

Race, Class, and Crisis in Higher Education

The United States has erupted into a class rebellion with racial terrorism at its center, as Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor put it on [Democracy Now](#) in the wake of George Floyd's murder. She and other Black socialists have taken to social media and even to liberal media bastions like the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* to put this anti-racist movement against the police into a socio-economic context in which a generation of people has been jointly educated by the Black Lives Matter movement and a crisis of capitalism that has seen the quality of working class life in the United States go into unprecedented decline. To put it simply, this rebellion is an outburst of multiracial class politics led by Black people. It shows, again, that when the Black community moves, the nation moves. It makes many working people see what they did not see before, which are the links between social underdevelopment in the United States and the role that the police and incarceration play in managing its effects. These are basic questions about the American class structure like, "Why do police have more funding than teachers?"—just like in 1967, when [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) was also asking, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-thirds water?"



Unfortunately, the leaders of higher education are not getting the point about race and class in the United States. They are not asking these basic questions. A read through *The Chronicle of Higher Education* will find a half dozen articles about the protests in which commentators malign the politically empty statements that universities, scholarly associations, and

departments are issuing in support of Black Lives Matter. Indeed, these statements mean little more than acknowledgment of what is happening, as we have seen them before. Scholars are aware that, [“Everything happening in our streets is going to be in our classrooms, in our committee rooms, our departments.”](#) They are also aware that, should students actually make it back to campus for the fall semester, they will have no more “listening forums,” “open forums,” “meetings with the president,” or “diversity task forces” as substitutes for concrete actions taken to address racism at their schools. The task of managing student discontent at universities is going to get harder.

What one finds next are calls to preserve Black studies against funding cuts, to put more funding into critical race and ethnic studies, and to make all these programs part of the general education requirements. There are also calls to make hiring more merit-based and less nepotistic (since white people tend to know white people) before asking the primarily white readers of *The Chronicle* to call representatives, find out where they can contribute financially, and [“speak up when it’s hard.”](#) Some proposals are more ambitious. In response to the demands of protesters to defund the police and uproot the entire idea of policing, some argue that [the same thing needs to happen in academia](#). Rather than toothless reforms like implicit bias training, microaggression workshops, and bringing in individual Black hires, there are instead arguments for “structural reforms” like anonymous antiracist reporting systems, dollars dedicated to scholarships and fellowships for Black students, tenure requirements that acknowledge the mentorship and service that many faculty of color do, community partnerships that elevate the concerns of “stakeholders,” and hiring more people of color in administrative positions, including presidents, provosts, and deans.

If you were squinting to find the parallel between calls to

defund or even abolish the police and the aforementioned reforms to higher education, it's because there is no parallel and none of these kinds of proposals comes remotely close to being "structural." The debate about racism in higher education is outrageous because it reflects middle class sensibilities about what is wrong with higher education in this country. The fact that not a single article or forum hosted by the leading trade journal in higher education has analyzed the relationship between the looming economic depression, the burst tuition bubble, the oversaturated hiring market, the poverty-wage working conditions of contingent faculty, the evaporating futures of graduate students, and connected these issues to the well-being of Black students on college campuses is, as I said, *outrageous*. If one were to really indulge in structural thinking about the state of higher education, then one would find real parallels with the movement to defund the police, with the labor movement in secondary education, and to the labor organizing within universities themselves. In sum, one might find that universities have to fundamentally change to start playing a socially progressive role in our society and to stop doing what police do, which is paper over endemic social problems by finding ways to react to them [on the cheap](#), thereby creating an unnecessary, intolerable bureaucratic and administrative apparatus that sucks up all of our energy and holds our political imaginations hostage. Instead, *The Chronicle* is hosting online forums on how to address racial injustice on one day and a forum on how to sustain the private college business model in a global crisis the next.

Let me explain. I am a philosopher, and my discipline is so white that I recall laughing when Black philosopher Charles Mills joked during a lecture about being blinded by whiteness when he steps in a room. It is also still mostly white men. Philosophy is more like STEM than other humanities insofar as white women are the main beneficiaries of affirmative action yet remain a minority. I responded to this situation as a

graduate student by becoming proactive in department-level, graduate school, and discipline-wide programming regarding diversity and inclusion. I have participated in reading groups about the experiences of women and minorities in philosophy, lead groups to support women in academia, implemented a pedagogy training program for graduate students (with a focus on inclusive pedagogy), and participated as a graduate student assistant in the Philosophy in an Inclusive Key (PIKSI) summer program that recruits minority undergraduates into PhD programs. My department also did a climate study sponsored by the American Philosophical Association to investigate the status of women and minorities. All these activities exist elsewhere in other schools and disciplines. I also know many other philosophers who are passionate about these issues who have done even more to promote diversity and inclusion, often focusing on racism specifically.

I want to be clear that I think these types of activities have some payoff. My student reviews show that I have become a better teacher by participating in these activities. Programs like PIKSI are effective in recruiting students of color by the ones and twos into graduate programs, which is one or two more than would be there otherwise. The latter is a particularly warm and welcoming educational experience, as anyone who has done it will tell you. The problem, however, is that this payoff is limited. This ad-hoc way of resolving racial injustices in higher education is a stop-gap measure that universities are happy to place onto the shoulder of discrete schools, task forces, diversity officers, institutes, private foundations, and so on, because it is less expensive and less politically costly than to change the priorities of the university as a whole. Police reform and anti-racist diversity programming and hiring within the university share this strategic function in common. More Black administrators, university presidents, and even professors will not solve racism in the academy, just like more Black mayors, police commissioners, and cops with heightened sensitivity training

will not solve racism or poverty in the streets.

It is not just that diversity and inclusion discourse and ad-hoc institutional reforms are insufficient. They are also playing a role in reproducing the unsustainable political economy of education beyond the walls of the Ivory Tower. "Inclusive pedagogy" has become a mission of whole institutes, centers for teaching and learning, community engagement offices, and trade organizations associated with specific fields. All of this exists while the wealth gap between those without college degrees and those with them has widened to 50 percent, which suggests that well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree have evaporated. The latter happened first for Black workers in the 1980s, then for white workers later. People are more dependent on access to education to attain a decent standard of living, but education is increasingly, inhumanely expensive, including in the public sector. These are the underlying conditions of the student debt crisis, and there are many exposes written about how this debt ransoms the futures of Black college graduates who start off with less intergenerational wealth with which to contribute to college funds. Moreover, only 33 percent of Americans receive four-year bachelor's degrees or a higher qualification, which is a statistic that has changed little for the age cohorts that graduated before and after 1990, during the neoliberal era.

Programs of diversity and inclusion are filling the gaps that American capitalism has left in the wake of ravaging its educational infrastructure, and not just in higher education. Higher education is too often analyzed apart from the problems that plague secondary education. Public school teachers have been fighting for their lives and those of their students across the country, but one has yet to hear a peep from university administrations about how this fight might affect them. My college students knew nothing about the [Red State Rebellion](#) of teacher's strikes, so I tried to make time to

watch videos of the Chicago Teacher's Union and the United Teachers of Los Angeles on the picket lines during a class unit on feminist social reproduction theory. Social reproduction is the work that we do to reproduce social life outside of and in preparation for the labor market, which is a primary function that both secondary schools and universities fulfill in capitalist economies. Increasingly, university educators are sharing in the burden of this work with secondary school teachers as the country's education infrastructure falls apart.

Universities justify diversity discourse by saying that they are responding to the fact that student bodies are increasingly diverse, so educators and staff must learn to meet their students' needs. Yet we know that working class students cannot afford to go to college, that Black acceptance rates are not increasing, so what are they talking about? It has to do with the fact that university teachers are doing what secondary education should be doing but cannot do. In my view, if university professors are becoming better teachers because of inclusive pedagogy training, it is because we must. Academically, university educators are increasingly focusing on basic reading and writing skills, even at wealthy, private schools. There are also significant differences between working-class and wealthier students in terms of their abilities to handle work, family, a full-time university schedule, and access to the cultural know-how needed for career networking. The latter affects performance, retention, and emotional health, which is compounded for many Black students by pervasive racism and threats to their safety.

My point is that higher education is structurally racist in large part because the working class needs it but does not have access to it, nor do they have the social support to succeed once they are there. The emerging crisis of higher education is connected to both the racial disparities and the class structure of the wider society.

There is an inspiring movement struggling to rearrange the values of that society, which are currently in complete disarray. Universities are no exception. Thus, if there is a student movement that challenges the whiteness of these institutions next semester, let it have more political will than the middle-class leadership of these institutions. Let it ally itself with public school teachers to force states to change their priorities away from policing and incarceration and toward education and social services. Let it be a labor movement of faculty, contingent and otherwise, to wrest control over university resources to serve the needs of the people who live and work there. Let it make tuition free. And, yes, let it fight to fund anti-racist education, just not isolate it from everything else so that Black, ethnic, and women's studies end up in a competitive financial relationship with other programs. Universities need to turn this situation around, but they will not if they continue down the path of trying to address social unrest without addressing the material conditions that produce it.