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Students at the Margins and the Institutions that Serve Them: A Global Perspective

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From the margins to the table

“The US has a complicated love affair with equal opportunity,” opened one panelist in a discussion about affirmative action in the US, Brazil and South Africa.

The prospect of promoting one race ahead another appears unfair, but education systems are unfair. Race still matters in the US, as in many countries, and affirmative action helps students from minorities have fairer access to higher education.

In the US, the percentage of minorities is increasing, and the White population might soon become a minority, but US higher education institutions (as well as the government and judiciary) are yet to reflect this demographic shift.

South Africa’s higher education institutions are also attempting to redress past inequalities. “In South Africa, affirmative action is enshrined as a human right,” explained one panelist, but controversially, some universities are now moving to a hybrid race and merit-based entrance system, before South Africa is truly ready to set race aside; the playing field is not yet level. “Equality cannot always be achieved by treating all people equally,” she added.

In Brazil, home to the largest Afrodescendent population in the Americas, affirmative action is first based on socio-economic background, with racial quotas being slowly introduced over four years from 2013.

Yet for all the positive impact affirmative action might have, the problem of marginalization and inequality is not going to be solved with a new higher education act, pointed out one panelist. Inequality is a much larger issue, and most factors – race, gender, geography, socio-economic background – have already had an impact before student even reaches post secondary education.



Panelists Michael Sorrell, Hong Pu and Zena Richards with session chair, Marybeth Gasman

“Build your own table”

Affirmative action might help marginalized students gain access to higher education, but how can higher education institutions ensure they thrive once there?

In a panel covering the US, South Africa and China, administrators shared their own colleges and universities’ success stories.

In South Africa, the University of Witwatersrand’s Student Equity and Talent Management Unit helps high achieving but marginalized high school students make the successful transition to higher education by targeting them before they arrive at the university. The program simulates what the higher education experience will be like for them. The resilience these students come to college with is not enough, support is vital. With no prior knowledge within their family or communities of the higher education system, students do not know how or where to ask for help; the Wits project helps mitigate against this.

Yunnan province in South West China, where Quijing Normal University is based, is taking a “top-down-meets-bottom-up” approach in helping its marginalized students.

Top-down, the local government

is implementing policies such as different kinds of financial support, boarding school for those from rural areas, affirmative action enrolment policies for disadvantaged students, locally contextualized teacher training, and bilingual education.

Bottom-up, the university has launched work programs, from farming to green energy. The purpose is to incorporate student voices and determination in how they are assisted, whilst for the students the initiative addressed not only work prospect but also developed a sense of community and self.

Paul Quinn College in Texas, USA also has a work program which incorporates farming, to help fund students’ tuition and address the Dallas food desert problem. The college is very involved with the local community and the students’ families: “We’re all in this together!” remarked Sorrell.

Besides community, language is vital to success at Paul Quinn. “We don’t refer to our students as marginalized – they’re just our students,” explained college president, Michael Sorrell. And rather than bringing the margins to the table, “I teach my kids to build their own table.”



From the Floor Quotes from the day's discussions

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be a nurse, but if you want to be a nurse because someone told it was too hard for you to become a doctor – there is something wrong with that.”

“If you can teach winning, stumbles remain stumbles and not great falls.”

“I teach my students to build their own table.”

“How do minority students ask for what they don’t know? They don’t know what they don’t know. They must be taught how to learn.”

“Equality cannot always be achieved by treating all people equally.”

“Giving students money shows how poor they are. Work study is better because it shows how capable they are.”

“We must reimagine the center for the equality of opportunity.”

“Give a man to fish – feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish – feed him for a lifetime.”

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Check out Salzburg Global Comms Team Intern, Jonathan Elbaz’s interview with William New on the plight of the Roma in Europe online now:

www.soundcloud.com/salzburgglobal

Today, together with Thai-Huy Nguyen from Penn, we will be conducting video interviews, which will be available online on our YouTube channel:

www.youtube.com/salzburgseminar

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