



CENTER *for* URBAN  
EDUCATION

# THE MISBEGOTTEN URM AS A DATA POINT

---

*Estela Mara Bensimon*

*Professor and Director, Center for Urban Education  
Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California*

---



This essay was written at the invitation of Dr. Shaun Harper and it was presented on a presidential symposium held at the 2014 meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in observance of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Bensimon, E. M. (2016). The misbegotten URM as a data point. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Urban Education, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California.

## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	3
Definition of URM .....	4
What Makes a URM a Misbegotten Discursive Practice? .....	4
1. URM is degrading and dehumanizing to the communities it describes .....	4
2. URM circumvents the “race question.” .....	5
3. URM is a form of Malpractice .....	5
Unlearning URM .....	6
References .....	7



## INTRODUCTION

We often think of data as numbers only. Perhaps because of the ascendance of analyses grounded in technical and rational ideologies, numbers currently enjoy greater legitimacy as symbols of reality. When it comes to issues of race and higher education, we are bombarded with all kinds of numbers depicting the intractable persistence of inequality for students from communities and nations that have been the subject of colonization, oppression, and discrimination, that is, students who are oftentimes labeled “underrepresented minority”—or even more briefly, “URM”—by those who have the power to produce the numbers.

Numeric data on these students fill policy reports, newspaper and magazine articles, and infographics, suggesting that, contrary to what one might expect 50 years after the Civil Rights Act, inequality is growing. While numbers can describe with some success dimensions of this inequality, they offer little insight into the reasons for it. Understanding why inequality is on the rise demands attention to other forms of information and evidence that are not quantitative in nature. Specifically, our language and discursive practices reveal much about the state of critical race analysis within higher education’s community of scholars, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers.

In higher education, the liberal, post-Civil Rights diversity agenda has desensitized us to the ways racism continues to play out in the normative structures, values, customs, and practices that are at the core of campus life and work. Inequality in higher education is a structural problem produced by institutionalized racism that is enacted or reinforced by the use of language imbued with political and social meanings that on first listen sound harmless. Language conveys how individuals, alone and in the company of others, give meaning to numeric patterns; how they talk about race without talking about it; how they shape the reality of racial inequity. Language is important because it reflects culturally acquired knowledge that forms the schemas of practitioners, leaders, policy makers, and others whose actions can make—or unmake—the anti-racism project in higher education.

Thus, in this essay, I focus on language, specifically the term URM because it represents a common discursive practice in higher education, particularly among those who control the representation of numeric data. I believe that URM as a signifier for marginalized populations and identities provides a window into the tacit knowledge that informs the

---

*I believe that URM as a signifier for marginalized populations and identities provides a window into the tacit knowledge that informs the ways in which practitioners, policy makers, leaders, and philanthropists represent and interpret racial equity/inequity patterns in higher education.*

---



ways practitioners, policy makers, leaders, and philanthropists represent and interpret racial equity and inequity patterns in higher education.

## DEFINITION OF URM

---

***U-R-M/URM:** Acronym for underrepresented minority in reference to African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, and Asian Americans. Most commonly used in official reports by the government, colleges and universities, think tanks, foundations, as well as in public announcements and scholarly articles.*

***Common Uses:** “URM Candidates Are Encouraged to Apply”: A National Study to Identify Effective Strategies to Enhance Racial and Ethnic Faculty Diversity in Academic Departments of Medicine; Nationally, only about 40 percent of underrepresented minority, or URM, students (African American, Latino, and Native American) earn a bachelor’s degree within six years. The figure for nonminority students is more than 60 percent*

***Plural:** URM’s*

***Antonym:** Non-URM, acronym for whites. In some cases Asians are treated as Non-URM.*

---

## WHAT MAKES A URM A MISBEGOTTEN DISCURSIVE PRACTICE?

It is not unusual nowadays to hear people say things like, “Our URM’s are not doing so well” or “URM’s have a lower rate of persistence after the first year,” or “Our goal is to cut the graduation gap between URM’s and Non URM’s by half.”

Regardless of whether URM is the preferred term of an African American Vice President of Diversity, a white policy maker, a Latino college president, or an Asian-American private foundation program officer, I believe that its normalization does harm to the equity project.

### 1. URM IS DEGRADING AND DEHUMANIZING TO THE COMMUNITIES IT DESCRIBES



URM is degrading and dehumanizing because it divests racial and ethnic groups of the hard won right to name themselves and assert their own identity. The movement to be “Black” rather than “Negro” was a political act of self-affirmation and agency. It was an act of rebellion and appropriation. “Black” is not simply about color or race; it represents a historical moment of liberation symbolized by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, the Black Panthers, and intellectual uprisings as symbolized by the writings of Cornel West, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, and many more. The emergence of “black” in higher education was an assertion of the right to be present without giving up identity as evidenced in the birth of Black Student Organizations and Black Study programs and departments. Similarly, those grouped within the Hispanic label wanted to acknowledge their nationhood, their indigenous roots, and their connection to usurped lands.

## 2. URM CIRCUMVENTS THE “RACE QUESTION.”

The feminist movement stood firmly against the generic use of male because it evaded the “woman” question, giving rise to misinformation, wrong assumptions, faulty decisions, and rampant discrimination in all spheres of life. As a generic designation for African Americans, Latinos and Latinas, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and American Indians, URM represses the critical race questions that numeric data should elicit from the individuals who have normalized URM. For example, what kinds of meanings are created by a group of higher education practitioners looking at a data table that shows a 75% admissions rate for Whites and 55% for URMs? What kinds of actions are prompted by a goal stating the graduation gap between URMs and non-URMs will be cut in half in the next 3 years? What does it mean when someone at a college says, “We need to recruit the right kinds of URMs?”

Being race-conscious requires that individuals learn to see the ways in which race is embedded in everyday practices. Critical race scholars (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Matsuda, Lawrence III, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004) contend that inequality is produced and maintained by the routine practices of institutions and the cumulative effect of racial micro-aggressions. In order to close racial gaps in opportunity and outcomes, it is necessary to take into account the social, cultural, and historical context of exclusion, discrimination, and educational apartheid as experienced by fully formed racial and ethnic groups, rather than abbreviated URMs.

## 3. URM IS A FORM OF MALPRACTICE

Reporting numeric data in the aggregate constitutes a malpractice as it hides significant inequalities across groups. URM promotes color-blindness; it contravenes the principle of critical race-consciousness that is essential to achieving equity in higher education. URM blinds us to the monumental differences in the circumstances that turned Blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and American Indians into URM’s.

True, Blacks, Latinos and Latinas, Native Hawaiians, Hmong, and American Indians may share unequal outcomes in all the indicators of equal opportunity such as access, persistence, and degree attainment, as well as in all the indicators of exclusive advantage, including enrollment in a highly



selective college; having access to research experiences, study abroad, and meaningful on campus work; majoring in lucrative fields; earning advanced degrees. But the roots of inequality for each group are enormously different. Different ideologies, beliefs, and politics legitimized the practices of subjugation, exploitation, oppression, stigmatization, and humiliation inflicted upon the groups contained within the category URM. The undifferentiated URM category hides the origins of inequality for Black, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Hondurans, Salvadoreans, Dominicans, Hmong, Vietnamese, Oneidas, Chippewas, Native Hawaiians, Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, and Japanese, and so on.

## UNLEARNING URM

When women insisted that “he” be abandoned as a generic term for all humans, they met opposition and derision. Men (and women too) did not understand that the universal “he” and “man” made women and the inequalities that characterized their lives invisible. Unlearning “he” and “man” as signifiers for all humans made it possible to see that what was true for “academic men” was not true for academic women, and that different kinds of questions and analyses were essential to achieving gender equality and inclusivity. Unlearning happened through the intentional introduction of new language, practices, and policies. It happened through purposeful education. And it happened because advocates of the feminist agenda were willing to take a position even when it put them at risk of being shunned.

Equity advocates must do the same. We need to model how not to use the term URM. We need to educate those who use the term why it is detrimental to the goals of racial equity. We need to point to examples of how numeric data aggregated into the URM category hide significant inter-racial inequality. To do so, we need language that helps us analyze inequality critically. We need language that empowers us to talk about race frankly. We need language that helps us trace inequality to the practices through which higher education is conducted.

But first, we must resolve to abolish “URM.”



## REFERENCES

- Bensimon, E. M., & Marshall, C. (1997). Policy analysis for postsecondary education: Feminist and critical perspectives. In C. Marshall (Ed.), *Feminist critical policy analysis: A perspective from post-secondary education* (pp. 1-22). Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press.
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *Journal of Higher Education*, 80(4), 389-414.
- Ladson - Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (Eds.). (2006). *Education research in the public interest: Social justice, action, and policy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Matsuda, M. J., Lawrence, C. R., III, Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. (Eds.). (1993). *Words that wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Yosso, T. J., Parker, L., Solorzano, D. G., & Lynn, M. (2004). From Jim Crow to affirmative action and back again: A critical race discussion of racialized rationales and access to higher education. *Review of Research in Education*, 1-25.
- Solorzano, D. G., Villalpando, O., & Oseguera, L. (2005). Educational inequities and Latina/o undergraduate students in the United States: A critical race analysis of their educational progress. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 4(3), 272-294.