

Foreword

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Los Angeles, November 9, 2020*

As I write, Americans are exercising their franchise in unprecedented numbers in national elections to decide who will lead the country in this moment of crisis. The vote is a referendum on the crises of a COVID-19 pandemic, mass protests against police violence, and extreme economic disruption and disparities. In a larger sense, the body politic will express its ideals and visions for the future. Ultimately, the election and discourse around enduring inequities by race, gender, and class speaks to the unfulfilled promise of the American Dream.

This important book arrives at a pivotal moment in history when the United States continues to be ruptured by mass protests. The public lynching of George Floyd and the clandestine murder of Breonna Taylor compromised our nation's conscience, ideals, and core institutions. A national movement for social justice, driven by widespread condemnation of wanton police violence and brutality against Black people, has shaken the very foundations of our nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also massively disrupted life in our society. This scourge leaves no one untouched, even as it exacts the greatest toll on those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. It is difficult to turn a blind eye, to make excuses, to quietly accept the status quo when the tragedies are no longer restricted to Black, Brown, poor, women, and others who live at the intersection of multiple disadvantages. As these threats to “domestic tranquility” loom, even the most taken-for-granted pleasures and routines have been compromised. Everyday life in America will never be the same.

Behind the Diversity Numbers astutely connects higher education—colleges and universities—to these larger, expansive social dramas. Carson Byrd highlights high-profile court cases where competing visions and facts for elite colleges and universities are being contested. The root question is, who will have access, success, and legitimacy in these hallowed spaces? The stakes extend beyond diversity on college campuses to determine individual and group position in the American economic hierarchy (and, by association, in the racial hierarchy). Certainly, the value of a college education—whether at an elite or a lower-ranked institution—cannot be minimized. A college degree enhances life chances, experiences, and outcomes exponentially; over a lifetime, college graduates earn a million dollars more than do high school graduates.

Racial inequality is expressed not only in educational disadvantage but also in threads across rampant police violence, health crises, and diminished quality of life. Byrd persuasively ties higher education to the systemic racism that degrades, blocks opportunity, and then penalizes Blacks and other victims of the nation's racial caste system. A college degree sets the course of life chances and life outcomes, thus helping to ultimately decide “winners” and “losers.” Byrd argues that despite claims to meritocracy, the college attainment game is rigged.

This book challenges status quo defenders, who, when faced with the dilemma of explaining persistent racial inequality in US higher education (and in the larger society), prefer to emphasize individual differences over structural or organizational patterns. Treating the system of meritocracy as sacrosanct, they argue that success or failure is personally determined (blaming the victims of racism, discrimination, and inequality). Are we to believe everyone has an equal chance to achieve the American Dream? Karen and Barbara Fields reject notions of “*the* American meritocracy,” pointing out, “If admission to the ranks is skewed and manipulated, then its members are not a meritocracy in the first place; they are a self-perpetuating oligarchy, even if they imagine themselves the best and the brightest.”

Byrd boldly charges into the center of existential debates over equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education. Using recent court cases about race-conscious admissions at Harvard University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Texas at Austin as the lever, he skillfully connects systemic racial inequity in the larger society to major institutions like

colleges and universities and to individual life experiences and outcomes. Yet, as he wryly observes, the primary focus in these complex, polarizing “lawsuits against colleges around one of the most debated set of policies in the last fifty years” centers on narrow, decontextualized statistical analyses. Byrd cautions that “the way institutions quantify and analyze diversity, equity, and inclusion may reflect other related issues shaping how we understand these important aspects of college life and how we address inequity and injustice in higher education” (see the introduction).

Behind the Diversity Numbers offers an instructive reflection on the “raced” origins and implications of quantification, including statistical analyses, in higher education research. Using QuantCrit (derived from critical race theory, or CRT), Byrd presents a conceptually elegant, theoretically rich, and empirically rigorous critique. He forcefully rejects the idea that the statistical concepts, theory, methods, and perspectives commonly seen in educational research are neutral. The book provides an excellent tutorial, based on a fully formed, mixed-methods research perspective. He persuasively argues how quantitative science can combine with CRT to achieve complex, “thick” descriptions of key macro-, meso- and micro-level factors underlying privilege or disadvantage. He clearly recognizes the assets and liabilities of quantification in the study of higher education. Rejecting the idea that one size fits all, he instead embraces the imperative that research methods and statistical analyses should be chosen to match the research questions at hand. He scrupulously rejects the illogic of using only quantitative methods when qualitative methods are better suited (“quantitative mismatch”). Hammers are excellent tools when one wants to drive a nail but poor choices when the goal is to crack an egg. Put another way, it is ridiculous to search for a quarter you lost on Twelfth Street, over on Fifth Street because the light is better there.

Byrd discusses the unintended, sometimes negative consequences of quantification in the study of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education. These approaches suffer from a failure to consider the larger historical, systemic, and organizational circumstances that individuals contend with. Quantification summarizes widely dispersed observations and recognizes explanatory patterns in the data. In this way, the method minimizes the noise and messiness of on-the-ground reality in favor of a bird’s-eye view with neatly ordered categories. Quantification is the appropriate standard when the

primary goal is to enumerate, summarize, and generalize individual characteristics across the larger sample or population. It aims to combine individual, idiosyncratic, particularistic traits into general characteristics or categories.

Paradoxically, quantification can in fact ignore context, nuance, and granular variation while claiming to statistically weigh these factors. For example, statistical controls hold other variables constant to examine a specific bivariate relationship. However, such manipulations do not necessarily remove the cumulative direct and indirect consequences of mismeasured or unmeasured factors. Witness the joke about a statistician who stumbles on a student's corpse but who concludes that "holding all things constant" (body temperature, respiration rate, heartbeat, etc.), there is no cause for concern; the student is just fine. After all, the student is on campus that day. An absurd formulation, to be sure, but this book challenges equally absurd research that expresses surprise over the predictable educational underachievement of college students who, during their K–12 education, were condemned to failing schools, unqualified teachers, substandard books, deficient labs, and stomachs growling from hunger. Similarly, Shaun Harper notes that research tends to focus on academic failure among Black male college students, rather than on their academic success. Perhaps this imbalance reveals more about the society (and the researchers) than it reveals about the students.

Quantification often ignores the nuance, richness, and "thickness" of everyday life, opting instead for more distant abstraction. This approach can miss the lived experiences bound up in a particular Black college student's truth, in a particular university, at a particular time. Statistical and mathematical manipulations, like regression to the mean, are valuable when the primary goal is to summarize variation across large numbers of individuals and answer questions like "Does high school GPA predict college GPA?" The resultant single or average measure can then be attributed with some precision to *all* individuals in the sample or population. However, individuals who don't fit the normed group reality or, better still, the stereotypes are most often—and most easily—dismissed as outliers. Interestingly, Sigmund Freud's emphasis on the outlier, or "single case," produced rich theories of social organization and behavior writ large. Similarly, great informational, theoretical, policy, and even methodological value has resulted in fields that prioritize the case: law, business, and medicine.

We are reminded that statistical significance does not necessarily equate to substantive validity. For instance, individual traits like GPA or test scores are known to be highly correlated with admission to highly selective colleges. Research confirms this “empirical fact,” which incidentally rests on the American cultural belief that “people rise and fall on their own efforts, intelligence and academic merits” (chapter 1). The fact that college GPA varies across major, institution type, gender, social class, and race is consequential. More to the point, racial discrimination determines educational opportunities and outcomes from the womb for a child who is born poor, Black, and female.

Behind the Diversity Numbers cautions against uncritical acceptance of quantitative measures as undisputed fact. Statistics do not “speak for themselves.” Instead, what matters is *who* measures, *what* is measured, *how* statistics are interpreted, and the *consequences* associated with the findings. Yes, statistical measures are seemingly objective abstractions, but they are also social products rooted in the society’s historical, political-economic, and racial system. Byrd notes that the power to determine who speaks and who will be heard is strongly determinative. Who dominates the mic determines whether a conversation about race and the achievement gap will compare white students with Black students *or* will compare white students with Asian American students. Again, the numbers and statistics do not speak for themselves.

Behind the Diversity Numbers points to recurrent themes in higher education discourse and research—questions such as “Who is on campus?” and “What are they learning?” Meanwhile, significant normative, structural, and organizational questions like “Why?” are overlooked. Byrd creatively extends the assessment of campus racial climate to focus on campus microclimates, like the experiences of a Black, lesbian, poor, first-generation student who is at the intersection of multiple hierarchical identities. Byrd provides an action agenda for change, advocating the need to “recognize that a true transformation of colleges and universities to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion and not reinforce racial inequalities requires that the institutions refrain from dumping into the laps of individuals the responsibility for organizational change. Universities, as racialized organizations, can create and maintain racial inequalities without individual malice and even with people’s best intentions” (chapter 4).

This book offers a penetrating interrogation of how statistics are used in the Harvard University affirmative action case. Since statistical analyses center

individuals (aggregated to categories), the broader conceptual, sociohistorical, and organizational contexts that drive persistent racial disparities are ignored. Diversity becomes a numerical “problem” for study, with statistics as the best (only) tools, and the primary goal is to reach set categorical benchmarks rather than reduce or eliminate inequality. Byrd examines how campuses’ “history of racial exclusion,” their organizational approach to diversity and inclusion, and indeed the very notion of diversity itself require more scrutiny to establish “what disparities on campus mean and what should be done about them” (introduction). It is sobering to be reminded how earlier goals of “race and restorative justice” were compromised by the *diversity rationale*. In a profound shift, the original emphasis on aiding students who were targets of racial bias, harassment, or discrimination was replaced by an emphasis on using their limited presence in “white spaces” to benefit the majority, for example, to prepare white students for diverse workplaces. Derrick Bell’s “interest convergence theory” anticipates this shift when he argues that racial “remedies if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites.” In a society founded on white supremacy, the cultural, ideational, organizational, economic, political, and educational systems cooperate in the goal of maintaining a rigid hierarchy where white people are at the pinnacle and Black people are at the bottom. *Behind the Diversity Numbers* reminds readers that some of our most beloved social institutions—our schools and colleges—contribute to unequal experiences and outcomes. And what’s more, our understanding of these institutions may be distorted by the way they are quantified and analyzed, leading to benefits accruing for some, to the detriment of many.

Post Script

All votes have been cast and counted in a national election with record-setting participation. Yet some see fit to dispute the empirical, statistical, and mathematical evidence of this referendum. Their challenges mostly question the legitimacy of votes from largely Black, urban areas. This week, Harvard successfully defended its race-conscious admissions policy in the First Circuit Court of Appeals. The ruling upheld judgements from numerous prior cases that had tried and confirmed similar elements. One wonders why it was necessary to revisit this well-trod legal ground—even as another court challenge to

race-conscious admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is currently underway. Widespread national protests supported the Black Lives Matter movement against police violence. Nevertheless, Black and Brown people continue to die in disproportionate numbers by the hands of police. The conundrum connecting these seemingly disparate events has to do with how racial mythology dismisses or reframes the reality of racial oppression. In each instance, we see how racial projects systematically reinforce and defend the notion of white superiority—even to the point of rejecting indisputable empirical evidence to the contrary. These racial projects make you question not only which numbers matter but also which lives matter.

Behind the Diversity Numbers interrogates the use, misuse, and dismissal of empirical evidence in the quantification of diversity and merit in higher education research. Byrd tells universities seeking truly diverse, inclusive campuses that given the persistent, stubbornly rooted reality of racial inequity, “neither quantifying nor dequantifying diversity will save you” (chapter 4). He warns, “Excluding race and ethnicity from these policies does not mean that race is still not a factor in who is admitted to a university . . . [C]olor-blind approaches allow other structural inequalities that shape students’ lives to take precedence and continue to privilege white students” (chapter 1). Derrick Bell offered a similarly pessimistic assessment of racial gains and prospects after the US Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which outlawed racial segregation. In his *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*, Bell declares, “On the agenda of unfinished business, America’s continuing commitment to white domination looms especially large for those citizens of color whose lives are little less circumscribed than were those of their slave forebears.”

Over sixty-five years later, our pursuit of racial equity and justice in higher education, and society as a whole, is still unfinished business. *Behind the Diversity Numbers* provides a compelling argument for why we must stop blaming the so-called bad apples and focus on what our universities, as complex organizations, must do to change their orientations toward racial equity efforts that matter for who and how they are counted. Universities must examine how racialized experiences and outcomes are analyzed and monitored and identify what can be done now and in the future to undercut a racially unjust and inequitable system.