borders of my intention: self-reflection and research" (p. 311).

My journey to this autoethnography was unanticipated. As a first generation high school graduate and Black male college student between 2006 and 2010, I participated in and led many organizations that sustained Black student subculture(s) and addressed our socio-emotional needs as a marginalized group. I supported the African American themed housing program, served as president of a historically Black fraternity, and worked to increase Black recruitment and retention through various student organizations. Working within these organizations connected me with larger regional and national affiliations, such as the Afrikan Black Coalition Conference, an umbrella organization founded by Black students across the UC campuses. In 2010, I began my doctoral studies at UC Berkeley and took on an advisory role for many Black undergraduate student leaders and organizations. I have witnessed these students suffer from the same fatigue that I did, while being driven by the same passion for uplifting their communities on campus and beyond.

While I am not a scholar of higher education, both my experiences and the trends I have witnessed across Black students' experiences have compelled me to write this article. As a graduate student, I had the opportunity to reflect more critically on these experiences and to engage in numerous conversations with students on campus and Black alumni from universities across the nation. This analysis captures the labor of love taken up by Black student leaders across the nation. Much of the work done by these students supports the building of spaces and networks not only for themselves but also for future

Black students. Black students engage in such work with a shared understanding that their universities will offer little support for them; they find this work to be essential for Black student survival.

To be clear, I employ autoethnography as a method, but I did not take copious field notes nor did I systematically document events across the 10 years that are accounted for in this essay; I was simply being a student and leader the best I knew how, with no intentions of conducting research on this topic. Yet, the experiences recalled here remain vivid in my mind. The recurring, distinctly racialized experiences of Black students (including me) compounded as a characteristic feature of my lived experience at UC Berkeley. The affective memory of these incidents is formidable in my "educational lifescript" (Alexander, 1999, p. 311). I readily recall what it feels like to be an active participant in the Black student community on campus.

This paper is situated within the context of my experiences and observations at a top university, but my conclusions and arguments should not simply be read as anecdotal. The wide coverage of Black student demands and protests at similar institutions across the country demonstrates that many of the concerns addressed in this paper are generalizable to Black student experiences at similar institutions. The theoretical arguments made in this paper and embodied in the autoethnographic data are substantiated by the historical literature on the history of Black student activism and social science scholarship on Black students' experiences at HWIs.

Conceptualizing the Invisible Tax

Generally stated, taxes are fees imposed upon individual parties of a collective entity to pay for public expenditures, or for public good. Student engagement loosely functions as a tax that students and institutions are expected to pay, to enhance the quality of campus life and support student persistence. In theory, student engagement should be a combination of both student involvement and institutional action centered on positive student development. This two-sided narrative is not usually the case for Black students. Given that Black students are isolated within the mainstream campus experience, they do not benefit from this social, cultural, and academic vitality in the same ways as other student populations, particularly students of the majority group (Harper, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000). To make up for this deficit, Black students are taxed to create alternative spaces of support for themselves within, yet separate from, a university they find to be racially hostile (Museus, 2008; Solorzano et al., 2000). The labor required to create and sustain counter-spaces (described in Microagressions and Counter-space below) and Black student organizations functions as an invisible tax that Black students take up at the margins of HWIs. In this way, there is an additional level of sacrifice required of Black students to sustain their communities, which goes beyond the microaggressions they encounter; their sacrifice also includes the counteractions they take to mitigate these assaults.

Microagressions and Counter-space: A Dual Conceptualization of Black Students' Sacrifice

While universities no longer explicitly exclude Black students, racial hostility continues to circumscribe their experiences at HWIs. Scholars have captured how

microaggressions—subtle attacks directed at people of color in majority spaces through verbal and nonverbal communication—are endemic to Black students' experiences at HWIs (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000). After reviewing scholarship on campus climate between the years of 1992 and 2007, Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that scholars consistently reported that racial/ethnic minorities experienced "isolation, alienation, and stereotyping" (p. 12) as a normal trend on campuses where they were not the majority. Their study, which surveyed 287 White and minority students across five HWIs from different regions in the United States, also showed that Black students expressed the highest degrees of dissatisfaction with the college social environment.

Responding to their isolation, Black students have historically exerted their agency to hold universities accountable, as noted by the Black student protest movement of the 1960s that produced Black Studies departments and the continual student protests occurring across campuses (Biondi, 2012; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Glasker, 2002; Ricks & McNair, 2013; Rojas, 2010; Taylor, 2009). Additionally, Black student leaders perpetually work to create safe spaces on campuses that are antagonistic to their very presence—CRT scholars have come to understand these spaces as *counter-spaces* (Solorzano et al., 2000). Counter-spaces are "created within African American student organizations, organizations or offices that provide services to African American and other students, Black fraternities and sororities, peer groups, and Black student-organized academic study halls" (p. 70).

Black student-leaders work to maintain "subcultures" (Museus, 2008, p. 580) through Black student organizations that aid students in adjusting, maintaining strong ties to their cultural heritage, and persisting. They employ these tactics to cope with the accumulated microaggressions, and at times egregious forms of racism, which they continue to experience. Additionally, Black students, through closely-knit communal ties, take on critical mentor-teacher roles for one another. Harper (2013) has demonstrated this phenomenon through his notion of *peer-pedagogies*. He builds on student engagement theory to highlight Black students' agency in constructing intricate educational systems amongst one another. These networks and educational systems do racial socialization work, and are both discursive and physical spaces where more senior students pass on communal knowledge to support their peers behind them. Older students work to sustain these spaces through recruitment and leadership transferal. These counter-spaces, constructed through student led initiatives, are the necessary coping mechanisms that Black students take on to challenge their experiences of isolation and exclusion within the larger campus community.

The consistent coping (through e.g., counter-spaces) and prolonged state of insurgency (through e.g., reoccurring student protests) lead to what Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) refer to as *racial battle fatigue*, which is "the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments" (p. 555). Coping with microaggressions forces Black students to spend their energy and personal resources on constantly resisting mundane racism, which then "depletes psychological and physiological resources needed in otherwise important, creative, and productive areas of life" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 40).

The invisible tax that Black students pay manifests through the mental, physical, and emotional resources that they could allocate to initiatives that promote academic and extracurricular success, but instead utilize to merely survive as students in a racially hostile campus environment. The constant coping deployed by Black students, and the fatigue it often causes, are both endemic to the invisible tax. In other words, the invisible tax is comprised of both Black students' strategies of resistance and the eventual exhaustion they experience from their labor. This is a tax that is both self-imposed for survival purposes, and imposed upon them by an institutional climate that neglects their needs as students in a variety of ways.

The concept of an invisible tax is reminiscent of the "double tax" paid by Black communities during Jim Crow. To support Black schools that were cheated out of state funding by local White school authorities, Black families and teachers contributed additional resources—through sweat equity, donated resources, and community fundraisers—to make up for the deficits (Anderson, 1988). Similarly, Black students at HWIs have to assume additional labor to create spaces within the university campus that affirm their cultures and address their group-specific challenges.

The Relationality Between the Invisible Tax and Black Student Enrollment

The invisible tax is even more exacerbated at highly selective HWIs in the contemporary moment, particularly when we consider that enrollment has decreased for Black students at these schools (Kolodner, 2015; Reardon et al., 2012). This decreased number of students often translates to more work on the part of enrolled Black students to maintain Black counter-spaces. According to Reardon, Baker, and Klasik (2012), the disparity between Black and White student enrollments at highly selective universities widened between 1982 and 2004. In 2004, "White students were five times as likely as Black students to enroll in a highly selective college and almost three times as likely as Hispanic students" (p. 15). Relatedly, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2006) has drawn attention to the failure of state flagship schools across the country to achieve racial parity in their student populations. While state flagship universities are research-intensive public institutions (typically the oldest in their state), they continue to demonstrate a failing commitment to Black students, as denoted by their declining enrollment. Between 2001 and 2004, 26 flagship schools showed a consistent decline in Black student enrollment (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2006). Kolodner (2015) demonstrated that this continues to be a trend.

Kolodner (2015) reported that Black students made up 5% of the students enrolled at U.S. state flagship universities, while they comprised approximately 14 percent of the overall population. Black student-leaders tirelessly labor to sustain on-campus community organizations, spaces, and events committed to a larger project of Black uplift—even when declining numbers of Black student enrollment signal diminished support for these activities. The fatigue associated with the invisible tax is particularly pressing today, given the consistent decline of Black students enrolled at highly selective HWIs after the chipping away of affirmative action (Reardon et al., 2012).

Teranishi and Briscoe (2008) have specifically explored how California's Proposition 209, which ended affirmative action in the state, impacted the experiences of Black students. Not only did this legislation drastically decrease Black student enrollment, but

the public discourse surrounding it created feelings of dis-ease and made many high-achieving Black students feel unwelcomed by the institutions. In a study of Black students who were admitted to UC campuses but chose not to attend, Contreras et al. (2015) found that many students felt unwelcomed and that a number of other socio-economic barriers prevented them from enrolling. Contreras et al. also noted the imprint of a "hyper-implementation of Proposition 209" (p. 3), meaning the provisions of 209 have created intense scrutiny toward attempts to address matters of diversity (race in particular) that impedes on the core mission of the public university.

The Invisible Tax and Anti-Blackness at HWIs as Endemic and Symbiotic

While it is easy to assume that students make a personal choice to shoulder the invisible tax, I aim to complicate this notion and instead focus on how these activities are survival tools for Black students. The tax that Black students incur is both imposed and assumed; hostile campus climates and a lack of institutional support to ameliorate the challenges Black students experience has forced them to do the work of creating spaces that are inclusive of their interests and cultures. My reading of this phenomenon is informed by a critical premise of CRT: that the logics of race and racism continue to be an autopoetic of U.S. society and the systems that organize it (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Despite university neglect, Black student-leaders take up this work as both burden and pleasure. Therefore, while I use the verbs "assume" or "impose" to capture how Black students are taxed on their university campuses, I acknowledge the limitations of both terms; they undermine how the invisible tax is operationalized *upon* Black students and *by* them simultaneously.

Some may question how Black students continue to experience HWIs as racially hostile and exclusionary, given the national shifts towards inclusion and diversity. These rhetorical shifts towards multiculturalism are in many ways more semantic than actionable (Dumas & ross, 2016). Ferguson (2012) offered a useful analysis of the academy, power, and difference that elucidates the tensions that have persisted in relationship to minority communities in mainstream academic spaces. Revisiting the student protest movement of the 1960s that led to the establishment of the interdisciplinary fields of Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Women Studies, Ferguson argued that the academy modeled for the state how to quell minority resistance in a manner that preserved systems of power.

> With the admission of women and people of color into the predominantly White academic setting, the economic character of the American academy did not simply vanish. The academy would begin to put, keep in reserve, and save minoritized subjects and knowledges in an archival fashion, that is, by devising ways to make those subjects and knowledges respect power and its "laws" (p. 12).

While universities have evolved to include a diversity of administrators and programs (e.g., diversity officers and Ethnic Studies), these are products of concessions to the original student demands for redistribution of power altogether. In these ways, power, as it manifested in higher education institutions, is an extension of White supremacist

capitalism produced by a formula for "redefining and perfecting its practice of exclusion and regulation" (p. 12).

The invisible tax offers a description of how Black students' engagement (often operating through acts of coping) holds a symbiotic relationship to their experiences with racial hostility and lack of institutional support. Their acts of engagement on campus are extensively centered around responding to, resisting, and dealing with their encounters of anti-Blackness, which manifest through low student admissions, low retention, microaggressions, and a negation of Black cultural heritage in and out of classrooms. In naming this symbiosis of Black student engagement and Black student exclusion at HWIs, the invisible tax offers an opportunity to explore the ontological space these students occupy as they navigate their university. In other words, this effort to describe the invisible tax is also an opportunity to get beneath the quotidian aspects of Black student life on these campuses, one that's lived in a prolonged state of insurgency. While Black student-leaders are invested in the university ideal of social uplift, they simultaneously possess an oppositional consciousness to the university itself. They understand their life at the university to be both caustic and beneficial. This suggests that Black students exist in a space of contradiction. However, as I will later demonstrate, this tension has been prevalent in the broader landscape of the Black educational trajectory.

Although this paper has an exclusive focus on the lived realities of Black students, it is worth noting that the concept of the invisible tax can be applied to the experiences of Black professors, who often times take on a vital supportive role for Black students (Jackson, 2015). For instance, striking similarities can be drawn between the experiences analyzed in this essay and that which was described in "An Open Letter of Love to Black Students" (Black Space, 2014) signed by hundreds of Black faculty members across the nation in response to the incidents in Ferguson, Missouri. These faculty members offered to Black students, "You, with your stories of erasure break our hearts because you are family, because your stories of erasure ultimately are stories of violence, because your stories mirror our experiences, past and present" (para. 9). The act of writing the letter itself represents the labor of the invisible tax. On university campuses, racial hostility is a quotidian feature of Black students' experiences and similarly for Black professors. These dynamics contribute to what Carroll (1998) has called mundane extreme environmental stress, which accumulates through racial microaggressions and the energy spent having to confront it on a continual basis.

Until now, the concept of taxation has been presented as a conceptual tool to trace how Black students' experiences of isolation and racial hostility compel them to create counter-spaces and campus subcultures to sustain their communities. While student engagement is theorized as both student involvement on campus and the cultivation of that involvement by universities themselves to improve general campus life, Black student engagement often emerges out of protest to hostile campus cultures and from a lack of institutional support. Thus, Black students feel less included or empowered by the broader campus culture than the majority of their peers, and are forced to create marginal spaces of engagement to offset the caustic experiences within the campus community. The invisible tax incurred by Black students offers a more complex reading of student engagement that accounts for how student involvement, and campus support for such, moves in varying directions for students of different racial groups. The inputs and outputs

of general student engagement theory are impacted when we account for the variability of race, and Blackness in particular.

Historicizing the Invisible Tax

Black educational history demonstrates that the oppositional nature of Black student engagement is not only a contemporary phenomenon. Black student engagement has historically emerged out of desperation and resistance to the anti-Blackness that is inherent in American institutions. Through notions of self-help, Black students have labored to make up for their universities' neglect of their group-specific needs. Thus, they assume the invisible tax as a means of offsetting the feelings of "onlyness" (Harper et al., 2011) that has continued to characterize their experiences at HWIs.

An early marker of Black student engagement at mainstream higher educational institutions is the creation of Black student fraternal organizations. The first of this kind was Alpha Phi Alpha, founded at Cornell University in 1906. Charles H. Wesley (1929/2008), the third African American to receive a PhD in History from Harvard after W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, documented how Alpha Phi Alpha's founding came as a result of the low student retention and general social isolation that Black students experienced on campus. In the 1905—1906 academic year, six African American students, nearly half of Cornell's Black student population, did not return. The formation of Alpha Phi Alpha was the Black students' response to this retention crisis. Thus, Black inter-collegiate fraternities emerged as a means of creating a supportive academic and social environment for Black students amidst a racially hostile campus climate. As an early marker of Black student engagement, this highlights the dialectical relationship between Black campus engagement and institutional neglect of Black students' needs to be a historical trend.

Furthermore, while six of the nine historically Black collegiate fraternities and sororities were founded at Howard University (an historically Black college) as opposed to at HWIs, they were all created as organizations committed to the causes of social justice and racial uplift (Ross, 2000). This reinforces the notion that Black student engagement transcends the borders of the college campus and is part and parcel of a larger collective struggle for Black freedom. This positions Black student engagement as an extension of the Black counterpublic sphere (Dawson, 1994), which has historically emerged as a result of Black people's exclusion from the dominant public sphere. However, it is also a result of Black agency employed to maintain these spaces for cultural nourishment and to interrogate political, social, and economic factors from their own racialized positionality (Dawson, 1994).

The demand for Black Studies in the 1960s further demonstrates how Black student engagement emerged to confront universities' failure to meet their needs as a marginalized group (Biondi, 2012). Black power ideology informed these demands; this concept was often articulated as a desire for Black self-determination over economic and social policies that impacted Black communities. Black power, as a mantra of Black Nationalist politics, became increasingly prevalent as the gains of the Civil Rights movement were increasingly understood as legal victories more so than lived and material change. Black students were demanding a relevant education that not only incorporated their histories and voices, but that also engaged the larger issues of their

community. The militant rhetoric of the Black power era influenced the objectives of this historic movement led by Black students (Biondi, 2012; Rojas, 2010; Rooks, 2006; Taylor, 2009). The demand for Black Studies in the 1960s exemplifies the invisible tax in that it captures how Black students have historically experienced the ecological and epistemic underpinnings of the university to be detached from their racialized identities (Nasir, 2011) and furthermore, how they have engaged their campus out of opposition to their intellectual and cultural isolation. While these historical citations of the invisible tax have helped to contextualize the concept within the broader trajectory of Blacks in higher education, the following sections will draw from contemporary examples of Black students experiences—largely taken from my own autobiographic past.

The Invisible Tax at UC Berkeley

Berkeley was one of the many institutions that erupted during the late 1960s student movement, when Black students demanded Black Studies. In the 21st century, Black student engagement at Berkeley continues to be articulated through resistance (Ricks & McNair, 2013; Taylor, 2009). The UC Berkeley campus climate data collected by Rankin and Associates Consulting (2014) highlight that current Black students continue to feel isolated during their campus experience at higher rates than their White counterparts. From 2006 to 2016, I personally witnessed how these ongoing encounters with racism and microaggressions continue to shape Black student engagement at UC Berkeley. The examples that follow are thematically organized, rather than chronologically, to demonstrate the varying ways that the invisible tax continues to emerge in Black students experiences at HWIs. Furthermore, this thematic organization is not meant to suggest that these themes represent isolated encounters, because they often overlap.

Participant in and Witness of the Invisible Tax at Berkeley

My experiences at Berkeley are in many ways reflective of the larger trends documented in scholarship on Black students at HWIs. For example, as a prospective student visiting campus, I had experienced first-hand the peer pedagogies that are central to maintaining the Black counter-spaces on Berkeley's campus. They also taught us about the history of resistance by Black students who had been continuously fighting against the hostility experienced from both university policies and other students. This knowledge was shared through student panels and often times through formal lectures and presentations.

Throughout my time growing up in Compton, California, I was surrounded by peers and instructors that looked like me. I attended a small Black Christian school in my neighborhood from kindergarten through eighth grade, and a relatively successful high school in Watts, with predominantly Black and Brown students. When I came to Berkeley, I knew there would be few African American students. During the spring of 2006, I attended "Black Senior Weekend," which was hosted by the Black Recruitment and Retention Center, and heard first-hand experiences from other Black students on campus. They warned us that we would feel isolated at times, but simultaneously assured us that the Black student community, though small in number, was very close-knit and that they looked out for one another.

I had in fact experienced this tightly-woven community during "Black Senior Weekend." High school seniors attended and were hosted by other Black students on campus—most of whom lived in the African American Themed Housing Program (affectionately referred to as "The Afro Floor"). Beginning with my first visit to campus, I witnessed the labor of Black students who worked to create a memorable and welcoming experience for me and about one hundred other Black students who attended. I personally received an invitation via a phone call; a student representative arranged my plane ticket, and Black students organized all of the events I attended over the course of the weekend. We had food, social events, and conversations that continued into the early morning hours with freshmen through seniors already attending UC Berkeley. All of these students encouraged us to enroll and attend in the fall. They explained to us why they worked so hard to recruit more Black students, and shared why they were personally invested in our success. I did not realize it then, but I was being primed for the responsibilities I would be expected to assume once I arrived that fall. For example, we were taught about past student protests such as the demands for Black Studies in the 1960s and a number of post-Prop 209 protests staged by Black students called "The Black Out" that began in 2001. I would participate in the third iteration of this political demonstration during my senior year in 2010.

"The Black Out": Key Themes in My Experiences with Black Student Engagement

Responding to the dramatic decrease in Black student enrollment post-affirmative action, UC Berkeley's Black students staged a silent protest, referred to as "The Black Out," in 2001. This student demonstration was triggered by the decrease in Black student enrollment at the turn of the 21st century, in addition to the university's failure to address a number of requests made by students of color. Black student-leaders circulated a flyer supporting this demonstration with the following title in bold letters, "!!!BLACK OUT!!! THE DIMINISHING BLACK POPULATION IS DEVASTATED!!!" The flyer addressed a number of student concerns: low admission rates for Black students contrasted with disproportionate admission rates of Black student-athletes, a hostile school climate, and student demands for a multicultural center in the student union that had been ignored by administration. The students dressed in all black with their mouths covered, locked arms, and blocked Sather Gate, the main path through the campus. A handout proclaimed, "We have been SILENCED and IGNORED! For these reasons and many others, we now stand as visual representations of this CRISIS!" Black student enrollment has continued to diminish over the years, and students have responded similarly. Whereas Black students represented 4.8% of the student population during the 2001 Black Out (as reported in student literature), they represented 4.2% during the 2003-2004 academic year when a second Black Out was staged, and in 2010, my senior year, a third Black Out was held when the Black student population dropped to 3.25% (Ricks & McNair, 2013).[3]

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[3] Various independent and university-affiliated news outlets documented the Black Out events ("Black students stage campus 'blackout,'" 2004; Marc, 2001).

The Black Outs, in many ways, represent the spirit that influences much of the Black student engagement taking place across HWIs. Black students work to mitigate the isolation they experience by organizing events and programs that incorporate Black students' cultures and that explicitly address issues of anti-Blackness on campus (e.g., Black Women's Appreciation, Welcome 'Black' Bar-B-Q, The Black Student Orientation, or Black Town Halls). Therefore, although many Black students are engaged on their campuses, this engagement is facilitated by a counter consciousness and continues irrespective of university support.

Explicit Encounters with Anti-Blackness

My experiences and observations have revealed that Black students encounter racism through recurrent, explicit confrontations with anti-Blackness—or the disdain for Black life that circulates in these institutional spaces (Dumas & ross, 2016). For instance, older students shared experiences from years past, including an incident from 2005 when PETA, an animal rights organization, hung pictures depicting the grotesque treatment of animals in the food industry alongside images of Black bodies being lynched during the Jim Crow era. Black students confronted the PETA representatives on campus, demanding that they take down the images and expressing their rage at the gross comparison. This inherited memory stuck with me throughout my experiences on campus. It captures how the suffering that Black students experience on their campuses "converges with, and exacerbates a broader *racial melancholia*, that heavy, deeply-felt awareness of the history and persistence of anti-black disregard and subjugation" (Dumas, 2014, p. 3).

In 2007, during the spring semester of my freshman year, Black students organized to protest the window display of a t-shirt canvassing the image of a basketball, with an afro and a "pic" (comb), and the words "Nappy Headed Hoes" printed across it. The store selling the shirt was directly across from UC Berkeley's campus and was a major vendor for school paraphernalia. Students were outraged at this image, which recaptured the language that had recently been used by Don Imus, a radio commentator, to refer to Rutgers University's Black female basketball players. As this event unfolded, I came to realize the microaggressions experienced by Black students had to be understood as a continuum of racial assaults within these primarily White academic spaces. For me, these racial hostilities ranged from being commonly mistaken for a student-athlete to being asked to produce my student ID to campus police to prove I was a student.

I was a member of the committee that organized the Black Out in 2010, my senior year. This was the same year that a White fraternity at UC San Diego hosted a racially themed party during Black History Month, called "The Compton Cook Out," and there had been a series of racial assaults experienced by Black students at UC Berkeley. In retrospect, I realize that during every year of my undergraduate tenure there had been some public display of racial hostility towards Black students. Given the consistency of these public assaults, we decided that we had to respond in a unified and public manner. We hosted a community town hall and agreed that we had to speak up. Local Black community members and alumni were similarly outraged. During the planning meetings for the Black Out and on the day of the demonstration, Black alumni and faculty members were present in a supportive role. It was in this moment that I came to realize

how the work we were doing, what I now conceptualize as the invisible tax, is part of a broader discursive project within what Dumas (2007) has called the Black Educational Imagination—where Black folks "work out amongst themselves an understanding of the dialectic between Blackness, education and the shifting material and ideological faces of racism" (p. 47). On these campuses, Black students see their work as contributing to more than just individual academic success; these students continue to see their experiences as connected to the larger challenges faced by Black people beyond the university.

These memories, of which my experience at UC Berkeley is replete, converged in the fall of 2014. I walked to campus on a Saturday during the week of final exams and ran into a group of Black students gathered together on the Mario Savio steps in front of Sproul Hall, the Registrar and Student Services building. The students showed me a life-size image of a Black woman with a noose around her neck that they had found hung from a tree outside of the building and two more under Sather Gate. The students were extremely offended by the image and unsure of whether or not the person that hung it did so in protest of the recent killings of unarmed Black people by police or if it was meant to extend the public attack on their presence at the university. Artistic intentions aside, Black students experienced this event in relationship to consistent acts of racialized trauma that they are consistently met with in both overt and structural form on the university campus and beyond. After communicating via social media, Black students and allies came together and occupied a major intersection near campus and marched to downtown Oakland where a larger rally, referred to as "The Millions' March," was happening at Oscar Grant Plaza. Once again, this encounter demonstrates how Black students' experiences of racial hostility on campus are often understood in relationship to broader experiences of anti-Blackness in American society. In this case, an incident that happened on the college campus became linked with a protest taking place with the push for #BlackLivesMatter at a location marked by the memory of Oscar Grant, a local Black victim of police violence.

Mundane Encounters with Anti-Blackness

Black students' experiences of anti-Blackness on their campuses are beyond the egregious examples of those provided thus far, such as the encounter with PETA or the hanging effigies. Recently, I found myself in a conversation with a group of undergraduate students who were discussing a dance showcase taking place during a Wednesday afternoon on campus. They were venting about how it felt watching a series of Asian dance groups performing Hip Hop dance routines while their own community dance group, Dance Junta, had not been active over the past few years because of low numbers. Their frustration was less about the fact that Asian students were dancing to music by Black Hip Hop artists, and more about the feeling of displacement that the sight of these dance groups triggered for them. In these moments, Black students feel conflicted by the commodification of Blackness and its representation on the campus despite a dearth of Black bodies. Students find themselves frustrated by the fact that the university benefits, or finds pleasure in, Black cultural production in a variety of ways but does so without an investment in Black people.

The invisible tax is further inflated by the mundane encounters with racial antagonisms that Black students encounter, as reflected in the previous example. These encounters range from being the only Black person in a class to being asked to provide "the Black perspective" on a topic being discussed during a course lecture. For instance, I recall being asked during my sophomore year to provide historical context on "Aunt Jemima" by a professor in a class where I was one of three Black students. In response, I gave a brief description of the caricatured representation of Black womanhood and "the mammie" stereotype. Unsurprisingly, my two Black classmates came up to me after class and expressed the same shock I felt that the instructor had the audacity to single me out in this way.

These encounters made the work we did to sustain Black counter-spaces on campus a necessity. In these spaces I felt most comfortable and positively affirmed in my identity as a young Black man. I was allowed to feel ordinary, as opposed to being hyperaware of the fact that I was the one Black face in a class. My personal experience of "onlyness" (Harper et al., 2011) was exacerbated by the fact that I was a Business major, a program with a competitive admissions process and a disparagingly low percentage of enrolled Black students.

The Invisible Tax as a Communal Expectation

This invisible tax that Black student-leaders incur is experienced as a burden, yet simultaneously as a requirement amongst the Black student community—particularly as their enrollment numbers shrink. Through peer educational systems and group accountability, students require one another to maintain engagement. These pressures of the invisible tax to sustain Black counter-spaces typically lead to Black student-leaders taking on multiple leadership roles across organizations because the shrinking population impedes leadership transferal. At community retreats, meetings, and orientations, Black student-leaders constantly urge the importance of involvement and participation. This becomes especially important during the beginning and end of the academic year, when new Black admits visit and are oriented to the campus. Black students encounter a community expectation that they host the new admits and create rich and inspiring experiences in the hope that prospective students will choose to enroll.

Black students feel obligated to maintain their engagement in Black student organizations for their sustainability and as a communal obligation. They feel invested in recruiting more students to attend their university not simply because of school spirit, but for the larger investment of increasing educational opportunities for Black students and growing their community on campus. Black student-leaders do the work of recruiting Black students to attend their respective universities because they recognize the ineffectiveness or lack of effort on the part of the institutions. In this way, Black student engagement is often experienced as a high-pressure obligation, not only because of community accountability, but also because the stakes are so high given the circumstances surrounding Black student experiences. Black student engagement is so costly precisely because the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) is so formidable; meaning, the emotional memory of accumulated neglect pertaining to Black education has an affective bearing on the relationships Black students have to the work they do.

The Enduring Legacy of Anti-Blackness and the Invisible Tax on Campus

At a Black Student Union (BSU) general body meeting in Spring 2015, students strategized about how they were going to respond to the chancellor's "dismissive response to the demands [they] presented him with," as one female leader noted. It is customary for one of the first agenda items at the BSU meetings to be communal check-ins from members in attendance. On this particular day, the chair asked students to respond to the following question, "How are you feeling about the current state of the Black community on this campus?" Students had the opportunity to talk in small groups, then they reported back to the larger group. The responses overwhelmingly included words such as "anger," "anxiety," and "stress." One Black male student stated, "Confronting your Blackness on this campus is too taxing. I feel taxed out most times doing the work that we do. But I don't have a choice. Fighting against anti-Blackness is a tax I cain't divest from." The ethos of the previous student comment captures an important aspect of the invisible tax. While Black students' engagement is significantly motivated by their experiences of racial hostility on campus, it is not only in response to such deficits. The work taken up by Black students also stems from broader motifs of collective uplift that have been a consistent feature in the historical and social fabric of Black America. This can be understood as a community-developed social ethic that continues to inform Black student engagement.

Discussion

While my deployment of "tax" is premised on the idea that there is a level of sacrifice expected of students to support the public good, the notion of invisibility denotes how Black students' engagement at HWIs results from their isolation from the dominant university culture and what they perceive to be a lack of institutional support for their needs. The broader university's neglect of Black students' needs requires that they tax themselves to create the experiences and structures that positively support their own development as students. The invisible tax reflects the contradictory nature of Black student engagement and some inherent dilemmas that characterize part of the ways in which Black students exist on their college campuses. The maintenance of Black counter-spaces as a means of coping represents a simultaneous investment in the university ideal of education for social uplift and an oppositional consciousness to the university itself, a tension worth exploring. The historical examples of Black student engagement coupled with my own experiences as a student at UC Berkeley highlight this phenomenon.

Take, for instance, the recruitment and retention efforts of Black student-leaders at UC Berkeley. There is something perverse about the tireless efforts spent recruiting other potential Black students to attend the university while they simultaneously indict the university as a hostile environment for Black students when they arrive. This is especially the case when the laborious recruitment strategies taken up by Black students continue to have such a small yield, as evidenced by declining numbers at highly selective HWIs. Black educational history can help unpack the tension inherent in Black students who find themselves to be in opposition to the university yet continuously invested in getting more Black students to attend.

Jim Crow schooling offers a useful reference point of analysis because, during this time, Black communities were similarly taxed to make up for the poor resources offered

to Black schools (Anderson, 1988). Siddle Walker's (1996; Siddle Walker & Byass, 2009) interrogation of segregated schooling does not negate the fact that Blacks were forced to comply with Jim Crow mandates, but she offers critical evidence that Black schools were more than just second class school structures. She pushes the historical narrative forward by highlighting the intricate networks of Black teachers and the impactful relationships between Black educators, students, and the local communities. Her revisionist scholarship demonstrates how Black schools during this time embodied what Morris (2004) calls "communally bonded" education. Taken together, these narratives represent how the double tax was caustic and beneficial at the same time. While segregated schools were material markers of Black exclusion within the larger society, they also offered opportunities for Black people to work collectively towards social equality through liberatory, community-based education.

The tensions inherent in the work done by Black communities who struggled to build meaningful educational experiences for Black students despite the state and local school boards' neglect of their needs, are in many ways the same tensions present in the coping strategies of Black student-leaders at HWIs. This tension highlights how Black people have been simultaneously committed to integrationist ideals and Black nationalism. As Harold Cruse (1967) contended, both of these bodies of thought continue to be engrained in the "Afro-American ethnic group consciousness" (p. 6). Echoing this sentiment, Robert Allen (1969/1990) argued that Black nationalism tends to remain peripheral until the Black bourgeoisie is shunned by White America, when integrationist and reformist efforts are seemingly ineffective. Recognizing how separatism may lend itself to the maintenance of racism by emphasizing difference, Black people have historically understood integration to be a human ideal. Their awareness of the caustic effects of anti-Blackness in the world, however, prompts an oppositional consciousness that pivots towards nationalist leanings; leanings that are intensified in moments of racial crisis (Allen, 1969/1990). This duality is endemic within the landscape of Black educational heritage and it is particularly prevalent in the narratives of Black student engagement presented throughout this paper. These nationalist leanings are ever-present in Black student engagement at HWIs because Black students have continued to experience their campuses as anti-Black.

Black students on the campuses of HWIs have existed in a prolonged state of crisis given the declining number of Black students and the consistent encounters with racial microaggressions. Their investment in the liberatory project of Black educational attainment and their simultaneous opposition to the university culture and structures reflects a swinging pendulum within the consciousness of Black students between integrationist ideals and nationalist leaning. Black counter-spaces, for example, embody this tension because they are extensions of the Black counter-public sphere within HWIs. They reflect a constant negotiation that never seems to find a resolution. This imbalance is endemic to Black student engagement on the campus of HWIs and has existed as long as Black students have been present at these universities. This unresolved tension is reflective of the duality that has continued to shape Black life, and what Du Bois (1903/2003) underscored in his theory of double-consciousness. Du Bois noted how Black Americans seek to maintain their identity as both Black and American without having to compromise their entitlement to one or the other. Perhaps this enduring duality

is a result of the historic failures to fully realize either alternative: full integration or Black Nationalism, to be only Black or only American. I am forwarding the invisible tax as a new grammar to think through the subjectivity of Black students at HWIs, as a paradigm that acknowledges how they experience anti-Blackness through campus structures and culture, and furthermore, their organized efforts, time, and resources used to offset the impact of these assaults in their quest for education to reveal itself as the great equalizer.

Conclusion

Black America has historically maintained faith that through educational attainment liberation could be realized; in this way, education has been culturally valued as a project of freedom (Anderson, 1988). Despite the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) they inherit, and the invisible tax they are forced to assume, Black student-leaders continue to be engaged and to resist the dominant culture of HWIs. They continue to invest hope in the possibilities that education can offer opportunities to bring about social change. This ideal is deeply engrained in the racial consciousness of Black people, and its roots lie in the conceptualization of education as intrinsically tied to freedom in the minds of the enslaved. As Fairclough (2001) asserted, "Education [like Black spirituality] provided a means of sustaining hope in an otherwise hopeless situation" (p. 9). Education gave credence to the projection that a better day was coming. Black student-leaders continue to be engaged on their campuses because they seek to make educational opportunities more accessible to Black people, as a means of collective uplift, and rarely because of institutional cultivation.

Traditional readings of student engagement fail to offer the analytical lens necessary to get at how Black students exist at HWIs and their cultural orientation to student engagement. Resistance and coping have been defining features of their engagement and directly correlate to their racialized experiences on campus—or the ways in which they confront anti-Blackness. The invisible tax, the cost of constant coping with racism and microaggressions, is about more than academic achievement or even what takes place on the university campus. Black campus engagement must always be placed within the broader context of how education features within the consciousness of Black people. William Watkins (1993) offered that "the way African Americans have developed their views on education… is connected to their socio-historical realities" (p. 322). Therefore, the educational experiences of Black people must always be understood in relationship to their positionality as Black people in a society shaped by White supremacy and anti-Blackness. The invisible tax that Black students continue to assume through the construction of counter-spaces and various other forms of coping is partially about these students addressing their neglect on campus, but it is also connected to broader challenges faced by Black people in the larger society.

Black student-leaders are never able to be just students; they are each always Black and student simultaneously, which poses conflicts within the White hegemonic context of these university campuses. This is Du Bois' (1903/2003) notion of twoness speaking back to student engagement theory, projecting that Black students possess "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (p. 9). These students exist at HWIs as both insider and outsider, people invested in accessing

the social capital gained from a university education yet critically aware of the exclusion they experience within these institutions and beyond. The campus engagement of Black students is constantly working to mitigate this tension.

The invisibility of Black student engagement, coupled with the overwhelming burden that these circumstances place on student-leaders, is in some sense tragic. The high volume of labor required of Black students is a result of both the university's neglect coupled with the low numbers of Black students at highly selective HWIs. Ralph Ellison (1947/1995) employed "invisibility" as a literary trope in his novel *Invisible Man*, and it has historically been used metaphorically to represent the experience of African American people in a society that has refused to recognize their humanity. While Black educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) has proliferated as a result of historical neglect, the needs of Black students continue to be systemically rendered illegible across educational levels. Because of their experience of invisibility, Black students have engaged their campuses in opposition, constantly seeking to find their own way in resistance to, as opposed to in collaboration with, their respective universities.

The invisible tax offers language for both students and higher education professionals to critically engage the work of Black student-leaders at HWIs. It is important that students be able to apply appropriate language to reflect on their experiences at these schools and to move towards healthy ways of dealing with their trauma. Furthermore, it is important for university and higher education officials to both recognize the challenges that Black students face on the campuses of HWIs and do more to support them as opposed to simply pushing for complete integration into the mainstream campus climate, which Black students experience as culturally, emotionally, and intellectually violent. There is a need to develop healthy strategies for students to deal with microaggressions and racial hostility that can offset the effects of racial battle fatigue, especially as Black student admissions and enrollment at many of these schools continue to decline. It is just that we demand higher education officials to do this work with and for their students.

Author Biography

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