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The Case for an Anti-Racist Stance Toward Paying Off Higher Education's Racial Debt

By Estela Mara Bensimon

In Short

- There is no shortage of documentation that racial inequality is coursing freely through every artery of higher education.
- We are endlessly studying data reports that show Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students stuck at the lowest percentile of representation and achievement, from admissions to elite institutions to low graduation rates at the broad access colleges that represent their only hope in a highly stratified higher education system.
- A focus on the "achievement gap" does little more than perpetuate theories that associate academic achievement with individual effort, motivation, and drive.
- To combat racial inequality we have to focus on the ways in which higher education policy can result in racist outcomes.
- To avoid racism in policies, four criteria are provided to construct anti-racist higher education policy.

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If we continue to skirt around race and racism by calling it other things, we are sacrificing racial equity to avoid rejection.

We have all seen it ourselves—educational policies, system and state goals, reports, and strategic plans that are all littered with references to racial disparities in outcomes. "Blacks performing at a lower rate than their White peers," "The achievement gap must be closed," "Too many Blacks and Latinx drop out of STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] programs." There is no shortage of documentation that racial inequality is coursing freely through every artery of higher education. And so, we continue to mourn the persistence of racial inequality in papers delivered at scholarly conferences, research reports published in academic

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journals, the glossy annual reports of foundations and other associations, and yes, even in the pages of *Change Magazine*, *Inside Higher Ed*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and more.

We are endlessly studying data reports that show Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students stuck at the lowest percentile of representation and achievement, from admissions to elite institutions to low graduation rates at the broad access colleges that represent their only hope in a highly stratified higher education system. Although access to higher education is no longer impossible for racially minoritized students, the great majority are funneled into lower- resourced institutions and subjected across the board to practices, policies, and racial climates that make racial abuse so routinized that its occurrence, if acknowledged, is typically brushed off with the sanctimonious declaration, "This is not who we are."

Concurrently, we lament the lack of racial diversity among holders of STEM degrees and the "left-out" status of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals from the professorial ranks and from the decision-making board rooms. And of course, we also say we want a more racially diverse faculty. We say we want more racially diverse leaders and trustees.

We are saying a lot of the right things, but we do not recognize—either because we do not want to or know how to—that the problem or racial inequality is created by policies and solutions that position the problem of racial inequality as an "achievement gap" separating Blacks, Latinx, and Indigenous populations from their more successful peers.

In her highly praised 2006 American Educational Research Presidential Address, Gloria Ladson-Billings declared that the "achievement gap" is the outcome of the "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies" that "constructed and compiled" the educational debt owed to racially minoritized people. She asserted, "We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt" (p. 5). The origins of "achievement gap," Ladson-Billings explained, date back to the 1960s' cultural deficit theories that pathologized the lifestyles of minoritized students and served to justify the educational system's failure to educate Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students as competently as it educated its White and wealthy students.

A focus on the "achievement gap" does little more than perpetuate theories that associate academic achievement with individual effort, motivation, and drive. It conveniently becomes the explanation for higher dropout rates among Blacks, Latinx, and Indigenous populations; for their increased likelihood to be placed in remedial education courses; and for their segregation in the lowest-funded sector of higher education: community colleges.

Ibram X. Kendi (2019) also made the point that the concept of "achievement gap" degrades Black minds. He said, "The acceptance of an academic-achievement gap is just the latest method of reinforcing the oldest racist idea: Black intellectual inferiority" (p. 101). He suggests that the way out of a system that is racially unjust is not by attempting to change minds but by focusing on the creation of policies that are anti-racist in spirit and intent.

I appropriate (respectfully and with admiration) Ladson-Billings' (2006) reconceptualization of the "achievement gap" (p. 5) as an educational debt and combine it with Kendi's (2019) proposal that a focus on policy is a more productive approach to addressing racial injustice than efforts to persuade people to do the right thing. He defines "racist policy" as "any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups" (p. 18). Surely, addressing the debt we must pay begins in part with recognizing and removing established racist policies from our systems and creating policies that truly address matters with equity-mindedness.

There are numerous higher education examples that meet Kendi's definition of "racist policy."

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One that comes immediately to mind is increasing the number of high school math courses required for admission to public four-year colleges. This will have a disproportionate negative impact on Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students who attend high schools with truncated math offerings. The use of placement tests to assess whether students are college-ready or require remediation in English and/or mathematics is another example of a racist policy; these tests direct racially minoritized students into remedial courses at a much greater rate than White students. Similarly, merit-based financial aid as a strategy to attract students whose academic profiles will maximize institutional prestige and ranking produces racist outcomes as well, because White, high-income students are the most likely to benefit.

In contrast, an anti-racist policy is, Kendi notes, "any measure that produces and sustains racial equity between groups" (p. 18). Affirmative action in admissions and hiring is one of the strongest examples of anti-racist policy—its impact was felt and feared so much so that it was quickly dismantled by the implementation of racist policies, especially by the courts. Another example of anti-racist policy is California's elimination of remedial education in community colleges and in the state college system with a requirement that students be placed in college-level courses and provided with academic support to succeed. By doing away with remediation minoritized students (and all other students) are no longer sent to wither in academic exile with little chance of being given access to "real" college courses.

I am aware of—and to some degree anxious about—the reaction many have to labeling policy as "racist" or "anti-racist." Straight talk about race and racism is not always welcome in higher education or in most realms of sociopolitical life. Labeling any particular policy as "racist" may be interpreted as an attack on the policy's architects or implementers. Throughout my career in higher education, my aim has been to promote racial equity through a pragmatic agenda of research and practice. The most effective way of doing so is by working on the ground, in partnership with institutional leaders, faculty, and system-level policy makers, as well as with private foundations to promote anti-racist policies and programs to produce results that are equitable between groups.

So naturally, the anxiety I feel that a schema that distinguishes policy as racist or anti-racist risks undermining the agenda for racial equity. It has occurred to me often as I have considered this issue and whether it would be more productive to be more subtle. Is labeling a policy as racist or anti-racist reductionist? Doctrinaire?

In the end, I recognize that these are potential pitfalls, yet I came to decide to take the risk. If we continue to skirt around race and racism by calling it other things, we are sacrificing racial equity to avoid rejection. The aim of this special issue of *Change* is to normalize the R-word.

One question remains for me, and that is about the nature of higher education's racial debt. I expect that readers may be wondering what *kind* of higher education debt is owed to racially minoritized groups? To define that, I would need to do justice to the enormous

evidence of the debt in this article, which could easily be the subject of a book. In lieu of that, the Recommended Readings are sources that describe the debt historically, financially, politically, and morally.

As Kendi argues, policies are the needed and most effective way to address this debt. The term "policy" can be misleading in that it conjures images of formal documents and edicts. In the context of this article, I am defining policy broadly to include the unspoken rules that govern higher education routines and decision making, such as admissions, faculty hiring, and evaluation, as well as the criteria that guide judgments about quality, excellence, and merit.

Table 1 is a brief guide that can be used by colleges and universities, systemic-level leaders, advocacy organizations, and philanthropic organizations wishing to craft racial equity agendas. C

Table 1. Criteria to Assess Anti-Racist Higher Education Policy

1. Does the policy identify its intended outcomes as anti-racist?

Anti-racist	Racist
• ***Avoids vagueness and names race.*** Specifies numerically, improved outcomes for Blacks, Latinx, and Indigenous populations. These outcomes may be in degree attainment or in the representation of faculty.	• ***Avoids naming race and uses racial euphemisms.*** Outcomes are identified as benefitting "all students," "every student," "success for all students," "underserved students." Vagueness around naming specific groups leads to generic strategies, usually coming from a Whiteness perspective. Vagueness also suggests a lack of comfort talking about race.

2. Does the policy explain the problem it seeks to address from an anti-racist standpoint?

Anti-racist	Racist
• ***The institution's racial history is transparent.*** The policy identifies institutional racism as the reason for inequality in the outcomes experienced by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations.	• ***The institution's racial history is swept under the rug.*** The policy names "achievement gap," "at-risk students," "first-generation students," "disadvantaged students," "low-income students," "not college-ready students" as the problem.

3. Does the policy offer solutions/practices that are identifiably anti-racist?

Anti-racist	Racist
• ***Critical race consciousness about institutional failure is the guiding principle.*** The policy offers race-conscious solutions specifically designed to remove barriers that disproportionately disadvantage Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations.	• ***Lack of critical race consciousness leads to superficial analysis and solutions.*** Policy offers solutions that aim to remediate "disadvantaged" students, redirect them into institutions or pathways that better "match" their talents.

4. Does the policy provide guidance on anti-racist implementation?

Anti-racist	Racist
• ***Whiteness is understood as a threat to anti-racist policy implementation.*** Policy acknowledges that Whiteness is the dominant "racial perspective or worldview" (Leonardo, 2009, p. 170) that governs institutions and systems of higher education, as well as the agencies and organizations that support them. Accordingly, fidelity to the anti-racist intents of the policy demand guidance and monitoring from racial equity experts able to discern the prevalence and impact of Whiteness.	• ***Romanticized views about the equalizing role of higher education assume goodness in implementation.*** Policy assumes there is great motivation in higher education to better serve all students, regardless of their race or other characteristics that signify deficits. Accordingly, reforms and innovations are cast as transformational for "all" students.

Recommended Readings to Understand the Racial Debt

- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *Journal of Higher Education*, *80*(4), 389–414.
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- Olivas, M. (2012). *No undocumented child left behind: Plyer V. Doe and the education of undocumented children*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Teranishi, R. T. (2010). *Asians in the ivory tower: Dilemmas of racial inequality in American higher education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Wilder, C. S. (2013). *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press.
- Wright, B. (1991). The "untameable savage spirit": American Indians in colonial colleges. *The Review of Higher Education*, *14*(4), 429–452.

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