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## Defining the Stakes

### Why We Cannot Leave the Nation's Diverse Talent Pool Behind and Thrive

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The stakes for earning a post-secondary degree are extremely high for individuals and for all of us collectively. Report after report reiterates that, despite the sometimes heated rhetoric questioning the value of going to college, higher education remains a crucial road to individual prosperity, a return that may actually be even more essential as we recover from the worst financial disaster in nearly a century. But the reality is that access and opportunity via higher education are more skewed than ever. Income inequality is at an all-time high, and trends indicate that this is likely to intensify because the gap between rich and poor in school performance is growing, social mobility in America is near the bottom of nations belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the present generation is the first in American history to be less well-educated than the preceding.<sup>1</sup> And, conversely, as Stanford sociologist of education Sean Reardon argues powerfully in his opinion piece, “No Rich Child Left Behind,” the wealthy in this country are wasting no time

in capitalizing on their advantage, pouring resources into preparation for their children that boosts the chances of entering selective institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Compounding this alarming situation are inexorable demographic trends. The Brookings Institution has reported that California, Texas, Florida, and New York are among the fourteen states where the toddler population already is majority minority, and the rest of the nation will follow at a faster than predicted pace.<sup>3</sup> We also know that minority groups are disproportionately poor and disadvantaged, so more children of color are being left behind more often, as they tend to be stuck in under-resourced school systems and deeply challenged neighborhoods. Moreover, there are race disparities in educational achievement all across the income distribution (on SATs; in terms of teacher expectations for and advice to minority students) that also constrain the likelihood of students from historically under-represented racial and ethnic minority groups entering selective institutions where they could—and do—flourish.<sup>4</sup>

So, the hourglass has been flipped and the sands of time are running out for us to do something about this: if we do not dramatically expand college access and opportunity for poor students generally and minority students specifically, we are headed for a catastrophe. And the stakes are raised even higher when we consider access to selective institutions, because we know that these colleges and universities still predominate as the pathway to leadership in our country.<sup>5</sup> We cannot make progress on the challenges facing large metropolitan communities without legitimately engaging the predominance of their residents—this next diverse generation of talent.<sup>6</sup>

This argument from the position of economics has equally compelling analogs from the positions of social well-being and cohesion. All assertions to the contrary, America has not become either “post-racial” or “color blind” in the decade between the *Grutter* and *Fisher* U.S. Supreme Court decisions.<sup>7</sup> Racial and socioeconomic diversity *still do* matter in lived experience every day and in every way. They define the landscape of opportunity.<sup>8</sup> They matter together and they each matter separately. They matter in powerfully negative ways when they define, as they do, disparities in practically everything that ensures individual well-being in our society. They matter in potentially positive ways when they coincide with richly diverse life experiences that in turn can strongly enrich the quality, creativity, and complexity of group thinking and problem-solving in organizations, firms, communities, policy settings and schools, as University of Michigan social scientist Scott Page demonstrates.<sup>9</sup> They

matter now, but they also matter for our future if our children can learn better than we have to think outside the box of stereotypes with the skills of moving flexibly and not simplistically across the many dimensions of difference.<sup>10</sup>

This is why access to higher education matters so significantly and why it needs to be as richly inclusive as possible, for example, to overcome the reductionism that dooms and short-changes us all when we assume that “all blacks are poor, all whites rich and all Latino students speak Spanish,” as president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. and University of Maryland professor of law Sherrilyn Ifill reminds us.<sup>11</sup> That is why achieving “critical mass” *within* racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and other identity groups on college campuses—defined by the variety of experiences a student can have with a rich assortment of individuals from within each and every social identity category and their intersection—is so critical to leveraging the full educational benefits of diversity. It not only makes for stronger social bonds, but it makes for better decision making and societal problem solving. Indeed, in research conducted by Page—an expert on complex systems—groups composed of individuals who had diverse perspectives (often reflecting their diverse identities) outperformed groups characterized by strong individual performers in problem solving because diverse groups increase the number of approaches to finding solutions to thorny problems. Page also found that diverse groups tend to be more innovative, growing out of the likelihood that among people bringing different life experiences to an organization one is likelier to find people who see the possibility for improvement in a process or product.<sup>12</sup> In turn diversity generates leaders and citizens equipped to work together to build resilient, healthier communities.

### Prioritizing the Public Good

Taken together, what we really have is an argument from the position of the public good. We simply cannot afford to waste all of the talent that is the key to individual prosperity, economic competitiveness, social well-being and cohesion. Yet the difficult task of leveraging diversity intensifies every year, as we leave disproportionately more poor and black and brown children behind (evident in persistently pernicious disparities in AP course taking, teacher expectations, school discipline, incarceration rates, graduation rates), and as we doom them at best to access to wildly

under-funded community colleges—places that *can* be superb stepping stones on the pathway to social mobility, if adequately funded and connected to opportunities at four-year institutions.<sup>13</sup>

As the Brookings Institution has shown compellingly, the challenges we face in leveraging diversity increasingly are concentrated in our metropolitan areas.<sup>14</sup> But the stakes for the public good make it *everyone's business* to work together on solutions, whether we are urban, suburban, or rural dwellers, rich or poor, majority or minority. As Roland Anglin, of the Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies at Rutgers University-Newark, recently reflected on the challenges facing his city and state, following the passing of one of the world's greatest champions for diversity:

Nelson Mandela would say that we need to cement the public will on all sides to make change, not just people in urban areas—that's a doomed strategy. It is in no one's interest to have a poor, under-fed class of people who don't have access to opportunity. It is in everyone's interest that they participate in the public life and economic life of this state and country.<sup>15</sup>

If we leave so many behind (and conversely give access to so few) we risk the trust of our fastest growing populations in the legitimacy of pathways to leadership in our democracy; we risk losing the very talent that can rebuild our communities and create civic renewal; and, critically, we risk the disintegration of the proving ground of our metropolitan areas, which are ideal environments for learning how to work and learn and live across difference—a prerequisite to a vibrant democracy.<sup>16</sup>

### Reaching Diverse Talent or Succumbing to the Dating Game

As higher education contemplates how not to leave so much talent behind, we confront the irony of our own norms and practices. We have come to define merit in such narrow terms, relying on proxies for quality that are highly correlated with the very disparities we strive to overcome, and that at the same time, doom us to miss the complexity of how talent is bundled at the intersection of so many aspects of identity and life experience that could do so well to define a rich and diverse student body. We overinvest in so-called objective test scores, imbuing point differentials with predictive utility and validity well beyond reason, as is obvious when one tries to tease out the differences in life achievement for students all clustered in the middle of an already above-average test range. We

embrace and reward strategies for selection that do more to exclude than include, never mind cultivate, talent. In this regard, the process of college admissions often resembles a “dating game”—and one that risks all of the same anomalous matches and lost opportunities.<sup>17</sup> With each new legal opinion, more and more of what defines a prospective student’s critical life experiences (including but not limited to race and ethnicity) is cloaked behind a screen, with admissions professionals forced to use proxy questions to tease out these life-defining characteristics. And as we perfect this fundamentally reductionist tack, we not only leave behind more and more of our talent pool—our potential game-changers in business, politics, and even law—but we also relinquish some of our power as educators, cultivators of talent, and community- and nation-builders. Under the glare of strict scrutiny, it becomes an imposing task indeed to compose a class with all of the rich variety necessary to reap the full educational and societal benefits of diversity.

Nonetheless, that is our most pressing higher education task, and so more and more attention is being paid to reaching talented students in “geographies of opportunity” all across this country, and similarly, we are all stepping up our efforts to make those metro areas that hold the next diverse generation of talented students into real places of educational opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

Efforts such as those being tested by the College Board and ACT, drawing on the work of Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby and University of Virginia economist Sarah Turner, are promising. Taking what we will call a “person-based” approach, they advocate reaching out into communities, aggressively recruiting and assisting the already “high-achieving,” low-income and minority students who are exceptional in the context of under-achieving schools to enter the maze of the admissions and financial aid process at those selective institutions in which they can certainly thrive and break the mold. Bringing these exceptional students to the dating game is critically important, but so too will it be necessary to reach deeper and more broadly to find the more hidden talent. This effort should involve engagement with community colleges, where so much first-generation talent initially lands, and building hybrid models with selective institutions, as the recent task force report from the Century Foundation suggests.<sup>19</sup> It must encompass all those geographies of opportunity that have so much to lose if students languish and so much to gain if the talent can instead be cultivated from the earliest ages possible. This goes hand in hand with adopting a broader vision of

academic potential, such as the holistic approach employed by the Posse Foundation.<sup>20</sup> Together, these person-based recruitment strategies focus on uncovering and leveraging diverse talent pools, and making it possible for these next-generation leaders to make their way to the selective institutions that disproportionately define social mobility in this country.

### Changing the Reality of Educational Opportunity

Additionally, we all should look to place- or community-based approaches, where colleges and universities work comprehensively and deeply through partnerships with government and community-based organizations and foundations to build their communities, tackling the challenges of metropolitan America at scale, working across a district or neighborhood, especially in places on the opportunity map that need it most and that have clusters of anchor institutions primed to bring their expertise to the table. Lumina's Cities Initiative is a prime recent exemplar of this approach, as are the city-wide initiatives undertaken recently in Syracuse and Buffalo by the Say Yes to Education Foundation, and the work in many metros by STRIVE.

This community-based approach is not unlike what Major League Baseball does when it sponsors farm teams in communities across America, creating a system that develops a deep and broad talent pool that ultimately benefits all of Major League Baseball, beyond the particular team sponsor. The analogy to farm teams is relevant on many levels to what higher education needs to do, working in its local geographies of opportunity with K–12 systems and community-based organizations to improve educational attainment and support sending those students on to institutions (“teams”) across America, thereby cultivating new generations of talent and simultaneously committing economic development investments within the “home town” communities. In Syracuse, New York, for example, Say Yes to Education Syracuse has built a higher education compact of forty-five private colleges and universities (both near and far from this city in Central New York) and the New York State public systems, each of whom pledges to provide tuition scholarships to any student from the Syracuse City School District who graduates and gains admissions to their institution. The Say Yes model includes comprehensive academic, social, health, and legal services to families of students in the district, engages the full spectrum of higher education anchor institutions in the region, and makes the case for educational

opportunity as economic development. Indeed, the Central New York Regional Economic Development Council, formed by Governor Andrew Cuomo, included Say Yes as one of its transformative economic development initiatives in its five-year strategic plan. A few years back, the Obama administration started down this road with a multi-agency initiative led by HUD;<sup>21</sup> we need to see more of that kind of broad thinking from government.

As the national think tank CEO for Cities has persuasively shown, increasing educational attainment by even a few percentage points in struggling urban centers across this country translates into substantial increments in aggregate annual income in these critical metros, and cities such as Syracuse and Buffalo are working to make this happen.<sup>22</sup> Further, engaging college students in these initiatives within the communities to which their institutions are anchored ensures a new generation of citizens, professionals, and leaders with firsthand experience at cultivating talent across generations and on the front lines of America. This kind of experiential, engaged learning sharpens all of our skills at working across difference, leveraging diversity to everyone's advantage and fine-tuning appreciation for the complexity of social identities and the variety of ways that potential shows itself. Just as we work on inter-group dialogue on our campuses, so must we put it into action within the communities of which we, as anchor institutions, are a part.<sup>23</sup> As one member of the first class of Say Yes students to graduate from Syracuse University announced at commencement: "Now I'm ready to give back to my community what was given to me, and possibly more."

### We Cannot Put Our Heads in the Sand

As we consider these outward-looking strategies, policies, and approaches for expanding access and reaping the full public benefits of diversity in higher education, it is hard not to be side-tracked by more inward-focused attempts at "race neutrality" tailored to meet the legal tests of strict scrutiny. And yet, it is perhaps worth a moment of questioning as to whether the commonly embraced alternatives on the table really are race-neutral at all, as they are consciously constructed to get at race without referring to race. Indeed, members of the court have mused on this as an absurdity. Justice David Souter wrote in dissenting from the majority in *Gratz* that trying to ignore race in such circumstances "suffers from a serious disadvantage. It is the disadvantage of deliberate obfuscation."<sup>24</sup> More

pointedly, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in her dissenting opinion in *Fisher*: “I have said before and reiterate here that only an ostrich could regard the supposedly neutral alternatives as race unconscious.”<sup>25</sup> Our world is not constructed in anything that resembles a race-neutral landscape, nor are the educational benefits of diversity color blind—so why not take positive advantage of what it means to educate our future leaders in a richly diverse environment that simultaneously breaks down the confines of stereotypic thinking and teaches the sorely needed skills of working and living in the world we actually confront every day?

If we owe it to ourselves to be honest about our purposes in crafting policies and building the architecture of inclusion to address issues of race, we owe even more to the diverse generation of students rising before us.<sup>26</sup> After all, the future belongs to them. As assuredly as the road to individual and collective prosperity leads through higher education, and the road to leadership through our selective colleges and universities, we ignore their diversity at our—and their—peril.