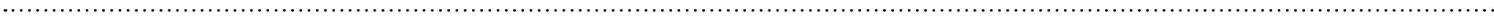


# Helping African-Americans Aim High in the Wake of Past Wrongs





Jacqueline Rushing spotted a problem back in the 1990s when she worked as a high school teacher at the Phillip and Sala Burton Academic High School in San Francisco.

When she used to query her students—mostly black and mostly poor—about where they were headed for college, oftentimes even the students with stellar grades would respond by saying they planned to go to the local community college. Rushing said she was taken aback by how frequently the students would overlook other postsecondary options they were qualified to pursue, such as state-run four-year universities, including more selective ones where the graduation rate was higher and the resources greater.

“They didn’t have any aspirations to go anywhere else,” Rushing said of these students.

Today, Rushing heads an organization called the Young Scholars Program. The Hayward, California-based program—which serves African-American males exclusively—relies on volunteers who mentor the young participants and teach them about the college-going process.

The void the program seeks to fill is one experts say is one of the most impactful when it comes to barriers that might influence if and how black students matriculate after high school.

A lack of knowledge on which colleges to pursue often stems from being a first-generation college student, said Marybeth Gasman, the Judy & Howard Berkowitz Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions.

Statistics show black students are more likely than white students to be the first in their families to attend college. For instance, white students represent 70 percent of all continuing-generation college students, while black students represent 11 percent of all continuing-generation students, according to a 2017 report issued by the US Department of Education.

But when it comes to first-generation students, whites only represent 49 percent of such students, whereas black students represent 14 percent of such students, the report states.

Since blacks represent 13.4 percent of the overall US population, they are underrepresented among continuing generation students but slightly overrepresented among first-generation students, whereas whites—who represent 76.6 percent of the population—are underrepresented among first-generation college students, for whom they represent 49 percent of all students.

The problem with this imbalance is how the population of black students view college. In Rushing’s experience, most of them think they can’t aim higher, and Gasman adds that they don’t have the entire picture of what’s possible financially. “If they are first-generation or low-income, they often don’t have access to knowledge about college, especially the difference between the sticker price of college and what one actually pays,” she said. “These issues serve as a deterrent to applying to high-tuition colleges even though they would get the financial aid to pay for them.”

The barriers that stand between black students and higher education are longstanding and transcend how much experience their families have or don’t have with college. For starters, historically, American colleges and universities actively sought to exclude minority groups.

As pointed out in a recent essay by Edmund T. Gordon, vice provost for diversity at the University of Texas at Austin, and Juan Miró, the associate dean for undergraduate programs at UT Austin, many US colleges and

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By Jamaal Abdul-Alim

universities once stood at the forefront of the eugenics movement—pushing a pseudoscience that held whites as superior.

“The movement was led by presidents of elite private institutions like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, and also at public universities like Michigan and Wisconsin,” the two UT Austin administrators say in an essay they wrote for *The Conversation*.

Miró and Gordon contend the remnants of such racist practices and ideologies linger on American campuses to this day, as evidenced in low numbers of minority representation among faculty and student bodies, and that race-conscious admission is one way universities can atone for their past exclusionary practices.

Clyde E. Moore III, associate director of diversity enrichment programs at the University of Oklahoma, observed that it wasn’t until a court case known as *Sipuel Fisher v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* in the late 1940s that African-Americans could legally attend classes at predominantly white institutions. The Supreme Court case brought by Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, a black woman who had sued to be admitted to the University of Oklahoma’s law school. At the time racial segregation was the law of the land in Oklahoma—as it was in other Southern states—and there was no law school at Fisher’s alma mater, Langston University (OK).

The Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that Oklahoma must provide Fisher with the same opportunities for securing a legal education as it provided to other citizens of Oklahoma. It wasn’t until 1949, more than three years after Fisher initially applied to the University of Oklahoma College of Law, that she finally gained admission.

“Racism is the end-all be-all of everything” when it comes to American higher education, said Moore. “Most colleges weren’t set up to support the education of African-American students and African-Americans had to fight to find a place on the college campuses that are primarily white institutions.”

“It’s been an uphill fight and with every decade and generation, strides have been made,” Moore said.

Indeed, much of the black struggle for educational parity in the US has involved protracted legal battles, most notably the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that ended legal segregation of America’s public schools.

Despite the legal victory in the *Brown* decision, America’s public schools remain segregated—or at least their student bodies are composed—largely along lines of race. The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, for instance, found that “intensely segregated nonwhite schools with 0 to 10 percent white enrollment have more than tripled” from 1988 to 2013. The UCLA researchers also lament a “double segregation” of students along lines of race and family income.

“Intense racial separation and concentrated poverty in schools that offer inferior opportunities fundamentally undermine the American belief that all children deserve an equal educational opportunity,” the UCLA researchers say in a 2016 report. “Segregated schools build and sustain a segregated society.”

The racial separation has serious implications for the college-going aspirations of black students, some admission officers say.

“One of the things we’ve noticed is while segregation technically ended, it didn’t really end the way that people want to believe it did,” said Shunverie Barrientez, assistant director of diversity recruitment at Dedman Law School at Southern Methodist University (TX).

Among the many challenges predominantly African-American schools face, Barrientez noted that these schools that don’t offer Advanced Placement or dual credit courses as often as schools in predominantly white and more affluent school districts, which deprives African-American students of certain benefits and advantages in the college admission process.

“These courses are not necessarily making or breaking the student as it relates to the admission process,” Barrientez said. However, she said, such courses not only carry the potential for college credit but allow students to earn a GPA higher than a 4.0.

This matters because grades in college prep courses, overall grades, and strength of the high school curriculum consistently rank among the top factors that admission counselors value as they assess student applications.

Indeed, 76.9 percent of admission counselors say they give “considerable importance” to grades in college prep courses, according to NACAC’s 2017 *State of College Admission* report.

The figures were 77.1 percent and 51.8 percent for grades in all courses and strength of the curriculum, respectively, the survey found.

Some argue that families should move to areas where schools offer a more rigorous curriculum, but the reality is that economic status determines where most people reside, Barrientez said.

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Beyond legal battles and fights for equitable resources, much of the struggle for educational parity for black students—and other students of color or those from low-income families—has involved interventions.

She said government should step in to make sure all students have the same educational opportunities regardless of where they live.

“If the student has the capability and they meet the requirements, I don’t think just because they’re in a particular district that they should not have the opportunity to take a course that a peer who’s in another district has the opportunity to take,” Barrientez said.

One way to tackle the problem is for community colleges to partner with districts to offer dual enrollment courses that enable high school students to earn college credit while in high school, thereby making it easier to complete college by lopping some time off the front-end, Barrientez noted.

The number of high school “dual enrollment” students grew 67 percent from 2002 to 2010, to a total of nearly 1.4 million in the 2010–11 academic year, the most recent year for which federal data is available, according to a 2017 report from the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University (NY). The report also found that there is “strong evidence” that the number of dual enrollment students nationally has grown since.

The report found “considerable variation” among states in students earning a postsecondary credential, and, perhaps more disturbingly, “substantial gaps in college success between lower income former dual enrollment students and those from higher income families.”

A similar situation exists at America’s selective colleges, as shown in a 2017 analysis by *The New York Times* that found black and Hispanic students are more underrepresented at America’s top colleges and universities than they were 35 years ago, despite decades of affirmative action.

Barrientez said when black students don’t access more selective colleges, they are more likely to attend colleges with fewer resources in areas such as academic advising, tutoring, and overall academic support services, which she said can enhance a student’s chance of graduating. “It basically perpetuates a cycle of African-American students not being able to be admitted to the institutions that would allow African-Americans to be just as competitive as it relates to academic achievement.”

Beyond legal battles and fights for equitable resources, much of the struggle for educational parity for black students—and other students of color or those from low-income families—has involved interventions.

In recent decades, there has been an increased reliance on college access programs, such as the Young Scholars Program that Rushing runs in northern California.

Accordingly, teasing out just what it is about these programs that works—or doesn’t work—becomes all the more crucial.

That’s what economists Scott Carrell and Bruce Sacerdote, of the University of California, Davis and Dartmouth College (NH), respectively, sought to investigate for their 2017 study, *Why Do College-Going Interventions Work?*

The pair found that information alone doesn’t appear to be effective. What makes a difference for students at the margin of failing to apply to college is “direct in-person help and hand holding in order to navigate the United States’ convoluted process for applying to colleges and financial aid.”

“A lot of students receive this help from a parent or college counselor, but a great deal of progress can be made in helping those students who lack such support,” Carrell and Sacerdote state in their study.

Which is why programs and initiatives such as the Young Scholars Program are so crucial to the effort to turn things around.

Rushing said she could easily find a more lucrative career by hiring herself out to affluent parents who want help with their children’s college application.

“There’s a lot of money out there,” Rushing said. “But I’m here for the kids whose parents don’t have that kind of money.”

She said her organization is meant to pick up the slack for overburdened guidance counselors with heavy caseloads—as is often the case in high-poverty schools—that often preclude them from devoting much time to helping students get into a good college.

“The counselors would do it if they had the time to do it,” Rushing said. However, she said, “If a guidance counselor has 500 kids on their rolls, how much time do they actually have to spend with these kids?” ▢

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