Struggling Against Culture and Power

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As a researcher who studies how K-12 schooling mirrors and contributes to social stratification and racial inequality, I can't help but see our outreach efforts as naive. As spectacular as our work may be, student- and school-centered activities alone are unlikely to produce UC student bodies that reflect California's diversity. There, I've said it. In print. But please don't stop reading. I want to explain why I'm gloomy, and also why I remain committed, even hopeful.

Our ambitious outreach programs confront powerful cultural forces bent on preserving the status quo. While we try to increase UC admissions among low-income students in educationally disadvantaged schools, these forces will work to make sure this doesn't happen. One such force is the tremendous resolve among educated and well-off families that their own children attend UC. We all know that with no planned increases in the proportion of high school graduates that will be admitted, the competition for UC admissions is a zero-sum game. As we increase the number of outreach program students who are eligible by 1997 standards, advantaged families and schools will inevitably raise the bar by making sure that their children are even more competitive. A second powerful force for the status quo is even more pernicious—that is, our very definition of merit. In this post-affirmative action period, we must decide who is worthy of admission to the university according to criteria that advantage students lucky enough to be born into privileged families and/or into cultures with long traditions that match what we call merit. Let me explain a bit more about how these forces will likely undermine outreach.

Elites will outpace outreach in the race for educational advantage

Not unlike our own work in outreach, families who are resolved to ensure their children's competitiveness for the university provide direct support to their children and use their resources and influence to increase the capacity of their children's schools. So, we shouldn't be surprised that as our student-centered programs seek to bolster students’ academic prowess with tutoring and bridge programs beyond the school day and year, advantaged families increasingly will provide similar help at their own expense. As we extend our academic support programs to middle schoolers, advantaged families will begin even earlier. As we make popular SAT prep programs more widely available, advantaged families will seek more intense and longer-lasting preparation. As we increase our hands-on assistance with preparing college applications, advantaged parents will increasingly turn to private college counseling services. While some might see this competition as helping all students be smarter, few university officials see such intense pressure as improving young people's preparation for actual college-level work.

At the same time, to the extent that we help our school partners pursue effective college-going cultures and curricula, we can expect that wealthier and more powerful parents will push their schools to better position their children at the top of the new educational hierarchy. While not a firm equation, hard work plus privilege will usually trump hard work alone. Relatively advantaged schools will face far fewer obstacles as they upgrade their programs.

As outreach brings a college-preparatory program to a broader, more diverse range of students, the backlash may well bring new, more intense forms of differentiation within the college preparatory track both in outreach and more advantaged schools. We've already seen how Advanced Placement (AP) classes with their strict entrance requirements and test-driven curricula have become a required part of the upper college-preparatory track, especially in high schools in affluent neighborhoods. Since the mid-1980s, the AP program has grown dramatically. In California in 1988, 39,040 public high school students took 56,668 exams. By 1998, these numbers had grown to 87,683 students taking 145,000 exams. As a consequence, participation in AP (or other weighted honors courses) has become essential for students seeking admission at UC's most competitive campuses.

However, the growth in AP opportunities for well-off white and Asian students has outdistanced those for Latinos and African Americans. AP courses are generally limited to those meeting strict entrance requirements, rather than being available to all students. Schools serving poor and minority students typically offer few or no AP classes (especially in critical gate-keeping subjects like science and mathematics), whereas schools in more affluent communities can offer 15, 20 or more. Some schools in low-income neighborhoods claim that they simply don’t have students qualified to take these courses. In mixed schools, restrictive admissions usually bring vastly disproportionate enrollments by race and social class, with few low-income students or African Americans and Latinos participating. Often AP classes are confined to selective magnets or choice programs, essentially separate schools on large urban high school campuses. In overcrowded, multi-track, year-round high schools, AP courses are often restricted to one of the school’s many tracks, permitting only those students enrolled in the right track to participate. Most telling, in what a Los Angeles Times story called an "academic arms race," we see that as "educationally disadvantaged" schools increase their AP offerings, more advantaged schools add even more. These schools can more easily increase the breadth and rigor of their academic offerings partly because they are more likely to have teachers prepared to teach advanced courses.

My UCLA colleague Amy Stuart Wells and I documented the efficacy of powerful and well-off parents to ensure their children's competitive advantage as we studied six racially mixed high schools' attempts to change their tracking practices and provide more students access to high-quality college preparation. In several of these schools, parents who considered AP courses to be critical overrode educators who worried that the AP curriculum actually limited students' access to engaging subject matter and to inquiry-based learning and prevented them from engaging in rigorous intellectual work with a diverse group of classmates. All of the reforming schools maintained separate honors, advanced or AP classes. These elite classes helped several of the schools satisfy the demands of an important parental power base that was not persuaded by arguments that many students, not just a few, could benefit from academic rigor and good teaching. The educators we studied told us that anxious parents expressed their concerns in terms of

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race for social rewards is fair. Those who reach the finish line first must be faster and thus more meritorious than those who come in last. Those not winning educational advantages and elite status must lose because of their own deficiencies (inability to run fast). Such a system constituted an apparently fair and "natural" sorting process for determining who should become society’s elites.

Our society’s definition of merit, like all human constructs, emerged in a particular cultural and political context. As Lemann weaves this story, he reminds us of how the history of meritocratic selection so closely intertwines with now-discredited links between intelligence, race and social class. Not only did the early mental testers argue that intelligence is genetic, most also believed in racial hierarchies that placed Nordics as the intellectual superiors of those of Alpine and Mediterranean “races,” and far above Negroes and Indians. The Beliefs in whites’ genetic superiority has largely fallen from favor, and allocating opportunity explicitly based on claims of racial and social class superiority has become taboo. (Don’t forget, however, that these arguments appeared as recently as 1994 in Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve*.)

Setting aside these blatant assertions of race and class superiority, today’s meaning of intelligence remains very close to that of the early mental testers. Theirs was one constructed by elite groups who, because of their political, economic and social power, were able to frame their definitions of intelligence as “common sense.” Today, the ways of knowing of white, wealthy and thus most powerful Americans have not only remain more valued, they continue to be acted upon by schools and society as if they are a function of innate ability. The logic remains so pervasive and has such explanatory value that we still find tolerable, if unfortunate, the large gaps in college admissions between upper-class, white Americans and lower income applicants and applicants of color. Cloaked in the aura of science, testing’s persistent stratifying effects continue to make deep, unquestioned sense to many in society. The cultural capital of white and wealthy families, masquerades as meritorious “natural” ability, rather than as a function of social privilege. Nothing in outreach promises to change this.

Amy Wells and I saw evidence of this powerful cultural force at work in the schools we studied. Innate intelligence and merit were largely defined as the skills and knowledge that educationally and economically privileged parents passed on to their children. Many such parents expressed a strong sense of entitlement, arguing that their children deserved “more” — i.e., more resources, teacher time, challenging curriculum and better instructional strategies — because they are more intelligent and talented than other students. In this way, racial politics consistently played a central, if not explicit, role in the resistance of powerful elite parents to reform. While debates and much acrimony ostensibly focused on curriculum and instructional strategies, it was abundantly clear that the real disjunction was over whose culture and style of life contributes to knowledge, and whose way of knowing is equated with intelligence, and whose accomplishments constitute merit. In a sense, outreach confronts a similar split between the surface, though not unimportant issues of students’ opportunities to learn a particular curriculum and the deep cultural issues that conflate race, merit, intelligence and university admissions.

Importantly, it is not only parents who resist efforts creating structures and school cultures that redefine who is smart and that make “honors” possible for every student. Such changes also challenge powerful professional norms. Developments in cognitive and developmental psychology during the past two decades have led educators and researchers to argue, from a growing base of theory and empirical evidence, that all children could be far “smarter” than conventional definitions and measures of intelligence seem to allow. But, despite educators’ efforts to use this research to redefine intelligence as multidimensional, developmental, and manifest equally across racial groups, traditional conceptions maintain their firm hold in schools and communities. Most reformers, and I suspect many in our own outreach group, have yet to grapple adequately with largely unquestioned, social norms that prevent them and others from having high expectations for all students or from pressing students toward high levels of academic competence. Our outreach efforts are jeopardized, not only by those who may actively resist out of concern for their children’s social
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can be simply intolerable. I watch them channeling their outrage at unequal schooling into respectful, hardworking relationships with those trapped by the status quo.

We must continually remind those who favor outreach and reform in the abstract that we really do mean to shake up structures and attitudes. Are we fools not to run from the powerful cultural forces that work against us? I think not. But if we are indeed fools, we are fools in the uplifting traditions that have driven social reform and change throughout history—the American abolitionist movement of the 19th century, and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in the 20th, being just two inspiring examples.

In the spirit of those traditions, I believe there are two strategies that we outreach workers must pursue simultaneously. The first is to fight the good fight and seek to find the margin of hope within the existing inequitable structures. For though a narrow approach to outreach is unlikely to achieve equal educational opportunity, it can improve somewhat the conditions of learning for some students. We believe that enhancing opportunities, no matter how marginal, the improvement, makes a tangible difference in the lives of young people and their communities. It is our professional and ethical responsibility to act here because we can make a difference, albeit small. Yet morality and pragmatism dictate that we don’t stop here.

Our second imperative is to critique existing structures so that they may be changed. Those of us in outreach must speak out about our intention to resist the political, economic and cultural forces that maintain a highly stratified system of educational opportunity. We must continually remind those who favor outreach and reform in the abstract that we really do mean to shake up structures and attitudes, especially those over which our university colleagues have particular responsibility and power to change. We as university educators helped create the admissions procedures and schooling structures on which the broader political, economic and cultural forces of stratification depend. We also might alter them. Outreach might actually lead our university and the K-12 system to recognize their complicity in creating this disaster of restricted opportunities and unfair competition. Outreach might also be the precursor to profound cultural and political shifts in how society and universities judge the merit of diverse American young people. Sociological analyses make clear how remote such outcomes are. Moral imperatives require that we try. 

STRUGGLE AND HOPE

If the prospects for outreach are dim, why do I remain hopeful and so committed to it? With my colleagues, I work in outreach because centuries-old attitudes and neglect have created a human disaster in schools. Like relief workers with some technical skills and resources, we rush in to serve where we can. It isn’t much, but triage is better than turning our backs. Every day, I watch my clever and determined young and not-so-young UC colleagues helping students overcome the enormous academic and informational hurdles they face in a society that stacks the educational deck against them. I watch them work to improve the quality of curriculum, teaching and advising in schools with deteriorated facilities, unstable political infrastructures, shortages of books and materials, less than a full complement of qualified teachers and too many damaged spirits. Few are blind to the power of stratified and unequal schooling; many have decided that