

Tolerable Suboptimization: Racial Consequences of Defunding Public Universities

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Abstract

We argue that the public defunding of public higher education and turn to private revenue streams—for example, non-resident tuition, grants, philanthropy, and corporate sponsorship—generates organizational racial resource disparities. We draw on a year-long qualitative case study of a University of California campus with a majority Latinx and low-income student body, including ethnographic observations and interviews with administrators, staff, and students, to argue that these disparities may impede majority-marginalized universities' abilities to serve their student body. Our data demonstrate how limited organizational resources impact the provision of academic advising, mental health, and cultural programming for racially marginalized students. We articulate a racial neoliberal cycle of resource allocation: Colorblind constructs of “merit” lead to racial segregation and generate racialized organizational hierarchies that result in unequal organizational access to private resources. University leadership at resourced-starved majority-marginalized universities may respond to fiscal constraints by accepting and normalizing suboptimal support for students—what we refer to as “tolerable suboptimization.” Tolerable suboptimization may also be unevenly applied within universities, such that supports accessed or needed by marginalized students are the most impacted. As a consequence, institutional racism can take on the appearance of financial necessity.

Keywords

race, higher education, funding, academic advising, mental health, cultural programming

“[This university] is already the leanest machine that exists in the public higher-ed world. . . . We can't get any leaner without being diagnosed with an eating disorder.”

—Administrator

The past half century brought dramatic and well-documented reductions in public commitments to higher education in the United States. On average, 4-year public universities experienced more than a 30 percent per-student state and local funding cut over the past 30 years (Deming and Walters 2017; Webber 2017). Competition between colleges and universities for private revenue streams—for example, non-resident tuition, grants, philanthropy, and corporate sponsorship—has escalated in part to compensate for lost governmental support (Berman

2012; Berman and Paradeise 2016; Clotfelter 2017; Connell 2019; Fabricant and Brier 2016; Lambert 2014; Newfield 2016; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

Public defunding has not hit all public universities evenly, as status and resource allocation in the postsecondary system fall along racial lines (Garcia 2019; L. Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Wooten 2015). In many states, public universities enrolling large shares of racially marginalized students have

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experienced sharper cuts (Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz 2019). Most central to this article, schools offering high access tend to have far less robust compensatory private revenue streams (Clotfelter 2017; Eaton et al. 2016; B. Taylor and Cantwell 2019). The result is a “separate and unequal system of higher education,” in which racially marginalized students from low-income households mostly attend resource-poor universities (Carnevale 2016).

Scholars have directed little attention to racial consequences of limited public postsecondary funding for students (but see Cottom 2017; L. Hamilton and Nielsen 2021). This is surprising, given rich research on the underresourced educational experiences of Black and Latinx students in U.S. K-12 public school systems (e.g., Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis McCoy 2014; Ryan 2010; Shedd 2015; Tyson 2011).¹ In this article, we ask, “How do limited university resources generate insufficient support for racially (and often economically) marginalized students?”

We draw on a year-long qualitative case study of one University of California (UC) campus serving a majority Latinx and low-income student body, including ethnographic observations and interviews with administrators, student-facing staff, student activists and organizers, and Black and Latinx students (for more see L. Hamilton and Nielsen 2021). The UC system, which includes nine undergraduate serving campuses, is a widely recognized mobility machine that is more equitable than most state systems (see Chetty et al. 2017). Yet, UC Merced (UCM) is one of a few campuses in the system doing the lion’s share of what we refer to as “institutional diversity work.”²

Like other public universities serving similar populations, UCM has been forced to function with very limited resources. “Tolerable suboptimization,” or the practice of normalizing suboptimal organizational support for students, is a symptom of what we refer to as “postsecondary racial neoliberalism.” Postsecondary racial neoliberalism is the particular way that race and class, as systems of oppression, have recently intertwined in higher education. As a consequence of defunding, public universities have been forced to compete for private resources on the basis of racialized hierarchies that disadvantage majority-marginalized universities. We show that the resulting fiscal austerity in resource-starved universities has racial consequences, regardless of administrative intent.

BACKGROUND

To date, scholars have not adequately attended to how *organizational racial resource disparities* in higher

education are exacerbated by a shift toward private revenue streams. This is, in part, because much research on fiscal changes in higher education (e.g., Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Clotfelter 2017; Fabricant and Brier 2016; Lambert 2014; Newfield 2016; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; for an exception, see Cottom 2017) does not address the fundamental links between race and the macro-political economy in the United States (see Conwell 2016; Du Bois 1898, 1935 [1999]; Omi and Winant 2015). We argue the current unequal distribution of resources to majority-marginalized universities is driven by racialized neoliberal postsecondary funding policies.

Between roughly 1940 and 1980, U.S. higher education was heavily subsidized by state and federal governments (Loss 2012; Stevens and Gebre-Medhin 2016). Public support receded as Black and Latinx students gained greater access to once-predominately white research universities (see Allen and Jewell 2002; Krogstad and Fry 2014). We can situate the reduction of public support for broader access to higher education in research on social welfare spending. Scholars have demonstrated that austerity has been fueled by a “politics of resentment” against people of color, who are seen as unfairly draining public resources (Cooper 2017; Gilens 1999; Haney López 2014; Omi and Winant 2015).

Neoliberalism rests on the colorblind belief that individuals and organizations should “earn” their financial rewards in a competitive marketplace (Brown 2015; Cooper 2017; Omi and Winant 2015). Yet, colorblind beliefs do not take into account the continuing centrality of race to educational, legal, economic, and political institutions. Non-redistributive structures ensure unequal access to wealth for racially marginalized individuals and families (D. Hamilton and Darity 2017)—as well as the organizations that serve them (Ray 2019; K.-Y. Taylor 2019).

We argue that organizational racial resource disparities are shaped by a racial neoliberal cycle of resource allocation. As Figure 1 illustrates, the social construction of “merit” leads to the racial segregation of students into different schools and validates racialized organizational hierarchies that determine organizational abilities to compete for private resources. The result is the normalization of inadequate organizational support for students at majority-marginalized universities—seemingly reinforcing merit as a construct.

Merit is a colorblind sorting mechanism that is, in reality, far from race neutral (Posselt 2016; Warikoo 2016). It emerged in elite U.S. higher education as a defense against demands for greater access by marginalized groups (Karabel 2005). The

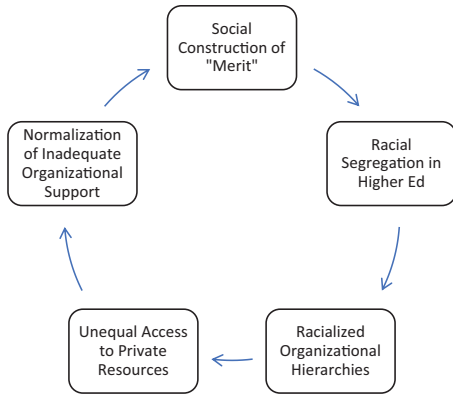


Figure 1. The racial neoliberal cycle of postsecondary organizational resource allocation.

SAT, a key component, was developed by a member of the Eugenics Society (Patel 2019) and has preserved white advantage (Freedle 2003; Santelices and Wilson 2010). White families have, on average, greater income and wealth to devote to producing academic and extracurricular accomplishments and are better able to place their children in well-resourced K-12 schools that enable demonstration of “excellence” (see D. Hamilton and Darity 2017; Owens 2020; P. Taylor et al. 2011).

Racially marginalized students are therefore often regarded as less meritorious and are sorted into two-year, open-access, and for-profit schools (Carnevale and Strohl 2013; Cottom 2017). Prestigious universities only enroll a tiny fraction of historically underrepresented student populations—primarily affluent, high-achieving students (see Berrey 2015). When racially marginalized students from low-income backgrounds break into selective universities, they are often concentrated in Minority-Serving-Institutions (MSIs).

Racialized classifications of merit attached to students are also transposed onto universities. There are “selective” and “less selective” universities—with the proportion of Latinx and Black students declining sharply as selectivity increases (Garcia 2019; Wooten 2015). The *U.S. News and World Report* rankings systematically reward schools that enroll primarily wealthy white (and increasingly, East Asian) students through factors such as student selectivity, school reputation, faculty resources, student retention, and alumni-giving. These factors are most accurately indicators of the privilege and resources of students’ families, as well as organizational wealth.

Organizational hierarchies are mechanisms for racialized resource distribution. Resources can

include finances, space, personnel, and supplies, among other things. Victor Ray’s (2019) theory of racialized organizations helps us to understand how this occurs. According to Ray, cultural understandings of race underlying hierarchies (in this case, “merit”) shape resource distribution across and within organizations, and resources tend to consolidate among dominant groups. Predominately white universities, and even units within universities, are viewed as more meritorious and claim more resources than majority-marginalized organizations—particularly when resource allocation is tightly linked to competitions on the basis of merit.

For example, elite private universities (with the most advantaged student bodies) have amassed vast amounts of wealth, pulling away from public competitors (Clotfelter 2017; Davies and Zarifa 2012; Eaton et al. 2016). The most prestigious state research universities (typically flagships with smaller marginalized populations) also use status to attract more private revenue, which in turn boosts status (B. Taylor and Cantwell 2019; see also Espeland and Sauder 2016). In contrast, at majority-marginalized schools, operating with bare-bones organizational supports can appear both necessary and tolerable to leaders faced with tough financial decisions.

Yet, organizational resources matter for student experiences (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Beattie and Thiele 2016; Carnevale and Strohl 2013; Fryar 2015; Reyes 2018; B. Taylor and Cantwell 2019). Wealthier universities can spend more on student and cultural services, offer comprehensive advising support, and provide smaller classes (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009). In contrast, resource-poor schools may eliminate or reduce faculty and staff positions, course offerings, and student services in order to survive (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2017). Consequently, the racially and economically marginalized students who most need supports are often least likely to attend universities offering these supports.

Race, Class, and Resource Distribution in the UC

During the 2016–2017 academic year, we conducted a case study of UCM. UCs are more racially diverse and enroll a larger number of Pell Grant eligible students than most other research universities. The system is also unique in that it includes nine undergraduate serving research organizations, rather than a single flagship and several regional schools. The “different type of university” justification for uneven resourcing does not apply.

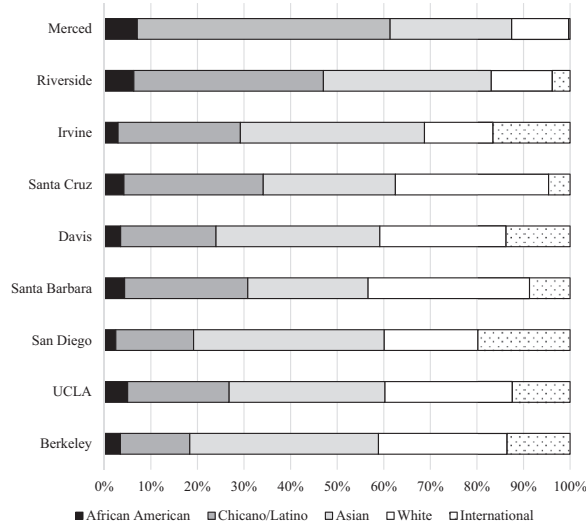


Figure 2. Undergraduate racial composition by UC campus, 2016.

Note. The American Indian population at all UCs is less than one percent, despite the fact that California is home to more people of Native American or Alaska Native heritage than any other state. UC = University of California; UCLA = University of California, Los Angeles.

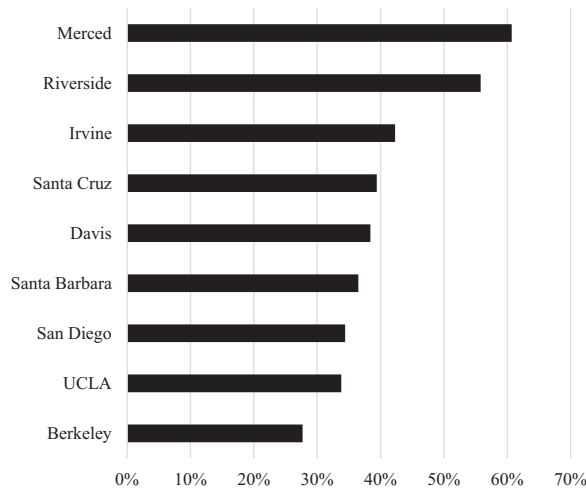


Figure 3. Pell recipients by University of California campus, 2016.

Note. UCLA = University of California, Los Angeles.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the system is, however, still characterized by race and class segregation. UCM (along with UC Riverside) serves the highest proportion of undergraduate Latinx students. Although all UCs have small Black student populations, these two schools led the system in 2016. Figure 3 shows that UCM and UC Riverside also serve a disproportionately large share of low-income undergraduate students (measured by Pell Grant receipt).

Merced and Riverside assume a larger share of what we refer to as “institutional diversity work” within the larger UC system. This concept draws on scholarship discussing “diversity work” as the production and enactment of a visible organizational commitment to diversity, often done by people of color (see Ahmed 2012). We extend previous scholarship by thinking of campuses as organizational actors that differentially contribute to the

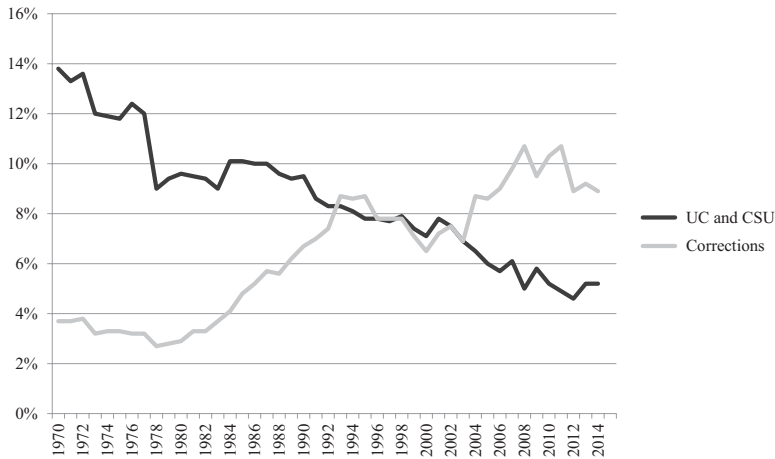


Figure 4. Share of state budget devoted to University of California and California State University systems vs. corrections.

Note. Data are drawn from the University of California Info Center, State Spending on Corrections and Education. UC = University of California; CSU = California State University.

system-wide production of diversity by serving historically underrepresented groups.

The UC is relatively unique in that each campus currently receives the same amount of state funding per undergraduate student. However, the share of the state budget devoted to the four-year post-secondary systems in the state has dramatically declined over time alongside increases in corrections spending. As Figure 4 indicates, the share of funding for universities dips precipitously while, after 1980, corrections spending spikes. As a result, state contributions make up increasingly less of overall UC revenue. For instance, by 2016, state contributions were around 10 percent of overall UC system revenue. Today, racialized resource distribution in the UC is instead primarily driven by campus variation in access to private revenue.

Tuition is a key source of private revenue. In the UC, non-resident undergraduate students pay around three times the cost of in-state tuition. Non-resident students are thus a financial boon—and the more that campuses enroll, the fewer the seats for low-income and racially marginalized in-state students (Curs and Jaquette 2017; Jaquette, Curs, and Posselt 2016). As Table 1 illustrates, Merced enrolls virtually no non-resident students, whereas several campuses are about a quarter non-resident.

Donations also vary by campus. Merced's foundation receives less than 1 percent of the private support that Berkeley's foundation takes in during a given year (see University of California 2018). The endowment assets of UCM are the lowest in the system. In 2016, when we were conducting the study, Merced reported \$1,370 in endowment

Table 1. Undergraduate Residential Composition by UC Campus, 2016.

Campus	% non-resident	% California resident
Merced	0.4	99.6
Riverside	2.9	97.1
Santa Cruz	7.6	92.4
Santa Barbara	12.2	87.8
Davis	14.7	85.3
Irvine	18.9	81.1
San Diego	22.7	77.3
UCLA	22.7	77.3
Berkeley	24.4	75.6

Note. UC = University of California; UCLA = University of California, Los Angeles.

assets per full-time student. By contrast, each student at Berkeley represented \$42,900. It might be tempting to assume this is because UCM was opened in 2005; however, UC Riverside (established in 1954) also has a low endowment and a similar student body. Endowments are often used for future investments, allowing schools with greater assets to more easily grow their funds than schools that start with less (Eaton et al. 2016). Additional differences in revenue between Merced and other UCs include access to indirect cost recovery from grants, patent royalties, and sales and services revenue coming from entities selling university gear, campus catering, and on-campus food markets.

Table 2. Characteristics of Student and Employee Samples.

Sociodemographic characteristics	Targeted student sample (N = 22)	Random student sample (N = 33)	University employee sample (N = 49)
Race			
Black	6	14	7
Latinx	13	19	17
White	3	0	19
Asian or Pacific Islander	0	0	6
Gender			
Woman	12	23	21
Man	8	10	28
Trans or non-binary	2	0	0

UCM thus relies almost entirely on state appropriations while most other UCs do not. Funding differences in the UC map directly onto racialized prestige hierarchies reified in the *U.S. News*. Below, we highlight the impact of tolerable suboptimization on academic advising, mental health support, and cultural programming at UCM, emphasizing the diversion of limited resources away from marginalized students.

DATA AND METHODS

Data were collected as part of a larger case study (see Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991 for more on this method) focused on how majority-marginalized research universities shape the educational experiences of low-income Latinx and Black students. We examined academic programs, advising, career counseling, housing, mental and physical health support, philanthropic efforts, social clubs and activities, cultural programming, financial aid, facilities operation and maintenance, budgeting and financial planning, and programs for historically underrepresented groups.

The authors and a team of undergraduate and graduate student researchers conducted ethnographic observations. We observed student orientations in English and Spanish, numerous protests, social events and cultural programming open to the public, diversity programming, faculty information sessions and town halls, and group-specific graduations. Laura received permission to shadow academic advisors in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts during sessions with students. Historical and financial documents were also included in our analyses.

We conducted 49 interviews with university employees, including chancellors, vice provosts, deans, faculty at all ranks (identified by students as

allies), student-facing staff in a variety of units, and staff dealing primarily with other university employees (see Table 2 for race and gender information). Participants were told that we were interested in understanding how universities support or fail to support students of color and were asked a series of questions about their background, job duties, interactions with students, race relations on campus, and perspectives on the campus in general.

The student portion of the project focused on Latinx and Black students, who were among the most and least represented groups on campus. As racially marginalized students they shared some similar experiences. However, their positionality on campus, and in the larger state, was different. Black students reported more racial microaggressions and were highly likely to engage in unpaid labor to make the campus livable for racially marginalized students (Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2019). California also has a relatively small Black population (6.5 percent in 2015); in certain areas, Black students were very visible and targets of policing.

We completed 55 student interviews; 33 were with a random sample of first- and fourth-year Black and Latinx students, generated with the assistance of registrar staff. We conducted 22 targeted interviews with student activists, some of whom were white allies. The response rate for the targeted sample was nearly 100 percent, as we were directly introduced to activists. Recruiting random sample participants through e-mail proved more challenging. The response rate was around 33 percent, and as Table 2 suggests, women were more likely to respond. Although we selected randomly sampled respondents on the basis of university racial data, we asked all respondents about their racial identities.

We interviewed students about family life, academic and social experiences, career goals, race relations on campus, interactions with campus

employees, involvement in student organizations, and protest activities. While all student interviews included questions about academic advisors and cultural programming, we approached mental health issues delicately. We only engaged in this line of questioning if a student mentioned campus psychological services. All student participants received a \$25 gift card for participating. University employee and student interviews lasted between 35 minutes to 2.5 hours, averaging around an hour.

Laura and Kelly, as white scholars, were well positioned to investigate the organizational operation of the university—in large part because of their racial privilege and access to leadership. Veronica, who identifies as Latina, completed many interviews with students, alongside a Latina graduate student. Interviewees often expressed relief upon seeing that the interviewer was a person of color. While the experiences of racially marginalized students are not homogeneous (both within and across racial categories), this article focuses on some of their shared frustrations.

With respondents' permission, we recorded and transcribed all 104 interviews. We entered field notes and transcripts into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis platform. In analyzing data, we were guided by the insights of race scholars, whose contributions to the sociology of education are often overlooked. We decided to focus on the three core services featured in this article—academic advising, mental health support, and cultural programming—as we had rich data from multiple perspectives, and these services were representative of a general pattern on campus. Taking an abductive approach (see Tavory and Timmermans 2014), we moved recursively between deductive and inductive modes of analysis, seeking to test our emerging hypotheses and confirm empirical patterns.

TOLERABLE SUBOPTIMIZATION

During the 2016–2017 academic year, Merced leadership engaged in workforce planning (WFP). Student enrollment and campus space would be growing, creating the need for more staff and faculty than in the past, but resources were scarce. On October 4, two members of the administration recorded an informational webcast. Staff members were asked to pause their work, tune in, and submit questions, which were answered live and in a document circulated after the webcast.

The long-range budget model only allowed for funding a third of staff positions requested during the WFP process. The webcast informed workers that they should instead practice “tolerable suboptimization,”

defined as follows: “Absent an allocation of X resources, then we must accept Y level of suboptimization.” Speakers exhorted the audience to expect to “accept a standard of output that may not be ideal but is necessary so that we do not overwork and overtax our valued staff.” However, as the (now former) Assistant Vice Chancellor of Human Resources warned, “Tolerable suboptimization is not an invitation—or permission—to abandon responsibilities.”

For dedicated staff toiling under heavy workloads, normalization of suboptimal support for students was not a relief. As one high-ranking Student Life staff explained,

They did a webinar talking about what's to come and . . . about tolerable suboptimization. . . . That's the kind of the model we'd been working with: you know, do more with less. . . . I've never worked on a campus with more folks committed to serving students. We're going to do what we need to do in service to them to make sure that they have an amazing, powerful, productive, life altering positive experience. But my mother used to say, you can't get blood out of a turnip.

Staff were committed to supporting students with the limited time and resources available to them—but recognized that they might fall short.

In what follows, we explore the costs of expected and normalized staff and resource shortages for racially marginalized students. Tolerable suboptimization, as a seemingly inevitable organizational policy and practice developed in response to Merced's fiscal position, decreased the quality of support many students received. We provide empirical evidence for the impact on three essential areas of campus support: academic advising, mental health support, and cultural programming. Throughout, we emphasize both the between- and within-school racial inequalities that resulted.

Academic Advising

As Figure 5 indicates, the median caseload per full-time academic advisor at a public doctorate-granting university is 285. Caseloads are higher at two-year public universities (441) and lower at private bachelor's-granting universities (100) (Robbins 2013). At the time of the study, full-time advisors in the UCM School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts (SSHA) had an average caseload of 740—2.5 times the national median for advisors at similar schools. In contrast, advisors in the School of Natural Sciences (SNS) had caseloads closer to

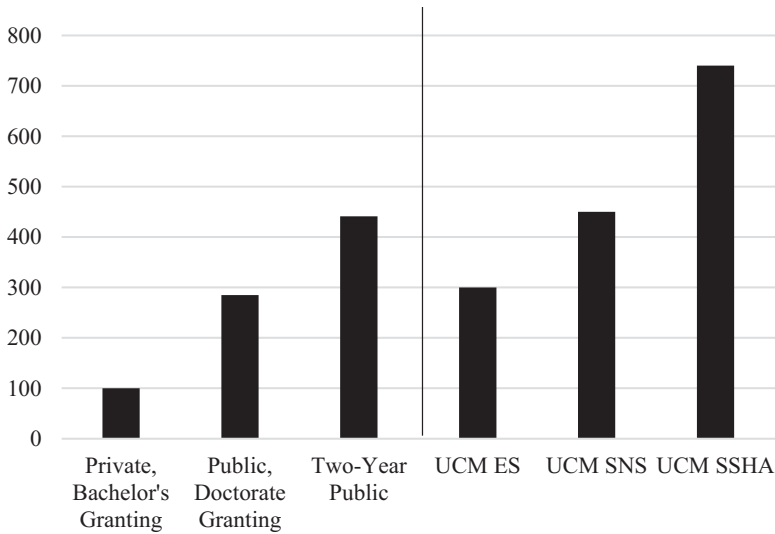


Figure 5. Median academic advising caseloads by university type and UCM school.

Note. UCM = University of California, Merced; ES = Engineering School; SNS = School of Natural Sciences; SSHA = School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts.

450—still over the national median but below SSHA numbers. The caseload for advisors in the Engineering School (ES) was around 300 for full-time advisors.

Thus, UCM students experienced *between-university* disparities in access to academic advisors. UCM has a large population of racially and economically marginalized students for a public doctorate-granting university, and advisors had unusually high caseloads. As we argued earlier, when university resources correspond to the racial composition of the student body, postsecondary racial inequalities result. Unequal access to private revenue streams thus contributes to these differences.

At the same time, racial inequities existed *internal* to UCM, as SSHA served a greater share of Latinx and Black students (see Figure 6). By comparison, Latinx students and Black students were underrepresented in ES and SNS. There is nothing unique about these patterns: Racial disparities across fields (often heavily inflected by gender) are visible in national data for four-year colleges and universities (Dickson 2010; Riegle-Crumb, King, and Irizarry 2019). However, if the most-marginalized students enter schools and fields that are systematically understaffed, then these students may have a more challenging and less enriching experience.

As one advisor explained, seeing a SSHA advisor was “mission impossible.” A student first

checked into a small waiting room separated from the suite of advising offices by a locked door. It was impossible to just “stop by” and difficult to pre-schedule. On busy days, the line snaked down the hall and the wait could be hours. Students would often spot the crowd and turn the other way. As a result of scheduling issues and limited numbers of advisors, students who remained often had to see any available advisor. Most requests of first- and second-year students were filtered to student peer mentors located in a shared office down the hall.

SSHA advisors worried about their lack of availability to students. Not being able to meet the needs of students was deeply disappointing. As one advisor noted with a sigh, “We want to be available more, [but] we just can’t. I know that’s another frustration our students have. . . . I think it’s a very valid frustration.” The realities of advisors’ jobs, and the acceptance of tolerable suboptimization, particularly in this part of the university, meant that SSHA advisors could not do their jobs as they were trained or desired to do.

Laura spent a day shadowing each of the three full-time SSHA advisors and the one contract worker during their advising sessions. The average advising session lasted between seven and eight minutes. As field notes indicate, “Interactions are clearly designed to check boxes and get business done. They are friendly but brisk. This is not an environment in which a student is likely to unload.”

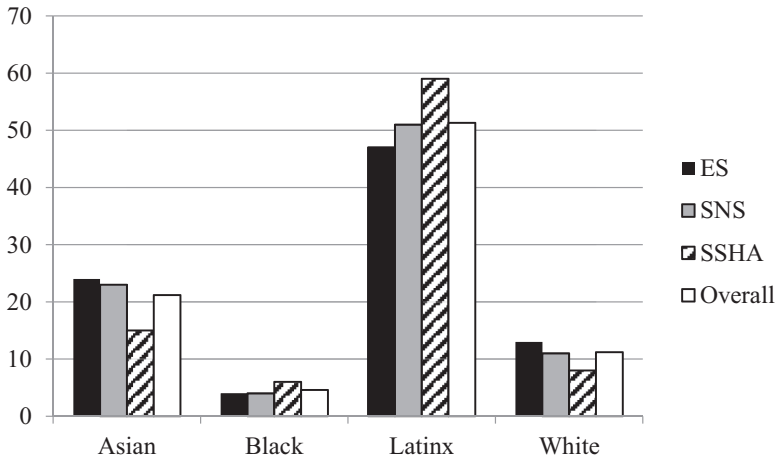


Figure 6. Racial composition (by percent) of UCM schools, fall 2017.

Note. UCM = University of California, Merced; ES = Engineering School; SNS = School of Natural Sciences; SSHA = School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts.

Even when the line was not long, advisors' interactions struck this tone. Advisors, in response to heavy workloads, had established an efficient routine. This is problematic: research suggests that academic advising, especially for racially marginalized students, should be proactive, holistic, and humanized—not brief and routine (Museus and Ravello 2010).

Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson (2008) have applied Bourdieu's notion of habitus to organizational analysis in order to understand how microprocesses of individual behavior build up into organizational structure. For tolerable suboptimization to be routine at UCM, it had to become part of workers' durable principles of judgment and practice—even among workers who wished to better serve their students. SSHA advisors reported that they had been engaging in tolerable suboptimization for some time, as they were in "survival mode."

The following field notes are a summary of a typical session between an advisor and a Latina student focused on course planning for the next semester. The session lasted five minutes, including the student's signing of the consent form.

Student: I failed calculus and I don't know what to do.

Advisor: What happened?

Student: I failed it.

Advisor: I mean, what was the primary issue? Time management, the professor, et cetera?

Student: Time management.

Advisor: So, you think this time around you will do things differently. Is there a reason that you are taking psych[ology] statistics? Because you could substitute econ[omics] statistics for that [since you have already taken it], and it will be one less stats class. Unless you really want to take psych statistics. It's not guaranteed, but you can petition to have that count. My recommendation, but it's totally up to you.

Student: [nods in assent]

Advisor: So, you have two other options [locates them on the screen and lists them to the student].

Student: The problem is many upper-division classes [in psych] are all taken and closed at this point.

Advisor: [Pauses, scanning the list online], you should keep checking if students drop, but I see that this [one class] has six spots. You could also find soc[iology] or other courses that are still open with no prerequisites. Anything else?

Student: No.

The advisor asks why the student struggled in calculus, but the pace of the interaction and the request to identify a "primary" cause may have discouraged her from elaborating. The student picked the first option, which may not have been accurate. The advisor did not offer advice on how to better manage time, direct the student to relevant campus resources, or open a discussion about why the student struggled. The advice about not needing to double up on statistics was likely helpful, given the student's past

history with calculus, but it may have also come across as doubting her abilities to manage the class. The closing of “Anything else?”—although technically a prompt for more questions—felt final.

The advisor utilized an interactional style that elicited and transmitted relatively minimal information, without engaging in in-depth conversations likely to become more time consuming. This was the norm for our observed sessions. For instance, in a different session another advisor ignored a student’s repeated remarks about her baby, even though the challenges of motherhood may have been competing with academics.

We asked our random sample students about advising, and SSHA students’ reports mirrored our observations, almost without exception. (There were no positive reports, only a handful of neutral accounts). As a first-year Latina explained, she could not get in to see her assigned advisor: “We’re not allowed to talk to our actual college advisors until we’re like third years or fourth years.” She was instead sent to a peer advisor whom she felt was not interactive or knowledgeable. A fourth-year Latino student was frustrated with turnover and the quality of his interactions. As he explained,

It’s like a runaround. . . . There’s a switch-up in advisors. I had [one advisor]. [Then] I got an email that [this advisor] is no longer with us so I went back to [another advisor whom I had in the past] and [who is] very busy all the time. . . . I’ve been trying to get [this advisor] to know me, but I know [this person] is very busy with a lot of students, so it’s kind of a difficult situation.

When academic advisors were not accessible, students often tried to figure things out on their own. Without necessary information, they made mistakes. Thus, the Latino student above explained that he worried about doing something that would prevent him from graduating. Previously, he had unknowingly taken many courses that did not count toward his major—and was not advised of this until later. As he pointed out, “I’ve taken enough classes to have like six associate degrees already [laughs].”

The contrast to the Engineering School (ES) was sharp. Walk-ins were accepted and the website invited students to “Make an appointment! See your advisor’s hours for their availability.” Inside the building, the advising office suite was not locked. Students waited in a seating area that allowed them to see the advisors’ offices and even wave if doors were open. A rack of science magazines, general info on internships, and a number of

specialty publications, such as *Diversity and Democracy*, were displayed.

Because the school was able to provide enough advisors, peer mentors were not necessary. As an ES advisor explained, “I feel like students should be connected to an advisor. . . that’s going to guide them the whole entire process . . . That’s a lot of pressure to put onto a student worker as well.” The advisor described a more holistic style of advising:

Academically if they’re not doing well, then we need to do a little bit more of exploration. Is it learning style? Is it time management? Is it just major fit? Then we look at the personal as well. . . . We ask about their community that they’re currently building on campus. . . . How’s that going?

This advisor then used a recent case to describe coordination with other campus offices, necessary to provide “wrap-around” services geared toward addressing a wide variety of student needs.

We were unable to directly observe advising sessions in the Engineering School. However, almost all ES students asked about academic advising indicated that they had positive experiences. As a first-year Black student described,

I’ve only been to the one advisor that I’ve been assigned to, of course, and it’s been really, really helpful. My academic advisor has told me essentially what I should be doing and what classes I should be taking, what recommendations if the worst-case scenario were to happen—like if I were to fail a class. She even gave me options for doing research or being able to apply to internships as fast as possible to build up as much of my resume as possible, so when it comes to the real world or looking for jobs it would be a lot easier.

As this quote suggests, ES first-year students had access to their assigned advisors and assumed this was the norm. Career planning was proactive so that students would have the experiences necessary to reach their goals by graduation.

It was thus not surprising that an external review report on UCM academic advising critiqued SSHA, in particular. Advisors were hurt by the fact that the report did not suggest the hiring of more advisors. “It was more of change your processes and everything should be fine. [But] our ratios are already much higher compared to the national average and we’re gonna keep growing.” It was clear to our

research team that the problem was not rooted in process, effort, or advisor skill, but the sheer lack of resources available for SSHA advising—and university acceptance of this state of affairs. Indeed, leadership were aware of staff disparities across the schools, but did not rectify them. SSHA administrators suggested that the engineering school was treated different because this school “got a lot of [external private] funding.”

Our data thus point to both between and within university differences in advising support. Racially marginalized students, who were most heavily concentrated in SSHA, paid the price for tolerable suboptimization. Staff were forced to downgrade the services they provided, shunting students to peer advisors, increasing wait times, and tempering interactions.

Mental Health Support

The International Association of Counseling Services recommends a ratio of one counselor to 1,000 students at schools with concentrations of students with severe mental health conditions or a need for behavioral threat teams. A staff member reported that the student-to-psychologist ratio at UCM was around 1,500 to 1—similar to other UC campuses. This ratio, however, was particularly problematic in the context of Merced.

UCM is located in a health care desert. UCM students are also less likely to have access to parental health insurance coverage and a car to reach highly qualified providers hours away. Thus, students that sought mental health services leaned heavily on campus supports. As one practitioner explained,

We’re kind of it. . . . At all the other campuses . . . if they have a student that has . . . a severe mental illness or something that is going to require more chronic care, they can refer them to a provider because they have 200 different clinical psychologists in the community.

The percentage of students utilizing Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at UCM was around 20 percent—double the national average (Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2017). Research suggests that individuals who hold marginalized positions across several systems of oppression are at greater risk for experiencing anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Grollman 2014; Rosenfield 2012). As one staff member explained, race and social class marginalization added high levels of stress to student performance:

We have a lot of first-generation students here. It’s the pressure . . . especially, I think, within the Hispanic population. . . . The pressure that my success really is not just for me but it’s for my whole family Otherwise, how’s my family going to get out of poverty? How are they going to be able to buy a house? All of the things they’ve sacrificed have to be for something.

During the 2016–2017 academic year, aspects of the larger political and social climate, in particular the election of Donald Trump, intensified pressures. Undocumented students feared for their safety and worried about the dismantling of policies that made college more affordable and citizenship attainable. Many students, even if not personally undocumented, worried about friends and family members who were. Trump’s commentary about Mexicans as rapists and drug dealers highlighted and promoted anti-immigrant, racist ideology that was painful to Latinx students. Black students described increased encounters with anti-Black racism on and off campus.

Administrators and staff indicated that a more workable ratio would be 700 to 1—less than half of the current caseload. Under existing conditions, CAPS workers were flooded with students. They reported an average of seven clinical hours of face-to-face contact with students a day; this did not include any other duties, such as the managerial labor of running CAPS, note-taking on existing cases, or emergency care. Quality assurance and risk management programs—which exist at many of the other UCs—were not viable.

Tolerable suboptimization led psychologists to triage. Students were asked a series of intake questions related to “suicidality and homicidality.” Those who did not meet these criteria, or who were uncomfortable answering in the affirmative, were given an appointment as far out as a month or more. Indeed, when students in our random sample brought up psychological services, it was typically to share how long they waited for help. As a Black woman described,

[The CAPS intake worker] said, “Are you having an emergency?” I said, “Well, what’s an emergency to you?” Because it could be different. And he basically asked me if I’m gonna kill myself, then at the end he’s says am I gonna hurt someone else? I was like “No, but that’s not the only emergency.” And then they were like “Oh, sorry. We can give you [an appointment in a month].”

Long waits for mental health services have been shown to elevate risks for poor outcomes (Nath and Marcus 2006).

Many student organizers pointed out the limited representation of people of color in CAPS. The issue came to a head after campus police shot and killed a student of color who had attacked members of the campus with a knife. A Latino student organizer explained,

Where are our psychiatrists of color? We have these folks who might be trained in cultural competency, but it's really different when you have someone who looks like you. How could you talk to someone who doesn't understand, or you don't feel will understand? We had a student [of color] who tried to stab a couple of folks [and] who got shot and killed on our campus. How is that not an indicator that like, hey, you know, maybe we should have some psychiatrists of color [to help us process this event]?

Without appropriate supports, as a senior staff person indicated, students “were looking out for each other, supporting each other.”

Mental health support staff and administrators were hopeful that conditions would improve. The UC had approved an increase in annual student service fees to expand mental health services across the system. Unfortunately, this approach relied on private family resources, rather than on state, system, or university funds, to address student mental health needs. In addition, the school struggled with recruitment. Located in California’s “Prison Alley,” Merced competed with the Department of Corrections (DOC) but failed to offer the same level of pay or similarly decent working conditions. As a staff member (who had experiences with both workplaces) noted to a coworker, “Being here [at UCM] is much more emotionally draining and tiring than working for a prison. And prisons pay like twice as much.”

Under tolerable suboptimization, resources to significantly increase pay for mental health practitioners, necessary to attract racially diverse staff, were viewed as nonstarters. In the workforce planning process, every salary above the average potentially meant one less staff position. Even mental health support, despite campus recognition of its importance, was subject to severe resource constraints. Deficits in mental health care were most likely to impact multiply marginalized populations, whose needs for campus-provided support were higher.

Cultural Programming

Recent research suggests that cultural centers and programming increase the comfort of Black and Latinx students, potentially improving student retention (Patton 2010). Even majority-marginalized student universities can be experienced as white spaces when staff, faculty, and administrators are primarily white, and practices are modeled after predominately white universities (Ahmed 2012). Furthermore, not all marginalized populations are equally positioned; for example, Black students at UCM were still numerical minorities.

However, at the start of 2016, UCM’s resources devoted to race-focused cultural programming could be summed up in one word—Deo. He was one of two staff members hired to support historically marginalized populations (the other being a women’s programs and LGBTQ+ coordinator). His office structure and placement were a fitting metaphor for the resources granted to this work. As field notes recount,

Deo is located in the bowels of the library building. . . . This is, of course, where the office of student life is located. But then Deo’s own office is way in the back of that suite, next to the women’s programs and LGBTQ+ coordinator. The two are in an open-air shared cubicle—divided only by a wall, which, at the top, has [only] a frame (no glass) and allows for sound from outside to freely filter in, as well as across offices. This is particularly problematic for two staff members who are supposed to be offering “safe space” for vulnerable populations on campus.

Administrators had plans to relocate Deo as more space opened up. However, in the calculus of who most needed private and accessible space, Deo lost—even though his office was frequented by a stream of racially marginalized students looking for mentorship and support.

Deo’s job description, as the “social justice coordinator,” was exceptionally broad. As he described,

Currently [I am working] with Black Lives Matter, with the North Dakota pipeline, socioeconomic class [issues]—especially the makeup of our students as first generation, low income—and we have . . . a good number of undocumented students. . . . As an office of one, I would get a phone call of, “What are you doing for Black history month? What are you

doing for Native American heritage month? What are you doing for Hispanic heritage month, right? What are you doing for Pride month?"

Deo was spread very thin. As one concerned staff member put it,

What a burden that's placed on that position. I definitely think that we absolutely could be doing more. . . . I just don't think right now we have the people resources to do it and do it right. . . . And who suffers because of it?

The implied answer was marginalized students.

Merced was unique in the UC system (and among many research universities) in that it lacked a single staffed cultural center. This issue was raised by almost all student activists. A year prior to the study, a delegation of UCM students attended the UC system Students of Color Conference, where they learned this fact. A movement for a multicultural space was born. Although Black students had been demanding cultural space for years, accounts of students, staff, and faculty suggest that administration only responded when Latinx student activists raised the issue publicly at a system-wide meeting. A Latina activist explained,

We spoke up in public comment, asking about multicultural centers and really highlighting the fact that we don't have any, and we're advertised as [a] diverse [campus] . . . that [is] first generation and low income. And then the system board was asking questions . . . and that's when things started moving.

In response to students, administrators indicated that cultural spaces were always "in the plans" for an upcoming campus development project. For student activists and their allies, however, the absence of existing cultural space and the lack of commitment to putting cultural centers in otherwise detailed building plans were sources of deep frustration. An external report on diversity efforts, commissioned by the university, concurred that leaders had made mistakes: "While the institution appears to take minoritized students' concerns [about the lack of cultural centers] seriously, the follow through is perceived as inadequate at best."

After continued pressure, UCM leadership responded by offering temporary spaces. The first to open was the Graduate Cultural Resource Center (GCRC). However, after two months the GCRC was

shut down. It was a poor choice for a cultural center, as it had been designed as a storage unit, with no ventilation system. Only a few students could be in the space with the doors closed because the carbon dioxide levels became dangerously high. The concentrated chemical off-gassing from paint, furniture, and new carpet also resulted in itching, coughing, and other unpleasant symptoms. Graduate student activists created protest posters reading "Unfit for Humans," "Enviro-racists," "Shame Merced," and "We want oxygen for culture!"

The second space was the undergraduate Intercultural Hub. The Hub was a small room that previously held a conference table and chairs. All groups that sought a "safe space" on campus would need to share the Hub. Like the GCRC, it was also unstaffed. It was at the opening of this space that a faculty speaker introduced students to the term "tolerable suboptimization." He urged students to think about what such a practice meant for their education—and to question tolerable suboptimization, particularly when applied to a largely non-white, low-income student body.

Why did administrators blunder in addressing students' cultural space needs? University leadership shapes the extent to which tolerable suboptimization is encouraged by controlling the flow of, often admittedly limited, resources. In this case, the school had instead focused its sights on increasing private revenue. As a staff member explained, "There are discussions about even having a natatorium [indoor swimming pool], but there's no discussion about a multicultural center." A swimming pool would help attract wealthier, non-resident students and bring competitive aquatic sports to the campus—both of which could contribute to UCM's financial self-sufficiency. The pool was soon written into the plans. The choice to commit to a pool before a designated space for cultural programming is a great example of how shifting financial streams can lead administrators to make choices about internal resource distribution that work against racially marginalized students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We highlight the struggles racially marginalized students faced at a resourced-starved majority-marginalized public university, focusing on three core services: academic advising, mental health support, and cultural programming. We could have discussed many other university services. For instance, accessing a financial aid advisor at certain times of the year was

near impossible. New off-campus housing did not have a designated residence life coordinator on-site. The availability of IT services dropped as new buildings came online and more students arrived. The university also had one of the highest student-to-tenure-track-faculty ratios in the system. “Tolerable suboptimization” was widespread.

UCM is harmed by the shift from public higher education as a public good to a private commodity. Postsecondary austerity is not an inevitability; it is a choice about how to spend governmental resources (see Blyth [2013] 2015). As we illustrated earlier, in the state of California support was channeled away from public welfare to punitive functions that target marginalized populations. Reductions in state spending fueled a postsecondary neoliberal cycle of resource allocation, in which majority-marginalized public universities were pushed into brutal competitions for private revenue.

This cycle is organized around merit, a color-blind system of categorization that devalues racially marginalized students, making it possible to legally segregate them into different postsecondary schools and to define the schools they attend as lower “quality.” When ranking shapes access to private revenue, universities with high concentrations of racially marginalized students lose. These organizations have less access to vital family, philanthropic, and corporate resources to compensate for reduced governmental support.

Tight fiscal conditions often lead to the acceptance of suboptimal support for students, as demonstrated in our data. Not surprisingly, in the postsecondary system at large, graduation rates map closely to prestige (Bowen et al. 2009; Clotfelter 2017)—seemingly confirming existing hierarchies. Neoliberal beliefs suggest that majority-marginalized campuses and their students are less meritorious and thus to blame for these shortfalls, limiting organizational abilities to capture private support. However, as our results suggest, greater access to financial resources would allow these universities to improve services that are often linked to successful college experiences and higher graduation rates.

The dynamics at play at UCM, relative to better funded UC campuses—and more sharply, the elite private universities in the state—are not unique. Under current funding conditions, colleges and universities with larger shares of racially and economically marginalized students are starved for resources (Garcia 2019; L. Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Mitchell et al. 2019; B. Taylor and Cantwell 2019; Wooten 2015). Prestigious research universities

with more advantaged populations have greater potential to secure private revenue (Clotfelter 2017; Eaton et al. 2016; Fryar 2015). When public universities serving marginalized populations are forced to scale down or limit services, the students most harmed are those that require the greatest support.

The postsecondary racial neoliberal cycle not only generates inequalities *across* higher education organizations—but also *within* universities. As we demonstrated, although tolerable suboptimization was present throughout UCM operations, it was more acute in areas of the university that dealt with higher concentrations of racially marginalized students or were arguably most needed by racially marginalized populations. Indeed, students from structurally disadvantaged families are most likely to rely on the services that universities provide, as these students cannot depend on family advantage (L. Hamilton 2016).

Administrators at majority-marginalized universities are not exempt from the postsecondary racial neoliberal cycle. Their decisions about where to invest limited university resources are often based on the same principles. For example, campuses may practice tolerable suboptimization in the provision of basic services at the same time that they build recreational facilities appealing to white students from out-of-state, consider developing honors programs (which typically serve more privileged students at higher rates), and expand graduate research capacity—all three of which were occurring at UCM (also see Bastedo and Gumport 2003). There are pressures to direct resources toward the building of private revenue streams, leading resource-strapped schools to invest in the constituents that have the greatest potential to bring needed funds or status (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). These constituents are typically not marginalized.

Tolerable suboptimization involves both operating under suboptimal conditions *and* normalizing these conditions as routine and expected. In our data, we could see this both in how problems were understood by administration and external reviewers (e.g., often as about staff effort and efficiency, not understaffing or resource limitations) and in the continuation of suboptimal supports. For instance, resource and staffing levels in all of the areas discussed in this article remained low after the 2016–2017 academic year.

Over time, suboptimal support becomes the typical way things are done. Workers adjust their habits and routines, even when they would prefer to do otherwise (see Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Administrators may no longer see units practicing

tolerable suboptimization as in acute need of resources. Tolerable suboptimization may also help naturalize profit-seeking as the driving principle of a university, and one around which operation is inevitably organized. Yet, what is viewed as “tolerable” from a leadership standpoint may not be experienced as tolerable by marginalized populations who depend on their universities for support.

Although we focus on the racial consequences of defunding, social class is also implicated. As intersectional scholars remind us, race operates in concert with other systems of oppression, making racial inequalities durable and difficult to combat (see Collins and Bilge 2016). Low-income whites are negatively impacted by postsecondary defunding, along with others who do not have sufficient privilege to avoid being on the receiving end of structural inequalities; they too can be swept up by racial projects (see Omi and Winant 2015). White students attending UCM, for example, are almost entirely working class. Yet, white students are underrepresented at less prestigious research universities like UCM, as well as at community colleges hard hit by divestment in higher education (Kahlenberg 2015). As race scholars also emphasize, whiteness provides benefits, even for those who are otherwise disadvantaged (see Collins 1990; Du Bois 1935 [1999] on whiteness as a “public and psychological wage”).

Our research suggests the importance of breaking the postsecondary racial neoliberal cycle. Efforts to challenge merit as the organizing cultural framework for opportunity and resource distribution are important. One step is to not use college admissions exams to determine admission—a change recently implemented by the UC system and many other schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. States could value and fiscally reward universities doing high levels of “institutional diversity work,” encouraging other universities in the state to follow suit. Collectively, universities could also refuse to report to the *U.S. News & World Report* until the formula is recalibrated to avoid penalizing schools with majority-marginalized populations. Moving forward, we encourage scholars to continue deepening knowledge on how higher education in the United States, and globally, maintains racial hierarchies—also highlighting potential mechanisms for change.

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NOTES

1. We capitalize Black and Latinx, in particular, to emphasize the political agency, collective identity, and solidarity of these communities in a racist society. Although there is ongoing debate about this terminology, we use Latinx when gender is unspecified, non-binary, or to refer to a community, and Latina/Latino when discussing respondents who use these terms to describe themselves.
2. Institutional review board did not require blinding the university name.

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