

Where Does Systemic Racism Live on College Campuses?

An opinion editorial by President Tim Hall, published in The Journal News, July 24, 2020

George Floyd's murder has ignited a nation-wide focus on racism. Not just the racism of bigoted individuals, bad apples consumed with racial hatred, but the racism embedded in systems and processes and rules. Systemic racism involves structures that produce disadvantageous results for people of color, without adequate justification.

Do such structures exist in colleges and universities? Consider the impact of race on graduation from college. Black students are significantly less likely to graduate from college in the U.S. within six years than white students, as are Hispanic students.

For some in higher education, these differing results are so enduring as to seem like demographic axioms. But what if gaps in student success along lines of race are not inevitable?

At Mercy College in New York, we have begun to

defeat demography on behalf of our students. A dozen years ago, the likelihood of graduating from Mercy was overwhelmingly linked to race and the link established itself like an iron chain by the end of student's first year of college. The likelihood that either black or Hispanic students would return to Mercy after their first year was significantly less than that of white students, and this beginning led inexorably to substantial differences in graduation rates along lines of race.

Today, though, first year retention rates are roughly equal, with students of color actually retained slight better than white students. Graduation rates differences have shrunk to no more than 10%, with every likelihood of becoming equal within the next several years.

These results are the consequence of Mercy's adoption of specific practices that have the effect of closing retention and graduation rate gaps along lines of race: intrusive advising, guided pathways to success, co-requisite remediation, and others. These results mean



Mercy leaders chosen to headline panel at prestigious

SXSW EDU

that racial gaps in success at colleges and universities are not inevitable. They are consequences of specific structures within an institution, and changes to those structures can change the racially disparate results that accompany them. Mercy hasn't finished closing the racial success gap, but it has made a strong start.

The logic of system racism has always been simple. Systems argue that they do not intend results that disadvantage racial minorities. They assume that differences along racial lines are inevitable, unrelated to their systemic practices. But the logic of systemic racism collapses once we discover differing ways of structuring our systems that accomplish the same end results, but without the racial differences.

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The failure to explore changes to higher education structures that would close racial gaps in success is shameful. These gaps are where systemic racism mostly lives in higher education, gaps born of low expectations for students of color and inadequate support for their success. And the shame of it is not absolved by hiring a Diversity Officer or tinkering with curriculum in ways that are more racially inclusive. Nor is it absolved by simply recruiting more students of color for admission. So long as students of color are not included in success, the success of graduating most all, other gestures of inclusion are a mainly a diversion from the real scandal, which is that institutions of higher learning permit systemic racial disadvantage solely because they are unwilling to make the structural changes necessary to close the success gap.

2020 may have been the year of the coronavirus (COVID-19), but it was also the year that Mercy College received a very prestigious honor: President Tim Hall and Vice President, Bronx William Latimer were chosen to headline a panel at SXSW EDU.

The SXSW EDU conference is the nation's premier gathering of education leaders from around the globe dedicated to the advancement of teaching and learning. Showcasing hundreds of speakers on topics ranging from emerging technology to diversity to leadership, SXSW EDU, which was cancelled due to the coronavirus outbreak, was also scheduled to feature films, case studies, workshops and live performances. Hall and Latimer, the former president of the College of New Rochelle (CNR), were to discuss "A Pathway for Students when a College Closes," a conversation focused on Mercy's groundbreaking agreement with the former CNR.

Their talk was all too timely, as colleges are closing their doors in unprecedented numbers across the country, with students who are left to fend for themselves and find their educational paths disrupted. Typically, failing institutions will try to partner with another local college that is in good standing to offer students a "Teach-Out," which allows them to continue their education. However, there is no guarantee that tuition and scholarships will be the same or that students can graduate on their current timeline. By contrast, when CNR announced its impending closure, Mercy College created a seamless pathway for CNR students to continue their education uninterrupted, accommodating almost every degree program, honoring all credits, ensuring costs would be the same or less, retaining half of CNR's faculty and leasing space on several of CNR's campuses so that students could continue attending class where they had started and graduate on their current timeline.

"The agreement between Mercy College and the former CNR was unprecedented," said Hall. "It is unique and a model for other institutions in the future. We were very proud that the SXSW EDU organizers deemed our experience relevant enough to share with a national audience."

To ensure former CNR students were able to continue their studies, Mercy received permission from state regulators to add several programs to its curriculum which were offered at the former CNR campuses. Most notable of these were two new nursing programs, which brought the total number of nursing degrees attainable at the College to six, which was also an added benefit for Mercy students. The agreement also included a meaningful commitment from Mercy to honor the history and legacy of CNR. Hall and Latimer had planned to take SXSW EDU participants step-by-step through their weeks of time sensitive negotiations, culminating in a successful agreement that was announced in March of 2019.

Unfortunately, the pandemic intervened, and in the interests of health and safety, the entire SXSW conference was cancelled within days of the panel. The College plans to work with organizers to participate in the future.

In the meantime, Hall is delighted to share best practices with institutions interested in learning about the agreement. "I am contacted by leaders at other institutions frequently wanting to learn of what we did and how we did it," said Hall.



President Tim Hall



Vice President, Bronx William Latimer