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Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity Across K–12 and Higher Education Sectors: Challenges and Opportunities for Cross-Sector Learning

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The racial, ethnic, and cultural complexity of the U.S. population is most visible in the school-age cohort, now more than 50% students of color.

Unfortunately, this increasing diversity coincides with increasing racial and social class segregation in the K–12 educational system (Chang, 2018; Harris & Curtis, 2018). The separate and unequal experiences that have shaped students' understandings of race and difference throughout

their K–12 schooling will matriculate with them into higher education.

Meanwhile, the segregation and inequality within the K–12 educational system perpetuates racial and ethnic imbalances across and within higher education (Ashkenas, Haeyoun, & Pearce, 2017). In addition, research on children's racial attitudes demonstrates that students' ability to develop intercultural understandings through experiences in diverse contexts declines as they get older (Tropp & Saxena, 2018). Thus, the racial and ethnic segregation that defines the K–12 system has a profound impact on higher education.

Ironically, at the same time that the K–12 educational system has become increasingly diverse overall and segregated within, many elementary and secondary educators have utilized their pedagogical expertise to develop culturally relevant teaching strategies that foster the educational benefits of integration (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2014; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016). In fact, many K–12 educators note

In Short:

- Higher education and K–12 public schools are tightly interconnected and interdependent when it comes to addressing issues of diversity and equity amid rapid demographic changes.
- The approaches, strategies, and emphases in addressing issues of diversity differ across K–12 and higher education.
- Higher education has been more successful in its legal defense of the educational benefits of diversity, enabling universities to maintain many affirmative action policies that foster demographic diversity.
- Many K–12 educators have applied learning theory to address the sociocultural factors of integration, especially curricular and pedagogical approaches as well as discipline policies and procedures that affect school climate.
- Strategic cross-sector learning, collaboration, and growth around issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity from pre-K to graduate school education are sorely needed.

that they could do more in a culturally relevant manner to achieve meaningful integration in their classrooms if their curriculum were less driven by standardized test mandates and narrow higher education admissions criteria (see Wells and Cordova-Cobo, forthcoming).

Clearly, these two sectors of our educational system are tightly interconnected and interdependent when it comes to addressing issues of diversity and equity. Yet, amid rapid demographic changes faculty are still nearly 80% White. Because of the increasing challenges both systems face when it comes to issues of diversity—from student enrollment to curriculum and teaching—the time for strategic cross-sector learning, collaboration, and growth is now.

TWO STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Over the last 50 years, there have been two main approaches to promoting racial and ethnic equity and integration in education from pre-K through graduate school. The first is a focus on *demographic diversity*, which relates to student admissions and enrollment, and faculty hiring. The second is a focus on the *sociocultural factors*, which includes everything from the culture, history, and knowledge valued in the curriculum to pedagogical approaches, discipline policies, and procedures and campus climate.

In the last several decades, lawyers representing higher education institutions in affirmative

action cases have developed successful legal strategies to maintain policies that promote student demographic diversity. Meanwhile, K–12 educators have applied the knowledge of our field to develop strategies for addressing the curricular and sociocultural issues in schools. The cross-sector contextual and institutional differences in terms of which approach is taken are worth exploring to help institutions enable students to reap the academic and social benefits of racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse learning environments.

Student Demographic Diversity on Campuses and Within Schools

This form of diversity is measured in terms of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic demographics and whether the student body of a school or college campus has a balanced representation.

In K–12 public education, enrollment is generally defined by each school's geographic attendance boundary. Thus, given the high degree of housing segregation in the United States (Monarrez, 2018), achieving demographic diversity in each school is extremely difficult. School desegregation policies have been used to change student assignments within districts to achieve demographic diversity at the school level. Increasingly, however, much of the segregation in the K–12 educational system is *between* school district boundaries and not *within* them (Clotfelter, 2004; Wells et al., 2014).

Universities changed their defense strategies by shifting the framework for why race conscious admissions was important. Rather than remedying discrimination of the past, the new purpose of affirmative action was to foster the cognitive and social benefits of learning in racially and culturally diverse contexts.

In comparison, higher education institutions are not bound by such geographic attendance zones, and even the public universities can control recruitment and admissions decisions beyond their state. Higher education has relied on affirmative action in admissions to achieve greater demographic diversity.

Contrasting Higher Education Versus K–12 Legal Strategies to Achieve Demographic Diversity

The difference in the long-term feasibility of these distinct K–12 versus higher education policies to achieve demographic diversity is grounded in distinct legal strategies.

During the Civil Rights era, when there was more focus in education policy on equity and access issues, legal strategies to diversify student populations in both K–12 and higher education were solidly grounded in 14th Amendment arguments of equal protection. Thus, court cases to eradicate discriminatory enrollment practices, such as *de jure* segregation, were offered in both higher education and K–12 cases to assure students of color had access to predominantly White schools and universities.

In the last three decades, however, the jurisprudence of affirmative action in higher education cases shifted away from 14th Amendment

arguments of equal protection for all students to have access to higher education to a First Amendment argument for the rights of universities to shape their admissions processes to maximize the educational benefits of diversity.

This shift occurred in large part as the plaintiffs in affirmative action cases changed over time. Originally, Civil Rights organizations brought equal protection affirmative action cases against universities, seeking access for Black and Latinx students to selective, predominantly White universities. Since the late 1970s, more of the affirmative action cases have involved White or Asian plaintiffs suing to dismantle these affirmative action practices, claiming they allowed less-qualified Blacks and Latinx students to be admitted in their place, constituting a form of reverse discrimination.

When these plaintiffs offered this argument, universities changed their defense strategies by shifting the framework for *why* race-conscious admissions was important. Rather than remedying discrimination of the past, the new purpose of affirmative action was to foster the cognitive and social benefits of learning in racially and culturally diverse contexts. Drawing on reams of social science evidences to document these benefits, universities argued that it is their First Amendment right to shape their incoming classes of students to further their educational mission.

“**Given that public school districts serve the ‘public’ that lives within their attendance boundaries, over which they have little direct control, it would obviously be more difficult for school districts to connect their specific demographic diversity to the research evidence on educational benefits.**”

Thus far this First Amendment argument has held sway in the federal courts. In its most recent case on affirmative action, *Fisher II*, the Supreme Court ruled that once a university has provided a “reasoned” and “principled” explanation for its admission’s decisions, “deference must be given to the University’s conclusion, based on its experience and expertise, that a diverse student body would serve its educational goals” (*Fisher v. University of Texas*, 2016).

In contrast to these higher education legal victories, recent K–12 public school desegregation cases have been less successful. K–12 desegregation cases also experienced a shift in plaintiffs and arguments against plans to change student choice and assignment policies to create diverse schools. However, the school districts’ defense strategy against White plaintiffs arguing reverse discrimination did not evolve in the same way.

In fact, efforts to pursue K–12 demographic diversity at the school or district level all but ended in a 2007 Supreme Court case, *Parents Involved vs. Seattle*, when the Louisville and Seattle school districts continued to focus on the harms of segregation—a 14th Amendment argument—to defend their school desegregation plans. Although the school districts’ lawyers also argued there were educational benefits of diversity, they did not do so convincingly, nor did they assert the districts’ officials’ First Amendment right to utilize their educational expertise to achieve those educational benefits in their schools.

The Supreme Court’s majority in this case compared the school districts’ legal argument to that of the University of Michigan’s in an affirmative action case, *Grutter vs. Bollinger*. The Court noted that the Louisville and Seattle school districts offered “no evidence that the level of racial diversity necessary to achieve the asserted educational benefits” coincides with the racial demographics of the districts. “This is a fatal flaw under the Court’s existing precedent” (*Parents Involved vs. Seattle*, 2007, p. 5).

Given that public school districts serve the “public” that lives within their attendance boundaries, over which they have little direct control, it would obviously be more difficult for school districts to connect their *specific* demographic diversity to the research evidence on educational benefits. In addition, the K–12 educational system has been, for the last 20 years, held accountable for improving students’ scores on standardized math and reading tests at the cost of almost everything else that matters in education, including history, social studies, and civics education, subjects in which these benefits would likely be most evident.

This test-driven policy context makes it more difficult for teachers to implement the culturally relevant pedagogical strategies to foster the educational benefits of intercultural understanding. Still, as I highlight below, many of these K–12 teachers have pedagogical expertise to teach this way, and

those who have the opportunity to do so have much to share with their fellow educators—in K–12 and higher education.

Diversity of Valued Culture, Knowledge, and Understanding

In order to achieve meaningful integration of not just bodies but also minds and understandings, diversity work must be deeper than merely demographics. If knowledge is power, then when schools or universities only offer a European-centric curriculum as the valued knowledge, students from other backgrounds and experiences can feel devalued. Similarly, when educational institutions have policies or procedures related to discipline or conduct that only recognize some norms of behavior and presentation of students of certain backgrounds over others, those who are “othered” will feel that they do not belong—the imposter syndrome.”

Neither K–12 nor higher education has done enough of this sociocultural “diversity” work, which requires a deep reexamination of curriculum, practices, and policies. But K–12 educators have an advantage over their higher education counterparts in this area. There has been important research and professional development being done on culturally relevant pedagogy and restorative justice as a more culturally sensitive discipline strategy in elementary and secondary education. Indeed, the closer attention paid to child development, including social and emotional development, and the ways in which children learn in K–12 education provides the insights needed to better address issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

For instance, the research of educational scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) has examined the deep cultural biases in schools, including pedagogical strategies and discipline practices, and offers ways to empower students and families whose cultures have been marginalized in the educational system. Connected to other forms of child-centered pedagogical strategies, such as progressive education, culturally relevant teaching builds bridges between home and school by focusing on the background knowledge, experiences, and understandings of students in lessons and methods of teaching (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014).

Culturally relevant teaching has become more popular, particularly in areas of the Northeast and Midwest, and in schools and districts serving large numbers of African American students. Similarly, the K–12 ethnic studies curriculum, another form of culturally relevant pedagogy has been taken up in districts across the country and has even become a state graduation requirement in California and Oregon. The curriculum for these programs builds on the knowledge developed in university-based ethnic studies departments while also incorporating the child-centered pedagogical strategies of good K–12 teaching.

Indeed, the ethnic studies departments and programs in higher education have been critical to changing K–12 education curriculum, including high school ethnic studies classes. At the same time, with less focus on pedagogy among higher education faculty, there is still much work to be done in colleges and universities to train faculty to connect their subject matter to their students’ backgrounds and understandings. According to Chang (2013), in higher education, the research is clear that student diversity contributes to educational benefits, but “we are only beginning to uncover *how* or *which* processes and conditions promote those benefits” (p. 172).

BRIDGING THE K–12/HIGHER EDUCATION DIVIDES: SHARE STRATEGIES AND KNOWLEDGE

Thus, a key paradox exists within U.S. education system with respect to issues of racial and ethnic integration: Our higher education system has succeeded in crafting the legal argument for demographic diversity as it relates to educational benefits, even if curricular and pedagogical reform within university classrooms has been lacking. Meanwhile, many K–12 educators have used their pedagogical expertise to create learning environments to foster those educational benefits, even as the legal strategy to maintain diversity in public schools has been less successful.

If higher education and K–12 policy makers and educators decided to share integration strategies, higher education faculty would have much to learn about teaching and learning in racially and culturally diverse contexts from many of their K–12 colleagues, and school district leaders could learn a great deal about framing the benefits of diversity so that legal and political efforts to address segregation would be more successful. ☐

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