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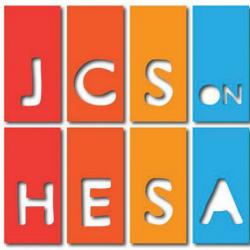
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Higher Education Path or Barrier to Opportunity?

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— Abstract —

Higher education has long been viewed as the pathway to economic and social mobility within the United States and yet institutions have historically restricted access based on race, gender, and social class. This scholarly paper, explores, argues, and presents evidence to demonstrate how the impact of colonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital/wealth intersect and have served to mold higher education into a tool of oppression, by limiting access and attainment, to historically underserved and oppressed populations.

Keywords: Higher Education, access

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Throughout the past decades scholars, policymakers, educators, and students, and their families have debated whether higher education should be a right or a privilege (Marginson, 2016; Morgan & White, 2014; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Williams, 2016). The outcome of this debate influences innumerable decisions such as funding, who receives access to institutions, and the types of programs and support services available to students (McMahon, 2009). At the same time, the landscape for employment and upward mobility within the United States has changed. High paying jobs once requiring only a high school education, such as those once prevalent in the manufacturing sector, have declined (Yamaguchi, 2018). Today's high paying jobs now require more complex and critical thinking skills commonly associated with higher levels of formal education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2014). A high school diploma is no longer enough for individuals to gain access to vocations through which they can earn a living wage and/or support a family (Baum, Kurose, & Ma (2013)., 2013; Hernandez, 2018). Economic data has demonstrated a growing wage premium in recent decades, and even though this premium has flattened in recent years due to The Great Recession, college graduates can still expect to out earn those with only a high school degree (Ashworth & Ransom, 2019).

Despite the shifting trends in workforce requirements, Ryan and Bauman (2016) reported that currently only 1 in 3 adults in the United States has a baccalaureate degree. As the United States continues to move from an industrial economy to a knowledge-based workforce, those without a college degree are likely to have diminishing access to social and economic opportunities. The issue of degree attainment is especially salient to students from traditionally underserved populations including Students of Color, Indigenous people, women, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, whose access to higher education has historically been denied or limited (Bailey & Dynarski, 2013; Bensimon, 2005;

Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2000; Delgado-Romero, Manlove, Manlove, & Hernandez, 2007; Unverferth, Talber-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012). Individuals from these populations experience disparities in income (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011), wealth accumulation (Kochhar, 2014), economic mobility (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018), health (Carnevale et al., 2011), and life expectancy (Hummer & Lariscy, 2011), all of which researchers have linked to lower levels of educational attainment. The disparities listed above demonstrate the importance of educational attainment, not just for the economic benefits, but also for individuals' holistic wellness.

The conversation about historically underserved populations' limited access to higher education and disparities in degree attainment is not a new area of inquiry; many scholarly articles, books, and white papers have focused on the persistent *achievement gap* (Jeynes, 2015). However, much of this research presents these disparities in attainment from a deficit perspective. The conclusions drawn from these studies' present students from underserved populations as lacking the skills, resources, and competencies to be successful within higher education. However, issues such as the achievement gap are mere symptoms of the systematic influences of power and oppression in the United States (Wilkins, 2006). Although Freire (2000) espoused the potential of education to provide liberation for the oppressed, higher education has fallen short of this goal and, instead, serves as a tool for marginalization and oppression. To establish a common frame of reference for this paper, I define and examine oppression from a structural perspective, where oppression is rooted in unquestioned societal norms and assumptions (Young, 2014). Likewise, marginalization is the "process by means of which certain people and ideas are privileged over others at any given time" (Ferguson, Gever, Minh-Ha, Gonzalez-Torres, & West, 1990, p. 7).

The shifting nature of the United States economy necessitates a reexamining of higher education and its

role in society. Higher education can no longer be a privilege since it is now a critical pathway to upward mobility, economic opportunity, and democratic engagement for all individuals within the United States. The examination of higher education's role in society is especially important for those who have been historically marginalized and oppressed by society as they have been systemically excluded by the system of higher education. Scrutinizing how higher education has acted as a barrier, rather than as a pathway, to opportunity could allow for a reshaping of the system—allowing all individuals to gain access to opportunities afforded by higher levels of education rather than reserving these benefits for the privileged few. This scrutiny could further the democratization of the system of higher education, fostering inclusion and equity instead of exclusion.

In this paper, I explore, argue, and demonstrate how postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital have intersected to mold higher education into a tool of oppression for historically underserved populations. Toward this end, I begin by providing an overview of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital. I also address the impact of these forces on higher education, particularly how they have disproportionately impacted underserved student populations. Following this overview, I discuss the implications of continuing to ignore the influence of these forces. I conclude by sharing potential approaches for higher education to resist and disrupt the currently oppressive system.

Author Positionality

I come to this important area of inquiry from a place of immense privilege within the academy, as a White, straight, upper-middle class woman. Essentially, I am the demographic that has benefited the most from the expansion of access to higher education and, in my case, attending college was always a foregone conclusion. I spent most of life around people who looked like me in an environment where the conservative mentality of pulling yourself

up by your bootstraps shaped my values and beliefs. It was not until I attended college that I began to recognize that my experiences were not the experiences of all students. More importantly, I realized that the opportunity to attend college, which I had taken for granted, was not something all individuals could access. I began to understand that societal forces continue to prevent access to higher education to many individuals. This realization led me to a career in student affairs and higher education where I have worked with students from diverse backgrounds and witnessed firsthand how the dominant cultural narrative operates within the organizational dynamics of institutions. Subsequently, I am exploring this area of inquiry because I believe it is important for the system's current beneficiaries—like me—to critically examine and work towards changes that disrupt the oppressive practices embedded with institutions of higher education today.

The Relationship among Postcolonialism, Neoliberalism, Cultural Capital, and Higher Education

Postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital are intertwined forces, both historically and contemporarily. Although they differ in terms of focus and impact, each force compounds the power and privilege of dominant groups and legitimizes their ideology. For purposes of this paper, I clarify each of these terms, offer examples of their influence on higher education, and discuss their impact on populations of underserved college students.

Postcolonialism

As a former British colony and with a postsecondary educational system modeled after British and German universities, the marks of postcolonialism are still present within the U.S. system of higher education today (Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007). Postcolonial theory is a conceptual framework for understanding how the remaining tenants of postcolonialism continue to influence the creation and privileging

of certain types of knowledge (Andreotti, 2011). Amongst scholars, postcolonialism and postcolonial theory remain contested concepts and their usage in the examination of United States culture is limited due to their focus on the experiences of the “Global South” (Ranke & Hempel, 2014, p. 1)—regions of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The broadening of this theoretical framework to examine U.S. higher education acknowledges the vestiges of colonialism within institutions, as well as how these norms continue to other and oppress individuals within this society. For the purpose of this paper, I rely on the postcolonial lens from Andreotti’s (2011), who highlights the impact of colonialism on claims of truth, the operation of power, and distribution of wealth, especially as it relates to the production of knowledge.

European colonialism was a materialistic force driven by a motivation to gain material, cultural, and discursive resources through the construction of *Otherness*, which, in turn, enabled the subjugation and exploitation of Indigenous people (Andreotti, 2011; Shahjahan, 2014). This construction of *Otherness* allowed European colonizers to establish themselves as superior to and more intelligent than Indigenous populations they sought to subjugate as well as justified—for the colonizers—the dehumanization and exploitation of these populations. This concept of superior intellect is linked to the production of knowledge, whereby knowledge held by those deemed *Other* is considered inferior to knowledge held by the colonizers. Postcolonial theory looks at issues of power and knowledge production in relation to colonial hegemony. More specifically, postcolonial theory critiques the normalization of Western or European knowledge making and delegitimized other ways of knowing and being (Anderotti, 2011).

The connection between postcolonialism and U.S. higher education. The influences of postcolonialism can be seen in the historical access to higher education and the practices of limiting access to certain groups of individuals based on their gender,

religion, race/ethnicity, and social class (Gelber, 2007; Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007). Institutions have historically created barriers to access for those considered separate from the dominant group, preventing those viewed as *Other* from participating in higher education. An example of such a barrier includes early entrance exams, conducted in Latin and Greek, for admission to many higher education institutions. Conducting the exams in Latin and Greek, created barriers for students from working-class and immigrant communities who did not have access to Latin and Greek tutors, like their more affluent peers (Gelber, 2007). Today, despite extensive research finding a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and SAT/ACT scores (Dixon-Román, Everson, & McArdle, 2013), similar barriers remain in place, as colleges and universities continue to rely on such standardized test scores for admissions decisions. These tests are not so much a measure of students’ abilities, but of some students’ (i.e., affluent applicants) privileged access to better academic preparation and test prep services. By over relying on these types of tests in college admissions, institutions privilege students from the dominant cultural background, while placing barriers to students outside the dominant cultural norm.

Students from racially minoritized groups such as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples faced even greater hurdles in achieving access to higher education, including outright discrimination in admission to most institutions (Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007). Although various legislative acts such as Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, Civil Rights Act of 1864, and Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (more commonly known as the G.I. Bill), changes to the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, and landmark court cases (e.g., *Sweatt v. Painter*, *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*) have sought to increase access to higher education by eliminating legal barriers, implicit barriers still exist. These barriers, such as inequality in K–12 education, access to

Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and the ability to pay for SAT/ACT preparation programs, continue to exist as the percent of students from underserved and oppressed populations attaining a bachelor's degree still lags behind those of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In the past few decades, the difference in completion rates between Latinx and White individuals more than doubled from 9–20% from 1974–2014, while the gap between Black and White individuals more than doubled from 6–13% from 1964–2014. This increased disparity in attainment between the 1960/70's and 2014 is even more concerning as it occurred when completing higher education was also becoming increasingly associated with increased lifetime earnings (Bailey & Dynarski, 2013), meaning individuals from minoritized populations have been unable to reap the economic benefits of higher education at the same level as their White counterparts.

Through the lens of postcolonialism, these barriers created by the dominant population are a tool by which they maintain superiority and subjugate those deemed *Other*. The vestiges of postcolonialism can also be seen in the conversation by researchers and policymakers around bachelor's degree attainment in and of itself. Researchers and policymakers center White, middle-class students as the norm and use them as marker by which to measure the attainment of all *Other* identity groups (Middleton, 2018). The implicit message is that those considered *Other* are somehow unable to achieve the same outcomes as their “normal” White counterparts. Recommendation from researchers focus on giving historically underserved students the tools, competencies, or knowledge students are deemed to lacking in order to conform and succeed within the established system (Smit, 2012). However, the focus on changing the behaviors of historically underserved students externalizes issues of attainment rather than critiquing the system. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model highlights the overlooked and discounted assets Students of Color possess in favor of more dominant forms of cultural

assets. The community cultural wealth model explains the value of the experiences that Students of Color bring to campus that go unrecognized because they are outside of the cultural norms expected from college students. A recent study by Iverson (2012) emphasized the perpetuation of “Otherness” at the institution level through the examination of campus diversity plans. Campus administrators present diversity plans a means through which equity and inclusion can be achieved. However, these plans use individuals from underserved populations serve as targets for compositional goals, while still maintaining their role as *Other* compared to the dominant majority. In seeking to improve compositional diversity on campus, institutions utilize the same systems and practices to achieve their diversity goals, rather than examining the systems causing underserved populations to be underrepresented on campus. By only seeking to address compositional issues of diversity, institutions fail to address the systematic “Othering” of students outside the dominant norm and, instead, continue to maintain systems of oppression.

The role of higher education in knowledge production and dissemination also warrants examination through the lens of postcolonial theory. As a primary location of knowledge production and dissemination, institutions have historically perpetuated and contemporarily perpetuate the privileging of certain types of knowledge over others. Evidence of this can be seen in the value placed on majors with a direct connection to the labor market, such as business and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, while liberal arts and cultural studies programs, such as ethnic and women's studies, experience subjugation (Mohanty, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). By privileging certain types of knowledge, institutions contribute to the notion that knowledge is valuable only to the extent that it is used to generate profit and cements power in a capitalist economy, demonstrating the lingering effects of postcolonialism within institutions. By continuing to reinforce the link between knowledge and power

through limiting access, institutions deny historically underserved student populations not just access to higher education but to power structures within the United States.

Neoliberalism

Early colonialism laid the foundation for neoliberalism through its preferencing of Western/European values of modernity, including individualism, freedom, progress, liberation, and universal reason which paved the way for the market-driven capitalist society of today (Andreotti, 2011). The neoliberal utilizes economic rationality to understand, evaluate, and govern society and is a core tenants of a capitalist society. Neoliberalism also builds off the colonial framework centering the dominant group and their version of social, cultural, and economic capital as superior and the oppressed *Other* as inferior. Through this lens, the purpose of education is to produce self-enterprising individuals only interested in improving their economic contribution. As Giroux (2011) remarked, “Delivering improved employability has reshaped the connection between knowledge and power while rendering faculty and students as professional entrepreneurs and budding customers” (para. 1).

In recent decades, higher education has seen the market-based philosophies of neoliberalism creeping into the missions, policies, and practices of institutions. Shahjahan (2014) highlighted the trends of marketization, privatization, and the intense focus on human capital development as markers of the influence of neoliberalism. In this context, van der Hoeyen and Sziraczki (1997) define marketization as the process by which administrators and policymakers restructure state enterprises, such as higher education, to operate in the open marketplace. An example of this can be seen today through increased competition amongst institutions. Similarly, privatization is the shift in the implementation of programs and services from government to private entities, a trend evidenced in higher education by the outsourcing of campus

dining, residence halls, and educational technology (Wekullo, 2017). The influence of neoliberal principles has prevented institutions from focusing on issues of equity as most administrators must focus on institutional survival as they strive to keep their institutions competitive and financially solvent in this environment (Harbour & Jaquette, 2007).

Neoliberalism in higher education. The changing rhetoric regarding the purpose of higher education highlights the growing influence of neoliberal principles. Once, the public perceived higher education as beneficial to democracy and society (The President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947), but now consider individuals as the primary beneficiary (Hebel, 2014) The change in public perception has led students, families, and policymakers to view higher education as a service, students as consumers, subjecting institutions to the market effects of supply and demand (Jacob, McCall, & Stange, 2011). These market-level demands have, in turn, created an ever-growing focus on increasing levels of efficiency with the hope that by moving to a more market-driven mentality, the quality of education will increase while costs decrease (Bottery, 2016; Choi, 2015).

The influence on institutions of marketization and privatization impact the relationship between students and faculty, in addition to other institutional practices. Positioning higher education as a service, where students purchase education, has reduced the student–teacher relationship to that of a service provider responding to consumer needs (Bottery, 2016). In their study, Judson and Taylor (2014) highlighted this changing relationship through the increased emphasis on student evaluations to assess satisfaction in faculty performance, even though other researchers have questioned the validity of these evaluations (Clayson & Haley, 2011). Likewise, grade inflation is a natural consequence of the overreliance on faculty evaluations to judge their performance. Ewing (2012) found a relationship between students’ anticipated grades and their evaluation of faculty,

leading faculty to grade more leniently to protect their jobs.

Institution administrators treating students as consumers has also led institutions to compete for students' tuition dollars on the global market. This competition has perpetuated the marketization of higher education, as institutions are now in an arms race amongst themselves for students' tuition dollars. Institutions especially compete for the tuition dollars of high-income, out-of-state students who pay more in tuition compared to in-state students and are more likely to persist and graduate on time (Burd, 2015). This arms race has also led to the further stratification of higher education institutions, whereby institutions that have attracted high achieving students in the past are more likely to continue to do so (Choi, 2015). These students then attract prominent employers, who provide well-paying jobs. Students who obtain well paying jobs are then more likely to make financial contributions to the institutions in the form of alumni donations, as well as assist in the recruitment of other high achieving students (Choi, 2015; Rivera, 2016).

The disparities in educational attainment experienced by historically underserved students may be another symptom of market based, neoliberal reforms, such as drastic funding cuts to public higher education (Mitchell, Leachman, & Saenz, 2019). These funding cutbacks have increased: the need to generate private revenue, outcome-based accountability measures, and institutions' dependence on part-time academic labor, as well as spurred a shift from a shared governance model to a more corporate model (Saunders, 2010). Drastic funding cuts have contributed to the increased competition for tuition dollars, especially for the tuition dollars of high-income students (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015; The Pell Institute, 2019) and international students, groups who generally pay full tuition (Hegarty, 2014). This competition for students has caused institutions to make financial decisions based on what will attract the most students, such as state-of-the-art residence halls

and recreation facilities (Jacob et al., 2011). However, such investments have also contributed to the increased cost of attendance, which may be a barrier to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or other underserved populations (Jacob, McCall, & Strange, 2013) for whom this growing tuition accounts for a higher percentage of their household income compared to their higher income peers (Mettler, 2014)

College and university rankings, such as those found within the *U.S. News & World Report*, *Times Higher Education World*, *University Rankings*, and *Princeton Review*, are both a symptom and perpetrator of neoliberal philosophies. These rankings have become the benchmark against which stakeholders measure institutions, with a 2014 study by Alter and Reback showing a correlation between being ranked in the top 20 lists and increased applications and academic rigor of the incoming class (Alter & Reback, 2014). However, the measures used to calculate these rankings do not promote equity. Instead, standardized test scores, acceptance rates, per student spending, and alumni giving create a performative criterion commodifying higher education with an emphasis on measurable outputs (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Institutions can game these ranking systems by capping class sizes, launching fundraising campaigns to increase per student spending, or casting a wider recruitment net while increasing admissions standards, such as by increasing required SAT scores, to be more selective (Pérez-Peña & Slotnik, 2012).

A 2017 *Politico* article by Wermund cited the example of two institutions, Georgia State University and Southern Methodist University (SMU), which both made dramatic shifts in their rankings by adjusting their institutional priorities. On the one hand, Georgia State University decided to focus on improving socioeconomic diversity and graduation rates. To achieve this, Georgia States implemented the following changes: de-emphasized SAT scores to focus on high school performance, invested in an electronic tracking system to flag students of concern,

and initiated of a micro-grant program. SMU, on the other hand, initiated a capital campaign that raised more than \$1 billion in alumni donations, allowing for more merit-based scholarships which, in turn, increased the average SAT scores of their incoming class and per student spending. These efforts resulted in an 11-place increase in the U.S. News & World Report rankings for SMU in 2 years. In contrast, Georgia State University dropped 30 places over the 5 years in which they focused on increasing and supporting the economic diversity of their students). By emphasizing factors valued by rankings organizations can limit access to traditionally underrepresented populations who tend to score lower on the SATs due to systemic disadvantages and may opt to not apply to institutions viewed as prestigious (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009). Shifting institutional attention away from supporting underrepresented students in favor of achieving higher rankings may serve to continue to hinder historically underserved populations' access and attainment of higher education.

Cultural Capital

Within current U.S. society, Colonial and neoliberal frameworks established frameworks for determining whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted (Bernal, 2002), not just in the academic sense but in relation to social and cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) referred to cultural capital as the accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society from their families and/or through formal schooling. The theory of cultural capital highlights the ways in which certain types of cultural training within the home receive unequal value in dominant society, allowing those with dominant cultural training to interact more effectively with institutions, thereby compounding their own cultural capital (Lareau, 2003). Those individuals without the cultural capital valued by the dominant majority struggle to exist within a society that does not value their ways of knowing or being

and that considers them inferior. The concept of cultural capital is connected to colonialism in that the dominant group views those with different ways of knowing and being are lacking the appropriate cultural capital to succeed in society; reinforcing their *Otherness*. In the United States, the value placed on cultural capital by dominant groups is closely linked to values of neoliberalism and capitalism, where an individual's worth depends on their economic status. Cultural capital and the economic and social value it bestows to certain groups reinforces the dominant ideology and cements the power held by some and withheld from others.

The connection between cultural capital and higher education. The presence of cultural capital has been shown to influence students' selection of higher education institutions (Unverferth et al. 2012), as well as students' access (Wilber & Roscigno, 2016), persistence (Wells, 2008), and completion of higher education (Wilber & Roscigno, 2016). Within higher education, the dominant values associated with cultural capital predominantly benefit to the dominant population's (White, middle class, male) ways of being and knowing. Institutions have operated under the assumption that all students and families possess this type of cultural capital and established systems and structures with this assumption. As higher education has diversified to include students from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, institutions have not done an adequate job demystifying or adjusting these structures for students and their families. This lack of adaptation on the part of institutions has led to outcomes gaps between traditionally underserved populations and their White counterparts, especially for first-generation college students, who are disproportionately Students of Color and immigrants (Unverferth et al., 2012).

First-generation students, defined as students with parents neither of whom previously attended college (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018), are not always as aware of the complex nature of higher education and their families are not always

able to provide the same guidance and support as second-generation or multi-generation college students (Rondini, 2015). In a recent study, Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) found disadvantages for first-generation students persisted even when accounting for socioeconomic status, concluding that parental knowledge, resources, and involvement were significant factors in students' access to and success within higher education. This disadvantage begins as early as college information sessions, where students may hesitate to ask questions for fear of appearing out of place (Unverferth et al., 2012). Disadvantages persist into the application process, where students report feeling overwhelmed by the process and an emerging sense of constraint as the financial burden of paying for college and the emotional burden of navigating the process on their own weighs heavily (Rodini, 2015). Low socioeconomic status and first-generation students are also less likely to attend selective or elite colleges and universities, even though most these students pay very little tuition at these institutions due these institutions' generous financial aid packages (Unverferth et al., 2012). This suggests it is not the cost of attendance but a lack of understanding of the financial aid system that prevents many first-generation and low-income students from applying and enrolling at selective institutions. It is important for institutions to recognize systems and structures are failing to support these students in their transitions to higher education, not the students and their families.

In examining experiences on campus, many scholars have taken a deficit approach to students' engagement with curricular and co-curricular experiences. First-generation students were found by Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) to be less likely to participate in co-curricular and high impact experiences, such as internships or research with faculty. First-generation students also tend to take fewer liberal arts courses and fewer total hours during their first year; they are less likely to enroll in honors colleges, all factors correlated with higher rates of

degree completion (Unverferth et al., 2012). In another study, Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rourke (2011) tied this lack of involvement and acclimation to campus life to a lack of cultural capital and understanding of the importance of participation in these activities. Although these findings might be statistically correct, it places the responsibility on students for failing to take advantage of college experiences, rather than questioning institutional practices that might be failing to adequately support students.

In addition, other responsibilities, such as needing to work full-time, or care for children or family members, may also contribute to some students lack of involvement and acclimation to campus life (Mangan, 2015). Despite the inherent value of these types of external commitments and engagements (i.e., work and childcare), college campuses do not value them in the same way as traditional forms of active campus involvement. The devaluing of forms of cultural capital held by individuals from minoritized populations and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compounds stratification of social class within the United States. Students from families with wealth and cultural capital can more easily navigate higher education because the system was built to serve them. Students with more economic and cultural capital can then leverage these assets to gain access to higher levels of economic mobility. In contrast, societal barriers relegate those lacking the advantages afforded by wealth and cultural capital to less prestigious institutions, community colleges, or do not complete higher education at all.

The information presented above demonstrates the power of the dominant cultural paradigm in privileging certain types of knowledge and cultural norms while discounting others. Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model pushed back on the deficit mentality around Students of Color as lacking social and cultural capital and focused on the wide array of often unrecognized cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by minoritized groups. However, the values of the dominant group are still ever-present

within the practices of higher education. Much of the research around student engagement centers these dominant values, characterizing students who do not adapt to these norms as unengaged, even though they may be deeply engaged with their families or communities outside of campus (Yosso, 2005). Indeed, the only type of engagement visible on college campuses or valuable for resumes are traditional student activities, such as Greek life, study abroad, or service-based volunteerism.

Higher Education as a Form of Resistance

As I have outlined in this paper, the impact of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital continue to be prevalent throughout the current higher education system. The perpetuation of these forces will continue to have an impact not only on higher education institutions but on society as a whole and, most importantly, on historically underserved college students. Institutions of higher education need to determine if their purpose is to reinforce systems of oppression, adding to the power of the dominant class and stratification of wealth, or to serve as an equalizing force, which disrupts the dominant culture. Using the cultural resistance framework outlined by Shahjahan (2014) the following section provides examples of ways in which institutions can resist these dominant norms and resist postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and dominant forms of cultural capital engrained within higher education.

Resistance as Rewriting and Undermining Colonial Narratives

Higher education was created to serve a homogenous population and currently operates under the established dominant cultural norms. To resist postcolonialism and neoliberalism, institutions must not just disrupt, but oppose and rewrite “dominant cultural values, codes, narratives, and behaviors” (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 222). Within institutions, this could take the form of in-depth questioning the dominant norms often taken for granted to broaden

access. First and foremost, this would mean disrupting the practice of “Othering” students who are not 18–22 years old, White, and middle or upper-class and redefining their image of the typical college student to be more encompassing of students from diverse backgrounds. Institutions will also need to reexamine what it means to be “college-ready,” as the research clearly demonstrates the relationship between the kind of academic preparation and extracurricular involvement most valued in admissions and individuals’ race and socioeconomic status and to systemic inequalities in the K–12 system (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). Admissions offices should rethink established norms, rewrite their processes, find innovative ways to honor and recognize the value of diverse experiences, and challenge their institutions’ overreliance on standardized test scores, class rank, and AP courses for admittance.

In addition, this shift to broaden access through the redefinition of what makes students college-ready will require education and training for faculty, staff, and other students across all levels of campuses. All members of the institution will need to re-norm their expectations of students to be more inclusive and welcoming of students from all backgrounds who have different ways of knowing and being within higher education. Finally, institutions and policymakers will have to rethink and redefine established outcomes, recognizing students will have varying goals and pathways to and through higher education. These new goals and outcomes cannot be defined for students from diverse backgrounds but must be defined with these students and communities to avoid assuming their needs and dictating what they should achieve.

Resistance as Opposition

Resistance as opposition most often takes the form of protests and social mobilization (Shahjahan, 2014). Protests have occurred on college campuses since the beginning of higher education. In the early colonial days, students rebelled against restrictive practices of *in loco parentis* and in the era of The Civil

Rights Movement, students protested in support of equal rights (Broadhurst, 2014). Indeed, campuses have long been a place where students push against the boundaries of society. Today, students protest to advance the rights of marginalized populations and against market forces encroaching upon higher education. For example, during my time in higher education, I have seen students protest funding cuts to liberal arts education, support faculty union contracts, advocated for more rights for adjunct faculty, and fought for better treatment of Students of Color. These protests were met with frustration from institution administrators and faculty that saw such protests as disruptive to the learning of *Other* students. These Institutional actors (i.e., administrators) also often dismissed student protestors as too ideological, who did not fully understand how the system works. The response to student protests as a form of resistance warrants considering through the lens of what types of cultural capital receive value within institutions. Students without dominant forms of cultural capital might find the only way to have their voices heard on campus is through organized protests, especially if they are from a minoritized group. Rather than seeing these protests as disruptions, institutions should embrace their role in questioning these practices and view protests as an opportunity to engage students in critical dialogue around both societal and institutional issues. Institutions should engage in protests challenging these dominant norms and the imposition of neoliberal values upon their campuses, rather than acquiescing for fear of being viewed as too liberal.

Resistance as Transformation

Resistance as transformation would require higher education to not just push against current systems of oppression, but to entirely transform (Shahjahan, 2014). What such a transformation might look like is an abstract concept beyond the scope of this paper; however, Stein (2019) offers some guidance in reimagining higher education outside

of the “dominant imaginary” (p. 1). Stein (2019) illustrates how this transformation would require institutions to look beyond the current systems and frames of reference with their underlying colonialist and neoliberalist foundations, and he argues that solutions created within the current system will likely only address the symptoms and not the root causes of oppression. Accordingly, this process would require not just rethinking the system of higher education but rethinking the orienting questions and purposes that serve as the basis for institutions (Stein, 2019). It would also involve openly recognizing past mistakes and injustices perpetuated by institutions and being open to being taught by difference rather than learning from difference (Bruce, 2013; Stein, 2019). These are lofty undertakings within the current socioeconomic climate and within the United States, which steadfastly holds on to the notions of meritocracy and individualism. However, if institutions truly seek to serve as a pathway to opportunity rather than a barrier, then these questions are integral.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined how postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital intersect with higher education and how these forces mold higher education into a tool of oppression by limiting access and attainment to historically underserved populations. As economic and social inequality continues to expand in the United States, it is left to institutions to decide if they want to continue to be a tool that perpetuates or disrupts systems of inequality. The influences of postcolonialism and neoliberalism, as well as the preference of dominant forms of cultural capital are present in almost every aspect of college campuses, hindering underserved students’ ability to not only thrive within institutions but also engage in what Shahjahan (2014) terms “new humanism” (p. 220) whereby new ways of being, knowing, and doing focus on positive notions of freedom and power. This focus on freedom and power would allow graduates to find more fulfillment in their work and lives, rather

than simply the attainment of a livable wage.

To shift their focus to helping students achieve this idea of new humanism, institutions must transform the current model of high education, through the acknowledgement of the neoliberal and colonial influences that continue to disenfranchise segments of the U.S population. While Shahjahan's (2014) cultural resistance framework presents ways higher education can disrupt neoliberal and colonial influences, this model leaves open the question of whether it is possible within the current system of higher education to create institutions that work for all students. This is a question that scholars of higher education and administrators must continue to wrestle with, while also questioning their role in either upholding or resisting the current system.

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