

The State of Black Education: The Politics of Educating African American Students at Colleges and Universities

Earnest N. Bracey, Ph.D.¹

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ABSTRACT

In terms of higher education for African American students, the “school-to-prison pipeline” or Prison Industrial Complex must be totally dismantled in order to focus entirely on academic performance at colleges and universities and HBCUs. Additionally, mentors should be identified to tutor and guide and help black youngsters overcome their fear of learning and going to school, so that our whole society can benefit and improve academically. Finally, in this respect, we the people can move our nation forward by graduating people of color at higher institutions of learning, while providing them with a more productive life, and social advancement.

Introduction

From the outset, it should be pointed out that African American citizens should be given the opportunity to attend college or obtain a higher education—that is, in order to have a well-rounded life; and “we the people” should be absolutely supportive and insistent on this educational endeavor. According to Professor Edwin G. West, “it has shown that, at least in the recent past, an American with full college education [will] earned much more than other Americans.”¹ Therefore, “research suggests that the best way to address American economic inequality, poverty and crime”² is attaining a higher education.

Thus, the goal should be to ensure that current and future generations of African Americans receive the benefits of a college education, especially in terms of earning power over a lifetime. Unfortunately, however, for some young African Americans—receiving a higher education has become a horror story or nightmare, particularly for African American males. Indeed, “the pipeline to America’s prisons (from schools) is one littered with black and Latino youth left behind.”³ This is to say that more black males are in American prisons than are attending college. According to former U.S. Senator Jim Webb, statistics “show that a black male without a high school diploma now has a 60 percent chance of going to jail during his young adulthood, and that a black male with a high school diploma has a 30 percent chance”⁴ of being incarcerated. These disheartening and dismal statistics are nothing to be proud of. To say the least, this grim, educational reality must change, if we are to become a “more perfect union.” If nothing else, the black community with their faith-filled spirit, must get directly involved in the process of educating African American students, especially our vulnerable black, at-risk male students.

Of course, black children “need adults in their lives who care about education and provide support every step of the way.”⁵ In other words, “we-the-people” should all invest in educating African American students at every educational level, particularly at the university or college level, instead of being harassed into some kind of silence about such an educational matter. Indeed, having some kind of *luck* shouldn’t be a factor in determining whether African American students should go to college or not, because education, as mentioned, is the key. Educating young, black people, essentially, has always been the key to a better life and prosperity in the United States. Unfortunately, some self-serving, conservative politicians have scrupulously denied that educating black people, or the general public, is even necessary. After all, some in the dominant group and other existing power structures firmly believe that many African Americans are still (intellectually) inferior—that is, in regards to the *efficacy* of receiving a higher education in the 21st century. For example, Professor David J. Leonard writes:

¹ Professor of Political Science, College of Southern Nevada, Social Sciences Department, Email: Earnest.Bracey@csn.edu

Selling the idea of college and its associated world of parties, fancy recreation centers, and posh dormitories, higher education, like Nike [shoes], is too often investing in the bells and whistles—the swag factor—rather than education itself or the production of knowledge, learning, and teaching.⁶

Professor of economics Walter Williams takes this notion a step further by stating, “Many black students are alien and hostile to the education process. [And] they have parents with little interest in their education.”⁷ But Williams should know that poor black kids “are more likely to have a single teenage mom who is stressed out, who was herself raised in an authoritarian style that she mimics, and who, as a result, doesn’t chatter much with the child.”⁸ Furthermore, it should be understood that poor black students “and those with learning disabilities also tend to be disproportionately disciplined. [Consequently], many end up at low-performing alternative schools, where their educational success” and the possibility of attending college is diminished.⁹

The Prison-Industrial Complex

When it is all said and done, we should rightly dismantle the Prison-Industrial Complex, or the prison system pipeline that often views black males negatively, worthy of imprisonment and humiliation. Michelle Alexander who is the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* has stated that “the school-to-prison pipeline is another *metaphor*—a good one for explaining how [black] children are funneled directly from school into prison. Instead of schools being a pipeline to opportunity, [some] schools are feeding our prisons.”¹⁰ To be sure, many young African American males muddle around recklessly (in life), while not really understanding the benefits or very concept of going to college. Alexander put it this way:

When young black men reach a certain age—whether or not there is incarceration in their families—they themselves are the target of police stops, interrogations, frisks, often for no reason other than their race. And, of course, this level of harassment sends a message to them, often at an early age: No matter who you are or what you do, you’re going to find yourself behind bars one way or the other. This reinforces the sense that prison is part of their destiny, rather than a choice one makes.¹¹

Indeed, “for those who become ensnared in our criminal justice, prison often become an alternate lifestyle.”¹² Clearly, our criminal justice system has failed us in many profound ways, as it concerns African American males. And, as former Senator Jim Webb tells us: “Our failure to address this problem has caused the nation’s prisons to burst their seams with massive overcrowding, even as our neighborhoods have become more dangerous. [Hence], we are wasting billions of dollars and diminishing millions of lives.”¹³ Unfortunately, our criminal justice system has also become part of the problem when it comes to undermining higher educational opportunities for African Americans. Of course, African American students and all citizens should be educated. Therefore, higher education should become fashionable for *everyone*, or all ethnic groups in the United States. But African Americans must assess their own feelings about obtaining a college degree. Not surprisingly, some young black people might argue about the merits of pursuing a higher education, especially if they are convinced that members of the dominant group will continue to marginalize them at every turn, and try to keep them (black people) in their so-called “place.”

Moreover, African American students must be realistic about their educational future. It is also crucial that such minority students have a clear understanding or reason for pursuing a college education in the first place. They should also know that:

Dropouts earn far less than college graduates, rely much more on food stamps and other social services, are more likely to end up in prison and often have children destined to repeat these mistakes in an endless, hopeless cycle.¹⁴

Additionally, African American students must be willing to finishing their respective degrees, no matter what, or whatever it takes. Education reporter for *The Times*, Richard Perez-Pena points out that “too often [black] students receive little guidance about how to navigate the system and how to choose a combination of classes that will move them closer to graduation.”¹⁵ This is where *advisors* or *mentors* should come in to play, and do their part. The whole idea for educators or mentors is to inject themselves in the lives of African American students, by being accountable for improving their achievement.¹⁶ General Colin Powell

and Alma Powell tell us that “Students who meet regularly with mentors are 52% less likely to skip a day of school and 37% less likely to skip class than their peers who don’t have such guidance.”¹⁷

Therefore, in order for African American students to be highly educated, and to escape the prison-industrial complex, or incarceration, they must have guidance from role models and mentors, as well as being up to the inevitable task—to compete and excel in higher education. Moreover, these African American students need additional help in the face of many social and administrative obstacles placed in front of them, created by the dominant group, or economic impediments that might block their educational path.

The Necessity of Black Education

Meanwhile, historically Black colleges and universities (HCBUs) should also be in the political mix in that such important institutions must demand the same educational goals for all African American students, as other American universities. However, it should be noted that black colleges and universities have the added challenge of being attacked and singled out for consolidation or elimination, with “racial undertones.” For example, in 2010, when Republican and former governor of Mississippi, Haley Barbour was in office, he proposed to combine the black universities of Mississippi Valley State and Alcorn State University into Jackson State University, while not touching the historically white institutions in the state.¹⁸ Fortunately, Barbour’s proposal didn’t go anywhere, or see the light of day, because “in 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed that the State [of Mississippi] still had vestiges of segregation in its university system and sent the case to the lower courts to arrange a settlement,”¹⁹ called the Ayers deal.

But it is possible that such a plan to eliminate the two smaller black universities will be addressed again. Or who’s to say that a possible merger of Mississippi’s three public historically black universities won’t be proposed or introduced again in the future, on “questions over state’s funding of those colleges.”²⁰ Equally significant, it should be pointed out that HCBUs “are facing an uphill battle for funding that have left many fighting to survive.”²¹ But HCBUs are vital to African American students and black communities, generally, throughout the United States. Moreover, financial support for such students at HCBUs is still needed in America today, because of educational inequalities. As a result, according to economist Julianne Malveaux, “We [black educators and HCBUs] are plagued by low endowments but also by our nation’s indifference to our service.”²² As further evidence, Executive Director of the White House Initiative on historically Black colleges and universities (HCBUs), John Silvanus Wilson, Jr. once described such daunting financial challenges for HCBUs, as “substantial cracks in the ice under American higher education.” He goes on to argue that “many of the cracks stem from atmospheric pressure. In Washington, budgets have rarely been tighter and policies have rarely been coarser.”²³ Wilson Summarized:

In higher education, the competition is stiffer, inequality widens, and it has become much more difficult for institutions with fewer resources to graduate [African American] students who are effectively prepared to enter and thrive in a technologically advanced, information-based, and increasingly competitive workplace. In private philanthropy, many donors are younger and more inclined toward “create tomorrow” investments rather than “save the day” gifts.²⁴

Nonetheless, as Malveaux cogently explains: “With its unique mission to prepare and secure the next generation of Black achievers, HCBUs must lobby federal departments just to ensure that their funding stays level or rise.”²⁵ Moreover, such venerable HCBUs should also step up their recruiting efforts, while creating information *networks* and connections at all colleges and universities for African American and minority students everywhere. Additionally, such traditional places of higher learning must make college affordable. As Journalist Frank Bruni has written, “Nothing—nothing is more important than the education of our children, and while various interests will make competing claims about whether it’s improving or slipping and how best to measure that, [black] education certainly isn’t at the level we want or need it to be.”²⁶ No doubt, professors and teachers at HCBUs must not stand on the sidelines or periphery of educating young African American students, while worrying about their relevance. This is to say that their passion as educators and mentors should translate in to a definitive way for African American students—to engage and learn. According to Malveaux, “Our colleges [HCBUs] are repositories of black knowledge, which some would like to ignore,”²⁷ but this will be an impossible feat, given the circumstances.

Former educator and actor Tony Danza posits that “we have to convince [black students] that, despite the formidable obstacles that they often face, it’s imperative that they do well in school,” at all educational

levels.²⁸ Which is to say, African American students must also want to be educated, so that their “academic preparation for college” is “tightly linked to socioeconomic status.”²⁹ So will realistic educational goals for African American students promote *real* equality of educational opportunities? That said, will educators do whatever it takes at selective universities or historically black colleges and universities to educate and nurture minority students, before it is too late to do *anything* to keep them on track? Mentoring, of course, is not simply telling potential African American students what’s in erudite books; it also entails letting them know something we, as educators, have learned over the years in a professional career. In a nutshell, moreover, *real* education is being able to nurture students “and that of others.”³⁰ Therefore, it is essential for us to “give back” as teachers and educators—that is, in terms of helping African American students receive a higher education.

Conclusion

On the whole, the job as an educator should be to impart the knowledge we have gained in our educational profession. Indeed, the educator must tell the ambitious African American student how to navigate the stressful educational rigmaroles at the college and university levels, while being truthful and honest about the things to come. According to educator Jennifer Gonzales, “a major stumbling block for [some] college students is remedial education [as well as having the necessary education funds].” Meanwhile, many low-income students who languish in certain “reading, writing or math classes” might “eventually drop out, curtailing their graduation plans.”³¹ However, some African American students shouldn’t be forever propped-up for statistical reasons, or excused for their lack of higher educational knowledge. In an interview, Michelle Alexander tells us that “the reality is we’re not going to provide meaningful education opportunities to poor kids, [or] kids of color, until and unless we recognize that we’re wasting trillions of dollars on a failed criminal justice system.”³²

Equally important, we must make the case for what African American students should actually be interested in (academically)—or what they really want to do with their lives, because such students can do great things. Indeed, major educational achievements are possible with such students if given the opportunity. We must be especially mindful that colleges and universities can be a stepping-stone (or spring-board) to future financial benefits and educational endeavors for African American students. Indeed, colleges and universities should also be the vanguard and educational battleground for all minority students. But we must try to make it exciting to be educated, if possible. And as mentioned, African American students must make the most of such educational opportunities, despite a *plethora* of obstacles they might face. In essence, a higher education can truly lead to a rewarding and professional life. Therefore, in the end, “colleges and universities [will] continue to play an invaluable role in our society,” especially in educating future generations of African American students, and “all the more so as the world changes.”³³

We should also take a hard look at whether African Americans will continue to face financial discrimination in the United States,³⁴ because this might be something that they cannot overcome, unless there is support from our federal government, or financial contributions from wealthy individuals. Furthermore, as educators, we must improve teaching and learning for all minority students, not only through lecturing and example, but also by a “hands-on” approach to higher education. Ultimately, the education of African American students can be improved immeasurably by all concerned educators, politicians, governors, Congress members and the President of the United States, with the help and assistance from dedicated parents as well. Otherwise, “black youngsters” will be “virtually useless in an increasingly technological economy.”³⁵

And any significant turn-around from the “school-to-prison pipeline” won’t happen, until our entire nation is concerned, and actively involved in this political issue of higher education. In the final analysis, this notion is important to understand, because young black men:

Who go to prison rather than college face a life time of closed doors, discrimination, and ostracism. Their plight is not what we hear about on the evening news, however. Sadly, like the racial caste systems that preceded it, the system of mass incarceration now seems normal and natural to most, a regrettable necessity.³⁶

All this is to say is we need a national debate about this academic matter, to develop the necessary strategy and tools for insuring that all African American students are able to get a higher education, if they so desire, while dismantling the Prison-Industrial Complex as soon as possible. In so many words, the great black

educator, W.E.B. DuBois was right when he said that black people and young people in particular, in America, have the mental wherewithal and intellectual capacity to learn, and to compete with anyone in the global community. In this regard, "black leaders should make public education the defining civil-rights issue of our times."³⁷

Finally, Dubois, along with other black educators "imagined that black colleges and universities would one day rise to rank among the best in the world."³⁸ This academic dream, of course, has become reality. Therefore, the educational agenda, as Alexander urge us, should be to expose young African Americans—in classrooms across the United States—to the truth about the dysfunctional American criminal justice system, in terms of black males, in particular, being incarcerated in our many prisons, while not attending college to pursue a higher educational degree. Finally, African American students must develop "their critical capacities" which, no doubt, will "open the door to meaningful engagement and collective, inspired action,"³⁹ to achieve serious educational goals.

Notes:

1. Edwin G. West, *Education and the State: A Study in Political Economy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1994), 114.
2. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Do We Invest in Preschools or Prison?" *The New York Times*, October 27, 2013, 11. According to Kristof, education is "the best tool we have to break cycles of [black] poverty."
3. David J. Leonard, "Shoes, Diplomas, and the American Dream," *The Chronicle Review*, September 28, 2012, B2.
4. Jim Webb, *A Time to Fight: Reclaiming a Fair and Just America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 218.
5. Colin Powell and Alma Powell, "One in Three Kids Drops Out of School: What We Can Do," *USA Weekend*, February 26-28, 2010, 6.
6. Leonard, "Shoes, Diploma," B2.
7. Walter Williams, "What to do about the sorry state of black education?" *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 23, 2009, 7B.
8. Kristof, "Do We Invest," 11.
9. Chandra Thomas Whitfield, "School Scam: How children of color get stuck in low-performing public alternative schools," *The Crisis Magazine*, volume 119/2, Spring 2012, 23.
10. Jody Sokolower, "Schools and the New Jim Crow: An Interview with Michelle Alexander," *Rethinking Schools*, Winter 2011-2012, 13.
11. Sokolower, "Schools and the New Jim Crow," 14.
12. Webb, "A Time to Fight," 218.
13. Jim Webb, "Why We Must Fix Our Prisons," *Parade*, March 29, 2009, 4. According to Journalist Jody Sokolower, "The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, D.C., for example, it is estimated that 15 percent of young black men can expect to serve time in prison. See Sokolower, "Schools and New Jim Crow: An Interview with Michelle Alexander."
14. Powell and Powell, "One in Three Kids," 6.

15. Richard Perez-Pena, "The New Community College Try," *Education Life*, July 22, 2012, 18. Perez-Pena writes that "these students do not display the habits or confidence that would have been instilled in a more privileged group."
16. John Cloud, "How to Recruit Better Teachers," *Time*, September 20, 2010, 52.
17. Powell and Powell, "One in Three Kids," 7.
18. Elizabeth Crisp, "Plan to merge black colleges draws outrage," *USA Today*, December 1, 2009, 4A.
19. *Ibid.*, 4A. It should be pointed out that under the Ayers settlement, "the Mississippi Legislature agreed to provide \$503 million to the three [black] colleges over 17 years."
20. *Ibid.*, 4A.
21. Julianne Malveaux, "Is there a War on HBCUs?" *Essence*, volume 44, number 4, August 2013, 120.
22. *Ibid.*, 120.
23. John Silvanus Wilson, Jr., "A Multi-Dimensional Challenge for Black Colleges," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 23, 2011, 76.
24. *Ibid.*, 76.
25. Malveaux, "Is there a War," 123.
26. Frank Bruni, "Teachers on the Defensive," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2012, 1. Professor Jean Twenge posits that some young people feel "entitled: or are over-confident in themselves, much to the chagrin of some academics, where there is "a growing disconnect between self-perception and reality." See Martha Irvine, "Study finds college freshmen over confident," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, June 17, 2011, 10A.
27. Malveaux, "Is there a War," 121.
28. Tony Danza, "What I Learned Teaching Your Kids," *USA Weekend*, August 24-26, 2012, 12.
29. Michele Moody-Adams, "Toward Real Equality in Higher Education," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 5, 2012, A80.
30. Spencer Johnson and Constance Johnson, *The One Minute Teacher: How to Teach Others to Teach Themselves* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986), 107.
31. Jennifer Gonzalez, "3-Year Project on Community-College Practice Seeks to Help Students Graduate," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 10, 2012, A20.
32. Sokolower, "Schools and the New Jim Crow," 16. Alexander goes on to point out rightly that black children are "growing up in communities in which they see their loved ones cycling in and out of prison in which they are sent the message in countless ways that they, too, are going to prison one way or another." Unfortunately, some black teenagers and college age kids also "regard school as the functional equivalent of prison—where they are forced to endure oppressive rules." See Steve Chapman, "Longer incarceration for the young," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, February 2, 2012, 9B.
33. Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring, "How to Save the Traditional University from the Inside Out," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 20, 2011, 72.
34. Christine Dugas, "Dual system of finance hits minorities," *USA Today*, April 5, 2011, 3B.
35. Williams, "What to do," 7B.

36. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised edition (New York: The New Press, 2012),190.
37. Michael Meyers, "The NAACP at a Crossroads," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2007, A17.
38. Wilson, "A Multi-Dimensional Challenge," 76.
39. Sokolower, "Schools and the New Jim Crow," 17.

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