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Introduction: Why “Critical”? The Need for New Ways of Knowing

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The incidence of racial inequality in higher education has been extensively documented. National studies and reports have chronicled in detail the status of minoritized¹ students: low retention and degree attainment; a dramatic

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¹Critical race theorists use the term “minoritized” populations in reference to racial groups who represent “involuntary minorities” because their presence in the United States resulted from enslavement, conquest, or colonization (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2005; Gillborn, 2005; Ogbu, 1990).

decline of male college students of color; severe underrepresentation in highly selective colleges and STEM fields; overrepresentation in community colleges exacerbated by low rates of transfer to four-year colleges; and the greater likelihood that minoritized students will be tracked into noncredit remedial programs that “cool” (Clark, 1960) them out of college.

Unfortunately, in examining such data, many of us are not well schooled in asking critical questions that begin with an understanding of the racialized patterns in higher education structures, policies, and practices that reproduce these inequalities in access and success. Rather, many academics have learned to use theories and research methods that exclude race altogether, include it as a predictive demographic characteristic, or make sense of racial and ethnic minority groups by how well they measure up to Whites. Thus, our research methods, questions, and interpretive frameworks are often more likely to lead to such conclusions as *Latinos have the lowest college completion rate of any group*, rather than *Higher education is least successful in retaining and graduating Latinos of any group*.

Simply put, the scholarship and policy frames that are familiar to decision-makers and practitioners too often fail to ask the “race” question critically and knowledgeably. Race, understood critically, focuses on structural racism: the systematic but often invisible way in which routine practices, traditions, values, and structures perpetuate racial inequity in higher education.

A detrimental result of race-blindness is the continuing neglect and undervaluing of scholars of color in the formation of policy that purports to address the educational needs of “underrepresented minorities.” This absence is particularly noticeable in the invisibility of race and equity in the forums, reports, studies, and initiatives that are shaping the national agenda for accountability in college completion. This “race gap” in scholarship and policy analysis is detrimental to everyone, regardless of his or her own racial or ethnic background. In 1903 in his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois declared, “Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (p. xxxi). It is alarming that Dubois’s observation is as fitting a description of our society and educational system today as it was more than 100 years ago. And in the absence of race-conscious scholarship and policy-making, “the color line” will endure and intensify the racial, economic, and ethnic divisions that are evident in the unequal distribution of educational opportunity and benefits.

With this deficiency in mind, a group of well-established scholars and policy leaders decided to come together and pool our intellectual, academic, and collegial resources, pushing the boundaries and seeking to integrate more critical and equity-minded research into the broad field of higher

education. The institutes were a collaborative effort directed by Estela Mara Bensimon and Alicia C. Dowd, Co-Directors at the Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California; Sylvia Hurtado, Director of the Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles; Michael A. Olivas, Bates Distinguished Chair in Law, University of Houston Law Center; Amaury Nora (Professor and Associate Dean for Research, University of Texas-San Antonio), Anna Neumann and Aaron Pallas (both Professors at Teachers College at Columbia University), and Brian Pusser (Associate Professor, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia); David Longanecker (President of the Western Interstate Commission of Higher Education); and Michelle Asha Cooper (President of the Institute for Higher Education Policy).

We began conversations in 2006 and identified four needs: (a) to strengthen the research capacities of early-career, tenure-track scholars to study questions of racial and ethnic equity in higher education; (b) to expand and diversify research methods and analytical frames to infuse critical perspectives into the study of race and equity in higher education; (c) to transform the agendas of higher education policy centers to be more responsive to problems of racial-ethnic inequality in higher education; and (d) to diversify the pipeline for professional staff and consultants affiliated with higher education policy centers and NGOs that influence the “non-academic” policy arena and that play a significant role in shaping state and federal higher education policy.

Thus, with the generous support of the Ford Foundation, the ASHE Institutes on Equity and Critical Policy Analysis were formed, bringing together more than 100 individuals over the two summers of 2009 and 2010. The core activities of the institutes included a series of intensive research methods workshops focused on quantitative and qualitative data from critical perspectives, as well as workshops on critical policy, scholarly publishing, and participatory critical action research. Many participants were initially unfamiliar or uncomfortable with research that confronted normative higher education policies and practices with such questions as “Who benefits?” “Who is excluded?” or “How do seemingly neutral categories reproduce inequity?” Thus, this collaborative examination within the institutes revealed that there is a great need for opportunities that enable higher education scholars, leaders of policy organizations, and editors of journals to become familiar with knowledge sources and conceptual frameworks that are foundational to equity and critical perspectives.

We issued an invitation to submit manuscripts addressing critical research questions to all members who participated in the ASHE Equity Institutes; we subsequently sent the same invitation to the ASHE listserv. We received a total of 14 manuscripts, including the four selected for publication and presented here. We engaged reviewers in a traditional blind review process, in which they rated and critiqued the articles based on standard *Review of*

Higher Education criteria, with the additional category of “effective use of critical perspectives.” For those offered the opportunity to revise and resubmit based on reviewer feedback, the revised manuscript draft was submitted to the reviewer to assess whether the revisions satisfactorily addressed the identified concerns. In cases where the reviewer still had minor concerns, the co-editors sought additional revisions. A complete list of the Board of Editors for this supplemental issue appears at the end of the article.

This special issue of the *Review of Higher Education* reflects the institutes’ goals of (a) strengthening the research capacities of young scholars to study questions of race and equity and (b) expanding research methods and interpretive frameworks to consider questions of race and equity from critical perspectives. The authors of the articles participated in one or more of the institutes, where they had the opportunity to share their work, test ideas, discuss them with peers and the institutes’ directors, and get substantive feedback.

The issue begins with an article by Shaun Harper, a participant in the 2009 Institute on Participatory Critical Action Research. He engages in a deep and systematic survey of recent articles published in the major journals in higher education. He finds that researchers report data in terms that ignore the realities faced by minoritized populations, thus minimizing the significance of racism.

Michelle Espino, a participant in the 2010 Institute on Scholarship and Publishing from an Equity Perspective, employs a critical race theory storytelling technique to incorporate data, personal reflections, and findings from multiple studies, ultimately providing a reflection on the production and resistance of master narratives.

Edlyn Vallejo Peña, a participant in the 2010 Institute on Research Methods for Critical Analysis of Qualitative Data, uses a case study to illustrate how engagement in inquiry can contribute to the development of self-change and critical consciousness among faculty.

Finally, Liliana Garces, a participant in the 2009 Critical Research and Policy Analysis Institute and in the 2010 Research Methods for Critical Analysis of Quantitative Data, explores how affirmative action bans have affected the representation of students of color in graduate programs in six fields of study in both the states with bans and in a comparison group of states without bans. She applies a critical perspective to highlight how the findings can inform understanding of current policy. Her study is particularly timely in view of the Supreme Court’s decision to hear the case on the use of race-conscious admissions at the University of Texas. That ruling, many fear, will undo the compromise reached in the University of Michigan case.

In addition to the aforementioned variety of methods, readers will find models of self-reflection in critical research, as authors consider their own positionalities in relationship to their work. For instance, Shaun Harper

reflects thoughtfully on the personal turmoil he experienced in considering the works of colleagues—and of his own—in his critique of avoiding the language of racism. Michelle Espino's work serves perhaps as a personal reflection first, as she interweaves the presentation of data and literature in a personal narrative about her own and her students' reactions to such data and paradigmatic discussions. Her article may well serve as an important prompt for reflection among graduate students and researchers alike.

Each of these four articles serves as a type of caution, an admonition about the ways in which higher education as a system, or the higher education research in which we engage, may fail to achieve positive ends in the absence of critical frames—be it by excusing racism through a euphemistic vocabulary, the continued lack of awareness among White faculty who do not inquire into the worlds of their students of color, the perpetuation of dominant narratives in our qualitative research, or the potential shortage of leaders of color in key fields in our democracy. At the same time, these articles might equally be viewed as tales of hope—hope for the kinds of change that may occur as we deliberately turn a more critical eye on our own work and on the structures and practices of our field.

To round out the issue, we invited Gregory Anderson, who was Program Officer at the Ford Foundation and helped to shape the institutes, and is now Dean of the Morgridge School of Education at the University of Denver, to pen a concluding commentary on the four articles. While he discusses the strengths of these articles, he also challenges us to go beyond simply pushing the theoretical or methodological boundaries and to be more intentional about the connection between critical race theory and policy formation and implementation. He urges us to generate “insurgent analyses capable of influencing critical decisions and legislation that negatively shapes marginalized students' choices, options, and educational opportunities” (p. 139).

Yet in reviewing this special issue, some will charge: Is not such work inherently biased? To begin one's research with assumptions about the presence of racism or other structural inequities—and to interpret data within a framework situated within those assumptions—has one not already determined the direction of one's findings? We assert that the reverse too often happens, as those aiming to operate within an objectivist paradigm often hold implicit assumptions about the *absence* of inequities, assumptions that may nonetheless inform their interpretations. In such cases, researchers run the risk that their work may serve as a tacit reinforcement of existing social processes.

And so, what do we hope that readers will gain from this special issue of the *Review of Higher Education*? For those engaged in current studies within critical frameworks, we hope that this edition provides a span of works that prompt the refinement of questions and methods for their own research. For future and emerging scholars, we hope that these works provide examples of possible academic directions, including directional choices that might

differ from dominant modes of research. Meanwhile, for those who operate within more traditional social science orientations, we hope that this issue might, at least briefly, prompt reflection upon the question: How might my assumptions of value neutrality influence my own research findings?

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