Why Only Race-Conscious Policies Can Fix Racism in Higher Education

January 15, 2020

We've written a lot about why policies that consider race are necessary to achieve racial justice. To do readers and policymakers a favor, we're laying out the case with three key points that we think provide a compelling and straightforward rationale for race-conscious policies.

1. Without race-conscious policies, students of color continue to experience gaps in opportunity and outcomes.

2. Race-conscious policies are necessary to achieve racial justice.

3. Policies that rely on substitutions (or proxies) for race, such as income, have not closed gaps in opportunity. Instead, race-conscious policies are more likely to be effective.

In this next report in our series of Hard Truths briefs, we'll provide evidence to help realize these truths in higher education, and offer recommendations for policymakers on how to advance race-conscious policies.

Institutions, states, and the federal government should provide more data that is transparent and allows for evaluation of race-conscious policies. Federal government investments in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) should be increased in order to provide high-quality opportunities for students of color.

Federal government should also invest more in MSIs, and make sure that enrollment driven MSIs are truly serving students of color. These investments should come with conditions that require accreditors to examine a college's campus racial climate, the extent of state and federal funding for institutions serving students of color, and state/federal investments in spending both in higher education and K-12 in order to participate in state/federal policies.

States should invest resources in colleges that provide high-quality opportunity for students of color, as opposed to race-neutral higher education funding formulas. States should also design statewide race-conscious higher education attainment goals that explicitly target students of color.

Institutions should stop over-relying on traditional measures of "merit" and other admissions preferences that disadvantage students of color. Policies that rely on substitutions (or proxies) for race, such as income, have not closed gaps in opportunity. Instead, race-conscious policies are more likely to be effective.

Institutions should adopt a renewed commitment to affirmative action in higher education. Historically, higher education has used racist policies to exclude students. Therefore, race-conscious policies are necessary to achieve racial justice.

In order to advance race-conscious policies in higher education and states, we recommend:

- Developing more focused strategies to address gaps in opportunity and outcomes for students of color.
- Using race-conscious policies in higher education admissions to achieve racial justice.
- Designing loan forgiveness and other student debt policy solutions to benefit students of color.
- Improving partnerships and empowering communities to advocate for race-conscious policies.
- Focusing investments in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs).