

THE INTERSECTION

Where race and higher ed meet

BY NAOMI HARRIS | DECEMBER 8, 2021



U. of Texas at San Antonio

Reckoning with race is not easy. Unraveling hundreds of years is messy. With *The Intersection*, I plan to tackle it head on. Here you can expect honest conversations, personal stories, and thorough analysis to figure out what is flawed and what is changing. [\(Here's where you can subscribe.\)](#)

Who I Am.

Hello, **my name is Naomi Harris** and I am part of the national reporting team with Open Campus. I focus on the intersection of race and higher education.

Before Open Campus, I reported on education for other news outlets. I've always focused on education because I believe access is the true cornerstone to a quality life. In this issue, I hope to present the news in a digestible and accessible way.

I care deeply about this beat. The topic of race and identity within higher education has become so popular to bring up, but I plan to interrogate what is really happening on the ground. We've heard so many promises of change and true action. I plan on holding people accountable because empty words directly impact the lives of so many.

Those were some of the questions I asked in my previous job as a higher education reporter with [PublicSource](#), an Open Campus local news partner in Pittsburgh. The summer of 2020 was rich with promises of change as the country reflected on the dangerous ramifications of racism and brutality. But what happened to those promises?

A year after George Floyd's murder, I interviewed Black students and faculty to see what had changed—and what hadn't. What was it like for Black student leaders to still attend classes and then spend the rest of their time pushing the city's universities to deliver on those promises? You can read what I learned and check out the whole package [here](#).

I'd like to hear your own thoughts. Who should I talk with? What voices don't we hear enough from? What questions would you like answered? Send me an email at naomi@opencampusmedia.org.

Build Back Better and Equity

For months, Congress has battled over a sweeping social spending bill. In the thick of the \$2-trillion Build Back Better proposal—which has passed the House and now faces an uncertain future in the Senate—are a number of provisions that could have a significant effect on equity in higher education.

Over all, the bill would provide \$10 billion dollars to minority-serving institutions. The money could help those colleges improve research, infrastructure, and student services.

Experts, administrators, and students I've talked with in recent weeks are enthusiastic about how that money could help these institutions, which offer a place of learning for students who often have been marginalized in our country. They also talked about the big challenges these institutions face and what changes could happen with the recent national attention.

Here's some of what I've heard:

We are still dealing with the ramifications of decades-long disinvestment.

In her [research](#), **Denise Smith, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation**, details how the historical exclusion of federal aid to Black colleges and universities have led to lingering funding disparities and financial struggles.

A possible starting solution? Bolstering federal aid for research and development at HBCUs could also help position the universities to move up in Carnegie classification, she says, which in turn would make them eligible for more philanthropic research funds. Right now, Smith says, **there are no HBCUs with the top, R1, research university status**, although there are eleven that have the second-highest, R2, status.

Another key? Closing the gap in endowment size between HBCUs and predominantly white colleges, Smith says. **The endowments of public HBCUs are 3.5 times smaller than those of other public colleges**, she says. And the gap is larger among privates—private HBCUs have a seventh of the average endowment of a private non-HBCU.

"The key to better supporting students of color is focusing on HBCUs," Smith says, "which have long been places that promote upper mobility within the black community and have changed the lives of millions of Black Americans."

Helping many of these colleges means helping entire communities.

The role of community looms especially large for tribal colleges and universities, says **Cheryl Crazy Bull, president and CEO of the American Indian College Fund**.

Tribal colleges typically provide a wide range of outreach programs, including culturally relevant early childhood education or, in some cases, housing options for students with children. In many ways, they act like community centers, where people of all ages gather.

"Native students, in general, say that they're going to college because they want to be able to take care of their families, they want to give back," Crazy Bull says.

They tend to want to help revitalize their communities, which have been devastated by their historical—and also current—relationship with the government.

Tribal colleges also play a key role in helping Native students earn degrees. **For Native students who travel three or more hours away for college, Crazy Bull says, the likelihood of staying in college and graduating decreases.**

More federal dollars could help tribal colleges with some urgent needs, such as updated infrastructure and technologies, Crazy Bull says, that then could help the institutions better serve their students and recruit and retain faculty—another key challenge.

How do we make sure minority-enrolling institutions are truly minority-serving institutions?

Having a rapidly growing Hispanic and Latino population means that the nation also has a growing population of Hispanic-serving institutions—at least technically.

To qualify as a Hispanic-serving institution, a university must have a student body that is at least 25 percent Hispanic, according to the federal definition. But that leads some people to ask: **How well, really, do all of those institutions meet the needs of their Hispanic students?**

A designation based upon demographics and geographies should only be the start, says **Deborah Santiago, chief executive officer of Excelencia in Education**.

Universities that become an HSI should be required to invest specifically in the students with the greatest need, Santiago says. Beyond enrollment, the colleges should create strategies for Hispanic students that focus on retention, faculty representation, and financial aid.

Across the country, there remain big gaps in educational outcomes among Hispanic populations. The graduation rate for Hispanic students, for example, is 12 percentage points lower than for white non-Hispanic students at four-year colleges, according to Excelencia in Education.

Kimberly Espy, provost of the University of Texas at San Antonio—one of the nation's 569 Hispanic-serving institutions—says access to higher education still varies despite the promise of a student. And that's what she works to change.

"Talent is clearly equally distributed across our population," she says, "and yet opportunities aren't."

One specific, and key, way she says her university is helping students persist through college is through an emergency aid fund. Sudden emergencies that can create what might seem like small financial burdens to others can be make or break for some students' college dreams.

"Sometimes students get in a car accident and it's a \$300 repair, and they don't have \$300 sitting in their bank account," Espy says. "That means that then they stop going to school in order to pay for their car."

+ Read more from *The Chronicle* about the growth of Hispanic-serving institutions, and questions about how well they help students.

++ Read this story by [Jason Gonzales](#) about two Hispanic brothers' dreams of college—and why only one got there.

Muddled Paths to College



At San Joaquin Delta College, I talked with current and former students about college.

For a week, I traveled across California, talking with people about their relationships to college. I spent my first days in Stockton, where fewer than one in five people has a bachelor's degree. It's a diverse community: more than 40 percent of the population is Hispanic, nearly 15 percent is Asian, and close to 7 percent is Black.

On an individual level, I heard about how higher education comes riddled with a long list of those things, confusing course requirements, and strict class schedules. And how even going after a degree in the first place.

For some of the students I talked to, college was an expectation but the path to graduation was muddled. The financial aid process was puzzling and solely placed on their shoulders. Their immigrant parents or parents without college degrees were unable to help. And for many, pursuing community college first was seen as a failure, a decision to not try and make it out of Stockton.

One person I met was Jennifer, a Hispanic 19-year-old student who was born and raised in Stockton. She saw the idea of college as coming with a heavy cost and very limited options.

"I do not want to feel like I'm spending my life away in one spot," she told me. "I realized that a lot of the careers were always office jobs, a lot of things where you have to go to college for this or to be a doctor, whatever it is only college could give you."

Her senior year of high school she navigated the college application process—from the financial forms to studying for SATs—by herself, a reality of many other students of color and students with immigrant parents. For years, Jennifer watched her mother remain in one job because of a language barrier, and her mental health took a toll.

Though her parents were wary of Jennifer not going to college, she said becoming a representative of a student-driven career and technical education program instead impressed her family. SkillsUSA was her chance to break out of the college mold, she said.

The message always had been: Go to college, go to college, go to college, she says. And she wishes she had known sooner about other paths.

"It was such a breath of fresh air for me especially because I had ADHD. I'm great at listening. I'm good at interacting with teachers, learning the subjects, but when it comes down to taking tests, taking notes, I was horrible at being able to put those words together."

In the next couple of months, we'll publish stories like Jennifer's and be talking with more Californians. They are helping us understand more about what gets in the way of educational aspirations and what, specifically, could make a difference.

Thanks for Reading

It's great to have you here. Please share my newsletter with colleagues, family, and friends who might be interested in subscribing, too. [Here's where they can sign up.](#)

Look forward to some of my next stories focused on the impact of career and technical education as well as the role of race in merit aid for colleges in the South.

I'd like to hear from you. Share your stories, tips or opinions by sending me an email. Reach out to me at naomi@opencampusmedia.org.

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