

# Land of Opportunity . . . for Whom?

For generations, the United States has promised universal access to opportunity. It is part of our history and the engine of our economic and civic prosperity. But opportunity in America continues to be disproportionately distributed.

The effects of this imbalance are evident. We have persistent gaps in education, income, and wealth, and these gaps are widening as our nation becomes more diverse. As a result, the middle class is shrinking, and the fastest-growing segments of our population are the least likely to have the opportunities they need to succeed.

Expanding access to quality education is key to making opportunity real for all. It is key to closing America's deepening divides, strengthening the middle class, and ensuring our nation's vitality. Yet at all levels of U.S. education, there are entrenched practices that reinforce inequities—and that lead to vastly different outcomes for low-income students and for students of color. We are failing the very students who must become our future leaders.

Higher education can no longer leave this issue unattended. It is our responsibility to the students we serve as well as to our democracy and the nation's economy. It is time for higher education to step up and lead for equity.

## Economic Vitality Depends on Expanding Educational Opportunity

The United States cannot thrive unless all Americans are fully enfranchised—prepared to contribute to our economy

and engage effectively in our democracy. And that means restoring the American middle class even as the profile of the U.S. workforce is changing.

Today, well-paying, low-skill jobs are disappearing, and in turn, America's economic polarization is increasing. The American middle class, once among the most affluent in the world, has both shrunk and become poorer relative to the middle classes in other developed nations.<sup>1</sup>

The decline of the middle class coincides with decreased economic mobility because educational and economic opportunity are so closely intertwined. In 1970, for example, 65 percent of Americans lived in a middle-class neighborhood, and today that figure has dropped to 42 percent. This change “limits access to quality schools and jobs for struggling people of all races.”<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, America's demographic diversity is growing—and the fastest-growing populations are the ones who typically have the least educational and economic opportunity.

The only path to economic success—for both individuals and the nation—is to be more intentional and equitable in our efforts to provide quality learning opportunities. We must expand access to high-quality postsecondary education, particularly to the kind of broad, integrative, and applied liberal learning needed for success in today’s workplace. Higher education cannot close the educational gaps by itself. But it can take a leadership role, on campus and in our communities, in addressing the issue honestly, constructively, and aggressively.

## Democratic Ideals Depend on Expanding Educational Opportunity

Deep, persistent, and unacceptable inequities in education begin in pre-K and continue through higher education. The results of these systemic barriers to educational success are evident, for both low-income students and students

of color, in uneven higher education enrollment rates, dissimilar college experiences, and lower levels of degree attainment.

Higher education has a special role to play in addressing the historically entrenched inequities that affect low-income students and students of color. These inequities directly contradict our democratic ideals, yet persist at institutions across the country.

Challenging this status quo requires being conscious of the ways higher education currently mirrors, rather than remedies, inequity. It involves providing leadership that guides colleges through frank, sometimes uncomfortable, conversations. It involves partnerships with our communities as well as actions on campuses. And it demands a deep commitment to making changes that ensure that *all* students have access to quality learning opportunities.

**“Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental.”**

— W.E.B. Du Bois