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ETHICS & EDUCATION

Inequality and the Public University
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Presented October 20, 2016
UW-Madison

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In early September, *FiveThirtyEight*, which you may be following for election predictions, published a piece on skyrocketing college tuition.

The article, written by an economist at Temple, makes a compelling empirical case that increases in tuition are not due to rising administrative costs, increases in faculty salaries or luxury student amenities: The single biggest factor has been declining funding for state education.

This is our context: Public de-investment in higher education. Thus, I decided to answer the first question—How does inequality get reproduced within the university—by looking at what happens at four-year residential universities when public funds begin to dry up.

I ask: How do organizational responses to this fiscal environment replicate and even exacerbate existing race and class inequalities?

I am going to highlight three important mechanisms: 1) Recruitment of those who can pay, 2) Internal Stratification, and 3) Parental Outsourcing.

Universities have at least three competing goals—1) remain solvent, 2) appear legitimate in the eyes of the public, and 3) maximize status. In recent years, solvency concerns have risen to the fore. Tuition dollars now make up nearly half of the revenue stream at public schools. At many schools this means recruiting out-of-state and international students who can pay top dollar for their education. Access for in-state students to selective and moderately selective public universities in their state decreases as a result.

What happens when universities need to recruit higher-paying students? They begin to shape the campus and college experience around the needs of this contingency. The increase in recreational and lifestyle-based student amenities—from luxury apartments to lazy rivers and upscale dining—is a function of appealing to these student populations, at schools that are able to do so.

Emphasis on campus social life, and investment in the historically-white, affluent, and sex-segregated Greek system is also a function of attempts to attract out-of-state students—who are often socially oriented, as well as capture donor dollars from Greek alumni. These factors make the campus environment measurably WORSE for many lower-income and/or minority students on campus, who struggle to fit in with visible displays of extreme wealth.

Internal stratification occurs when a campus offers qualitatively different types of college experiences to different student constituencies. When catering to affluent families, schools provide special benefits for these students, while failing to meet the needs of others.

This includes financing—many schools have shifted from large need-based aid packages to many, small merit-aid packages that draw in families that can afford near full price. This practice is often referred to as financial aid leveraging, and it benefits wealthier students over those from moderate to modest means.

Students from high-resource backgrounds are also offered the ability to segregate themselves from their less advantaged peers through small, but highly funded honors programs, pre-professional programs, and other competitive tracks. Early and unforgiving requirements (e.g., particular high school classes and early application) ensure that students who attended less-resourced schools and who don't have parental assistance will not have access to these goodies.

These programs tend to incorporate the best researchers and teachers on campus. They have larger pots of money and special advising services. Relationships with internship and job providing partners are strong.

Compare this to the experiences of students who arrive in need of remediation. I have been observing basic math classes, and it appears that universities send their least equipped lecturers to teach the students most in need of quality instruction. These students often have advisors who serve 799 other students. They cannot access quality help in getting an internship or writing a resume. In short, it's a fundamentally different experience within the same school.

Finally, I wanted to touch on the trend toward parental outsourcing as another mechanism for the production of inequality.

To give you an illustration of what I am talking about, I brought a picture of a UW-Madison website advertising the school's "nationally recognized Parent Program." As it notes, "Badger parents are protective of their young, whether out in the wild or at home, in touch with their sons and daughters at the UW." This program helps parents to "embrace their new roles as mentors and coaches."

As this website so beautifully illustrates, universities have been turning to parents in more recent years, as they attempt to produce graduates and successful workers with fewer resources than in the past. I refer to this as "outsourcing" to parents in my new book *Parenting to a Degree*, and you can really see a shift in language and attention to parents in the last couple of decades. Parents can offer academic advising, mental health counseling, social and emotional support, career development, and—of course—financial support, among other things.

The problem, of course, is that the more we rely on family background to produce student success, the more that students of modest means will struggle, as well as those whose families have been shut out of higher education. Simply put, those students whose parents can out-fund and out-strategize others have a serious advantage.

This brings me to Question 2: What (if anything) can universities do to undo (or mitigate) these trends?

I have many answers for what SOCIETY could do to help mitigate these trends. The first, and most obvious, is to dramatically change the funding structure for public education. One could do this by redirecting federal and state funds from for-profits and ending special subsidies for private schools. This is a redistribution project, and one that universities could contribute to by throwing political weight behind the project. But it would require far greater cooperation from the government and shifting public sentiment. None of these things are theoretically impossible, as we have seen some movement in this direction.

I could also think of many things universities could do TOGETHER that would help. One major step would be for a large group of schools to divest the U.S. News rankings of its power by refusing to participate, period. Alternatively, a number of schools could refuse to participate if U.S. News doesn't move forward on substantially incorporating measures of Pell Grant and minority student representativeness, programming, funding, and graduation rates.

Why would it help to shift the rankings conversation? Rankings do more than just reflect school "quality." They shape the very hierarchies that they purport to assess. Schools model their policies and practices around criteria that will optimize their standings. Right now, certain criteria—selectivity, reputation, and overall graduation rates—lead schools to focus on attracting and retaining the more privileged students who come from better resourced high schools. There is no incentive to attract or serve low-income, first-gen., or minority students well.

Thus, you either change the system on which inter-college competition is based—or you get out of the game altogether.

If we assume universities won't work together with their competitors, what could a school do inside its own walls to promote social change?

I have a few suggestions:

Recruit and house historically marginalized students in networks: The POSSE program sends networks of minority and low-income students from the same high school or community to an elite college together. It has been a wildly successful program, in that students who would not have even been admitted to these schools have graduated at the top of their class. It highlights the power of utilizing existing social networks to support marginalized student populations. I should also note that POSSE's success highlights the limitations of focusing on test scores as an indicator of students' abilities to succeed in college.

Be attentive to classed requirements: One thing schools can do is limit the extent to which graduation requirements rely on family resources. For example, programs that require internships but outsource this labor put low-SES families at a serious disadvantage. In addition, courses that rely heavily on family cultural capital or student appearance need to be seriously considered and revised.

Harness the power of older peers: Of course, not all students have parents who want to help or could help—even with university assistance. Some universities have connected younger first gen. students to first gen. students in their final year. Even a one-time panel at orientation with older first gen. students talking about how they managed to navigate college has been shown to significantly improve first-gen. graduation rates.

Invest in advising services: Advisors are some of the worst paid and worst treated staff on campus. At my school, for example, we cannot keep them because they leave for the local K-12 system where they get paid more and treated better. With student advisor ratios approaching 1 to 800 or 1 to 1000, it is impossible to attend too carefully to students' needs. And often those needs are outside of the classroom, but have a direct impact on what goes on in the classroom—such as being hungry, or having to drive home to care for your parents. Paying advisors more, offering them training to engage in holistic counseling—like that a highly-educated parent might give to their child—hiring enough advisors, and maintaining consistency in who students see over their career would go a long way to helping students whose parents are not equipped to offer this sort of advice at home.

Reduce the power of historically-white Greek life: My ongoing research suggests that universities with larger numbers of Greek students and Greek property have larger graduation gaps between low and high-income students. (And, by the way, higher rates of sexual assault.) Reducing the special benefits provided to these groups—including property, which historically black and Latino houses have not had access too—reduces racial and class segregation on campus.

Make visible first-gen. status: UC Irvine has a brilliant first-gen. campaign whereby first-gen. t-shirts are worn around campus by all who share this designation—including faculty, staff, and graduate students, with the goal of making the near 60% of the student body who are first-gen. feel like they belong, and see others who share their background in leadership positions.

Recruit and reward faculty who mentor: Student relationships with faculty are powerful, and one of the most significant predictors of student success. Some schools are experimenting with faculty advising groups that link disadvantaged students to each other and a faculty member with a similar background. These groups are maintained through college. Yet, faculty are not rewarded for their student mentoring efforts, and this work tends to fall disproportionately on women and faculty of color. So in order to motivate faculty participation, this work needs to be recognized and offset by course releases, extra research support, or some other form of remuneration.

Provide incentives for faculty to teach what are often the least desirable classes: Weed-out courses and remedial courses should involve increased money or course releases to attract better teachers. Competition for these rewards should include evidence of compelling pedagogical plans.

Finally, recruit and retain black, Latino, and underrepresented Asian faculty and staff. Many universities are finding it hard to keep non-white students in part because these students are not reflected in university leadership. It is not enough to say that underrepresented minorities are not

in the hiring pool for faculty, staff, and top administrative positions. Yes, the pipeline is leaky, but research suggests that in many fields minority candidates are disadvantaged by social networks and implicit bias. When these processes keep scholars of color out of important positions on campus, it only exacerbates the leaky pipeline problem. Fixing the leadership is thus going to have to happen before the pipeline is running smoothly.

Note that these suggestions for faculty hint at a major change—that is, a shift in how faculty are tenured to include a model that values teaching and service. This is not impossible to do, and some schools are experimenting with it.

Thank you!

Laura Hamilton's Equity and Education Symposium Comments, 10-21-16
Sponsored by the Center for Ethics and Education

How do I conceptualize equity in higher education?

Students come in with different capacities, resources, agendas, vulnerabilities, and needs. What I see as equitable is a postsecondary system that offers students what they need to succeed. And by "succeed" I mean be involved members of their communities, find gainful employment, build families of choice that support them, and feel cognitively enriched and satisfied with their lives.

Higher education is a bit of an odd institution to place this burden on. In the U.S. in particular, it acts as a key part of a submerged welfare state. And a pricey one at that. Poverty, neighborhood segregation, health disparities and food insecurity—these are mechanisms for the production of profound class and race-based differences. Higher education was not designed to create equity in the face of such challenges—or really to create equity at all. This is not how schooling has been used, despite our attempts to reform it. And without other forms of state and federal support, such as better support for low-income families or a tax structure that is more equitable, students come in on dramatically different ground.

But given this context, what does my research suggest that schools should do? Currently the system works, in many ways, in the opposite direction of equity. That is, students and families who are more advantaged get more of the advantages that higher education has to offer. They are more likely to enroll in institutions where endowments are in the MILLIONS per student and student/advisor ratios are very low. They are more likely to get benefits at college, such as move into the more prestigious honors systems or professional class tracks. They secure social network advantages by isolating themselves from their less privileged peers, for example, by joining the historically white Greek system. They receive special career help via their specialized and competitive law, business, and finance programs that allow them to get good jobs at top firms that are not accessible to other students. They create a social climate where what they know and how they dress buys them popularity with their peers.

An equitable system would flip this on its head. Students who have the fewest resources and the most challenges would receive greater assistance. Financially, this means moving away from merit-based scholarships and back to need-based scholarships. It means providing better and more systematic advising for low-income, first-gen., and underrepresented minority students. Professors with the best track record of teaching should be teaching the remedial and basic level courses, to ensure quality instruction for students from less privileged high schools. Students shouldn't be asked to assimilate into college climates that are hostile to them. Thus, this means limiting the benefits that affluent, typically white organizations on campus often have over other student groups. It means considering the food choices of students from different cultures in the

cafeteria, designing housing that doesn't segregate but doesn't tokenize marginalized students by throwing them on a floor of all advantaged students.

What it takes to be equitable is going to vary from campus to campus. And that variation introduces interesting puzzles. For instance, at the University of California-Merced where I work, the campus is 40% Latino, 4 % black. These are two typically underserved populations, but the Latino students, particularly those who are Mexican-American, feel more at home on our campus. They are the majority. While undocumented students need special support, many Latino students with U.S. citizenship feel at home when they step on campus. And there are some upper-level administrators who identify as Latino, and many staff at different levels in whom Latino students see themselves reflected.

I have had many meetings with administrators and staff on campus about the need to provide extra supports for our black students, such as special housing communities, support groups, and a direct line to administration. We need NPHC fraternities and sororities to balance out our slate of historically white fraternities and sororities (that's a story in itself, how those came to be on our campus in the first place). Equity at UCM means giving this student group attention that we wouldn't otherwise. But our mission as a Hispanic Serving Institution often directs our efforts elsewhere.

Another way to think about equity is to consider the various institutional pathways at an institution. Pathways are social and academic infrastructures designed to serve particular student constituencies. A party pathway, complete with big time sports, Greek life, and investments in student amenities serves socially-oriented affluent students who ensure their class positions largely by forming exclusive ties with other affluent students.