Separate & Unequal How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege

Abstract
The American postsecondary system is a dual system of racially separate and unequal institutions despite the growing access of minorities to the postsecondary system. Affluent white students as well as prestige seeking four-year colleges are flowing to the top tiers of selectivity, while lower income minority students are flooding low tuition, open-access, two- and four-year institutions. This report argues how the postsecondary system is more and more complicit as a passive agent in the systematic reproduction of white racial privilege across generations.

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Some white and higher-income parents use school and neighborhood racial composition as a proxy for school quality when deciding where to live and whether to enroll their children in local public schools (Holme 2002; Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Krysan 2002; Lareau 2014). Lower-income parents may assess schools on the basis of safety, school leadership, and school culture rather than test scores or school composition, and they have less access to information about academic characteristics of schools than do high-income parents (Hastings, Van Weelden, and Weinstein 2007). American higher education has evolved into a two-tiered separate and unequal system that fuels the intergenerational reproduction of white racial privilege. Our racially stratified postsecondary education system serves as a passive agent that mimics and magnifies the race-based inequities it inherits from the K-12 education system and projects them into the labor market. Whites educated at elite colleges go on to have successful careers, marry other whites with similar backgrounds, and buy homes in the right neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods in turn give their kids access to a top education in pre-K through high school that prepares them for selective colleges, beginning anew the self-sustaining intergenerational cycle of racial privilege.