American Elite: The Use of Education for Social Stratification

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Abstract

The following essay will investigate the United States educational system and how it has been used to increase social stratification and limit the mobility of social class. This essay will define social stratification and give examples of how it limits social mobility based on various determinants such as race, class, and socioeconomic status. Understanding the use of education and the role it plays in moving social class, we learn how education has now been commoditized and its use for social stratification has been exploited. The essay will contend that the proliferation of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were created to assist students of color in their educational opportunities and ability to move social strata. In doing so, predominantly white institutions began to focus their attention on underrepresented populations and their ability to compete in the educational marketplace, as well as HBCUs’ ability to move social class by instituting summer transition programs assisted with the federal government implementation of TRiO to assist universities in their efforts. With this focus, this essay will discuss the impact of college transition programs and their impact on retention and graduation rates for underrepresented student populations and how they are influencing the ability to move social class and the overall achievement gap that still exists in today’s society.
Chapter 1

What is Social Stratification?

Stratification is entrenched within the American culture in which we live. From the street you grow up on, to the friends you have, and even down to the food and places you like to eat; stratification is undeniably a part of the history of the United States of America. Ironically, stratification was also one of the reasons for the mass migration of millions of people to this country. Socialization, salient to the average person, is so entrenched within the “American way” that we must force ourselves to recognize it. Like the Pavlovian dog, we have become conditioned to accept its existence and answer to it only when we have been educated to do so. It has become institutionalized with where we work, where we live, and ultimately within social class mobility. However, our unquenchable desire to achieve the “American Dream” allows individuals to push their limits to incredible heights. What we soon find are the limitations and barriers to the dream. The glass ceilings, the color barriers, religion, sexual orientation, and gender are only a few of the litany of disparities that are the result of stratification within the American culture.

The social ramifications of stratification can be seen in history books from one civilization to another dating back hundreds and thousands of years. For in the United States, we need only to look back to yesterday to see that social stratification is alive and well and persisting into tomorrow. In Sociology, social stratification refers to the social inequality in the construction of the social categorization of people in a given society. Factors that play a role in
social stratification include wealth, income, and race. The perceptions of the differences in these factors help shape our roles in the social construction of society as well as impact our mobility, both between and within movement in social class. Though as we look at the educational system and framework of America, we must begin to ask ourselves, “Is education creating a divide within America?” More specifically, “is education stratifying America?” The answer to both questions is a resounding, yes, as the economical and societal shifts have changed the fundamental purpose and requirements of the need for a more advanced, and educated society. Division and stratification within the United States is all but too common and to suggest that the educational system of the United States would be anything different would be as comparative as to suggest that “all men were created equal.” It is education where we need to focus more of our attention and need to understand how to interpret its’ importance to the growth in the social stratification here in the United States.

The United States Education System

Our education system is one that has served and serves millions of people here and around the world. With our open door policy, we are free to educate those who are willing to learn and will explore the market of education further in this essay. Historically in the United States, from differences based solely on income or class, color, and/or Brown v. Board of Education and integration, our education system has always been stratified. There has been little to no growth or change to our system of education for far too long. It is predicated upon two types of schooling: public and private. Generally, education is based on a K-12 level for
both public and private school attendees though the curriculums may vary since those who choose to attend a private school system may do so because of other values pertaining to education i.e. religious, cost, or sports-based. The rise of private schools came about after a resolution in 1925 by a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, which insured the freedom of citizens to send their children to schools outside the public system (Levin, p. 87). Curriculums between the two vary as those which are public must adhere to the state regulations since there are no national regulations that are set by the U.S. Department of Education. Thus each state has the ability to create their own rules and regulations and deem to themselves what constitutes an education. Private schools will structure their curriculums to resemble those of public schools as to allow for easier transparency for their constituents as well as those who would desire to transfer from a public to a private school institution. Also, where we begin to see another difference between public and private education is the variation in the funding of the school system. Whereas public education is dependent upon local and state taxes and property taxes, private schools have the liberty of charging tuition or may require some sort of entrance exam before enrolling. The rise of charter and magnet schools have provided a new wave of educational opportunity, mostly to those are economically disadvantaged to receive what is perceived as a better education comparable to that of a private school. Education has become a primary source of inequality as we begin to see the how stratification is inherent within the DNA of our education system.

The mission of the United States Department of Education reads: “our mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Dept. of Education). However, we must
question how we can achieve educational excellence if there is no consensus of what constitutes an education. If there is no finite or resolute definition for the standard of an education, what gives justification to a high school diploma? Bachelor’s degree? Master’s degree? Or Ph. D? Without proper regulation, education will continue to stratify and become commodified and looked at as a public good on an open market.

Education as a Public Good

Over time, research across all areas has shown a correlation between education, income, wealth and social class. As one garners more education, income and wealth tend to rise and one begins to move social classes. Likewise, should one decide to only receive a high school diploma or drop out of school, statistics show that income and wealth will be much less over time. Looking at the data in Figure 1 provided by the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, one can clearly see the results one’s educational attainment has on a weekly earnings basis. Considering the impact that the level of education that one receives, then naturally over time these numbers will begin to increase creating an even greater income disparity and greater income inequality amongst people in the United States.
How early does this disparity take place? Most will occur before children are even able to speak as their educational pathway is determined, more often than not, by society and not by their own choice. African American children begin to fall behind white students on standardized test as early as kindergarten (Epps, 1995). Some may attribute this disparity to access which we’ll cover later in this essay, and others state the disparity is based upon the student or socioeconomic status. However, due to other variables and because of the structure of the United States education system, education has been marginalized within groups, commodified to the public, and ultimately made as a public good in an open market system. In any capitalistic market economy, supply and demand reign supreme. The perception in the United States of education and choice in terms of the demand for a quality education is high, however, the supply of a quality education is limited. Herein lies the struggle we encounter in
our education system as it currently exists between public and private schools. Where one goes to school has residual effects that start from the beginning of their schooling and lasts well into the later years of one’s life. Schools have come to be known to reinforce social inequality in American society (Labaree, 1997). They have become the breeding grounds of social and educational injustice, the glass ceiling to social mobility and the forefront of a “culture[al] [war between] poverty, disintegrating family values and a growing gap between school culture and popular culture (Labaree, 1997 p. 40).

Outside of the home, school is the second most important institution of learning that we encounter. Schools are an essential institution in society as their most important function is to socialize individuals into gender, class, and racial/ethnic roles as well as serve their universal function to impart knowledge and skills that will enable the learner to participate successfully in the society’s institutions (Epps, 1995). We are to use schools as a tool to teach people how to become learners and how to use that education and adapt that learning to societal changes. Though schools do help to socialize individuals in society, they do contribute to the social, economic, and political opportunities among persons drawn from different racial and social class origins (Levin, 1997). As we will discuss further, education is the tool that will help individuals increase their income potential and assist in uplifting them to move social classes.
Public vs. Private School Education

Primarily society focuses on the differences between a public school education and a private school education. Many will debate which is better, nonetheless the debate should center more on the question of “who” the education is better for: society or personal attainment. The type of educational environment can have an impact both educationally and socially. Thus, having the ability to choose can be a major advantage to the type school and education you receive is a pivotal factor between a public and private school education and the culture your child is exposed to. John Coons and Stephen Sugarman support the value of choice as they “argue that, in the absence of consensus, the decision should be left to the private marketplace with parents deciding for themselves the types of schools to which they send their children (1978). What one constitutes as essential to an education will determine the manner in which one goes about the determining their educational pathway. According to Henry Levin, the degree that families have different political, social, and religious beliefs and values, a basic incompatibility may exist between their private concerns and the public functions of schooling (p. 629). Thus the reasoning behind what type of private school an individual decides to send their child is solely based upon their own beliefs of what they consider to be essential to their own educational and personal outcomes.

Unlike public education, private education allows for choice. School as a public good is meant to provide students with a common set of values and knowledge to create citizens who can function democratically and contribute to the equality of social, economic, and political opportunities among persons drawn from different racial and social class origins (Levin, p. 630).
The unintended consequence of education is inequality. The type of inequality will range from socioeconomic and educational to racial and social inequality. Within an open market and democratic government, “effective participation in a democracy requires a willingness to tolerate diversity” (Levin 1997, p. 636). Public school is there to teach individuals how to understand and accept what you cannot comprehend and to gain different perspectives of how to see the world. Schooling for [a] democracy must ensure exposure to different views in controversial areas, a discourse among those views, and the acceptance of a mechanism for reconciling the debate (Levin 1997, p. 636). How we socialize the world within our own construct and the manner in which we view society is a result of our schooling. The openness and diversity that can be found in many public schools is essential to the overall quality of education that one receives while in public school. With the many backgrounds, different socioeconomic status and cultures that are infused with the public diaspora, one has the potential to truly learn and educate themselves among their peers.

The availability of choice was critical to the development of private education and has now found its way into the public education realm as charter schools. As Levin (1997) states in his article, “the larger the range of public educational choices in a geographical area, the smaller the number of private enrollments, ceteris paribus, [thus] suggest[ing] that expanded public choice can be an effective substitute for private schooling in the quest for private educational services” (p. 637). According to the National Center of Educational Statistics, “a public charter school is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state or jurisdiction.” Furthermore, the charter exempts the school from certain state or local rules and regulations.
(NCES). Figure 2 and Figure 3 display the number of charter schools, the number of student enrollment and their expansion and growth from 1999-2000 to 2009-10 and 2011-2013, clearly indicating there a rise in charter schools as the demand for a quality public education has risen through the years.

Figure 2
Though still young in nature, charter schools have adopted the idea that the power of choice will offer an exchange for a better education. Still based as a public school in nature, choice can now be offered to those who cannot afford private school institutions with the hopes of receiving a better education in comparison to those of the general public education school system. The effects of charter schools have yet to be determined as they are still in the early years of functionality. But with plenty of research and data available, we can see the differences in education if we look into high school graduation of students.

As stated before, we will be looking primarily at the differences between White and Black students. Taking a look at Table 1 (NCES), we can compare high school graduation rates from public schools in the United States across race/ethnicity from 2011-12. Overall, the rates of Black students are considerably lower by 17% at 68%, compared to the 85% for White students.
If educational stratification did not exist, we should be able to see much more equality on the number of graduates regardless of one’s race or ethnicity. Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics states that “among schools with 12th-grade students during the 2010–11 school year, the average percentage of 12th-grade students who graduated with a high school diploma was 89 percent for traditional public schools, 91 percent for public charter schools, and 92 percent for private schools. Within this group of schools, the average percentage of graduates who went to a 4-year college was 40 percent for traditional public schools, 37 percent for public charter schools, and 64 percent for private schools” (NCES). This data supports the assertion that a private school education connotes a better education due to both the higher graduation rates and the percentage of students who went on to a 4-year college. More data and research would need to be provided to discover if there is any validity to the
data that would support choice in the results the increase in the statistics, especially for those provided by charter schools.
Socioeconomic status and educational attainment level have been always been linked to an individual’s status within society, which will depend on their education and income. The disparity amongst individuals and groups is very hard to ignore, even though both those with high and low socioeconomic status share a lot of similarities. Most notably, both are required to attend some form of formal education, either public or private. However we find that those in the lower socioeconomic statuses have a multitude of variables that hinder them in their educational development. Some of the variables that hinder those in the lower socioeconomic status consist of a lack of resources, a lack of a positive learning environment, and a lack of motivation for academic achievement. With the lack of resources in some schools, it becomes very difficult to ensure that each student is well prepared and equipped for the ability to learn. This can be due to the lack of support in the home or the inability to afford additional educational material such as books, new technology or specific outside tutoring services. Nutrition can serve as a lack of resources as it is pivotal to brain and learning development, and thus an [inadequate] diet may affect a child’s ability to respond appropriately in a school situation (Bond, 1981 p. 243).

An example of a negative learning environment would be one which consists of a school that has low education expectations pertaining to academic performance and is accompanied by a lack of resources. Unlike schools that are more affluent, there is consistent, often times
high turnover when teachers who are the more qualified educators accept positions in higher socioeconomic education systems. With the lack of a positive learning environment, many students will find it hard to reach their full potential as there is no one to help motivate them in what they need to accomplish. For Black students who have a low socioeconomic status, they are pushed even further behind as their standard of education is relegated to a level of inadequacy since they believe they are unable to perform at a required or higher education level. Depicting these variables in an educational environment, Black students are left behind at an early age and continuously struggle just to be competitive with their white counterparts; they are left feeling that social mobility is unattainable through education.

Creating a Meritocracy

Inequality within America is as inherent within our society as it seems air is to breathing. It’s as if it has become part of our daily life that inequality is persistent within multiple strata in American society. Through the commodification of education has risen the ideology that education has become a merit good; a good that it would be underproduced in the market relative to its social merits, and thus would find it meritorious to expand educational output beyond the market equilibrium to capture the social benefits (Levin, 1987). Normally, the equilibrium of the number of educated outputs equals the demand for qualified outputs but a merit good does not follow along the same guidelines. Within a meritocracy, there are a limited number of positions to be filled and must only be filled by the most qualified applicant, regardless of the color of their skin and rather based on merit i.e. education. Richard Breen
supports this argument pertaining to the “liberal theory of industrialism,” stating that economic development leads countries to become ever more meritocratic in the sense that positions in society will increasingly come to be filled on the basis of achievement rather than ascription. He also argues that it is a functional necessity of an industrial society; that is, the acquisition by individuals of positions on the basis of anything other than merit or ability will be sup-optimal both for the individual firms competing among themselves within a country and for that country’s competitive position vis-à-vis other nations (1997). Therefore over time, any other outside factors outside of merit will have basis of importance on the selection of individuals with regards to job placement. Consequently, the effects of one’s socioeconomic status has great implications as it pertains to family income and has a direct effect on their educational attainment. The educational gap still grows despite best efforts that support the increase in graduation rates amongst lower socioeconomic and Black students. In the table below, we can see the impact that a meritocracy has on based on one’s earnings defined by their race or ethnicity (Baum, Kurose, & Ma, 2013).
Based on the data provided in Table 2, the merit or reward of obtaining a higher degree guarantees a higher level of income, regardless of one’s race or ethnicity. Within the numbers, Blacks have the smallest gap in overall earnings of $39,500 compared to Whites with $47,400, whereas the greatest disparity between education attainment and income lies with Asians at $63,100. Though the data is stratified between race and ethnicity, the differences within the strata of the particular race or ethnicity is inherently greater.

Naturally, those with degrees have a lower unemployment rate than those who do not have a degree. Under supply and demand terms, this does not seem bad at all. For Breen agrees with this sentiment when he writes that social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons (1997). In an open market economy, one’s pay is going to
be commensurate with their level of training or expertise, ultimately leading to a stratified system built upon the importance of a position relative to the supply of qualified individuals available to fill those positions. Improving one’s educational status will only improve their chances of moving social classes in that the meritorious reward of increasing their education leads to an increase both financially and socially.

Education and Social Mobility

Moving social classes within the American landscape seems much easier than what society states. Even movement within one’s own social strata is more apparent than between classes. In the United States, the various ways in which one can move social classes is what the American dream lives on. The manner in which one moves can vary by chance or luck, creative ingenuity, or be passed down from generation to generation. Over time, education has long been seen as the means by which once can advance in social class and help move their family into the next social strata. According to data from a 2011 report, those who earn a bachelor’s degree will earn on average roughly 60% more than high school graduates (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013), while individuals who go on to earn advanced or professional degrees will earn roughly two and half to three times as much during their lifetime (Baum, Kurose, & Ma, 2013).

For Black students, the importance of furthering one’s education is critical to advancing from one social class to the next. Using Table 2 as a reference, we see the correlation of how income relates to education amongst Blacks comparatively to Whites and other races and ethnicities. Comparing Black men and White men, we see there is nearly a 15% earnings
differential for those who earn a bachelor’s degree with White men earning more, however the income gap is almost zero comparing those who earn advanced degrees. We are also able to see how education and income are stratified within the data as there is still a wage earning gap between Black men and women who have the same education level. For Black men and women who earn a bachelor’s degree will see increases in their median earnings of 66% and 56% compared to those who earn only a high school diploma. Those earning advanced degrees will see their median earnings increase by 46% for Black men and 20% for Black women. Though the difference in earnings seems substantial, other factors must be taken into consideration when looking at the income distribution of how education affects median income.

We do know that over the lifetime of an individual, those who graduate and earn a bachelor’s degree have higher earning potential than those who only receive a high school diploma or an associate’s degree. Advancing one’s education is what has allowed many to move upward in social mobility and begin to set a new track for their family for generations to come.
Chapter 3

Access, Affordability, and Empowerment

When discussing the ways in which education can empower individuals by providing them access to opportunities for upward social mobility, it is clear that the ability to attain a higher education must be attainable and achievable to as many people as possible. The American dream hinges upon one’s ability to move social strata in hopes of creating a new pathway for a family’s new generation. Access becomes an important factor in determining who has the access to the proper educational resources. Likewise, the ability to afford a higher education determines who has the financial capability to pursue it. In terms of speaking of differences between Blacks and Whites, access and affordability are key contributors to the growing gap in their numbers. As we move forward on this discussion, there needs to be continued conversation on the affordability and access to higher education, and what can be done to empower groups or an individual.

Affordability is defined by as “to be able to bear the cost of” (Webster’s) and “to make available, give forth, or provide naturally or inevitably” (Webster’s). Many individuals have all of the ability and will to strive for a better education, however the cost of education can seem to be too much of a burden to handle. Affordability is not just limited to the initial cost of an institutions tuition. Rather it is accompanied by the additional fees, room and board, books and supplies and the overall general living expenses of attending a higher education institution. Is
the burden of financing a higher education and earning a higher income to move higher in social mobility greater than the fear of the potential shortcomings of underachieving and dropping out of school? Statistics will show this argument to be true, but who are we to determine the weight of carrying that burden of financing an education.

By no means does the term “access” and “affordability” limit themselves by definition. For both are similar to a Swiss army knife and have a myriad uses to identify their range of resources in education. According to the dictionary, the definition of access is the “freedom or ability to obtain or make use of something” (Webster’s). Freedom being the key word in the definition as access to education is essential to social growth and development. The ability to have access to computer to complete required homework may seem mundane, but to some, access to a computer could mean the difference between graduating and dropping out. Those who may come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are generally ill-prepared for next level education after high school. Many in this category do not even attempt to pursue education as it seems unattainable after a pathway defined by educational underachievement.

The access and affordability of an education empowers an individual to believe because it bestows upon them the ability to open doors of opportunity in hopes of changing their life. For Black students, this empowerment declares there is an ability to achieve equilibrium through education. There are abundant amounts of resources at their disposal waiting to be used to fulfill the obligations of society. Discovering the ways in which to access and afford the opportunity to receive a higher education give way to an imagination of endless possibilities that begin to manifest the definition of a new generation and a move to a new social strata that was once deemed unachievable. The many pathways that a student has access to a higher
education is greater today than it has ever been. With the ability to have access to early access to community colleges, assistance from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and transitional and supplemental programs, Black students have an opportunity to help reshape and manifest a paradigm shift in their educational goals and achievements.

Postsecondary Enrollment

The need for more education has increased tremendously and has resulted in higher enrollment in higher education institutions across America and throughout the world. According to data provided by Baum, Ma, & Payea in their research titled “Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society,” Figure 4 shows us that since 1974 enrollment rates by recent high school graduates have risen 25% for Black, Non-Hispanic students and by 31% for White, Non-Hispanic students (p. 35). Within one year of graduating high school, we continue to see an increase, specifically in Black student enrollment into postsecondary institutions.
If we look at the overall enrollment rates for all 18- to 24- year olds, we find that White and Black students continue to increase though a gap still exists. Figure 5 displays the continuous disparity of 6% between White and Black students at 44% and 38%, respectively (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Though a disparity still exists, the one important note is that Blacks compose about 15% of the 18- to 24- year old population (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013) and enrollment has steadily increased over time with very few dips in enrollment.
Various factors, social and educational, have played a role in the continued rise in enrollment for students. Economic pressures of advancing one’s education for job possibilities has grown at an alarming rate where former entry level jobs that required only a high school diploma are now requiring a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. Job market supply and demand in this generation is unlike anything there has ever been in the United States. With the increased requirement for job employment and job mobility, there is a necessity to stratify to help maintain the status quo. Thus, the equivalent of a high school degree is now that of a bachelor’s degree. What was once a defining moment in graduating college has now become the standard for social mobility and one’s ability to move social classes.
Community colleges play an integral part in providing access and affordability for individuals. Most generally have lower overall costs than traditional colleges and universities and can allow for an easier transition into higher education, especially for those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or may be a particular ethnicity. For most students, taking the next step at a community college is the first step in their educational journey. Enrolling within a community college has been linked to one’s socioeconomic status, notably higher in enrollment for those in a lower socioeconomic status. In their 2006 article titled, *The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility*, Haveman & Smeeding point out that “lower income children are twice as likely to attend public two-year (community college or associate’s degree) programs than are high income children” (p. 138). Additionally, community colleges are generally local and can provide a resource for higher education at a lower cost and are closer to home for increased family support.

In Table 3 and Table 4, we see the impact that one’s socioeconomic status has on enrollment in postsecondary education institutions. The findings are based on dependent students who enroll in postsecondary education sectors.
Table 3

Family Income Distribution of Dependent Students Within Postsecondary Sectors (with Percentage of Students Enrolled in Each Sector), 2011-12

Table 4

Dependent Students’ Postsecondary Sector by Family Income, 2011-12
The data provided by Baum, Ma, & Payea exemplifies how enrollment into postsecondary education institutions is stratified based on income. “Lower income students, who come from families with less than $29,600, are overrepresented in the for-profit and two-year public sectors, but underrepresented in four-year public and private nonprofit institutions (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013 p. 37). Even if lower socioeconomic students do enroll at a higher rate at two-year colleges, nonetheless their willingness to enroll into higher education is one essential to the equalizing the footprint in educational attainment. The primary social mobility role of community colleges lies in their ability to raise completion rates among low-income students (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006 p. 140). Understanding the role and importance of community colleges in education will continue to play an essential role in the growth and rise in numbers of lower socioeconomic students, especially Black students.

The Proliferation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The proliferation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities has had a profound effect on the United States higher education system, as well as in the societal structure as a whole. Black students have been affected in their educational and economic growth as a people; their ability to move social classes has vastly grown since the 1960s and 1970s. In part, Black colleges have helped to produce a “privileged class” of African Americans (Brown and Davis, 2001) that led to the rise of the Black middles class. The ability for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, henceforth known as HBCUs, to create and facilitate a positive
educational environment that encompasses the needs of Black students has been pivotal to Black student success. The American ideology that anyone can be successful with education has permeated and echoed throughout the history of the United States. For African Americans, education embodies not only a means toward gaining equality and progress, but the very essence of citizenship and personhood (Allen et al., 2007, p. 263). Education for the African American community provides definition and gives validity to who we are as a people. The struggle to be accepted by educational means has been at the forefront of our educational pursuits. What Black students learn and how they learn are deeply rooted in our investigation to understand who we are, both personally and culturally, and how it is interwoven within the American construct. Black students should know that they are much more than slaves. As Emile Durkheim stated, “education is simply the means by which society prepares, in its children, the essential conditions of its own existence” (Durkheim, 1972, p. 203) meaning that “education is culturally specific; education is rooted in and reflects the conditions, worldviews and purposes of its parent society” (Allen et al., p. 263). Culture in America is inherently defined by the White, male dominant culture of our society. HBCUs role in higher education serves to help perpetuate Black culture, improve the community for Black people, and prepare the next generation of Black leadership (Allen et al., 2007). In creating an educational environment that is conducive to Black students, we have to manifest an environment that encompasses Black culture, is taught by those who understand and can interpret black culture relative to the societal development of the Black student.

In his article, “The Color of Success: African American College Student Outcomes at Predominantly White and Historically Black College and Universities,” Walter Allen identified
the six goals of HBCUs which include: “(a) the maintenance of Black historical and cultural tradition; (b) the provision of key leadership for the Black community given the important role of college administrators, scholars, and students in community affairs; (c) the provision of an economic function in the Black community; (d) the provision of Black role models to interpret the way in which social, political, and economic dynamics impact Black people; (e) the provision of college graduates with a unique competence to address the issues between the minority and majority population groups; and (f) the production of Black agents for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination in dealing with the life environment of Black and other minorities” (1992). With these six goals at the foundation, HBCUs have been tasked with creating a culture of educational success that assists in perpetuating the paradigm shift of black educational excellence in higher education. The ultimate goal is for those who are successful to go back to their communities and to help uplift them in the proper manner.

Creating a Culture of Education for Black Students

Education is not what is only found in books. Rather, education encompasses a broad and comprehensive knowledge of the phenomena that surrounds us in our everyday life. What makes us think? What makes us human? The anatomy of the universe and the physiology of our well-being are all a part of our lifelong educational process. For Black students, education means much more than the books we read about American culture which tends to leave out the Black perspective other than slavery. Black students are forced to learn the history of the white predecessors in American culture while sublimating the education of their own culture
and identity as Black people. The struggle to learn about black culture is evident in the education curriculum as primarily the only focus is discussed one time a year during Black History Month and only centers on those who are deemed necessary to learn about according to the dominant culture of White America. Since schools are the birthplace of educational stratification, within them lay the characteristics of a school, such as its size, ethnic diversity, gender mix, [...] type of funding, etc., [that] contribute to the experience[s] students will encounter as they travel their educational journey (Shurlruf, Hattie, & Tumen, 2008, p. 625).

Furthermore, Fleming pointed out that Black students attending predominantly Black institutions experience better social adjustment, whereas Black students attending predominantly White institutions experience a crisis in social adjustment (1984).

Culturally, many Black students are at a disenfranchised when it comes to educational institutions, particularly those in higher education. Having a feeling of acceptance that one belongs, a positive social environment is essential to Black students in their discovery who they are and who they are to be. Hence, the evolution of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and their growth and importance to the higher education and societal needs for Black students and communities here in America. To better understand the educational needs of Black students, there must be an educational shift in how we perceive what is important for Black students to learn. The response and growth of the demand for educational and cultural awareness of Black students created the demand for Black Studies departments across the educational landscape in the higher education system. For the growth of these new departments, the emergence of the Black ideology meant much more than pigment, rather its proponents insisted that the persons of African descent had to be Black on the “inside,” or
identify with their race intellectually and emotionally, as well as the “outside” – the designers of the new department[s] had to have Blackness at its core (Williamson, 1999, p. 97). To foster the development of Black students, one does not have to have the complexion of being black, more so, they must possess the ideology of what it means to be black and the social and cultural identity of being black.

The rise of the Black Studies departments and student organizations at predominantly White institutions was a response to Black students request and a need to satisfy this new wave of Black ideology and educational growth on campuses around the country. By 1971, there were over five hundred such departments and programs at PWCUs across the nation (Sims, 1978). One such example would be the development of the Department of Pan-African Studies at Kent State University. The creation of the student organization, Black United Students in 1968 prompted a campus revolution, which resulted in the founding of the Institute for African American Affairs in 1969, the Center for Pan-African Culture in 1970, and finally the Department of Pan-African Studies in 1976 (Pan-African Studies Department, 2015). Kent State was only one of many that went through these preeminent changes in their schools structure. The need for a social and cultural environment for Black students at predominantly White campuses fostered the growth of student groups and departments to help in the retention and persistence of Black students to create an environment that fosters success – similar to ones found at HBCUs for Black students. At the time, HBCUs provided Black students benefits that are manifested in positive psychological adjustments, more significant academic gains, and greater cultural awareness and commitment than Black students on White campuses (White, 1992).
Cost vs. Culture

When valuing education, does cost weigh more than culture? More often than not, many students find themselves having to make decisions based solely on financial means than any other factor pertaining to their education. What school on attends, whether in-state or out-of-state, will most likely be the determining factor in what school they attend. That said, many will find that more of the bigger, state funded schools have much better financial means of assisting Black students in their educational endeavors. Factors such as tuition and fees, financial aid packages, federal Pell grants all contribute to the educational decisions most Black students make when selecting what college to attend. Since many Black students are in dire need of financial assistance, the decision of weighing the cost versus culture could have far reaching results in the end, resulting in an identity crisis of who one is a Black man or woman.

Results show that Black student enrollment at HBCUs is determined by the average cost of tuition and fees, the average Pell Grant per student, the retention rate, federal policies, and the black population trend (Sissoko & Shiau, 2005, p. 202). Though research is not provided, one can assume that the same factors would be taken into account with students selecting to attend predominantly white institutions. Their data and research further shows that a rise in the real average cost of tuition would cause a decline in Black student enrollment at HBCUs as well as it provided supporting data that Black students have a higher propensity to be affected by changes in need-based financial aid than their white counterparts (Sissoko & Shiau, 2005). Selecting a school on the basis of culture as opposed to cost can have psychological, cultural and identity ramifications on the identity of Black students. The development of and creating a
social environment of success is pivotal to the advancement of Black students. Implementing a strategy that is designed to the success of Black students at predominantly White institutions will help to facilitate their transition, matriculation, and ultimately their graduation from a school of higher education.
For many students, the educational journey of getting into college can seem long and tedious, however the journey has only begun. Most students will find themselves in a new atmosphere at a higher education institution. For students of color, this can be a much bigger adjust than for white students due to the cultural differences as well as the inherent stratification that is found within education. Unless a White student is attending an HBCU, then generally there really is not much of a cultural shock or personal identity struggle that will happen as a freshman at a college institution. Incoming students will experience various differences such as adjusting to campus life, newfound personal freedom, and understanding the college workload and adjusting with time management.

Black students and their transition into college is much more intricate than their fellow white counterparts. Many Black students will be coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that have inhibited their performance and learning abilities that have been challenges for them throughout their educational pathway. Some may have chosen community college before attending a traditional four-year college, however those numbers will not be considered in this essay. As we illustrated earlier, predominantly White institutions of higher education are an adjustment for students of color, particularly for Black students to adjust to. Since the implementation of Black Studies programs, many predominantly White institutions
have found it beneficial to incorporate federal initiatives as well as create transition and cultural programs help to alleviate the pressures of Black students and help aid in their transition, retention and matriculation through college. What this chapter will focus on are the different resources that are used at Kent State University and comparing those resources to the national averages. We will be featuring various programs and illustrate the ways in which predominantly White institutions help to close the achievement gap that exists within our education system.

Academic S.T.A.R.S.

Kent State University is one of the largest schools in the state of Ohio with an overall enrollment of nearly 40,000 students across eight campuses, with the main campus located in Kent, Ohio. Using data provided by The Education Trust, the demographic profile of Kent State would profile it as a predominant White institution that consists of 41% male and 59% female, 75% White and 8.6% Black. For the purposes of this essay, I will only focus on these two demographics. Kent State has a history of being a liberal institution since its inception in 1910 and as being a university rife with issues, most notably for the deaths of four students that happened on May 4th, 1970. Its first Black student organization, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. was founded on its campus in 1949 which paved the way for the development of its Pan-African Studies Department that began in the late 1960s, after Black students walked off campus demanding a center where they can learn about the history and culture of their people.
With the help of the Pan-African Studies Department and the Student Multicultural Center at Kent State University, the creation of a cultural transition program to assist Black students in their retention and graduation was implemented. Academic S.T.A.R.S. (Students Achieving and Reaching for Success) is a transition and retention program designed for newly enrolled Kent State University freshmen who are African-American, Latino, and Native American (SMC). Prior to 2010, the Academic S.T.A.R.S. program was only for African American students, after which it was changed to incorporate students of the AALANA (African American, Latino, and Native American) populations. This program is a university initiative to help in the transition of underrepresented populations that have been shown to struggle in the transition to a predominantly White institution.

Within this program, students will take classes and participate in workshops that will focus on their academic process and the enrichment of their college experience. As a participant in the S.T.A.R.S. program, one will develop in three key areas which are: (1) academic, professional, and social skills; (2) a sense of community with peers and staff at Kent State University; and (3) a sense of cultural identity and awareness (SMC). There is an application to apply to the program and will have on average 25-30 students from both in- and out-of-state generally have a split ratio of males-to-females. The program will held during the summer and last seven to eight weeks in length. Students will be enrolled in two classes: College Writing 1 and Black Experience 1; and will receive six credit hours that count towards graduation so long as they fulfill the requirements of courses. One of the best advantages of this program is that there is no tuition or room and board costs to students who participate which helps to negate any student has struggled previously with financing their education, even
if they come from a lower socioeconomic background. Both the college writing and Black Experience classes will be centered on African American writers and provide an analysis of the African experience prior to, and following, the arrival of Africans in the New World, with emphasis on North and South America and the Caribbean (SMC). To help build a sense of community, students will participate in workshops and in a Rites of Passage experience that encompasses their journey through education and life, promotes self-pride, acceptance of a student’s cultural heritage and awareness as well as an appreciation for cultural differences (SMC).

To answer the dilemma facing a predominantly White institution, Kent State University has taken the initiative to assist Black students in moving in an upward direction. This program has had a large impact on the overall graduation rates of students that participate. The national average for 6-year graduation rates is 59% (NCES). According to data from The Education Trust, Kent state has a 6-year graduation rate of 51.5% with White students at 53.4% and Black students at a mere 36.6%. Looking at gender and ethnicity specifically, White males and females are outpacing Black males and females 49.6% and 55.7% to 37.1% and 36.4%, respectively. The Academic S.T.A.R.S. program gives us insight into seeing how programs such as this are able to boost graduation rates for underrepresented populations at predominantly White institutions. On cohort data provided by the program in from 1997-2007 in Table 5, we have found that the Academic S.T.A.R.S. program operates at a 60% graduation rate for Black students (STARS).
As we look at the data, there is without a doubt evidence that a program such as Academic S.T.A.R.S. can have a positive impact on the graduation rates of Black students at schools and universities around the country. Specifically, at predominantly White institutions where the Black student population is much lower relative to the rest of the university.

Assisting in raising the rates of Black students at any school, whether HBCU or a predominant White institution, can only have positive effects their graduation rates. Expanding the knowledge of a program such as this to other universities could have the same effect on their Black student populations as well as equipping Black students with the proper knowledge, self-awareness and confidence to succeed at the higher education level. With the increase in the number of Black student graduates, we are increasing the likelihood of them being able to achieve more and aid in their advancement of upward social mobility moving Black men and
women along the social construct and closing the Achievement Gap. Thus, moving us closer to a less stratified educational system.

Upward Bound

We know that for students who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the idea of pursuing higher education can sometimes seem lofty, even unachievable. Kent State offers some federally-funded programs to assist in this manner to help make the dream of higher education a reality. The Kent State University TRiO Upward Bound Programs housed within the Division of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, is committed to providing equality, preparation and access for populations seeking entrance to post-secondary education (Upward Bound). Pre-College/TRIO Upward Bound programs include three federal TRIO Upward Bound programs that seek to increase educational opportunities and diminish barriers for first-generation, low income students and families through comprehensive services in targeted school districts (Upward Bound). These programs begin in high school and help in the matriculation to give students the possibility of reaching and exceeding their educational goals. Additionally, this program is federally-funded and thus is of no cost those that participate, lifting the burden of financing this opportunity.

There are two goals within the Upward Bound program: (1) Partnering to enhance college readiness; and (2) promoting college access, retention, and success (Upward Bound). Students within this program will have various opportunities to experience college by living in the residence halls during the summer, taking college courses, and learning to adapt to the
A major benefit is the assistance to high school juniors and seniors in preparation for standardized testing for both high school graduation and college entry. According to data provided by the Upward Bound program, 75.9% of students who had completed high school enrolled in postsecondary education following graduation from high school (Upward Bound), exceeding the national average of 68.4%, according to The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS 2). A major component within this program is their Senior to Bridge College program that connects students to postsecondary/dual enrollment coursework that is bridged into their first year of college (Upward Bound). Research has shown that assisting students in their transition from high school to college profoundly increases their chances of retention at a higher education institution as well as dramatically increases their graduation rates. Currently, the Upward Bound program has a 76% retention rate, which closely resembles Kent State University’s retention rate of 77.1% (The Education Trust).

The impact of the Upward Bound program cannot be measured solely on its statistics. The social, economic, cultural and academic barriers that the program assists students with are immeasurable. Giving student the opportunity to have access to college gives students belief that they are able to do more than what society tells them. The motivational factors the program provides by giving students a sense of community and belonging at this educational level, assist in mitigating the effect that education plays in stratification. Upward Bound provides a link to access the ability to use education as tool for upward social mobility with the American economy.
The Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program

In addition to assisting Black students through the Academic S.T.A.R.S. and Upward Bound programs, Kent State University offers another federally-funded TriO program through the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program. As with the Upward Bound program, the McNair Scholars program has no cost for those students who participate. The McNair Scholars program is an income-based award that supports first-generation undergraduate students for doctoral study and aims to successfully prepare scholars for entrance into graduate school, with the ultimate goal of the program recipients to achieve a Ph.D. within ten years of earning their undergraduate degree (McNair). The previous programs we looked at focused more on the college transition to college graduation, whereas the McNair Scholars program is for those students looking to exceed the expectations of a bachelor’s degree and pursuing advanced degree goals. There are four requirements to be eligible to participate in the program: (1) a student must have at least a 3.0 grade point average; (2) have completed their sophomore year; (3) be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident; and (4) be a first-generation college student who meets income guidelines, OR from an ethnic group underrepresented in doctoral programs (McNair).

The McNair Scholars program offers students from lower socioeconomic or underrepresented populations the ability to have access to resources that would otherwise be barriers to further their education. They are given the ability to choose a specific area of research to study with the help and guidance of a professional mentor or faculty member (McNair). Doing so enhances their overall understanding of what to expect beyond their goal of
obtaining a bachelor’s degree. Students are also given the ability to travel to various schools to
gauge their interest in other school’s graduate programs around the country. This is conducted
in the Summer Research Institute in which participants will reside in the Honors College, go on
graduate school visits, present research at local and/or regional conferences with all expenses
paid; and earn a research stipend of up to $2,800 (McNair).

A program such as this is unique in that it helps to identify students who have a specific
income- or ethnicity-based need who want to achieve the highest level of educational
attainment. The McNair Scholars program provides immediate and direct access in higher
education at the highest level and making it affordable to all students, within their guidelines.
Based on their most recent information form 2014-15, the McNair Scholars program has a
100% graduation and retention rate (McNair). Though this number can be skewed by the
overall low number of the graduating class (10) as well as the academic requirements to
participate in the program, more information and research on the impact that the McNair
Scholars program has on graduation and retention rates should be further conducted.
Chapter 5

THE SOCIAL IMPACT

Throughout this essay, we have seen how education has been used to stratify the American education system and how it has disenfranchised those in lower socioeconomic statuses, in particular Black students. Commodifying education has led to widespread social stratification, limiting access to resources for those at economic disadvantage. At the epicenter of this discussion lies the salient truth that our current system of education is leaving students behind, relinquishing the possibility of equitable access to educational resources and the affordability of a higher education, most notably for those in lower socioeconomic status and underrepresented populations who are dire need.

With the ever-changing economy, we know that there is no future without education at the forefront. In the previous chapter, we looked at how the implementation of college transition and retention programs can and how those programs can increase the retention and graduation rates of Black students. In this final chapter, we will dive into graduation and retention rates of other schools and universities, and put further emphasis on the impact of HBCUs and programs on retention and graduation rates for black students and the sociological ideology of our current and future education system.
Graduation Rates

Nationwide, the Black student graduation rate remains at 43% (JBHE), down 16% compared to the national average. With the help of these types of programs, there is hope on the horizon that we can change the educational outlook for Black students. There are some colleges and universities that have shown to have success year after year at graduating Black students. Figure 6 depicts the highest Black graduation rates from high ranking institutions in the country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Black Student Graduation Rate, 2006</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>95 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amherst College</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton University</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellesley College</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams College</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington University</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern University</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith College</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dartmouth College</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wesleyan University</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice University</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke University</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swarthmore College</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wake Forest University</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton College</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source of statistics: NCAA.
Table © The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.

Figure 6
Many factors can be attributed to the high graduation rates among Black students at our nation’s highest ranked institutions. The literature provides support from previous mentioned data stating that a nurturing environment for Black students is almost certain to have a positive impact on Black student retention and graduation rates (JBHE). Also, many of the colleges and universities with Black student graduation rates have in place orientation and retention programs to help Black students adapt to the culture of predominantly white campuses as well as provide Black student organizations to help foster a sense of belonging among the African-American student population (JBHE). Many predominantly White institutions have begun to take the initiative to understand how to accommodate Black students and increase their enrollment, their involvement with the student body, and lead a pathway towards graduation.

Below in Figure 7 and Figure 8, we can see a side by side comparison of flagship state schools and HBCUs and their Black student graduation rates. As of 2006, there are only 15 HBCUs that have a graduation rate above the national average compared to 35 at our state’s flagship institutions (JBHE). There has been a clear shift between predominantly white institutions and HBCUs and their graduation rates of Black students. Including the rates by the highest ranked education institutions, this could be due to many factors outside of education such as state and federal funding for schools. Also, consider the contributions of endowments to universities such as Harvard, which alone has by far an abundance of financial liquidity than all of the HBCUs combined.
From this data we can derive that the predominantly white schools listed have discovered that putting a focus and attention on black students has had a positive impact on their graduation rates. Likewise, Kent State University has done the same even though they are not listed on the flagship statistics.
As we noted earlier, our education system is based in an open market economy. The “almighty dollar” continues to be the controller of the educational frontier determining and limiting access to resources. The struggle for economic resources have continued to plague HBCUs for years as they begin to deteriorate from misappropriated or lack of financial stability. Some have even lost their accreditation along the way and have been shut down. They have succumbed to the market and find themselves at the mercy of having to raise tuition or other costs to help offset the lower revenue. One could even say they are still fighting the civil rights movement for education in that Historically Black Colleges and Universities exist at the intersection where the “American Dream” of unbridled possibilities meets the “American Nightmare” of persistent racial-ethnic subordination” (Allen et al., 2007, p. 275).

Recommendations for Further Research

We are years away from making education both equitable and affordable for all people, however we have made strides along the way. Even those considered to be in the lower-socioeconomic status have found ways to achieve a better education. Throughout this essay, we have discussed various ways in which education has been used as a means to stratify Black and lower-socioeconomic individuals and maintain status quo. The impact of HBCUs and predominantly White institutions have had on retention and graduation rates for Black students cannon be denied. But there are areas in which further research must be conducted to obtain greater insight into what can be done to continually increase these numbers across the country.
After researching this area, I have comprised a list of several recommendations for further areas of research within this topic:

1.) What is the residual impact on retention and graduation rates for Black students following their sophomore and junior years;

2.) Devise a longitudinal study which follows students in the Academic S.T.A.R.S. program that focuses on Black student retention, both sophomore and junior years, graduation rates, and post-graduation socioeconomic status;

3.) Develop a study that measures the social impact that participation within a transitional program such as Academic S.T.A.R.S. or Upward Bound has on the Black and/or lower-socioeconomic status student;

4.) How do programs such as Academic S.T.A.R.S., Upward Bound, and the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program assist in the networking and career development of Black and lower-socioeconomic students;

5.) Continue to research the impact of the private and public high school education and their impact on graduation rates;

6.) Researching the cost versus culture differences among schools and how they assist students transition, both educationally and socially, and;

7.) Further research into the differences between a predominantly white institution and HBCU and their ability to assist in the retention and graduation rates of Black students.
What the Future Holds

Education has, and will continue to be the primary tool of upward social mobility within the constructs of our society. With the growth our economy, the work to increase the access and affordability of an education has never been more evident for our society. The pace at which technology advances ensures the need for further education as the market shifts educational needs and requirements, even for what was once thought of entry-level positions. There is inherent change and conflict within our education system as we try to make improvements only to increase the educational gap along the way.

Many Americans understand and appreciate education however state and federal changes continue to impact education and those that have access to it. As a nation, we have strived to make our education the best in the world and have used legislation to help facilitate access to help people of all races and ethnicities, especially low-income. State and federal initiatives such as the aforementioned TRiO programs are guiding lower socioeconomic and first-generation students into colleges and universities across America. Even with our current President who has delivered multiple initiatives to assist all people with furthering their education, and in hopes of making some higher education free to all people.

From a sociological perspective, C. Wright Mill’s would argue on the basis of conflict theory in the debate over educational resources and that those of the “Power Elite” hold the means to the access over those resources. He states that “the power to make decisions of national and international consequence is now clearly seated in political, military, and economic institutions that other areas of society seem off to the side…” (Mills, 1958), meaning
we must be careful of who is in power to make decisions as they have the power to shape our economy and educational well-being. Our education has come to be shaped by our capitalistic economy and hinges upon the shifts in the market for those in power to help maintain the status quo. Therefore those with access to funds are able to legitimize their power by political means changing the rules and limiting the access to resources to higher education. Education is a prime example as it is often the first to be cut when looking at the general budgets for both our state and federal governments, knowing that education is the primary source of advancement for those in lower socioeconomic classes.

As our economy changes and evolves, so must our education. It has been shown that time and again that individuals with higher levels of education earn more and are more likely than others to be employed (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013, p. 5) and that a college education increases the chances of adults will move up the socioeconomic ladder (p. 6). In order for us as a society to make clear change, we must look at the legislation and the policies that are hindering us from advancement. We need a paradigm shift in education and help break the societal norm with regards to access and affordability of education. There has not been a loss on the significance of education, rather a misplaced notion that cost equals a good education. If costs remains the focus of our education, then we have acquiesced ourselves to the notion of social stratification and giving reverence to the inequity within our education system. Because of the unequal access, social stratification systems limit the possibility of discovery of the full range of talent available in society (Touzard, 2009). As of now, the U.S. education system fails to equalize opportunities among students from high- and low-income families (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006), halting the notion of education being the “great equalizer.” There must be a
collective effort with regards to legitimizing access to all individuals who desire to pursue higher education, either at a community college or four-year institution, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity or any other factor prohibiting equal access. Though there are those that defy the odds, statistically more individuals will find themselves only ever dreaming of the opportunity to advance, not themselves, but the economic position of their families. Now that is anything but the “American Dream.”


(n.d.). Retrieved February 17, 2016, from https://www.kent.edu/smc/academicstars (SMC)

(n.d.). Retrieved February 17, 2016, from https://www.kent.edu/upwardboundprogram (Upward Bound)


(BLS 2)