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Racialized Horizontal Stratification in US Higher Education: Politics, Process, and Consequences

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Abstract

In this review, we integrate three bodies of scholarship—education stratification research, political-historical sociology of higher education, and sociological theories of race and racism—to understand the production of "separate and unequal" postsecondary experiences for racially marginalized college students in the United States. We argue that the US postsecondary system is plural, heterogeneous, and stratified partly as a result of hundreds of years of contested efforts to deploy higher education in the service of white supremacy and capital accumulation. Organizational stratification of higher education along racial lines leads to horizontal stratification in individual experiences within the same level of schooling, and even within the same university. We review literature on racialized sorting between schools, which channels racially marginalized students to different parts of the postsecondary system relative to their racially advantaged peers. We also describe stratification within schools, as students are tracked, often by race, into divergent academic and social pathways internal to a single university. Both types of sorting have racial consequences for students' career trajectories, economic security, and well-being. Finally, we detail recent efforts to challenge horizontal stratification, responses to those efforts, and avenues for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

This review integrates education stratification research, political-historical sociology of higher education, and sociological theories of race and racism to understand how racially marginalized students continue to have "separate and unequal" (Carnevale & Strohl 2013) postsecondary experiences in the United States.[1] We argue that hundreds of years of contested efforts to deploy higher education in service of white supremacy and capital accumulation have aided in the production of a plural, heterogeneous, and stratified system of postsecondary provision. Organizational stratification of higher education by race leads to divergent and unequal educational experiences both within the same level of schooling and within a given university. Racially stratified student outcomes are thus inextricably linked to the processes that produce and maintain postsecondary hierarchies.

Research in the education stratification tradition often details the lifelong benefits of college completion, particularly for racially and economically marginalized students (see Brand 2023, Hout 2012). Notably, as Gerber & Cheung (2008) explain, stratification in higher education is not just vertical, by level of educational attainment, but also horizontal, by nature and type of education. Education stratification research in this vein, particularly in economics but also in sociology, tends to consider race as an individual characteristic but not as an organizing principle structuring the postsecondary system. This scholarship tends to obscure power because it treats educational options as a given and stratification as largely a consequence of individual, choice-based educational trajectories.

By contrast, Stevens & Gebre-Medhin's (2016) intervention, grounded in the American political development tradition, details how actors seeking to accomplish political, economic, religious, moral, and other agendas through educational expansion have, over time, created a heterogeneous and hierarchical postsecondary system. Higher education in the United States is a hub linking multiple institutions (Stevens et al. 2008); control over forms of postsecondary provision, and their meanings, is highly contested, fragmented, and plural. Yet political-historical accounts often fail to recognize that the leveraging of education in nation-building efforts and government social provision is integral to larger racial projects that have lasting effects on postsecondary equity (Williamson-Lott 2018).

To address these elisions, our review draws on sociological theories of race and racism to understand how race operates as a system of domination at multiple levels to produce postsecondary stratification along racial lines. Omi & Winant's (2015) term "racial projects" describes the efforts of social groups to link racial hierarchies to the distribution of resources and capital. Universities are key organizational structures through which racial projects are enacted (Ray 2019). The racial projects of dominant groups frequently involve efforts to protect or grow power and resources through education and also reflect gender, class, nationalist, and other intersecting structures of power (Collins 2004).

Read together, these three traditions suggest that racial projects result in horizontal stratification, or differentiation in postsecondary experiences. Horizontal stratification can occur through opportunity hoarding, when actors "secure their relatively privileged social position through

[1]We use the term racially marginalized to refer to groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education, which includes students who identify as Black, Latine, Native American and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and some Southeast Asian groups. We have chosen not to capitalize "white." Capitalization is always a political decision. We elect to capitalize Black and Latine to emphasize the political agency, collective identity, and solidarity of these groups in a racist society. We use Latine when gender is unspecified, although debate about this terminology is ongoing.

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monopolizing scarce resources" (Diamond & Lewis 2022, p. 1474). If access to college is relatively open, advantaged actors ensure that the most prestigious and well-resourced universities, programs, and majors include their offspring and those seemingly similar to them, while making it difficult for others to enjoy the same benefits. Exploitation, or the extraction of resources such as land, knowledge, bodies, capacities, and financial means from marginalized groups to produce profit or opportunities for dominant groups, often occurs under the auspices of education and also produces horizontal stratification (Diamond & Lewis 2022).

Horizontal stratification generates white educational spaces, or segregation. When segregation is part of white racial projects, it facilitates the inequitable distribution of educational resources. Most centrally, white spaces impose racialized hierarchies onto bodies in ways that generate prestige and other resources for those defined as white, as well as for organizations implicitly understood as white (Diamond & Lewis 2022, Ray 2019). Hegemonic efforts to hoard educational opportunities for white people (i.e., segregation) are distinct from efforts to create supportive spaces for marginalized people.

Marginalized groups disrupt and reshape the racial projects of dominant groups, such that oppression is never total, and universities can also be staging grounds for "creative spaces of possibility and freedom" (Mustaffa 2017, p. 712). Disadvantaged groups have leveraged universities to fuel social movements; redistribute resources; pave rare avenues into the elite; and incubate, legitimize, and diffuse marginalized histories and perspectives (Davis et al. 2020, Rojas 2010, Wooten 2015). As Omi & Winant (2015) explain, "At any given moment, we are in a particular phase of the *trajectory* of racial politics," in which waves of oppression are met with mobilization, then organized resistance faces backlash from and strategic response by those in power (p. 372, emphasis in original).

Our review centers the experiences of Black and Latine students, who are disproportionately low-income and clustered in precarious postsecondary pathways. Although Black is a racial category encompassing multiple ethnic groups and Latine is a panethnic category encompassing multiple racial groups, both Black and Latine students in the United States are often racialized in ways that disadvantage them. Higher education as an institution supports race as a structure of power that reifies and naturalizes a racial hierarchy, with white people at the top and Black people at the bottom. Asian people are often considered closer to the top of the racial order, with Latine people closer to the bottom. However, lived experiences of institutional hierarchies are historically contingent, and there is considerable heterogeneity in both groups, often around phenotype, ancestry, and relationships to colonization (Bonilla-Silva 2018, Song 2004).

As we are integrating three large bodies of scholarship, we limit our references to recent, key, or synthetic works. Below, we foreground the historical roots of contemporary horizontal stratification by race, examine research on how racialized sorting between schools shapes student experiences and outcomes, and describe consequential stratification within schools. We conclude with recent efforts to challenge horizontal stratification, responses to those efforts, and avenues for future research.

ORIGINS OF A HETEROGENEOUS AND HIERARCHICAL POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM

In the United States, the racial projects of dominant groups, and the resistance of marginalized groups, have been channeled, in part, through higher education, as it sits in the intersection of multiple institutional domains. These dynamics have produced the prestige hierarchies, uneven resource flows, and unequal infrastructure that define the contemporary postsecondary system.

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Early Expansion, Exploitation, and Resistance, 1600–1930

The first US colleges, some of which now comprise the Ivy League, were founded in the seventeenth-century colonies as private religious institutions for Protestant white men. These colleges reproduced Eurocentric notions of civility among settlers and strove to evangelize Indigenous peoples (Stein 2018, Wilder 2014). Money-raising schemes that promised to bring higher education to Indigenous populations, while almost entirely funding the education of white men, were central to the establishment of many elite institutions, including Dartmouth College, Harvard University, and the College of William & Mary (Wright 1988). Postsecondary institutions founded before the US Civil War exploited slave labor to build infrastructure and perform domestic labor, courted slave owners as trustees and patrons, and funded lasting endowments from slave trades and plantation economies (Dancy et al. 2018, Mustaffa 2017, Wilder 2014). They also developed scientific knowledge to justify racial hierarchies that helped to define postsecondary education moving forward (Patton 2016, Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008).

The prohibition of chattel slavery after the Civil War required the cultivation of a new labor regime and labor force, especially in agriculture. The Morrill Act of 1862 supported the establishment of agricultural and technical "land-grant" colleges, expanding postsecondary education to the children of white laborers (Fanschel 2023, Stein 2020). As Rocha Beardall (2022) explains, the Morrill Act physically and juridically erased Indigenous populations from large swaths of the United States. The land and mineral rights obtained by seizure or treaties never ratified by the federal government continue to produce revenue (now in the form of endowments) for 52 postsecondary institutions, including the public universities of California, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and private universities such as Cornell University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Lee & Ahtone 2020).

Colleges prioritizing the education of Black people, later federally designated as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), were initially founded as private colleges by Black communities working with paternalistic white philanthropists and missionaries (Allen & Jewell 2002, Mustaffa 2017). Public HBCUs were founded largely through a second Morrill Act in 1890, which stipulated that states had to admit Black students to existing institutions or create separate colleges in order to access federal funds supporting white land-grant colleges (Harper et al. 2009). HBCUs have incubated Black activists, professionals, artists, and thinkers whose influence endures (Holloway 2002, Hudgins 1994, Wooten 2015).

Historical scholarship on the college students who might be identified as Latine today is exceptionally sparse. MacDonald & García (2003) describe two key moments, both highlighting US colonial expansion. They narrate the "southwestern class exceptionalism" of 1848 through the 1920s: After the US invasion of Mexico, class-privileged Mexican students began attending college in the historically white institutions (HWIs) of newly founded western US states. The boundary separating Mexicans and whites during this period was inconsistently institutionalized and based in part on whether Mexicans were treated as white or nonwhite (Fox & Guglielmo 2012). Selective educational opportunities, however, waned as Mexicans faced increasingly discriminatory measures (MacDonald & García 2003).

MacDonald & García (2003) also describe the "imperial conquests" of the United States in Puerto Rico. After Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States in 1898, small numbers of Puerto Ricans were sent to the US mainland to attend college every year—some to HBCUs and others to HWIs, with an eye toward assimilation and staffing the colonial government. In 1903, the University of Puerto Rico, which would later create mobility opportunities for future generations of Puerto Ricans, was founded. Through 1920, however, subjects of study at the university were limited to agricultural and mechanical arts, resembling the racialized and classed curricular constraints at HBCUs and land-grant colleges.

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Mid-Twentieth-Century Investments and Inclusion, 1930–1970

State investments in postsecondary education and infrastructure would grow dramatically through the mid-twentieth century. The federal government partnered with universities for social provision, nationalist state building, and military domination. The result was dramatic growth in postsecondary institutions and enrollments and markedly improved (but not equal) opportunities for marginalized students, especially Black students. Veterans, then women, those with low incomes, and finally racially marginalized students enrolled at higher rates (Allen & Jewell 2002, Horowitz 1987, Skrentny 2002).

During the 1930s, President Roosevelt administered many New Deal social programs through regional colleges and universities (Loss 2012). The first Black female administrator in the federal government, Mary McLeod Bethune, was director of the National Youth Administration (NYA) Division of Negro Affairs and founder of what is now HBCU Bethune-Cookman University (Smith 2022). She interfaced with HBCU leaders to provide federal educational aid to Black college students at the same rate as for white students in HWIs. New Deal policies, however, were not uniformly positive for Black families. In particular, Federal Housing Administration redlining made it difficult for residents of Black neighborhoods to insure mortgages, leading to state-sponsored segregation and lasting racial wealth disparities (Rothstein 2017).

Universities were at the center of military projects during two world wars. The federal government spent billions on military research, especially for the development of the atomic bomb and radar, and on the education of World War II veterans through the GI Bill (i.e., the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) (Loss 2017). The GI Bill increased the enrollment of students at US colleges and provided revenue for postsecondary infrastructure (Loss 2012, Stevens & Gebre-Medhin 2016). Thousands of returning Black and Mexican American veterans benefited from these opportunities (Loss 2012, MacDonald & García 2003). Yet, while the bill itself was race neutral, government officials routinely rejected and discouraged the college pursuits of veterans who were racially coded as Black and steered them toward HBCUs or vocational programs (Humes 2006).

Moving forward, the tilt toward a more inclusive postsecondary system hinged on the convergence between US nationalist projects to advance global economic and military standing (Stevens & Gebre-Medhin 2016) and activism to fight racial discrimination and improve economic mobility for racially marginalized Americans (Moreno 2009, Schrecker 2021). Mounting civil rights pressures were effective in the context of federal interests in a broad talent pool to win the space and arms race of the Cold War. Greater inclusion also helped the United States to evade global scrutiny about the treatment of racially marginalized Americans amid imperatives to advance US imperialism (Dudziak 2000, Loss 2012).

The expansion of the postsecondary system was accelerated by the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which was passed amid panic over the Soviet launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957, channeling funding to students studying areas deemed essential for national defense (Loss 2012). The 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) extended infrastructure to all areas of study. It formed the basis for today's student-based funding system of loans, need-based financial aid, and work-study programs (Stevens & Gebre-Medhin 2016). These investments produced the "golden age" of the American university (Loss 2012), exemplified by what University of California President Clark Kerr described as the "multiversity."

The opening up of US higher education fundamentally changed access for racially marginalized students. Until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision—a result of nearly 100 years of desegregation legal challenges by Black, Chinese, Mexican, and Indigenous plaintiffs (Martinez-Cola 2022)—Black students attended primarily HBCUs (Allen & Jewell 2002). Civil rights activists, often led by HBCU alumni (Favors 2019, Mustaffa 2017), successfully pressured

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President Lyndon Johnson to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited racial discrimination and endorsed desegregation. Post-*Brown* orders and federal funding incentives for scientific innovation pushed toward desegregation, although change was slowest in the US South (Williamson-Lott 2018). By 1975, three-quarters of Black students attended HWIs (Allen & Jewell 2002).

During the movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, Black students on HWI campuses organized for greater representation, critical and liberatory curricula, increases in and redistributions of campus resources, and the expansion of affirmative action (Mustaffa 2017, Stulberg & Chen 2014). Chicana/o student activists in California pushed universities to extend the state's 1960 Master Plan of Higher Education mandate to serve all the state's residents. The Boricua (Puerto Rican) movement accelerated change on the US east coast, especially in New York, where Puerto Rican and Black activists successfully fought for open admissions at the City University of New York's City College (MacDonald & García 2003). The infrastructure and collective knowledge built through these efforts had a lasting mark on the academy through a spike in Black and Latine enrollment and the formation of Black Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Latino/a Studies, Latin American Studies, and Ethnic Studies majors (Loss 2012, Moreno 2009, Rojas 2010).

The accessibility and inclusivity of this period should not be overstated, however. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, socially constructed notions of "merit" that appeared race neutral ensured that racial boundaries did not dissolve in the face of rapid expansion (Karabel 2005). This particular construction of student worth systematically disadvantaged racially marginalized families that often had less income and wealth to produce the academic and extracurricular distinctions that prestigious universities opted to value (Warikoo 2022). For example, standardized tests in admissions were adopted at The University of Texas at Austin immediately after *Brown v. Board of Education* in the attempt to, as administrative records document, "exclude as many Negro undergraduates as possible" (Price 2019). Racially marginalized student populations were largely supported through the development of community and regional colleges and an increasingly tiered postsecondary system. Tiering ensured that "as overall access increased, so did institutional stratification" (Stein 2018, p. 86). At the same time, cohorts of racially marginalized students who gained entry to HWIs often encountered hostile campuses (Mustaffa 2017).

Re-Entrenchment, Further Stratification, and Predation, 1970 to Present

When the US postsecondary system was at its zenith, having grown in size, power, and access, re-entrenchment began (Loss 2012). Starting in the late 1970s, efforts to undo the expansion of access to state flagships and elite HWIs took shape. Below we identify six interconnected mechanisms that reinscribe racial inequality in postsecondary education and structure contemporary horizontal stratification: postsecondary defunding, affirmative action bans, racial concentration in numeric Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), racialized organizational stratification, within-campus differentiation, and predatory for-profit growth.

Defunding. The heavily subsidized public higher education of the mid-twentieth century switched course as a national tax revolt came to a head in the late 1970s (Martin 2008, Omi & Winant 2015). Nationally, beneficiaries of progressive postwar educational and housing policies voted to restrict property and other taxes to obstruct redistribution across racial lines. As the baby boomer generation aged, states saw funding priorities shift away from universities and toward health care, eldercare, and prisons (Gumport & Pusser 1999).

As a result of these cuts, over the course of several decades public universities became more reliant on private streams of funding, including tuition, especially nonresident tuition, donations, endowment returns, and corporate partnerships (Clotfelter 2017, Hamilton & Nielsen 2021).

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Funding cuts further intensified during the Great Recession of 2008. Over the subsequent decade, state funding for two- and four-year colleges remained far below pre–Great Recession levels, and public universities responded by raising tuition (Mitchell et al. 2019). Pell Grants and other forms of aid did not keep pace with the new and higher costs of college (Goldrick-Rab 2016).

The public withdrew funding for higher education just as demands for access from racially marginalized communities grew (Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). The Latine population in the United States surged in the 1980s and 1990s (MacDonald & García 2003). Consequently, between 1996 and 2012, the enrollment of Latine students (of all racial categories) ages 18–24 increased by 240%; Black student enrollment also increased by 72%, while white student growth was minimal (at 12%), given earlier waves of growth (Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). New waves of marginalized students entered a fiscally hollowed out postsecondary system. For these students, college was no longer affordable, and the risks of student debt accumulation were high (Goldrick-Rab 2016, Houle & Addo 2022).

Affirmative action bans. Affirmative action bans developed alongside the defunding of public education. The 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case shifted affirmative action policies from racial redress to a diversity rationale. The Supreme Court ruled that racial quotas were unconstitutional but allowed consideration of race as one factor in admissions. In the following decades, states with a decline in the percentage of white students at flagship universities adopted racial affirmative action bans that undermined competition by racially marginalized students (Baker 2019).

These shifts, coupled with the rolling back of equal opportunity protections, ushered in color-evasive propositions and discourse (Allen & Jewell 2002). Subsequent Supreme Court rulings (i.e., *Grutter v. Bollinger*, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*) upheld a compelling interest in diversity, opening the door for the institutionalization of diversity discourse and practices on most campuses (Thomas 2020). The term "diversity" would come to encompass an array of initiatives, from those celebrating individual differences to direct challenges of systemic racism on campus (Berrey 2015, Johnson 2020).

Development of numeric MSIs. As a multiracial Latine demographic (including Mexican Americans, but also those with Caribbean, Central American, and South American heritage) began to enter US higher education in higher numbers, merit-based processes sorted them into a subset of lower-ranked four-year and two-year schools with students from similar backgrounds (Garcia 2019, Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). Starting in 1995, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) could access earmarked federal funds. Many universities mechanically converted to an HSI when the student body reached 25% Latine. HSIs and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander–Serving Institutions (or AANAPISIs) are two examples of MSIs where designation is primarily numeric.

Numeric MSIs differ from HBCUs or Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in that federal designation does not explicitly require commitment to serving the specified student population. Although numeric MSIs are positioned to play a critical role in supporting marginalized populations (Garcia 2019), there is great variability in the degree to which institutional resources and federal funding go toward this function (Reyes 2018, Vargas & Villa-Palomino 2019). The development of numeric MSIs reflects ongoing segregation processes; even as the postsecondary system diversifies, student populations are heavily concentrated by race, and marginalized students are rarely well represented in well-resourced institutions (Reyes 2018).

Racialized university stratification. The postsecondary system has become increasingly stratified over the last 50 years (Clotfelter 2017, Davies & Zarifa 2012). Stratification occurs along the lines of both prestige and resources, in ways that are mutually reinforcing and deeply racialized.

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Powerful consumer-ranking systems have played a critical role in linking racialized hierarchies of student worthiness to organizational prestige, which then determines university access to resources.

The *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, created in 1983, have historically rewarded universities that enroll wealthy white students by prioritizing retention and graduation rates, which are lower for marginalized students (Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). The rankings heavily weigh academic reputation based on surveys of mostly HWI leaders, who view HBCUs as inferior (Miller et al. 2021), and center selectivity—reifying measures of merit and rewarding schools who turn away students. Consequently, organizations serving larger shares of white students are often coded as prestigious, selective, or high quality, and those serving Black and Latine students are coded as lower status and less selective, regardless of the quality of the education provided (Garcia 2019, Wooten 2015).

Prestige hierarchies underlie organizational resource disparities (Clotfelter 2017). Organizations serving greater shares of marginalized students are the most fiscally disadvantaged. Shrinking state appropriations are often channeled toward flagships, not broad-access or community colleges, which educate greater shares of low-income, Black, and Latine students (Kahlenberg 2015, Mitchell et al. 2019). MSIs often have less access to federal and state support or private forms of revenue (Garcia 2019, Hamilton & Darity 2017, Hamilton & Nielsen 2021, Wooten 2015), and they are also constrained by racial inequities in employment and in the wealth accumulation of families who might donate to their alma mater.

The result is severe racial inequities in student access to postsecondary resources. The Institute for College Access & Success (2021), for example, found that predominantly Latine institutions (with 40% or more of the student body identifying as Latine) received approximately $4,300 less in annual per-student revenue than other universities in the same state. Similarly, in 2023, after examining 30 years of federal funding data, the Biden administration revealed a $12 billion funding disparity between land-grant HBCUs and their non-HBCU peers in 16 states—a disparity that violates an equal funding statute in the second Morrill Act.

Within-campus differentiation. The turn of the twenty-first century was also characterized by efforts to hoard opportunities and produce social closure within college campuses, particularly those with demographically diverse populations. Honors colleges at public universities, for instance, were almost nonexistent in 1960 but became widespread by 1990 (Singell & Tang 2012). Internal academic tracking provided select students, often from advantaged households, with smaller classes and intensive instruction. The practice termed "major restriction," in which specific programs of undergraduate study are gated with prerequisites and grade point average (GPA) minimums, follows a similar logic and has proliferated in recent years (Bleemer & Mehta 2021).

On the social side, membership in white Greek-letter membership resurged in the 1980s, reversing a near fatal decline during the Civil Rights era (Horowitz 1987). White fraternities and sororities worked to separate predominantly white and affluent students from increasingly heterogeneous campus populations (Torbenson & Parks 2009). Internal stratification created racial disparities in college experiences, even on the same college campus.

For-profit growth. An influx of marginalized students into an organizationally heterogeneous postsecondary system, fueled by student-based funding and lax federal regulations (Mettler 2014), created new opportunities for exploitation. For-profit entities went from playing a small part in US higher education to playing a substantial role at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The share of total postsecondary enrollment in for-profit colleges such as DeVry University, Kaplan University, and the University of Phoenix grew from 5% to 13% between 2001 and 2009

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(Deming et al. 2012). The sector enrolled 2.1 million students in 2014, a 225% increase since 1998 (Cottom 2017). In parallel, public colleges partnered with for-profit online program managers (OPMs), such as 2U, Academic Partnerships, AllCampus, Ed2Go, and Trilogy, to offer online versions of postsecondary education. By 2019, nearly two million students were enrolled exclusively online at public universities (Hamilton et al. 2023).

For-profit colleges and OPMs have thrived on the financial aid dollars of low-income, Black, female, and older students (Deming et al. 2012, Mettler 2014, Smith et al. 2024). These entities are frequently backed by private equity or venture capital, ownership structures that create pressures to maximize returns to wealthy investors (Eaton 2022, Hamilton et al. 2023). Even for public universities partnering with OPMs, online education was primarily a financial calculation (Ortagus & Yang 2018). The expansion of for-profit education, nestled alongside a variety of private and public nonprofit institutions, created the potential for new dimensions of postsecondary stratification.

SORTING ACROSS THE POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM

Below we transition from historical research on organizational differentiation to research on student-level horizontal stratification. We consider what it means for students to be sorted into universities with divergent resources and unequal track records for student success, highlighting inequities along racial lines.

Contrary to economic conceptions organized around student "choice" in postsecondary education "markets," sociological approaches emphasize constraint. Although students and their families have some agency when seeking postsecondary opportunities, geographic locations, financial means, knowledge of higher education, familial obligations, and the active role of postsecondary institutions in targeting students render choice conceptualizations limited at best (Callender & Dougherty 2018, Rodriguez et al. 2021). Not all experiences into which students are sorted are positive; some are even exploitative. This perspective challenges the notion of access to higher education as universally positive. Instead, as Bastedo & Gumport (2003) suggest, it is useful to ask, access to what, on what terms, and with what consequences?

Racialized Sorting in Higher Education

Figure 1 uses Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) enrollment data from Fall 2019, the last year before the COVID-19 pandemic, to plot the percent of Black, Latine, Asian, and white students in specific parts of the postsecondary system, relative to that group's overall representation in higher education.

In relation to their representation in the postsecondary system at large, Black students are overrepresented at for-profit institutions, schools offering primarily online education, and private two-year schools, which often focus on medical, cosmetology, or religious education. Black students are underrepresented in four-year private and four-year public schools. By contrast, white and Asian students are underrepresented in often predatory for-profit and online sectors, as well as in two-year sectors.

Latine students are underrepresented in online and private two-year sectors and also share underrepresentation with Black students in private and public four-year schools. For Latine students, the largest marker of racial segregation is extreme concentration in HSIs (not shown in **Figure 1**; see Garcia 2019), as well as in the highest rates of underrepresentation among schools with an admission rate of 25% or less.

A complex set of factors, including US immigration policies favoring highly educated Asian professionals, high family resources, fears of labor market discrimination, and racial stereotypes,

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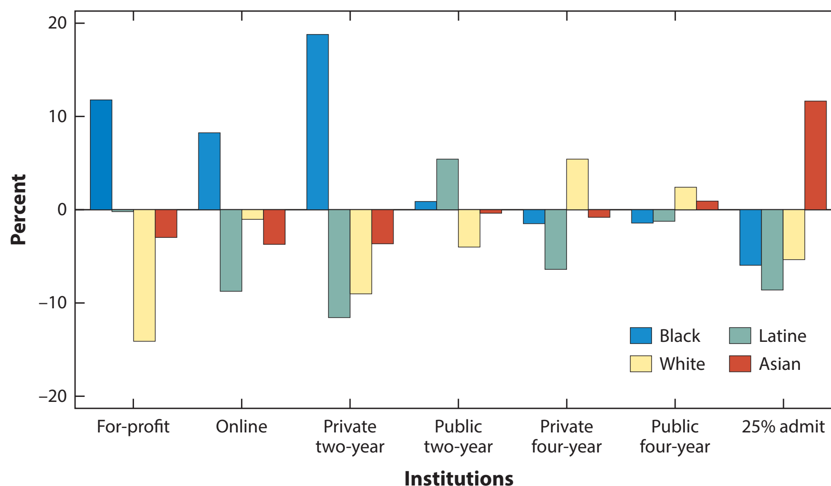

Figure 1

Racial representation by postsecondary sector relative to overall representation. Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Fall 2019.

lead to an overrepresentation of Asian students in the most competitive schools (Lee & Zhou 2015). Asian students are, however, also slightly overrepresented at HSIs (not shown in **Figure 1**), reflecting racialized residential patterns, concentrations of Southeast Asian students from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and the designation of some HSIs as AANAPISIs (Kao & Thompson 2003).

Predatory Inclusion in For-Profit and Online Education

Black students' concentration in for-profit and online education reflects "predatory inclusion" Seamster & Charron-Chénier (2017, pp. 199–200) argue that inclusion can be predatory when marginalized individuals are granted services, goods, or opportunities that they have been historically denied but "under conditions that jeopardize the benefits of access." This form of exploitation typically occurs when an alternative provider, such as a for-profit college or OPM, claims to be expanding access, even while the business model indicates financial profit as the primary motivation for provision.

Cottom (2017) argues that for-profit colleges exploit the social mobility aspirations of marginalized groups. Dawson (2024) further conceptualizes Black women's structural vulnerabilities to for-profits as a form of "alternativelessness." The economic and social precarity faced by many Black women ensures that they have many responsibilities and few avenues to meet their needs—a position manipulated by for-profit recruitment strategies. OPMs providing online education similarly target racially marginalized groups (Hamilton et al. 2023).

The recruitment of marginalized students into sectors rife with predatory activity is consequential. Students at for-profit schools have lower degree completion rates (Gelbgiser 2018), take on greater student loans (Houle & Addo 2022), and have worse employment prospects relative to similar students at nonprofit universities (Deming et al. 2016). For-profit schools play a substantial role in the student loan crisis, which most heavily impacts Black women (Dawson 2024, Houle & Addo 2022). Similarly, online attendance is associated with lower retention and graduation rates and less desirable student repayment outcomes, in both for-profit and nonprofit sectors (Smith et al. 2024).

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Racial Segregation in Nonprofit Education

The nonprofit, in-person sector includes two-year and four-year schools, both public and private. Racial segregation in nonprofit higher education has persisted over the last century, despite massive increases in marginalized student enrollment (Baker et al. 2018, Carnevale & Strohl 2013). Several factors drive race and class segregation.

Most first-year college students attend schools located within 50 miles of their homes (Hillman & Weichman 2016). This geography of attendance reproduces racial and class disparities in neighborhoods, cities, and regions (López Turley 2009). Black and Latine students, especially from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, attend vastly different K–12 schools than do their racially privileged and class-privileged peers (Reardon & Owens 2014). Inequities in access to K–12 educational resources, structurally misaligned high school graduation requirements, information and encouragement gaps (in which students in different locations receive different amounts and kinds of college information), complex admissions processes, constrained finances, and familial obligations dissuade marginalized students from submitting applications to schools far from home (Dynarski et al. 2021, Lor 2023, Ovink & Kalogrides 2015).

Racial segregation is also driven by institutional recruitment processes at competitive (e.g., top 100) HWIs. Flagship universities target affluent, white, out-of-state communities for recruitment visits (Salazar et al. 2021). Selective schools often privilege students who can pay full tuition, legacy enrollment, geographic diversity, and athletes playing resource-intensive, predominantly white sports over class and racial diversity, providing the rich and children of donors with enormous advantages (Chetty et al. 2023, Poon et al. 2023).

Notably, segregation is not driven by Black student enrollment in HBCUs. 2019 IPEDS data indicate that less than 10% of all college-going Black students attended HBCUs. HBCUs provide shelter for Black students in the context of a hostile and exclusionary postsecondary system (Wooten 2015). Similarly, the concentration of Latine students in HSIs is a function of racialized and classed sorting, as well as of non-Hispanic white students' aversion to schools explicitly marked as nonwhite (Garcia 2019, Hamilton & Nielsen 2021).

The 2023 Supreme Court ruling on *Students for Fair Admission, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* ended the legality of race-based affirmative action after decades of state-level bans and will likely reduce Black and Latine students' presence within this small but powerful part of the postsecondary system. However, admissions will continue to be racialized. It is impossible to strip race from the essays and biographies of applicants, who will also be pressured to share stories of racial trauma in order to capture admission officers' attention (Waller-Bey 2023).

Consequences of Unequal Resources in Nonprofit Education

The racial segregation of students into different universities creates the potential for racial stratification of resources across organizations. As documented earlier, MSIs receive substantially less funding than do HWIs. The "qualitative differentiation" in educational resources and experiences that universities provide their students plays a critical role in generating racial and class disparities in student outcomes (Arum et al. 2007).

Better-resourced universities offer more robust services, which in turn enhance rates of retention and timely completion: Instructional expenditures, student-services spending, and academic support programs boost graduation and persistence rates (Chen 2012, Gansemer-Topf & Schuh 2006, Webber & Ehrenberg 2010). The best-resourced universities also tend to be research intensive and monopolize grant dollars, providing undergraduate research experiences crucial to compete for slots in graduate school (Owen-Smith 2018).

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Funding disparities between four-year MSIs and HWIs lead to meaningful differences in access to financial, academic, and health support for marginalized student populations; for example, underfunded schools may have few financial advisors, extremely high student-to-academic-advisor ratios, limited and less legible major options, and long waits for access to mental health counseling (Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). Students from marginalized backgrounds who begin at poorly resourced two-year institutions may experience a particularly arduous path to a four-year degree (Rosenbaum et al. 2006). These students may unknowingly take noncredit "remedial" classes (Goldrick-Rab 2010) and "swirl" between two-year and four-year schools (de los Santos & Sutton 2012).

Studies of the consequences of affirmative action bans at the state level suggest that such bans lead racially underrepresented students to enroll in lower-ranked colleges, where they are less likely to obtain degrees and persist in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) courses and subsequently earn lower wages in their early adulthood (Bleemer 2021). This research provides evidence against the mismatch hypothesis. The mismatch hypothesis suggests that marginalized students are harmed by policies that allow them to attend more competitive colleges for which they are assumed to be unprepared. Instead, Bleemer's work indicates that lower-scoring applicants from marginalized groups are better off at more selective universities (see also Bowen & Bok 2019).

Resource stratification also contributes to racial gaps in student loan debt. Houle & Addo (2022) demonstrate that approximately one-third of the Black–white student debt disparity can be explained by differences in the types and resourcing of universities attended by Black students. Mustaffa & Dawson (2021) conclude that Black people often experience higher education as a state-sanctioned debt trap: Policies that would help Black families seeking knowledge acquisition and economic security through schooling (e.g., tripling of Pell Grants, making college truly cost-free, providing a living wage and benefits) are often politically foreclosed.

Segregation and Campus Climate

The costs of racial segregation are not just economic. Racialized sorting ensures that Black and Latine students are underrepresented in HWIs, contributing to a hostile campus climate for Black and Latine students who do enroll at HWIs (Reyes 2017). Hostile campus climates subject students to routine racial microaggressions. As Smith et al. (2016, p. 1192) indicate, racial microaggressions "range from racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatments, stigmatization, hypersurveillance, low expectations, and personal threats or attacks on one's well-being" and are indicative of macrolevel "large-scale, systems-related stressors."

Qualitative research documents anti-Black microaggressions at HWIs (Dancy et al. 2018, Smith et al. 2016, Strayhorn 2013), as well as at HSIs, where Afro-Latine students who identify as both Latine and Black may have experiences more similar to those of their Black peers (Brooms 2023, Pirtle et al. 2024). Latine students at HWIs also report racial microaggressions (Reyes 2017, Von Robertson et al. 2016). At HWIs, racially marginalized women often face gendered racial microaggressions—a dual form of oppression that can manifest as invisibility (e.g., being overlooked or ignored in favor of white men) or hypervisibility (e.g., having one's body subject to a high level of scrutiny and public commentary) (Newton 2023). By contrast, racially marginalized students' reports of discrimination and bias are lowest, and sense of belonging highest, at the most diverse universities (Hurtado & Alvarado 2015).

Universities often respond to student reports of a hostile campus climate in superficial ways. Administrators may focus on celebrating individual identities rather than addressing systematic inequalities, fail to engage with marginalized communities on and off campus, and focus more on

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the appearance of "diversity" rather than devoting resources toward marginalized groups (Berrey 2015, Byrd 2021, Hamilton & Nielsen 2021, Johnson 2020, Thomas 2020). Students, faculty, and staff—typically from racially marginalized groups—often engage in substantive and uncompensated efforts to address systemic racism and racial marginalization on campus, what Lerma et al. (2020) refer to as "racialized equity labor." Racialized equity labor often takes a physical, mental, and academic toll and can be subject to university pushback or appropriation (Gorski 2019, Lerma et al. 2020).

SORTING WITHIN FOUR-YEAR POSTSECONDARY SCHOOLS

Attending the same university does not ensure similar academic experiences or career outcomes. Students are often sorted into different schools, programs, and social organizations within a single university. Racism contributes to divergent and inequitable experiences for students within the same organization (Ray 2019, Reyes 2017).

We focus on four-year, in-person universities in our review of internal horizontal stratification. Intra-school stratification is likely most intense where the undergraduate population is more diverse. For example, at many private schools, exclusive admissions assure privileged students and families that admittees are "acceptable" for interaction (Chambliss & Takacs 2014). By contrast, wealthy white students (and their families) attending large state schools may actively seek academic and social segregation by sorting into different pathways. College pathways encompass academic and social infrastructures through a particular school (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). The efforts of advantaged families to access better-resourced pathways with greater perceived returns are a form of opportunity hoarding that can have racist and classed consequences (Hamilton et al. 2018, Riegle-Crumb et al. 2019).

Academic Pathways: Majors and Career Trajectories

Black and Latine students, especially women, are concentrated in pragmatic social and behavioral science majors associated with public service, which tend to be lower paying. Both groups have high representation in human services, community organizing, and social work and lower representation in engineering, mathematics, and computer science, where Asian and white men are concentrated. Racially marginalized students are also underrepresented in high cultural capital liberal arts fields that benefit from familial support to compensate for lower salaries (Carnevale et al. 2015, 2016; Dickson 2010).

These differences are not just, or even primarily, a result of student choice. Kizilcec et al. (2023, p. 344) describe academic pathways as a function of both "available curricular programs (i.e., curricular structure) and considered and selected academic opportunities (i.e., student agency)." As the authors emphasize, not all universities offer all major possibilities, and not all curricular programs offered at a given university are available to all students.

Within a university, major restrictions produce racialized exclusion. The introduction of GPA major requirements led to an average 20% drop in the share of racially marginalized students in the University of California system (Bleemer & Mehta 2021). Honors programs, which typically employ similar screening mechanisms, also reduce racial diversity and generate clusters of white and East Asian students (Cognard-Black & Spisak 2019), mimicking racialized tracking at the K–12 level. Another process blocking marginalized students from entering some science and engineering fields is a science and math curriculum that starts at an advanced level, with no on-ramps (Chambliss & Takacs 2014). Students who cannot access advanced training or accrue AP (advanced placement) credits in their high schools, and those required to take remedial college courses, are more likely to be excluded (Harrison et al. 2022, Hirschl & Smith 2023).

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Introductory courses play the role of gatekeeper in many majors. However, the impact of receiving a low grade in an introductory weed-out course is racialized: Low scores in an initial STEM course have a stronger negative effect on racially marginalized students' likelihood of obtaining a STEM degree (Hatfield et al. 2022). This finding is consistent with research on "stereotype threat" (Steele & Aronson 1995); the racialization of smartness as synonymous with whiteness, especially for white boys and men (Leonardo & Broderick 2011, Musto 2019), can lead students to respond differently to barriers in their courses. Racist expectations projected by academic institutions anticipate failure for Black (and often Latine) students (Chavous et al. 2004).

Marginalized students, especially Black women, may encounter hypervisibility and tokenization in classrooms that decrease their sense of belonging and dissuade them from continuing, particularly in STEM fields (Palmer et al. 2011, Rainey et al. 2018). Microaggressions by faculty and peers, lack of curricular representation, and anti-Blackness in instruction can push students out (Grier-Reed et al. 2021, Johnson 2018, Newton 2023). Low numbers of Black faculty, especially in STEM fields (Li & Koedel 2017), also contribute to racialized major sorting, as Black students are more likely to persist in STEM majors if they have a course taught by a Black instructor (Price 2010). The importance of classroom representation for reducing stratification by major is highlighted by the fact that HBCUs and HSIs produce an outsized share of Black and Latine STEM graduates (Núñez et al. 2015, Perna et al. 2009).

Variation in knowledge about and comfort with college also stratifies student academic experiences. As Jack (2019) illustrates, middle-class students, who are more likely to be white, often proactively engage instructors and college officials. They share this distinction with the privileged poor, low-income students who attended elite boarding, day, and preparatory schools. By contrast, doubly disadvantaged low-income students tied to their resource-deprived neighborhood schools are less at ease in academia.

Academic sorting within schools matters for student access to postsecondary resources. Differences in racial composition map onto resource stratification, such that Black and Latine students are often underrepresented, and white and Asian students overrepresented, in majors that receive greater institutional resources and have more access to private resource streams (Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). In addition, only some majors connect students with employers that offer "career conveyor belt internships" directly linking students to well-paying and secure jobs after graduation (Moss-Pech 2021). Rivera (2015) and Binder et al. (2016) document partnerships between select programs in elite universities and finance, consulting, law, and high-tech firms. On-campus corporate recruitment, open only to majors in certain fields, leads to placements in the uppermost rungs of the occupational structure.

Wide-ranging income returns make academic pathways consequential for economic stability. Black and Latine graduates face labor market discrimination regardless of major (and in complex ways, depending on intersecting identities) (Conwell & Quadlin 2022, Paul et al. 2022). However, sorting by major plays a role in racial earning disparities, as racially marginalized students are systematically excluded from the highest-paying fields and concentrated in lower-paying fields (McClough & Benedict 2017).

Social Segregation and Exclusion

The academic and social elements of college are packaged together, such that students who see each other outside of the classroom often select the same majors (De Giorgi et al. 2010). Social experiences also matter beyond academics. They shape interactional dynamics, friendships, romance, and even future economic stability.

The most segregated organizations on campus are Greek-letter fraternities and sororities. Membership in Greek life is heavily delineated by race, class, and gender. Indeed, segregation

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is the point of the historically white Greek-letter system, which developed to maintain boundaries as student bodies became increasingly heterogeneous (Hechinger 2017, Horowitz 1987). By contrast, historically Black Greek-letter organizations were founded at the turn of the twentieth century in response to Jim Crow segregation and the legacy of slavery in order to promote social cohesion, academic excellence, and racial pride (Brown et al. 2012).

White Greek organizations produce social closure for the dominant racial group, concentrating resources among white students. White Greek-letter participation reduces the likelihood of interracial friendships, as students associate primarily with other white Greek members (Stearns et al. 2009). Exclusionary networks ensure that knowledge of how college works, information on which classes are easy or hard, exam banks holding example tests and papers, and materials needed for academic study are concentrated among wealthy, white students (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). At HWIs (but not MSIs), white Greek life is therefore associated with class-based graduation gaps (Hamilton & Cheng 2018).

Historically white fraternities and sororities (but not historically Black Greek-letter organizations) often own large, stately houses in the center of campus (Ray & Rosow 2010). White Greek life is often the site of explicitly racist acts, such as the use of blackface, nooses, the confederate flag, and racially and culturally offensive party themes that mark spaces as unsafe for racially marginalized students (Garcia et al. 2011, Patton 2008). White fraternity houses also protect white men from policing and give them enormous power over underaged drinking (Ispa-Landa & Thomas 2023). With the concept of "sexual geography," Hirsch & Khan (2020) highlight the ways that intersectional inequalities in control of social space on campus create sexual risk for some students, especially racially marginalized women and LGBTQ+ students.

Dormitory housing at HWIs also tends to be racially segregated (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). Expensive condominiums and apartments may become wealthy white student party enclaves. By contrast, pockets of culturally affirming housing limit racially marginalized students' exposure to racism in their daily living arrangements, as white living spaces are particularly toxic for racially marginalized students (Foste & Irwin 2023).

Racialized and gendered experiences with on- and off-campus police jeopardize the well-being and safety of racially marginalized students, especially Black men (Grier-Reed et al. 2021, Smith et al. 2016). As Jenkins et al. (2021) highlight, the need for Black men to carry a campus ID affirming their right to belong on campus traces back to freedom papers that freed slaves carried while traversing white spaces. Racially marginalized students at HWIs may also be policed when trying to defend their right to a campus free of racist hate speech (Stokes & Davis 2022).

College extracurricular activities outside of Greek life can also fail to provide positive spaces for interracial interaction and well-resourced opportunities. Even in student organizations where there is diverse membership, racist and sexist stereotypes reinforce marginalization in group dynamics (Silver 2020). In addition, not all clubs or groups receive the same institutional resources. Those focused on racial identities or racial justice may be given less funding, physical space, and administrative support (Hamilton & Nielsen 2021).

Being a student employee can overshadow other elements of the student experience. Students who serve food, clean up after, and monitor other students are not fully included in the social experiences and networks of privileged peers (Jack 2019). The uncompensated work of students engaged in building racially supportive infrastructure similarly detracts from other social and academic experiences that might benefit students (Lerma et al. 2020).

Social network development during college is crucial for academic success (Chambliss & Takacs 2014). As McCabe (2016) explains, racially marginalized students at HWIs often rely on small, tight-knit networks of friends with similar commitments. This strategy can boost academic achievement, but the struggles of some members can take a toll on the whole network. By contrast,

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white students at HWIs often have compartmentalized networks, which include several distinct friendship groups, through which students meet different needs. This more diffuse network configuration, which is easier for students with race and class privilege to achieve at an HWI, yields the greatest overall benefits to students, shielding them from the risk inherent in reliance on a few close ties.

Johnson's (2018) research on the peer network navigation strategies of Black and Latine engineering students also suggests that precollege socialization matters. Racially marginalized students who come from predominantly Black, Latine, or mixed high schools may experience less ease engaging with the whiteness characteristic of academic networks at HWIs. It is also notable that Black men are more likely to succeed academically at an HBCU than at an HWI, in part because they can more easily tap into the rich and expansive social and cultural capital of their peers (Palmer & Gasman 2008).

As Chambliss & Takacs (2014) describe, social ties developed in college are a rich source of information about types of jobs and job prospects. College friends can be connectors to vast, and often informal, alumni networks. The more economic and career advantages are concentrated in the network, the more likely it is to yield desirable information and contacts. Racial and class segregation and exclusion in college, particularly at HWIs, can result in uneven access to valuable employment resources.

Disparate social experiences lead to disparate marital outcomes, which in turn implicate economic sorting and stratification. Marriage is still one of the primary ways that women, especially white women, see economic returns from college (DiPrete & Buchmann 2013). Students from advantaged backgrounds receive the largest boost in their odds of marrying from attending college, and they marry college-educated partners with increased income potential (Musick et al. 2012). Black college women find that same-race men are far less likely to attend four-year colleges and have less earning potential due to structural racism (Clarke 2011, Lichter et al. 2020). As most people marry within race, Black women are thus less likely to experience the marital benefits of college (Bowen & Bok 2019).

ONGOING POLITICAL STRUGGLES OVER HORIZONTAL STRATIFICATION

The ways white supremacy and capital accumulation structure postsecondary horizontal stratification have not gone unnoticed or unchallenged. Consequently, racialized hierarchies may be less stable than in the past. For example, in the upcoming 2024 rankings, *U.S. News & World Report* has promised to remove metrics such as alumni giving and to factor in university success in graduating students from different backgrounds. Researchers have also provided new tools to assess colleges on the basis of their potential to facilitate social mobility rather than to reproduce social advantage (e.g., Chetty et al. 2017).

Public universities with marginalized student populations have challenged formulas that funnel greater resources to campuses with more privileged student bodies. In 2021, University of California, Riverside (UC Riverside) department chairs started a public campaign highlighting the chronic underfunding of University of California campuses serving racially disadvantaged students. UC Riverside representatives argued that this underfunding is reminiscent of redlining—a series of discriminatory practices that deny public services or support to residents of certain areas, based on race. The One University Campaign in the University of Michigan system has raised similar issues.

Since 2010, for-profit colleges have faced greater scrutiny, governmental investigations, and accusations of unethical marketing practices and financial aid fraud, likely fueling declines

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in enrollment (Cellini et al. 2020). In 2023, and after a brief COVID-19 uptick in for-profit enrollment, the US Department of Education proposed the strongest yet gainful employment rule, designed to terminate access to federal financial aid for programs that saddle graduates with high debt and lead to earnings no different than for workers with a high school education. Also in 2023, the Department of Education began to reevaluate the guidance that allows OPMs running online educational programs to create revenue-sharing agreements with universities.

Proposed policy changes around student debt relief are also now politically viable. Legal battles around student loan debt cancellation brought to the fore evidence that separate and unequal experiences in higher education play a role in generating a substantial Black–white wealth gap (Houle & Addo 2022). Although President Joe Biden's student debt cancellation plan was rejected by the Supreme Court in 2023, public opinion has shifted toward belief in increased governmental support for higher education (Quadlin & Powell 2022).

Yet the re-entrenchment of public spending on higher education, which has been detrimental to increasing access for Black and Latine students, continues to undermine the funding model of the US public postsecondary system. Organizational reliance on private sources of revenue amplifies already high levels of racialized resource inequality among colleges and universities (Clotfelter 2017, Hamilton & Nielsen 2021). Public defunding also incentivizes problematic efforts to grow revenue in partnership with for-profit actors at the expense of marginalized students and educational outcomes (Hamilton et al. 2023, Ortagus & Yang 2018).

Revitalized in part by the Black Lives Matter movement, Black students and other racially marginalized students have revived efforts to challenge structural racism on campus (Cole & Heinecke 2020, Williams et al. 2021). However, activism is exhausting, particularly when institutions refuse substantial change and the political climate promotes false equivalences (Johnson 2020, Lerma et al. 2020). For instance, a conservative law firm recently filed a federal Civil Rights complaint against the UC Berkeley Department of African American Studies for hosting Black Graduation, claiming that it promotes racial segregation (Song 2023). Such complaints misrepresent Black-affirming programs as exclusionary; legal attacks instead aim to undermine antiracist responses to racial oppression.

New rounds of state-level legislation frame attention to diversity in education as reverse discrimination for groups that benefit from a racist status quo. As of June 2023, there were more than 30 bills across US states aimed at cutting diversity, equity, and inclusion funding and practices at state-funded universities. As of this writing, six of these bills had been signed into law by state governors. These attacks target various forms of racial justice work. Alongside recent Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action and student loan forgiveness, they signal an assault on efforts to address racial inequities in higher education that now operate in large part through horizontal stratification.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Continued research should investigate the ongoing contestation around racialized postsecondary opportunity, experience, and outcomes. Rather than being raceless or race neutral, this research should center power and resistance and recognize the enduring legacy of systems of education built to preserve white supremacy and capital accumulation.

Our review has prioritized Black and Latine experiences of higher education. We have not been able to fully address the ongoing significance of settler colonialism in higher education or attend to the experiences of Indigenous students. Given distinct flows of immigrants from countries with unique relationships to the United States, the category of Asian includes some of the most and least educationally and economically advantaged groups (Lee & Zhou 2015)—intricacies that we

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did not have space to discuss. Similarly, we have not been able to discuss Afro-Latine students in detail or to consider variation in how African American students and children of African immigrants experience US higher education. While we have elaborated the ways that race and class are mutually implicated in the stratification of postsecondary resources, status, and other social and economic goods, we have drawn less attention to the simultaneous significance of gender, (hetero)sexuality, nationality, citizenship status, and able-bodiedness (Collins 2004).

Although we have discussed research on a variety of US postsecondary institutional types, we have often privileged four-year, in-person education at relatively selective institutions due to comparably scarce research on the experiences of students at other schools. The majority of college students who are racially marginalized, low-income, and first generation do not attend selective four-year schools. More research is needed on student experiences across the system.

A full accounting of horizontal stratification in US higher education requires a wide variety of methodologies. Quantitative stratification scholarship, especially work utilizing emerging critical quantitative methods, is central to this project. As this review suggests, however, qualitative research is equally essential. For example, a richer racial history of the shift to individual loans, rather than funding given directly to institutions, is needed, along with comparative scholarship that places the post-1980 US postsecondary system in a global context.

As this article reveals, research on the postsecondary horizontal stratification of students and resources by race has rapidly expanded in recent years. New research is often multilevel, drawing on macrolevel and organizational-level contexts to understand student experiences, and it centers race and power. Much of the scholarship that we have reviewed is also generated by racially marginalized scholars, often early-career scholars, whom we see as positioned at the vanguard of the field. Over the next decade, there is enormous possibility for rethinking how we understand and address racialized postsecondary horizontal stratification.

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