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**Selective Undergraduate Admissions and the Opportunity Gap:  
Two Modest Efforts to Reinvigorate our Liberal Arts  
Communities by Challenging Racial and Economic Isolation at the  
High School Level**

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## **Selective Undergraduate Admissions and the Opportunity Gap: Two Modest Efforts to Reinvigorate our Liberal Arts Communities by Challenging Racial and Economic Isolation at the High School Level**

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Over the past four years, I have collaborated on two modest “tries” or essays aimed at challenging racial and economic isolation at K-12 by creating new, and/or supporting existing, educational settings that prepare students to invigorate the liberal communities at our nation’s colleges and universities and the world beyond. These tries include:

- *Refining selective undergraduate admissions criteria so as to broaden conceptions of individual merit and encourage inclusive, high-quality educational opportunities at the national level. Might the highly-selective undergraduate admissions process play a role in encouraging parents to seek out or create inclusive, high-quality educational opportunities that prepare their children to thrive in college and the diverse world beyond?*
- *Creating a college-level research seminar that develops innovative and effective solutions to local problems precisely because it draws motivated high school students from three economically and racially distinct, but geographically proximate school districts. Can community members, government and school officials create an inter-district educational opportunity that prepares students to take on the biggest challenges at our best universities and colleges?*

This paper discusses these two ongoing and not altogether successful essays in the hope that both the process by which this work has been undertaken and the broader issues involved would be of interest to practitioners and policy makers laboring to push similar rocks up different and perhaps steeper hills.

*Overview*

It’s fair to say that the legal means by which America achieved integrated education in the second half of the twentieth century are no longer operational. Approximately fifty years after *Brown v. School Board*, very few legal or compulsory means remain to ensure that our nation’s schools remain racially and economically diverse, where residential housing patterns can make such a thing possible. “Voluntary” is the key word in the Department of Justice and Department of Education’s recent “Guidance on the Voluntary use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, unless school boards can be shown to be acting intentionally to promote segregation by race, federal courts have no constitutional tools to compel school authorities to provide racially diverse educational environments.

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<sup>1</sup> See also, *Guidance on the Voluntary Use of Race to Achieve Diversity in Postsecondary Education*.

Freed from judicial oversight, many local school boards are currently opting for student assignment policies that lead inexorably to racial and economic isolation. And while the Justice and Education Department are now suggesting that the portion of the Supreme Court's majority opinion in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, authored by Justice Kennedy, indicates that challenging racial and economic isolation at K-12 may constitute a compelling interest, the very existence of these guidance letters indicate that the ruling has, and dare I say will, continue to discourage most school districts from using race and ethnicity in current and future student assignment programs.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of these new legal and institutional patterns are clear. According to a report released by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, in 2006, some 51% of all African-American students in the Northeast, 46% in Border States, 42% in the Midwest, and 30% in the South attend schools that are 90-100% minority.

It is not surprising that parents of school age children are increasingly raising questions about the benefits of integrated public schools at the K-12 level. Many parents who want their children to gain admission to our nation's best colleges have made choices largely on the basis of what they perceive these colleges want. Convinced that colleges and universities are primarily concerned about individual academic achievement and that diversity and high academic standards are incompatible, many families have spurned diverse high schools. Parents who appreciate the value of diversity would gladly send their children to an inclusive high school if they believed their child's access to the college of their choice would be "protected." Many African-American parents find themselves in a different kind of dilemma. Their children are frequently trapped in grossly inferior and segregated schools. In most cases, high-achieving schools that are racially and economically diverse are simply not available for their children.

These parental choices—constrained and in some cases non-existent—have an impact far beyond the families that confront them. Here, I focus on the impact on the sector of our society that has most publically and self-consciously articulated its commitment to education that is both excellent and inclusive and whose ability to continue to deliver on this commitment depends on educational preparation at K-12 that is rigorous and inclusive: the selective higher education community. Despite a recent cascade of applications, our leading colleges and universities are struggling to find students who both qualify under existing admissions criterion and who reflect the dramatically changing demographic patterns underway in the United States.

Nor is the impact of K-12 segregation related solely to crude, but still necessary counting—i.e. diversity measured in terms of the ethnic and racial composition of entering classes at our leading colleges. Our best schools are also coming to realize that their ability to deliver the liberal arts undergraduate education—that is

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<sup>2</sup>For examples of districts that are creatively maintaining or developing inclusive public schools, see the National Coalition on School Diversity: <http://www.school-diversity.org>.

the pride of their campuses and the envy of the world—is being undermined by the homogenous and segregated environments in which so many of their freshmen matriculate from. Indeed, there is growing evidence which suggests that college students are increasingly self-segregating by racial and ethnic background at our leading colleges and universities. Nathan Martin and I have found that the diversity of friendship networks—to take just one marker of self segregation—among college students at some of our best universities is becoming *less* diverse and more homogenous during the course of these students’ liberal arts education. Research also suggests that students’ pre-college experiences and attitudes play an important role in determining the diversity of their college friendship networks and the broader tendency to self-segregate in college.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, the promise of our undergraduate liberal arts communities cannot be realized if students are self-segregating within these communities. Our liberal arts communities—characterized as they are by the seamless relationship between the classroom, dorm, extra-curricular organizations and activities—must, by definition, be inclusive, and must, by definition, be made up of students who have sought out and not avoided inclusive environments. The tries discussed in this paper all seek to simultaneously challenge growing racial and economic isolation at K-12 *and* fulfill the promise of the inclusive liberal arts communities on our campuses. These tries have been animated by the conviction that in order to fulfill the promise our leading colleges and universities made to the Supreme Court and the nation in *Grutter*, we must fulfill the legacy of *Brown*.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Milem, J. F., & Umbach, P. D. (2003). The influence of precollege factors on students’ predisposition regarding diversity activities in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44, 611-624; Saenz, V. B., Ngai, H. N., & Hurtado, S. (2007), and Factors influencing positive interactions across race for African American, Asian American, Latino, and white college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 48, 1-38.

## An Elegant Idea

Conceptual elegance is pretty easy to see, even by people who don't like the underlying concept or idea. Few students of Hegel, including Marx, failed to appreciate Hegel's ability to explain how the world works in a handful of sentences. But there is a reason why no one—save graduate students and exceptional undergraduates like the one who recently helped me think about conceptual elegance and Hegel—read Hegel today. In the philosophy seminar room no one asks: how can this elegant system help us solve real world problems? When, however, you are trying to build a social movement that will yield inclusive, high-quality educational opportunities, the animating idea has to move you toward that goal. While admittedly at the conceptual level of Hegel, the idea that has animated these initiatives at the national and inter-district levels is conceptually elegant, it is still of uncertain utility. The short version of the animating idea goes something like this: in an environment where parents will not be compelled to send their children to inclusive schools, incentives must be created to persuade them to actively create and/or support these schools or other kinds of inclusive educational opportunities for their children. The most powerful incentives for creating and sustaining inclusive, high-quality educational opportunities at K-12 will come from gate-keeping institutions situated at critical nodes in America's opportunity structure. From the K-12 perspective, that critical node would be our leading colleges and universities.

A longer version of the animating idea goes like this.... The present era, in which court-ordered integration of our public schools has effectively ended the educational landscape, has a peculiar shape. It is easy to see the challenges of this terrain, and although somewhat harder, it is more helpful to see opportunities. In the present landscape, inclusive public education will exist only where communities, school boards, parents, and children freely choose it. Parents must voluntarily choose an inclusive public school or educational opportunity for their children. Students must want to go to these schools. School boards must make conscious decisions to develop and or sustain genuinely integrated, now inclusive, public schools that are attractive to parents. In order to be attractive, inclusive public schools must be academically rigorous, ideally for all students.

From a public policy perspective, one might say that school boards, parents, and students need to be persuaded to choose high-quality, inclusive educational opportunities. Once chosen, then the rhetorical, financial, organizational, and political support necessary to sustain them will need to be developed. Or that is the theory. The reasons why parents and their children are not presently choosing such schools and school officials are not developing them are significant and numerous. First, it is exceedingly difficult to make a persuasive case for these kinds of schools and educational opportunities in large part because the case that diversity is necessary for educational excellence simply has not been consistently made. This failure has much to do with the prevailing tendency to define educational excellence in terms of individual achievement on

standardized tests. Thus, for parents, school board members and administrators, and indeed Arne Duncan's Department of Education, diversity is a good thing, but not as important as student achievement, and given the choice, these actors would choose student achievement at the expense of diversity.<sup>4</sup> Second, because we have not made the case that diversity and educational excellence must be joined in order to educate students for full participation in our college and university communities and the increasingly diverse American society, integrated schooling at K-12 has never had fewer friends than at any time since *Brown*.

Several years ago, Gene Nichol, Jack Boger and I began considering who might support high-quality, inclusive education in this new environment. We began by identifying institutions or sectors that had direct interest in inclusive, high-quality schools at K-12. From this small group, we then asked three additional questions: 1) who had already persuasively made the case that diversity was necessary to realize educational excellence for all students? 2) Who had influence with school boards, teachers, and parents? 3) Who possessed the capacity to provide strategic support for both communities and parents? We ended up with one sector: selective higher education.

The selective higher education community knows well that diversity and excellence can coexist. Indeed, the *amici curiae* briefs submitted by our leading colleges and universities in *Grutter v. Bollinger* indicate that diversity is an appropriate goal in the field of higher education. The Supreme Court's decision in *Grutter*, deferring to the good faith judgment of university officials, illustrates how authoritative the higher education community can be on questions of diversity. Justice O'Connor explained in her majority decision in *Grutter*, that the university's "educational judgment that such diversity is essential to its educational mission is one to which we defer."

Colleges and universities can help parents appreciate the value of individual accomplishments that are achieved in an environment that mirrors and does not elide the diverse character of our society. For parents who wish to send their children to diverse high schools, but are afraid to do so, colleges and universities can counter these fears by making it clear that they too attach great value to schools that reflect America and the world today. For parents in failing schools that are racially and economically segregated, colleges and universities can send the message that their children have not been forgotten. If those parents who acquiesce in racially isolated public schools are motivated largely by a desire to improve the chances of their children to attend the colleges of their choice, and if they believe that a homogeneous secondary education is likely to be more rigorous and/or safe for their children, America's elite colleges and universities have a unique opportunity

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<sup>4</sup> The highly difficult, but necessary task is to synthesize the animating idea behind the DOE's Race to the Top initiative and *Guidance on the Voluntary use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools*."

to act upon their own deepest values to abate those tensions and reorder parental priorities. Higher education has always played a role in K-12 education. Since the 19th century, America's colleges and universities have profoundly shaped the composition, as well as the curriculum and pedagogy of our high schools. Does not the present environment require that our leading colleges and universities work with K-12 to ensure the survival of integrated education?

In theory at least, this seemed like a reasonable point of departure. In theory at least, there was good reason to believe that selective higher education might be persuaded to act consistently with its own self-interest, consistently with its overriding mission, and consistently with the fact that both public and private colleges and universities have an obligation to act in the public interest given state and federal support. Two modest tries were then undertaken to see if the theory held up in practice.

## Two Challenges

- I. **Refining the selective undergraduate admissions criterion to encourage inclusive, high-quality educational opportunities at the national level.**

### **Framing the Challenge**

Initially, we focused on the highly-selective undergraduate admissions regime. We were struck by the extraordinary, implicit power of this regime to influence what our high schools look like and the kinds of educational choices parents demand for their children.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, we became convinced that the admissions regime was unwittingly contributing to racial and economic isolation across districts and within schools. The messages that students (and by extension their parents and teachers) were taking from the selective admissions process included: 1) academic achievement was the single most important component in the college preparation process; 2) it was completely possible and reasonable to achieve academically in environments whose racial and economic character bore little relationship to either the inclusive liberal arts communities that they aspired to enter as freshmen or the larger world they would enter (and presumably play leadership roles in) after they left college.

While this understanding goes against the values of our best colleges and universities and the intentions of most admissions directors I have met, it is a message that can easily be taken from the present, highly-selective admissions process. In *Grutter* of course, the main contention of Harvard, Yale, Stanford and others in their *amicus briefs* was that educational success depended on the environment—especially the composition of the student body-- in which it occurred. You can't explore the legal question in *Plessy v. Ferguson* without African Americans in the classroom. But in the selective admissions process, academic preparation is operationalized largely in terms of individual grades and test scores. Here, with the exception of a handful of measures of high school rigor--class rank and the availability of AP classes-- the learning environment, to say nothing of the composition of the students in the classroom, has little import.<sup>6</sup> It is hard to imagine that a high school whose students can discuss the *Plessy* in an inclusive setting aren't better prepared for college—if only because that is exactly what they will be doing when they get to our campuses—than those who attend a high school that is racially homogenous. However, the admissions process isn't good at measuring the qualitative difference between an AP American History class that is inclusive and one that is

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the profound changes in the college prep curricular offerings in California in the wake of *Daniel v. California* and the equally important changes in the admissions process and thus the ability of high school students of color and from poor backgrounds to access UC Berkeley and other UC schools in the wake of *Castaneda v. Regents*.

<sup>6</sup> It is certainly true that these factors may become part of the conversation about a particular applicant in the selective, whole-file admissions process. My point is only that this conversation may not occur in terms of academic preparation, the most important criterion, and thus parents can reasonably be expected to minimize the importance of an inclusive environment.

not. If academic preparation is understood as a set of narrow individual outcomes that can be acquired in any context, that is, in a manner inconceivable by a liberal arts dean at our best colleges and universities,<sup>7</sup> then it makes sense for parents to choose high schools for their children that are primarily focused on individual academic rigor, narrowly conceived<sup>8</sup>—i.e. homogenous high schools and homogenous college tracks in diverse high schools.

### **Strategy and Social Movement**

We then embarked on an ambitious plan to explore the viability and promise of an admissions advantage for academically qualified students who have *both* attended a high school that has demonstrated the capacity to prepare an inclusive student body for college *and* have personally demonstrated the ability to compete, cooperate, and achieve in this diverse educational setting. This effort was animated by the hope that over the long term this admissions advantage would encourage—where possible—the creation of high schools that are both genuinely inclusive and academically rigorous; high schools that are capable of producing graduates that may be thought of as agents of diversity first in our college communities and then later in our nation’s communities. (Later, we broadened our focus to all high- quality, inclusive learning environments, not just those that existed in our high schools.)

We used Chief Justice Powell’s holding in *Bakke*—which the *Grutter* Court recognized as the “touchstone for constitutional analysis of race admissions policies”—as a starting point for our efforts to move this initiative forward. Powell wrote that “race or ethnic background may be deemed a “plus” factor in “the context of a flexible and individualized consideration of each college applicant.” Looking to the future, Powell urged the adoption of admissions criteria that are “often individual qualities or experiences not dependent on race, but sometimes associated with it.”

Our approach emphasized collaboration. Our first challenge was to devise a collaborative strategy that would energize and mobilize the higher education community. We grappled with the challenge of building a social movement within the higher education community and how best to bring about institutional change both within individual institutions and across the higher education community at large. While we realized that

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<sup>7</sup> It seems entirely possible that the larger disconnect—inadvertently affirmed by the selective admissions process—between what we want high school students to do to gain admissions to our best universities and what we want our best college students to do in college contributes to racial and economic isolation. The largest advantages of an inclusive education lay not in crude outcomes— individual achievement or aggregates of individual achievement of underrepresented minorities— but in the process by which students learn. For example, research suggests that the most creative and innovative solutions are developed by inclusive working groups. See below.

<sup>8</sup> “Narrowly conceived” in the sense that the high school classes that count the most in the admissions process— Honors , Advanced Placement, and I.B.—are, even in our best high schools, focused on knowledge acquisition, not in developing the skills and learning styles we want our best college students to be able to deploy.

the participation of college presidents and chancellors would be critical, we also recognized that much preliminary work and relationship building would be required before we approached these leaders. So we began close to home. We first talked with college officials at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—universities with which we have affiliations—about this challenge.

These conversations persuaded us that within higher education we should pursue a strategy that was simultaneously “bottom up” and “top down.” We sought to engage middle-level actors within universities, including Undergraduate Deans of Arts and Sciences, Chief University Diversity Officers, University General Counsels, education scholars, and Admissions Directors. We believed these actors would have an institutional interest in this initiative, would be able to advocate for it within their institutions, and would ultimately be responsible for its implementation. Second, we focused on engaging university presidents and chancellors who—we hoped—would then publicly explore the viability of this initiative. We believed that there would be productive synergy between these two approaches.

We began to implement this strategy in September of 2006 when Julius Chambers formally introduced the initiative at the *Politics of Inclusion* Conference, a national gathering of college and university administrators held at Chapel Hill, North Carolina. We built on the momentum of this address by forging individual relationships with admissions directors, diversity officers, general counsels, and deans, and provosts from colleges across the country. From these conversations, we learned that (in addition to the moral appeal we were making) it was critical to emphasize how the presence of high school students with diverse experiences would directly benefit colleges and universities. In addition, these conversations convinced us that our strategy would best be developed by targeting four communities within the university world: admissions officials— who would implement this initiative, scholars—who could test the empirical assumptions that animate the initiative, university general counsels and other relevant attorneys—to consider the legal viability of this initiative and the limits of race neutral programs, and, most importantly, presidents/chancellors who would commit their institutions to this idea. We then coalesced related trajectories involving these groups. Here I discuss three of these trajectories.

### **Engaging College Leaders**

One trajectory centered on our efforts to involve university leaders in our work. In April of 2007, James Moeser, then Chancellor at UNC-Chapel Hill, led a discussion at the meeting of the presidents and chancellors at the American Association of Universities (AAU) that focused on this initiative and the broader question: Do our nation’s finest universities have a collective—as distinct from an institutional— responsibility to challenge increasing racial and economic isolation at K-12?

The conversation that followed was far-ranging and passionate. Four critical points emerged. First, there was general agreement that this issue was directly relevant to the mission of our greatest public and private universities. The assembled presidents simply assumed that it was important to talk about racial and economic isolation at K-12. Second, there was great pessimism about the future of integrated schooling not only at K-12—and this was before the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*)—but also at the higher education level. One president predicted that “in the very near term the only integrated schools left will be the private academies that are very intentional in their admissions policies.” He was convinced that “we have lost integration altogether in the public schools.” Several presidents, who are also law school graduates, believed that the Supreme Court would soon reverse *Grutter*, given how quickly they are reversing elements of the *Roe* decision. Third, many of the assembled presidents stressed the necessity of developing new ideas. “We are losing affirmative action,” one Ivy League president noted. “It is soon going to be completely shut down in this country, either by the Supreme Court in a reversal of *Grutter*, or through a series of state-wide initiatives. We have to figure out how to work in a totally new environment” he continued. Fourth, several presidents believed that an admissions “plus” for simply attending a diverse high school was not a nuanced enough instrument to address this problem. This view—which has been supported by our own subsequent research suggesting that mere attendance at a diverse high school had few if any individual or collective effects at the college level—profoundly shaped our future work.

### **New ideas in Undergraduate Admissions**

We convened a group of seven admissions directors representing selective private and public institutions to discuss the viability of our initiative in January of 2007. Soon after this meeting, the College Board—which is best known for the SAT, but also sponsors meetings and colloquia that attract college officials throughout the country—expressed interest in co-sponsoring (with the Center for Civil Rights) a meeting that would further develop the concept. More than twenty admissions officials from around the country—including those who represent large public universities that were grappling with new state laws that limit the use of race in the admissions process—met to discuss the viability and wisdom of our ideas. In late 2008, we presented our ideas to the admissions directors from the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) schools, our leading private colleges and universities.

Together these conversations helped us refine our original idea, which was an “admissions plus” for simply attending a racially and economically diverse high-school. The admissions officials encouraged us to focus on indentifying: 1) qualities that would enable students to adeptly negotiate and enrich an inclusive educational setting and 2) characteristics of the environments in which students would likely acquire these qualities—high schools in most, but not all cases,.

These insights led us to develop the concept of “diversity capital.” Diversity capital is an alternative way to conceptualize diversity in both high school and college settings. Diversity capital is analogous to “human capital” or “cultural capital.” It denotes the qualities, skills, and life experiences that enable a student to communicate, cooperate, compete, and achieve in a truly inclusive setting. Diversity capital was an attempt to redefine merit—in the sense that John Powell, Lani Guinier, and Susan Sturm use the term. While diversity capital can be considered to be an attribute of an individual, it is experientially acquired, not ascriptively given. Students develop diversity capital. Put differently, diversity capital might be considered one form of cultural competence necessary to be successful in our contemporary democracy and globalized world.

From a social scientific perspective, we would anticipate clear benefits of diversity capital at both the individual and collective levels. Individual students who possess diversity capital and the qualities associated with this capital may display a range of improved outcomes both within and outside the classroom. Students with diversity capital might be expected to do better in a range of areas both in high school and in college. And the presence of a critical mass of students who possess this capital may advance the general educational mission of our colleges by serving as agents of engagement and inclusion. These of course are merely assumptions. We are now in the process of testing these assumptions with relevant national data.

There are a number of advantages to this focus on diversity capital. First, unlike many other admissions criterion—legacy status, for example—the ability to work cooperatively in an inclusive educational setting—is a skill that is directly relevant to college success. Second, unlike athletic prowess, diversity capital could be an admissions criterion that would be relevant to all applicants. Potentially all applicants could develop diversity capital. (Of course, the development of bridge building skills—like the development of special music skills—would not be a *requirement* for all applicants in the kind of individualized, holistic review that most of our selective colleges now undertake.) Third, a focus on diversity capital would make this initiative race neutral, even as its introduction would be undertaken with the knowledge that at present few white students that apply to our selective colleges and universities attend diverse high schools. Indeed, while the language is certainly race neutral, the intent is also race neutral. Conversations with a broad range of attorneys has convinced us that the knowledge that, at present, historically under-represented minority students are more likely to have these qualities—precisely because they are more likely to have attended a diverse school—does not make this merely a “proxy for race” and thus a policy requiring strict scrutiny. Finally, diversity capital might be used to compliment “objective” data collected at the individual, school, and, increasingly, at the neighborhood level—i.e. GPA, class rank, and quantitative measures of the socio-economic make-up of the neighborhoods and high schools from which applicants are drawn.

## Developing Research to Support New Admissions Criteria

We have presented our ideas to scholars at two of the leading centers for higher education research in America—Princeton University and University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA)—as well as at Duke University. Through these presentations we developed relationships that have enabled us to test our hypotheses using several existing data sources. (Indeed, Professor Doug Massey at Princeton graciously gave us the time of an incredibly capable doctoral student and access to his data to run analyses.) While our work is still at a preliminary stage, we have found that the best existing measure or proxy for diversity capital is the ability to develop and sustain a diverse circle of friends in high school. Most students—but not all—with diverse friendship networks attend a diverse high school and/or live in a diverse neighborhood. We have found some evidence that these students have different experiences in college. They are, for example, more likely than other students to have a diverse friendship network in college, more likely to have roommates (after freshmen year) that are of a different race, and more likely to join service or cultural organizations (other than fraternities or sororities). We are also discovering that students who do not have diversity experiences in high school also have distinct trajectories in college. Indeed, they are more likely than other students to self-segregate when they reach college. Through focus groups with college students, we are now beginning to tease out the process by which students develop the ability to, for example, create and sustain friendships with people from different backgrounds. We are finding that skills and abilities that are developed outside the classroom often are utilized in the classroom.

The implications of this research are far ranging. In presenting this research to the COFHE admissions directors, I noted that students from homogenous and segregated high schools, who did not make an effort to develop diverse friendships and participate in inclusive modes of engagement outside of the comfort zone of their high schools, tend to self-segregate in college in everything from choice of roommate, to choice of friends to choice of, extra-curricular activities. What this means—and this is of critical importance for our leading colleges and universities—is that these students are unable to either fully contribute to or realize the immense benefits of the world-class liberal arts education they are being offered when they come to college. Other scholars have found that self-segregation is also often a characteristic of diverse high schools. Indeed, many of my students at Duke report that the college track at their “diverse” high school is overwhelmingly white and Asian and often physically separate from the rest of the highly diverse student body. In this way, we began to empirically understand how racial and economic isolation at K-12 is impacting the educational benefits of diversity on our college campuses. Put differently, we were beginning to understand how *PICS* may be impacting the ability to realize the promise of *Grutter*. Moreover, this is a problem not just for individual students or “critical masses” of students, but for the liberal arts communities we are continually refining on our best campuses.

## Outcomes and Lessons

To be sure, participation and support do not in themselves equal progress. Indeed, the best indicator of our success in the field of admissions is the willingness of some of our most influential colleges and universities to begin to consider future admissions decisions in terms of diversity capital. At the national meeting we co-sponsored with the College Board, an admissions director from a highly selective college suggested how his school might use the concept of diversity capital. He began by complaining that every admissions initiative that his college had designed to attract students who could enrich an inclusive educational environment on his campus had been “gamed”—mostly by parents, advisors and personal coaches. Typically, the family’s week long vacation to the Dominican Republic, or Costa Rica or Mexico... had enabled the applicant to develop at once an appreciation for and familiarity with difference. He said that the idea of diversity capital would create a different set of incentives. Indeed, he went on to say that his college was ready to give an admissions advantage—“a thumb on the scale”—to that student who: 1) Attended a high-performing, inclusive diverse secondary school—a school, for example, in which the demographic profile of the college track resembled the profile of the overall student body, and 2) Demonstrated leadership or bridge-building qualities—a form of diversity capital. Under this policy, “gaming the system” would produce more of the kinds of applicants that this college desired as it challenged the increasing racial and economic isolation in our country. Indeed, in the words of another admissions director, the challenge is “to proceed in a manner that links individual private gain with long-term public good.” When key stakeholders operationalize your vision more eloquently than you, some progress is being made.

Even with such success, two things became clear: First, we were unable to obtain a critical mass of support within the admissions community in the period in which we received foundation support —from the Fulfilling the Dream Fund—to develop this initiative. Second, it became evident that our focus on diversity capital was conceptualized by admissions officers in a manner that did not address the structural problems that underlay K-12 racial and economic isolation. We had sought to reward individuals who possessed diversity capital on the assumption that it would spur efforts to grow the number of high-quality inclusive educational opportunities at K-12. By 2009-10, we were no longer sure that an admissions incentive would lead to structural change. Put simply, we were unable to convince admissions officers that diversity capital should not be just another area in which an applicant could demonstrate their talent, achievement, and passion, but a prerequisite for actively participating in the inclusive liberal arts communities they were growing on their campuses.

This failure, however, has taught us much about the character and the limits of the current highly-selective admissions process. The current highly-selective college admissions process might be cynically, but

not altogether inaccurately, understood in terms of individual human capital achievement.<sup>9</sup> Here, the individual applicant must of course demonstrate outstanding achievement in the classroom and examinations hall. They should also, however, demonstrate achievement on the athletic field, or the conservatory, or in the community soup kitchen. The challenge, then, for the applicant, is to craft a story of individual accomplishment that illuminates engagement, passion, talent, and the ability to overcome challenges. The task for an admissions director is to identify the most promising of these stories, find more students from poor and minority backgrounds who can tell these kinds of stories, and craft a class in which the various individual stories complement each other in a manner that will invigorate the liberal arts community that is the pride of their university or college.

The first lesson we learned was that diversity continues to be understood largely as evidence of individual uniqueness. We tried unsuccessfully to suggest that diversity capital was a trait that was necessary for all students who were entering the university, not another area in which individual distinctiveness and accomplishment could be demonstrated. For example, many admissions officers of genuine goodwill were leery of *proscribing* yet one more extracurricular focus, form of engagement, or avenue of excellence for their prospective applicants. As one admissions director told me, “I am reluctant to tell students that developing a style of inclusion was more important than becoming an accomplished musician.” Another worried about what message an emphasis on diversity capital would send to the large number of students who apply to his school for its prestigious business major.

The implications of this failure are incredibly important. As long as diversity capital is conceived of as another item in the check-list life of a high school student, or yet another possible theme for an individual story of pre-college accomplishment and not as part of the preparation of all students for college, admissions directors will be competing for a handful of elite individuals who have demonstrated diversity capital achievement, just as they compete for exceptional athletes or violin players. This, needless to say, will not grow the pool of students who can achieve in an inclusive setting or, more importantly, encourage parents and school boards to seek out high-quality environments in which all students could grow diversity capital in conjunction with and in support of their preparation for college. In a word, diversity capital was too easily co-opted in a manner that allowed it to be separated from a way of being that is necessary to invigorate the liberal arts communities that high school students would be entering when they arrived on our best college campuses. It is clear that the mantra the legal and educational community has taken from Grutter—“not diversity as an end in itself, but the educational benefits of diversity”—has not prevented the segregation of diversity in regard to both the broader profile of our students and the larger university community.

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<sup>9</sup>For my own effort to understand the highly-selective admissions regime, see:  
[http://www.kirwaninstitute.org/docs/Bill%20Tobin\\_DM%20concept%20paper\\_July%2019,%202010.pdf](http://www.kirwaninstitute.org/docs/Bill%20Tobin_DM%20concept%20paper_July%2019,%202010.pdf)

Second, we learned that the selective admissions process is very good at creating avenues of opportunity for individual students, but not so good at growing the pipeline and addressing structural inequality in the education system. That the current highly-selective admissions system creates real opportunities for a number of under-served students is undeniable. (See for example, Bowen and Bok, [The Shape of the River](#) and Massey, et al; follow up studies, [The Source of River](#) and [Taming the River](#).) Indeed, the small numbers of high-scoring minority students are very highly sought after in today's selective admissions process. Several years ago, one admissions director from one of our nation's best schools told me, "I know the name of every Black high school senior who scored over a 1300 in the (old) SAT." There were 76 such students that year in my state, North Carolina. Social scientists would call our effort to grow high quality inclusive institutions by rewarding individual achievement a level of analysis problem. We had overlooked the differences between the individual and the organizational levels. Institutions designed to reward individual achievement—like the selective admissions regime—lead to high schools that nurture, support, and encourage a small elite group of academic stars, not high schools that explore what being a star means in the context of preparation for an engaging and thus inclusive liberal arts environment and offering their best education to all students.

We came to realize that growing structural opportunity would require targeting—not just for college information sessions —and supporting environments that developed cohorts of students who would help ensure that the potential of our leading liberal arts communities would be realized. If school-wide or environmental factors played a more important role in the admissions process—and they should because they are critical for preparing students for our best colleges and the world beyond—school boards might attend to them. If, for example, the relationship between a high school's overall demographic profile and the profile of those students who were receiving the schools best curriculum and instruction were considered in the application process, more school boards might explore new ways of linking equity and college preparation.

**II. Creating a college-level research seminar that can develop innovative and effective solutions to local problems precisely because it draws motivated high school students from three economically and racially distinct, but geographically proximate school districts.**

**Framing the Challenge**

An opportunity to explore the second, less-individualistic and more structural component of diversity capital emerged in the spring of 2009, just as the defects of the admissions work were becoming clear. If the effort to tweak the admissions process was focused on broadening the profile of the students who would be entering our leading colleges in the hope that over time, new inclusive learning environments would develop; the second effort was focused on creating these environments from the community up in the hope that we would create cohorts of students who had developed college level problem solving styles and thus the ability to engage in a sustained manner with students from other backgrounds. Our first essay was decidedly top-down in the sense that it was initiated at the top administrative tiers of our best universities on the assumption it would impact students, parents, and teachers at the high school level. By contrast, the second essay was bottom-up: it sought to coalesce at the community-level a high-quality and thus inclusive educational program that might be a model of how pre-college experiences could reinvigorate our undergraduate communities. Diversity capital became an end in itself in the selective admissions context. In the work of building a college level community based educational opportunity, diversity capital was a means or a prerequisite for developing creative solutions to real world problems.

Because we conceived of diversity capital as both the “merit” of a new generation of students in mind and the environments in which these students would develop, the synergies between the two tries were powerful. Indeed, what tied the two efforts together was our continuing effort to use the implicit power of our leading colleges and universities to challenge racial and economic isolation and produce college students who possessed merit characterized by the ability to be engage in a style most necessary for the kinds of liberal communities we aspire to at our best universities and the democratic world beyond the college walls.

A more prosaic link between the two essays is in the fact that the networks that we had created in the admissions work made this second opportunity possible. Rye Town, New York has three small racially and economically distinct school districts in a small geographical area. Over time, members of the town became concerned that students from the three district high schools were leading parallel lives, not engaging with each other and thus not realizing the benefits of the diversity of the town. Tom Parker, Admissions Director at Amherst, who had helped us craft the notion of diversity capital, had been in contact with one of these community members, an Amherst alumnus, who challenged one of the school boards, Blind Brook, to devise ways that their students might interact with the largely Hispanic students from the neighboring school district

of Port Chester. I subsequently wrote a letter to the local newspaper reporting my own research findings regarding the relationship between diverse pre-college environments and friendship networks and full participation in college liberal arts environments. As reported by the New York Times, Parker wrote a far more important letter stating that:

“It is an inescapable fact that today’s high school students will live their adult lives in a strikingly diverse society. If America’s preeminent educational colleges and universities can continue to lay claim to the education of the next generation of leaders, it stands to reason that they will be seeking out students who have demonstrated that they can not only negotiate racially diverse settings, but also thrive and provide leadership within them. It is hard therefore, not to believe that those demonstrated traits and skills will not be a distinct advantage in the admission process at those institutions.”

The Board remained largely unconvinced that inclusive experiences were critical for the education of students in their district. However, Parker’s letter created the kind of leverage we believed that higher education was capable of producing in the K-12 environment. Indeed, the exchange struck a note with the town supervisor, Joseph Carvin, a conservative Republican who managed a large hedge fund. Carvin had come to realize the value of diversity in the course of his work, which required extensive international travel. Carvin knew well the importance of being able to compete and cooperate with people from different backgrounds. Indeed, he was a graduate of Port Chester High School, the most diverse of the three district high schools, but lived within the Blind Brook school district lines, which was significantly less diverse. In addition, one of the dominate themes in Carvin’s political campaign was the idea that Rye Town should be a model American community. The concept of diversity capital gave him language to articulate both the importance of diversity in any model American community and a strategy to begin to develop this aspect of the town. In late 2009, Carvin asked me to develop an inclusive, high-quality educational program town that would build “diversity capital” among students in the three district high schools and create synergies that would impact the entire town.

### **Strategy and Social Movement**

I visited the town and initiated a set of relationships which continue to the present with members of a bi-racial community organization, Building Community Bridges--which Carvin had helped to found--school board members, superintendents, and most importantly, parents and students. The conversations reinforced the lessons I learned in the admissions work. The challenge in Rye Town was to recruit students from all three high schools, including those presently most sensitive to the highly selective undergraduate admissions process and those who I was hoping would become more sensitive to this process. Framing the program in terms of diversity would not, I believed, attract either group of students or those from either homogenous or diverse high schools. Indeed, the lesson from the admissions work was that virtually anything with the word

“diversity” or “inclusion” in the title would reinforce the separation between a program aimed at helping high school students “get along” with peers from different racial and economic backgrounds and a program that focused on really engaging high school students in a manner that prepared them for the best that college had to offer. I tried then to create a learning opportunity in which inclusive ways of being were prerequisite for an outcome that was highly valued by colleges and universities and thus parents and students. The more I talked to parents, students and community members, the more I realized that the Honors Seminar that I had developed and co-taught in the Sociology Department at Duke could be a model for this course I should teach in Rye Town.

The Sociology Honors seminar at Duke was developed to encourage undergraduates to solve problems they cared about within a disciplinary framework and bestow status on those who undertook this difficult work. In the program in sociology, students applied the social science research method to solve problems and answer questions. Participation in the honors seminar was open to senior sociology majors who were academically qualified and motivated enough to bring to completion a year long, original research project. The seminar could serve as a model for the Rye town project in at least two ways: First, a research seminar would be relevant to high school students in a way that even the best Advanced Placement classes seldom are: it would provide students with a method to solve real world problems in their community outside of their school. Second, the seminar could teach high school students to do something that was incredibly highly valued not in the college admissions regime, but in the college classroom itself—solve a problem within a disciplinary framework.<sup>10</sup> Undergraduates who could undertake and complete social science research projects were and are extremely rare and highly sought after at Duke. This then was an idea for a seminar in which high school students could be introduced to the skills and mindsets that would expose them to a way of engaging that would distinguish them from the other students in their freshman class on criterion that mattered in the highly competitive college environment.

Though there is much rhetoric to the contrary, much of what happens academically even in our best high schools is animated by the unstated and perhaps unconscious assumption that serious engagement can wait until college. This is easiest to see in regard to developing the ability to work in inclusive settings. There is no great imperative to ensure that my child gets inclusive experiences because they will get that when they arrive at Duke and interact with students from around the country and around the world. But the same impulse is true in regard to academic training. Even our most demanding classes, Advanced Placement classes, are about content mastery, breadth not depth. Research commonly means retrieving articles from the internet

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<sup>10</sup> This is not a normative statement suggesting that all students need to major in a traditional discipline. It is clear now from the preferences of our students that these majors need to be revitalized. However, the programs that are now attracting some of our best students require mastery of not one but several disciplinary frameworks.

and answering content based questions. Creative and analytical engagement can wait until students get to college. This might be fine if our best colleges were moving beyond measuring diversity—say in their entering classes— in terms of numbers and actually meeting the challenge of *Grutter*. This might be okay if most of the graduates of our best colleges and universities were able to solve problems in at least one discipline by the time they graduated. But this is not the case. In my years teaching undergrads at Duke, I come to realize that training in disciplinary based problem-solving could not and should not be delayed until the student reached college. It needs to accompany content mastery. Indeed, I have met many incredibly talented and motivated students who, through no fault of their own, have graduated from Duke without developing the capacity to solve a problem in a disciplinary framework.<sup>11</sup>

I was hoping that this kind of opportunity would attract a diverse group of highly motivated students who would ensure that the research process, findings, and policy recommendations that would flow from these findings, would be innovative and relevant to the entire community. The task was to translate the objectives, curriculum and pedagogy into terms that were appropriate for high school students and relevant to the high school administrators in whose schools I wished to recruit students. Thus, we collaboratively developed the “Tools for Change” problem solving seminar. In the seminar, students refined a research question and then were taught the social scientific research method as a means to solve the problem and develop policy recommendations. The first cohort examined voter participation in Rye Town elections. Together, the students in the seminar formed a large research team. Within this large team, we created several small working groups made up of first-year students in the seminar directed by students who were taking the seminar for a second year. With guidance from my teaching partner—Dr. Valerie Feit, Head of Enrichment at Rye Neck High School—these teams are undertaking all the steps in the research process—finding relevant research articles that helped them understand what previous researchers had found, synthesizing these articles and writing up a literature review, deciding on a research design—students have conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews—each carrying out the research in the community, analyzing the results, and converting research findings into policy recommendations.

I had devised the seminar from a college or university perspective. Over the three years, the seminar offered had refined the course so that it better prepared students for college success as defined not only by an

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<sup>11</sup> Nor is subsequent professional training is not a substitute for this disciplinary or multi- disciplinary education at the undergraduate level. As a law school dean recently reminded me, in today’s new legal environment, clients are demanding to work with associates who can think productively and creatively about legal questions, not just tell them what the law is. This is what an undergraduate disciplinary multi-disciplinary based education aspires to provide.

idiosyncratic professor at Duke, but by the best thinking in the field.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the seminar teaches high school students college level cognitive strategies—i.e. intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, interpretation, analysis, etc; college level academic knowledge and skills—i.e. writing, and study skills, and, more generally, what college is like—i.e. how to interact with a professor and cooperate and compete with people from different backgrounds. At the same time, students, teachers and administrators helped refine the seminar so it better complimented and enriched the college preparation programs that already existed in the town’s high schools. Ensuring that the seminar was academically relevant for the district high schools was critical for getting buy-in from the schools and parents. Thus, Tools explicitly reinforced the skills and dispositions that teachers and principals wanted their best students to master and the notion that districts were increasingly being assessed by the state. The term of art here was 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and these skills were—in most cases—entirely consistent with the objectives that had informed the course from the start.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the seminar served to translate these abstract goals into concrete curriculum.

Since the course was developed in the fall of 2009, we have built a collaborative structure that includes students, parents, teachers, superintendents, school board members, elected officials and community members. Each year the seminar has come to be more fully ingrained in the fabric of the community. In the beginning of the third year of the seminar, all three school districts have formally embraced the course and have contributed to the course with kind contributions—smart classrooms, etc. (Prior to this year we had buy-in from two districts and had informally recruited students from the third.) The principals of the three district high schools sit on the seminar’s steering committee. Moreover, one school district has made the Tools course and the idea of training high school students to employ the social scientific method to solve real world problems part of their curriculum.

The Rye Neck School District has also allowed one their best teachers, Dr. Valerie Feit to assist in the teaching of the course, making it one of the few programs in the country where college and high school faculty teach side by side, rendering concrete the abstraction of alignment. The town of Rye and Building Community Bridges—a bi-racial community organization made up of parents from all three districts—has each supported the program financially. Other community groups have also played a role. This year, Ms Deborah Reisner, Chairwoman of the local League of Women Voters, served as the seminar’s community liaison. Just as important as the formal support and assistance, is the critical but easily overlooked help that makes a community based course like this work. This assistance ranges from buying pizza to accompanying students as they collect data in the community whether it is via focus groups, interviews, or surveys distributed at local

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<sup>12</sup> The best guide to the skills and mindsets needed for college success are to be found in [Redefining College Readiness](http://www.aypf.org/documents/RedefiningCollegeReadiness.pdf), <http://www.aypf.org/documents/RedefiningCollegeReadiness.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> On twenty-first century skills, see: [http://www.p21.org/documents/P21\\_Framework\\_Definitions.pdf](http://www.p21.org/documents/P21_Framework_Definitions.pdf) .

shopping centers. Here the parents and members of Building Community Bridges, especially Jack Zaccara and the President, David Thomas, have been indispensable.

### **Outcomes and Lessons**

Informal conversations and more formal exit interviews have taught us a little bit about what the students have learned from each other. These lessons range from the opportunities that arise in a research group where only half of the students have laptops to the realization that the Hispanic students are just as smart as the students of white professionals. The seminar has also helped the over-entitled students—usually from professional families—be more respectful learners as it encouraged the more respectful—usually middle class—students to feel more entitled in regard to their education. Lessons in entitlement and respect are very important. For example, it is incredibly helpful to understand, as one of our students wrote in her college application essay, that some kids are raised to believe that they can speak up in class even if they haven't done the required reading, while others wouldn't dream of talking in class unless they had not only read, but mastered the required material. Important as these lessons are, I have come to believe that the benefits of an inclusive environment are a baseline. Indeed, the research enterprise and policy solutions that emerge from the research should be richer, more creative because of the inclusive nature of the students involved.

Perhaps the best evidence of the richness of the research process consists of a note one of the student leaders wrote to a member of his working group when she submitted an adequate, but not great draft of the group's assigned section of the literature review:

Today, at lunch, I was reading what you wrote, and it was pretty good, but there are some things that could make it even better! I thought it was good how you summarized what the article was saying, but there was really nothing in our specific future study that you related to what you said. In other words, make a point about what the article said and relate it to something in our future study. Also, don't ask questions in your "clump." Say something that relates to the question you asked but is not an actual question. For example, you said, "Are they really interested in politics?" Instead, say something along the lines like "teenagers might not really be civically engaged even after the age of eighteen, according to (the name of the author who wrote the article)." After that, say what groups of people we should study. Do we want to focus on just middle-aged people, registered voters over the age of 18, etc? Be specific. Be sure to use proper citations when citing quotes from the actual article. In other words, after quoting the article put a citation of the article in parentheses. Ask your school librarian or use Google to try to do this. Also, use APA citations to cite the article that you're discussing at the bottom of the page. Your "clump" had good things about it, and these things will make it even better. If you could try to do this and send it back to me by preferably Friday, that would be great. Thanks so much!

When students from different backgrounds genuinely engage each other intellectually the research the research process in incredibly enriched. Of course, research outcomes and the research process are related. Thus, for example, the results of our voting habits survey were far more representative because we had an English and Spanish language version of our survey and the questions on the survey attended to race and ethnicity as well as income and education in manner that were not implicitly normative and thus increased the number of respondents from all parts of the community. Finally, several participants in the seminar's second year have used the methods developed in the course to explore other issues such as the advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing intellectual work.

Getting the program established and institutionalized in the town has been a long labor intensive process that is still ongoing. Persuading schools to formally participate, inviting them to adopt the concept of disciplinary training as part of their instructional and curricular offerings, convincing school officials that the course is worth their students' time, persuading over-committed students to participate in this program and not the hundreds of other activities they enjoy are difficult but essential tasks. For the first two years of the program, we felt —as those directly involved in developing a community based program like this invariably do—that the class we were offering the school districts and the students—i.e. a real-world, problem-based class that engaged students as it prepared them for college—was a free gift. We also felt as if it was a class that, at least initially, the districts didn't really value or have much interest in.

While we, of course, realize that there are many other priorities for school districts in New York, especially at a time when public education is under attack in the state, and that there are many other valuable activities students can and should be engaged in, we are struck by the fact that much of what students believe is necessary to get into college has very little to do with what we want our best undergraduates to do. Volunteering at a soup kitchen in high school should ideally be accompanied by trying to understand why there are soup kitchens in the first place. As long as the work of understanding why soup kitchens exist is treated as something extra, something that there is no public money for, the less students will make time to develop the problem solving mindsets and styles of engagement that are needed to address homelessness and poverty.

But this is only half the story. The closer preparation for college—and by extension the admissions process—is linked to what actually occurs or should occur in college, the more likely it will be that inclusive, high-quality educational experiences will become prerequisites for college. As the authors of *Grutter* opinion understood so well, it is in the analytical and creative work most commonly undertaken in our college communities that the educational value of inclusion is most readily apparent. Conversely, as long college preparation and the admissions process is largely about individual knowledge acquisition and the crafting of

personal stories of achievement, tasks in which the environment and community are largely irrelevant, the more inclusion— as an aspect of a style of engaging with the world— will be thought of something that is not essential for life in a liberal arts community and the world beyond.

## **Conclusion**

It is very easy to see the many ways that selective colleges and universities and high schools might collectively and collaboratively work together to help ensure the future of high quality, inclusive education. The two extremely modest and not altogether successful tries documented here suggest what might be done at the individual and the community levels. They also suggest how much ground still needs to be covered to collectively ensure the promise of *Grutter and Brown*. There are many reasons why so little progress has been made thus far. At the K-12 level --even at high schools that serve children of our wealthiest and most educated parents--current state and national measures of academic success, from standardized test to metrics of teacher accountability, have left little time, energy, or creativity to develop the kinds of programs that prepare students to revitalize the arts and science communities at the colleges and universities they will be attending. Passing an AP class in a rigorous, homogenous college track is simply not preparing a student to do what we want our best students to do in an inclusive freshmen college seminar. There are, of course, good reasons why districts that know this feel like they have little choice. At the state and local level, calls for public accountability—measured by these narrow-outcome measures—have never been louder. Indeed, in states like New York, public education itself, to say nothing of inclusive public education, is under robust attack.

At the college and university level we have not yet reached a point of crisis that Jerome Karabel has told us has historically occasioned a rethinking of the admissions regime. Indeed, the dramatic increase in the number of applicants to our best colleges and universities has made it easier for the admissions office to continue to operate largely apart from the day to day operation of our schools of arts and sciences and for admissions decisions to be made largely separate from what we really want students to be able to do in the arts and sciences in the next decade. This makes it harder for colleges and universities to develop programs that will ensure that they will continue to train leaders for an America that is undergoing profound demographic changes.

To be sure, our best colleges and universities have collaborations with struggling schools from East Palo Alto, CA to Durham, NC. These are incredibly important and helpful programs that deliver benefits to both the students at Stanford and Duke and the K-12 communities they serve. What these programs do less well is connect the teaching, learning and research that exist at the core of the undergraduate experience to the curriculum and instruction at our high schools. Most K-12/Higher education partnerships link public schools and Graduate Schools of Education and/or Offices of Community Outreach. The latter exist far from the core teaching, learning, and research of our undergraduate schools of arts and sciences and thus, in part, are peripheral actors in the university. Indeed, what would a collaboration look like that linked schools of arts and sciences at our best colleges, on the one hand, and offices of curriculum and instruction at our best inclusive high schools on the other. I am convinced that without this kind of substantive collaboration between the core

units in our high schools and colleges, the development of styles of inquiry that are shaped by inclusive engagement will not be regarded as what they are: prerequisite for full participation in our vibrant liberal arts communities and the world beyond.



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