Chapter 8

Beyond a "new normal": Covid-19, Black Lives Matter and the remaking of higher education

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> "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" "Black Lives Matter!" "Enough is enough!" "No justice, no peace!" "Shut it down!"

Thunderous chants like these, born of pain, exasperation, incredulity, anger and resolve have been reverberating through the streets of communities of every size across the United States and around the world. Communities everywhere have been jolted into renewed awareness of systemic racism by the doubly deadly convergence of the Covid-19 global pandemic, whose impacts disparately affect people of colour, and a new concatenation of killings of Black and Brown people by police, examples of which are all too easy to find seemingly in every country (Inclusion Project 2020).

After the pandemic first exploded in the United States in March 2020 (it is growing again at a record pace as we write, in mid-July 2020), the global higher education community's angst was focused on how and when universities would "recover" from the financial crisis wrought by the pandemic and establish a "new normal" in operations. We have argued elsewhere that such concerns, while no doubt important, fail to address the enduring challenges we face that have been thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic, whose disparate impacts lay bare the structural inequities embedded in the US educational system, reflecting broader and deeper structural inequities that remain pervasive (Cantor and Englot 2020).

US colleges and universities now are demonstrating awareness of this imperative (Anderson 2020). Only time will tell if today's well-intentioned statements of support signal genuine commitment to join with others to do the hard work of dismantling the architecture of segregation that permeates our culture. But at a moment of clarity like this, when the truth is so raw and undeniable, the higher education community must take swift action to build the momentum needed to effect lasting change reflecting renewed awareness that a "new normal" is far too modest a conception of what is needed (Carnevale et al. 2020a).

A RECKONING WITH SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

"Institutional transformation" is a more apt description of what is needed, transcending boundaries within the academy and between the academy and the world, with an eye towards collective work to advance equity and impact, to cement the identity of our institutions – each in its own way – and to build their role as indispensable partners in improving the human condition. We suggest that there are four inextricably intertwined aspects to the necessary transformation, all aimed at the public good (Cantor 2020). First, we need to diversify the student body and faculty, building a critical mass of representation so that our demographics better reflect those of our communities. Second, we need to recognise and reward publicly engaged scholarship, giving scholarship "a richer, more vital meaning", in the words of the late great Ernest L. Boyer (Boyer 1990). Third, we need to cultivate genuinely reciprocal, sustained relationships between our universities and our communities (as the stable, committed anchors of equitable growth and opportunity). Fourth, we need to learn to overcome our competitive instincts and collaborate across an ecosystem of institutions, organisations and sectors (all committed to a movement of change).

Yet resisting the urge to merely return to normal is no small matter, especially when the consistent message from US political leaders flies in the face of every truth there is about what we need to do to continue saving lives during a still-active pandemic that has already killed on the order of 130 000 people in the US and more than a half-million worldwide, while also denying the very existence of systemic racism (Baker and Haberman 2020; Scherer and Dawsey 2020). As Nicholas Kristof wrote in a column titled, "Crumbs for the hungry, windfalls for the rich", even US Government efforts purportedly aimed at helping those most gravely affected by the economic collapse caused by the pandemic are being twisted to reinforce prevailing power structures (Kristof 2020). This is occurring side by side with more than the usual recognition of the disparate impact of the pandemic on precisely the communities most disadvantaged by that very status quo – black and brown urban centres; Indigenous tribal communities; Asian American communities facing the bigotry of stigmatisation; immigrant farmworkers; rural towns with meat-packing plants; and "essential workers" in grocery stores and nursing homes (Artiga et al. 2020) – reflecting decades of systemic failure to embrace the safety nets needed in the United States, not to mention failure to level the path to prosperity (Porter 2020).

Proactive and innovative investments are needed to create genuine opportunity beyond a safety net – investments that, prior to the pandemic, were being proposed to change the future educational, social and economic outlooks (Tienda 2016) for the fastest growing parts of the US population (Frey 2015). Even before the toll of the pandemic, many in the US recognised that to pay for the next generation's social and economic security in retirement would require constructing a more equitable educational and economic roadmap for social mobility among that next generation (Carnevale and Smith 2016). As Mary Kay Henry, President of Service Employees International Union, asked David Gelles in an interview for the *New York Times*, "Are we going to return to a status quo that was not good for the majority of US families? Or are we going to use this shock to our system to create the real structural change that we need?" (Gelles 2020).

We wish, here, to ask those same questions about the road to recovery vis-à-vis the educational status quo and the new majority being educated in our primary and secondary schools that needs and deserves a genuinely viable path to post-secondary attainment and the social mobility that it affords (Carnevale et al. 2020b). What does that kind of transformation look like?

On the ground in Newark, New Jersey, we can see that it must start with the fundamental realities of everyday life. Newark is a city that characterises the gross inequities of the US: 85% of residents are Black or Brown, the poverty rate is 28% and nearly one in five people do not have health insurance – all in a city situated in the New York City metropolitan area, one of the most prosperous areas in a country where nationally the rates of poverty and lack of access to health care are less than half what they are in Newark, while the State of New Jersey's rates are even lower (U.S. Census Bureau 2020a). These disparities in life circumstances reflect gross disparities in opportunity that are intensely racialised. They play out every day in the form of constraints that people of colour face in access to housing, education, technology, legal representation, and health care – every domain of life – but very tangibly in cumulative disparities in wealth. In New Jersey, for example, white families have a median net worth of US$352 000, which stands in staggering contrast to the US$7 300 median for Latinx[51] families and US$6 100 median for Black families (New Jersey Institute for Social Justice 2020: 1).

The Covid-19 pandemic and resurgent Black Lives Matter movement are demonstrating unequivocally that these are not just challenges for Black and Brown people; they are challenges for us all. For US higher education, this acceptance of responsibility must go back at least to the Morrill Acts of the late 1800s, which enabled higher education to benefit directly from the theft and re-appropriation of land from Indigenous nations to found the nation's system of land-grant universities (Lee and Ahtone 2020), as well as to the slave labour that built many universities (Georgetown University 2015; Rutgers University 2015). Transparency about the past must motivate commitments in the present to leverage our physical, financial, human and intellectual capital in partnership with others to combat racism and advance social mobility in the communities where we are located.

Doing this entails engaging deeply with public, private and non-profit sector partners in collective, place-based work that focuses on the roots of racism and social stagnation. In a city like Newark, working on housing opportunity is an obvious choice because housing is the source of much of US citizens' wealth, accumulating over a lifetime and across generations through the acquisition of real estate. Yet despite civil rights legislation that has been in effect for upwards of a half-century, progress in assuring equal opportunity in housing remains a distant dream. Today's segregation of neighbourhoods in cities across the US is the result of a combination of *de facto* choices of individuals with regard to where they want to live, abetted by generations of *de jure* federal, state and local laws designed to segregate white families from families of colour (Rothstein 2017). For example, while 77% of New Jersey's white households own a home, only 41% of Black households do. Building

51. "Latinx" is a term increasingly used in the US to refer to people of Latin American background, employing a gender-neutral "x" rather than the gendered "o" or "a" ending.

on the legacy of slavery, structural factors that have suppressed real estate wealth accumulation by Black and Brown people while creating patterns of deeply segregated neighbourhoods include racially restrictive land covenants, exclusion from certain veterans' benefits, exclusionary real estate sales and financing practices – known collectively as "redlining" – and predatory lending practices (New Jersey Institute for Social Justice 2020: 2).

While many US cities have grappled for decades with the degree to which such policies and practices continue to mire progress towards eliminating housing inequities, Newark's Mayor Ras J. Baraka has made achieving equitable growth one of the city's highest priorities. He has formed an Equitable Growth Commission to advise him and the city's elected Municipal Council on developing policies to mitigate gentrification in Newark, as housing costs rise with population growth in the New York City metropolitan area and more people are being priced out of living in the area's core. The highly inclusive commission includes Rutgers-Newark law professor David Troutt, whose Center for Law, Inequality, and Metropolitan Equity received strategic support from the university to conduct the policy research that ultimately led to the commission's founding. The commission also includes appointees from global corporations such as Prudential, which is headquartered in Newark; real estate developers; community-based non-profit organisations that provide essential services to lower-income residents; state and regional housing advocate groups; and Rutgers-Newark business professor Kevin Lyons (City of Newark 2018).

Housing opportunity goes hand in hand with educational opportunity in the US because primary and secondary schools are funded primarily by taxes paid by residents on their real estate. This creates inequalities that can last generations. New Jersey's primary and secondary schools are among the most segregated in the US, more so than any of the former Confederacy of southern states that fought in the US Civil War to preserve slavery. Today, nearly half of New Jersey's 585 000 Black and Latinx public school students attend schools that are more than 90% Black and Latinx (Boddie 2019). Ultimately, then, schools in New Jersey tend to be doubly segregated – by race and class – with poorly funded schools being found disproportionately in communities where residents are predominantly Black and Brown.

Cognisant of this, and with strategic financial support from Rutgers-Newark, law professor Elise Boddie created the Inclusion Project, which explores legal avenues to create more inclusive communities. Among them is research into the extent and deleterious effects of segregated schools on students of all backgrounds, as well as how to desegregate them. That work has become foundational for the legal strategy adopted by the New Jersey Coalition for Diverse and Inclusive Schools, a non-profit organisation that has filed a lawsuit against the State of New Jersey to desegregate the schools. Their two-pronged argument is that inclusive schools with diverse student bodies are demonstrably better for all students than segregated schools, and that a New Jersey state law requiring students to attend school in the local school district in which they live is a root cause of the segregation. So, the coalition is suing the state to change that law, a case which is currently being adjudicated (Stein 2020).

An even broader coalition, the Newark City of Learning Collaborative (NCLC), is working to increase college-going among students in Newark's schools, where, as

of 2018, only 21% of Newark residents had earned an associate's (two-year) degree or higher, compared with 46% of all New Jersey residents and 40% of US citizens (U.S. Census Bureau 2020b). With backbone administrative leadership and support provided by Rutgers-Newark, NCLC's cross-sector partnership of community-based organisations, K–12 schools, local government, foundations, corporations and higher education, shares the goal of increasing the proportion of Newark residents with a degree, or credential beyond high school, and ultimately sustaining an ecosystem of support for post-secondary degree attainment. Initiatives driven by NCLC to build that ecosystem include:

- pre-college mentoring and co-curricular engagement to assist high school students in the transition to college;
- a partnership with the Rutgers University–Newark School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) to create a city-wide data project assessing post-secondary trends in Newark that produced *Post-secondary outcomes of Newark high school graduates*, the first comprehensive analysis of college-going patterns for high school graduates from district, charter, county and parochial school sectors (Backstrand and Donaldson 2018);
- a partnership with the Newark Public Library that helps residents build their knowledge base of what it takes to prepare for college throughout the primary and secondary school years;
- a city-wide challenge in co-ordination with the Newark Board of Education and the United Way of Essex County to support high school seniors and their families applying for federal financial aid programmes;
- a city-wide dual enrolment initiative, allowing Newark high school students to earn college credit while still pursuing their high school diplomas, all at no cost to their families.

NCLC's 10 higher education partner institutions in the region work to make the transition to college seamless and affordable for Newark students. For Rutgers-Newark, that includes a funding programme guaranteeing that full tuition and fees will be covered by financial aid for any Newark resident or New Jersey County College transfer student with an adjusted family income of US$60 000 or less. Known as Rutgers University–Newark Talent & Opportunity Pathways (RU-N to the TOP), it has helped more than double the representation of students from Newark at the university since 2013 to the present level of 14.5% of all undergraduates.

Complementing these hyper-local initiatives are collaborative efforts to increase educational opportunity for other groups statewide who face systemic racism. One such group is undocumented students – individuals who were brought to the US as children without standard immigration documentation, but who effectively know no other home country. Living with the recurring threat of deportation owing to torturous vicissitudes of US immigration policy, undocumented students number nearly half a million in the US and 20 000 in New Jersey alone (Presidents' Alliance 2020). Rutgers-Newark advocates for them nationally, along with several hundred other college and university leaders, through the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration for policy changes that will remove the threat of deportation and create a pathway to US citizenship for undocumented students. Like some other institutions, Rutgers-Newark also deploys significant resources to

provide financial support for them, as current US policy makes them ineligible for federal financial aid for college.

Likewise, there are clusters of institutions collaborating to increase educational opportunity for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals through a small handful of programmes across the US (RAND Corporation 2020). Rutgers-Newark is the hub of one of the largest such networks, the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP) Program, which is co-ordinating "stackable" two-year and four-year higher education institutions to grant college degrees (Kendall 2020). In addition to teaching in seven New Jersey prison facilities, NJ-STEP is working with non-profit groups like the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and the Vera Institute, as our publicly engaged faculty and staff advocate for voting rights, train re-entry entrepreneurs and push the state and our nation to provide equitable growth pathways, especially for those from Black and Brown communities that have disproportionately high incarceration rates.

Indeed, mass incarceration warrants collective action in and of itself, having eviscerated communities across the US, where one in three Black men nationally is projected to serve time in prison at some point in their lives, reflecting a rate of imprisonment two-and-a-half times that of Latino men and six times that of whites (La Vigne et al. 2015). There is no shortage of partners in our community eager to engage with our faculty, staff and students in taking collective action on policing and criminal justice reform, as well as increasing educational opportunities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals to build the skills and rightfully gain employment, so that their communities can reap the benefits of their talents (Davis et al. 2013). Such partnerships include the Newark Public Safety Collaborative, in which faculty and staff members from the Rutgers-Newark School of Criminal Justice have joined with local law enforcement and neighbourhood groups to collect and analyse hyper-local data on the characteristics of crime hotspots, then collectively focus on changing those characteristics as a way to strengthen neighbourhoods while reducing crime, supported by community-based "street teams" – community members who help the aggrieved find ways forward because they empathise with the struggle to survive in a world where the odds always seem to be stacked against you (Newark Public Safety Collaborative 2020).

Indeed, the hyper-local knowledge and credibility of the street teams work on a much larger scale, too. When Newark's own recent protest in support of the Black Lives Matter movement drew 12 000 people onto the streets of downtown, the marchers' combination of rage and peaceful resolve – and the protest's virtual absence of violence – were noted by observers whose familiarity with such events in Newark was limited to the 1967 Rebellion that resulted in 26 deaths and millions of dollars in damage (Tully and Armstrong 2020). That was due in no small part to street teams dispersed in groups throughout the crowd, righteously enraged as everyone else, as protest organiser Larry Hamm attested, but also righteously resolved to help their fellow marchers maintain their focus on the real reason they were there: to make the case for justice and for peace.

If universities are to play a meaningful role on the other side of the inflection point in history the world is experiencing right now, when up until now we have been

part and parcel of the social systems that have perpetuated racism and inequity, we should aspire to that level of empathy for and with our communities, and to that level of commitment to working in true partnership with them to achieve justice, equity and peace (Maurrasse 2020).

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