



College of Education

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Research Highlights of Current Faculty Projects

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Using Critical Race Theory to Understand Higher Education Desegregation Policy

Anti-affirmative action sentiments are prominent in national disputes now facing American higher education institutions and federal courts. The continuing viability of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HCBUs) is also being challenged. Educational Policy Studies Associate Professor Laurence Parker has been investigating ways not only to understand university and government policies and decisions reached by the courts, but also to look critically at the very presumptions and reasoning that undergird them—questions often not asked. Parker's recent study examined two major postsecondary desegregation cases, *Knight v. State of Alabama*, which ruled that "diversity scholarships" could be used for White students to attend HCBUs, and *U.S. v. Fordice*, which held that race neutrality depends on dismantling state policy supporting postsecondary segregation. The study's goals included determining how implementation of the *Fordice* mandate to dismantle segregation might alter the historical missions of HCBUs and Traditionally White Institutions (TWIs), highlighting any evidence of discrimination against African American students at public TWIs and examining minority student educational opportunities at public HCBUs.

Parker sought to analyze educational and legal policy outcomes and tested the usefulness of critical race theory to support this research. Critical race theory treats racism as a normal, ingrained element of political and legal structures rooted in historical and social circumstances, uses narratives and storytelling to highlight how persons of color experience the world and racial oppression, challenges assumptions that White European American experience is the norm, and questions the belief that law is intended to create an equitable, just society. Critical race theory methodology questions the racial content of seemingly objective and neutral traditional scientific norms, focusing instead on social justice, and underlines the value of knowledge people gain through experience. To analyze the postsecondary desegregation cases of *Knight* and *Fordice*, Parker used critical race theory methods to delineate themes and recurrent patterns of policy expressed in those cases' legal documents.

What this research tells us:

Parker's analysis found evidence of legal system failures: the court decisions did not acknowledge that the nation's history of White control and domination of educational institutions has threatened HCBUs and their African American constituents, but instead, have hindered HCBUs' abilities to access the very resources ordered by the court, resulting in increased inequities between HCBUs and TWIs. Legal system failure was also demonstrated in ordering that White students be included in HCBU student bodies, overlooking HCBUs' traditional mission of serving African American students, although such institutions have produced more than forty-two percent of African American professionals. Parker's use of critical race theory in policy analysis also found continued postsecondary discrimination against minority students in TWIs. Such documentation may prove valuable in court litigation by giving voice to this marginalized group, and serves as an example of how narratives or personal stories may assist in understanding the academic and personal experiences of minority elementary and high school students as well.

What this research means for postsecondary and K-12 educational policy:

- ⇒ Evidence of continued discrimination at TWIs suggests the need for marginalized views to be heard and acknowledged in the formulation of state and federal policy at every level, from K-12 to postsecondary settings.
- ⇒ Continued support of exclusionary practices in admissions and other areas of institutional functioning at TWIs suggests that continuing resistance to desegregation must be addressed.
- ⇒ Critical race theory, as a method of research, holds promise for both addressing the indifference of TWIs to racial diversity, strengthening the public presence of HCBUs, and increasing understanding of how marginalized groups experience the American educational system.

For more information about this research:

Parker, L. (2003). Critical race theory and its implications for methodology and policy analysis in higher education desegregation. In G. R. Lopez & L. Parker (Eds.), *Interrogating racism in qualitative research methodology* (pp. 145-173). New York: Peter Lang.

We invite your response...

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