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# Expanding the Conversation: The Value Proposition of For-Profit Institutions for African-American Post-Secondary Students

## **About the Author(s)**

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**Mario Jackson, Ed.D.** is an educator with over 15 years of experience in higher education teaching and administration. He has excelled in both the traditional and proprietary sectors where colleagues have recognized him for cultivating faculty development and student success. Currently, he leads institutional research at Strayer University where his team's work informs decision-making across all academic and operational units at the institution.

## **Keywords**

proprietary education, traditional education, non-traditional students, African-American students, higher education, U.S. higher education system



## EXPANDING THE CONVERSATION: THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

**Thomasina O. Lawson**, Webster University  
**Mario Jackson**, Strayer University

### **Abstract**

This article presents a different discourse to promote access to and equity in higher education by re-examining the value of for-profit education and its attractiveness to African-American students underserved by traditional institutions. The authors suggest that for-profit institutions face similar challenges to traditional schools in the matriculation of African-American students but to a larger degree. Guided by the spirit of researchers Asa G. Hilliard and Barbara Sizemore, the article offers a progressive view of improving African-American students' access to higher education. Additionally, the article suggests ways to engage in meaningful conversations on how to improve higher education by replacing traditional standards of academia at non-traditional institutions. The lack of value for proprietary education's role in educating African-American students distracts from the real issue of how to best support students across existing sectors. Last, the authors offer a contemporary perspective on students' needs and achievements as a framework for developing alternatives to the dated minority student success paradigm. The article concludes with implications for future scholars and practitioners in the higher education system.

*Keywords:* proprietary education, traditional education, non-traditional students, African-American students, higher education, U.S. higher education system

### **Introduction**

As evidenced in the scholarly work of Asa G. Hilliard and Barbara K. Sizemore, the call to radically reform views and practices in K–12 and higher education is of paramount importance. Both scholars urge re-imagining teaching in ways that inspire, strengthen and drive African-American students to learn in a manner that increases self-efficacy. Hilliard (1982) asserted that teachers have a duty to close the gap between intelligence and student success. Sizemore (1970) espoused a similar sentiment in the belief that "group mobility" was the conduit for African-American students to achieve academic success. Over three decades later, the same call to action continues. Colgren and Sappington (2015) argue for a culturally responsive pedagogy to close the achievement gap of marginalized students. In this view, college and university educators and administrators can answer the call to action by expanding approaches to educational access and equity respective to the contemporary landscape of higher education.

### **Purpose of the Paper**

Poor academic preparation and traditional standards of academia have limited access to post-secondary education for some African–American students. In this manuscript, the authors suggest reshaping the current for-profit higher education discourses to include the value provided to African-American students not served by traditional post-secondary institutions. Moreover, the authors encourage redefining the scope of academic success for minorities, particularly African-American students. The implications and recommendations aim to debunk restrictive ideologies

held by scholars and practitioners in the United States higher education system that limits minority students' ability to receive quality post-secondary education and to inspire educators and administrators to reach beyond the confines of traditional perspectives.

### **Impaired Discourses of For-Profit Education**

Colleges and universities across the nation face the challenge of educating students at varying levels of academic preparedness. Growing numbers of students seeking higher education are less prepared to handle the academic rigor demanded. Viewed as the strongest indicator of success by many colleges and universities, results on entrance exams like the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) significantly affect students' access to gaining post-secondary degrees. These exams are a major factor in determining entrance into higher education institutions as well as the types of institutions that will grant admittance. Subedi and Powell (2016) found that in 2014, the percentage of students in the United States who were college-ready in ACT reading and ACT mathematics was 44% and 43%, respectively (p. 72). Marginalized populations are less likely to be accepted because institutions may hold misleading beliefs that lower scores on standardized tests are an indicator of lack of college readiness. Watson et al. (2002) cite poor K–12 educational experiences for low standardized test scores stating, “far too many students have not been properly trained in public school and are unable to understand the process within higher education in order to take full advantage of the system” (p. 65). If admitted, minority students are challenged to quickly address inadequacies that could impede their success in college, such as through placement in non-credit-earning remedial coursework.

According to 2017 report entitled *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*, African-American students accounted for 14% of total undergraduate enrollment in 2014 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). This proportion pales in comparison to White students, who represented more than 50% of the undergraduate enrollment population that year (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Given the growing evolution of an information-based economy that requires a bachelor's degree, it is imperative that equitable opportunities and access to higher education are available to increase admission and enrollment of minorities to higher education institutions.

Although many traditional two-year and four-year colleges and universities have made strides toward improving educational outcomes for minority students, many more opportunities remain. The spirit of Sizemore and Hilliard's work provides both theoretical and practical approaches to solving enduring problems in the space of higher education for African-American students. Both scholars advocated for radical changes to educational policy and practice, viewed through the contemporary lens of social disruption. The authors of this article also suggest changes be made to the current discourse, including recognizing the value for-profit higher education plays in educating African-American students.

Current views of the proprietary education sector exhibit pessimism at large and consider proprietary education to be second rate, predatory, exploitive, and apathetic about student outcomes. Conversations become particularly tense around the deceptive recruitment practices, costly tuition fees, and lackluster graduation rates demonstrated by institutions that have closed their doors and left students without credentials and saddled with insurmountable debt. While reforms are needed to remove the irresponsible players from the for-profit space, the authors believe that these views are incomplete, as they do not acknowledge the fundamental factors that are attracting African-American students to pursue for-profit colleges and universities.

The current dialogue does not focus on how to serve best the needs of students with limited access to traditional colleges and universities who choose for-profit education to improve their chances of pursuing educational and career goals and earning a family-sustaining wage. In addition to class flexibility for working and non-traditional students, online courses and corporate partnerships for reimbursement, Goldrick-Rab (as cited by Quinlan, 2015) suggests that minority students are attracted to for-profit institutions because “traditional systems haven’t worked for them” (para. 3). The authors support changes to the existing higher education frameworks and suggest a closer examination of the role for-profit education plays in educating students who lack access to traditional educational pathways.

### **Correcting Impairments to the Discourses**

Between 2000 and 2004, enrollment of undergraduate African-American and Hispanic students increased two-fold. Equally, enrollment data analyzed during this time indicated enrollment growth among other ethnic groups, including Whites and American Indians/Alaska Natives (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Of the total undergraduate enrollment in 2014, roughly a third of African-American students attended for-profit institutions compared to private and public non-profit colleges and universities. The findings indicated that over half a million undergraduate African-American students chose for-profit institutions (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). An analysis of data from the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) conducted by Black Issues in Higher Education concluded that proprietary institutions have significantly increased their market share for all students but particularly for underrepresented minorities, including African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians.

Growth in interest in proprietary institutions could be due to several factors. However, there is a lack of empirical research in this area. Some of the possible contributing factors will be explored later in the article. While there are multiple reasons for this growth, the authors hypothesize that the primary reason African-American students choose proprietary institutions is directly related to access and the lack thereof. The authors assert that proprietary institutions provide an alternative path for African-Americans and other minority students to earn college degrees when traditional opportunities do not exist.

Acknowledging the valuable role proprietary institutions play in educating African-American students facilitates the development of strategies that equalize minority students’ access to higher education. The traditional higher education institution community at large must eliminate the blind spot impeding the view and value of for-profit education. It is not the authors’ intention to promote valuing one sector over the other but to insert important observations of positive outcomes for African-American students into the conversations about for-profit education. By doing so, the authors seek to sharpen the view of the for-profit industry and shrink the disparities in access to higher education for African-American students.

While statistical analysis by NCES and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) continues to demonstrate that African Americans hold the largest share of undergraduate enrollment at proprietary institutions, the data do not account for those students who were unable to gain access to education in the public, non-profit sector. Procuring such data is difficult, as gatekeepers do not want to share the alarming numbers. In response to the lack of accurate data to inform stakeholders, Yaffe (2015) hopes the “bleakness of the statistical picture may itself be an impetus to change” (p. 8).

Conversations about the value of for-profit education must focus on academic quality and the student experience. The current debate emphasizes unsavory recruitment practices and expensive tuition costs. Claims of predatory recruitment and substantial tuition rates are valid,

and legislative reform is needed to address such practices. However, it is the authors' position that most of the conversations surrounding the role proprietary institutions play in educating African-American students remain incomplete. Academia has yet to acknowledge the role proprietary institutions have played in redefining and popularizing online learning. The sector's ability to offer programs of student interest has influenced how non-proprietary institutions develop, market, and deliver online learning programs.

### **A Closer Look with Fresh Eyes**

It is important to reiterate that the authors acknowledge the nefarious practices some proprietary institutions have used to recruit and enroll students and do not condone these practices. This section extends the conversation by inserting new topics into the current discourse regarding how proprietary institutions are more appealing to minority students, specifically those who were denied access to schools in traditional sectors. Supporting the hypothesis that the primary reason African-American students choose proprietary institutions is directly related to access and the lack thereof, it is the authors' assertion that certain characteristics of for-profit education that benefit African-American students are seldom discussed. Some of these features include the sector's capacity to support the needs of non-traditional students, the ability to offer majors that meet students' interests and employer demands, and the exposure to faculty and staff who provide extensive academic development to address the challenges of teaching students lacking college preparedness.

### **Non-Traditional Students**

Rawlston-Wilson, Saavedra, and Chauhan (2014) reported that 65% of African-American undergraduate students were identified as nontraditional students. NCES defines nontraditional students as those meeting at least one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into post-secondary education attends college part-time, works full-time, is financially independent for financial aid purposes, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma. NCES has expanded the definition to include age as the defining characteristic for this population. NCES posits that "age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives" (p. 13).

Fairchild (2003) noted that nontraditional students tend to decide to pursue higher education to obtain new job-related skills or to prepare for a career change. They have determined there will be a return on their investment of time, money, and effort. Benschoff and Lewis (1992) found that nontraditional students value opportunities to integrate academic learning with life and work experiences. Choy's (2002) research using the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies, which followed cohorts of students enrolling in postsecondary education for the first time in the school years 1989–1990 and 1995–1996, reported that two-thirds of highly nontraditional students considered themselves primarily employees and not students. With this perspective, for-profit institutions offering asynchronous courses that allow students the flexibility to access them on demand using robust online learning management systems are appealing. Bailey, Badway, and Gumport (2001) underscore the attractiveness of proprietary education to nontraditional students, stating that for-profit institutions offer "a more streamlined, responsive and customer-oriented approach to delivering post-secondary educational services" (p. 47).

### **Practicality of Majors**

Traditional four-year colleges' and universities' undergraduate curricula typically consist of general education and major fields of study focused on liberal arts. General education is purposed to provide students with broad knowledge and prepare them to be engaged and informed citizens (Eckel & King, 2004). The general education requirement is most commonly delivered using a common core curriculum through which all undergraduates take the same courses. The requirements typically constitute between one-quarter and one-half of a student's courses, depending upon the institution. Students can choose their majors either upon enrolling or after completing their second year of studies, depending upon institutional policy (Eckel & King, 2004).

While traditional four-year higher education institutions continue to offer majors focused on liberal arts, for-profit institutions offer a more specialized focus on professional training. In interviews Farrell (2003) conducted, students reported that the practicality of classes that focus on preparing for a specific career versus general education classes to fulfill requirements was an important factor. The ability of for-profit colleges to integrate real-world applicability of the skills they teach in the curriculum resonates with minority students because for some, "economic concerns take precedence over intellectual development" (p. 3).

### **Faculty and Staff**

It is the authors' experience that faculty teaching at for-profit colleges and universities face unique challenges teaching students who may lack basic writing or math skills, have suffered emotional trauma from negative educational or familial experiences, and often lack the resilience required to persist for college success. The authors recognize that similar student profiles exist in the traditional institutions but believe that the proportion of such students is greater among the for-profit sector since many were denied access to public institutions. Lack of preparation for the college experience coupled with the emotional wounds of failed attempts at obtaining a post-secondary degree causes many minority students to require more focus and attention to help them matriculate. It is the authors' opinion that this is a daunting task for dedicated faculty who must address the academic and socio-emotional needs of the students they teach.

For African-American educators, this burden often referred to as the "invisible tax," is even more heightened. Black students may seek out help or advice from Black professors instead of their academic advisors. Recognizing the need and desire for specific approaches to teaching and supporting non-traditional students' academic development and success, for-profit institutions have established nurturing networks that extend beyond traditional office hours. Academic services such as tutoring, writing labs, and disability support services are offered, often with access on ground or online. For these reasons, it is the authors' view that the negative opinion of for-profit education devalues educators working in the proprietary sectors. That lack of value perpetuates a second-class view of the work required to achieve student success.

Failure to acknowledge the value the for-profit sector contributes to providing educational access to minority students implies complicity for ignoring minority students who are underserved in the higher education community. By failing to highlight this value, stakeholders in academia are guilty of tacitly upholding social and pedagogical classism. Hilliard (1989) declared, "There are no absolute critical periods with human beings. It is never too late to learn" (p. 197). Acknowledgment of the institutions that are committed to supporting Hillard's declaration provides an opportunity for all to critically evaluate the existing landscape.

### **Implications for Scholars and Practitioners**

Hilliard (1995) called for an examination of the educational system, stating, "...there is a failure to examine the educational service systems systematically. There is a failure to account for the political and economic arrangements that impose themselves on the context of teaching and learning" (p. 4). Hilliard's call endures in the current climate of politics' impacting contemporary higher education. The following recommendations are offered for further research and examination of practice.

First, policymakers must broaden access to post-secondary education as a matter of education policy through fiscal commitments to student preparation, both academically and financially. Educational policy at the federal, state and institutional levels is dictated by funding. The current structure, deeply rooted in money, suggests that the only clear path to change is disruption to the system at the fundamental level. Considering that such a transformation takes time, changes can be made at the micro level. For example, both traditional and nontraditional proprietary institutions can increase communication and presence with middle and high school counselors, educators, parents, and students. This communication and presence should break down the walls of the unknown and provide information on topics such as admission, financial aid, and academic opportunities. Starting these conversations will decrease the apprehension of minority students and how they perceive themselves as being successful in college.

Second, the authors suggest a redefinition of student success in practices that reject archaic academic ideologies. Post-secondary education is highly evaluative; the assessment of competence is based on examinations, assignments, and internships (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Writing in the context of teacher education, Hillard (1995) posits that "school itself has been a tool to prevent educational advancement and to ensure domination" (p.13). This statement also applies to the larger issue of preventing wider access to education for African-American students. The foundations of academia serve to keep the dominant culture in power. Moreover, White male patriarchs regulate access to knowledge and advancement, as Hilliard described it.

The way academia at large views success and how students see success on a personal level are misaligned. Equally complicating the matter is that faculty, administrators, and regulators each hold conflicting views of student success. Hence, the authors suggest that students provide the blueprint for success and institutions navigate the route required to arrive at the desired destination. Some strategies for doing so include expanding the use of faculty as student mentors, increasing the use of analytics and technologies for academic development and support, and enhancing the integration of social-emotional learning into program curricula.

Last, the authors recommend that case and longitudinal studies that examine the full academic experience of African-American students who are succeeding at for-profit institutions are needed to fill the existing gap in the current body of literature. As discussed, the authors' conflict with the current debate is that surface-level conversations about recruiting and marketing practices, along with high amounts of student debt, overshadow the work for-profit educators do to help African-American students achieve baccalaureate degrees. Consequently, scant empirical research is available profiling first-hand accounts of minority students' experiences at for-profit colleges and universities. Ethnographic studies focused on this population can enrich the body of literature through which educators and administrators can accurately and fairly view proprietary education.



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