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Message from the Senior Editor

## Community Engagement and Partnership in the Age of Neo-Inequality

Paul M. Ong

The need for community engagement and partnership is greater than ever because much has changed since the 1968–9 strike by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley. The struggle's greatest achievement has been the establishment of ethnic studies, but racial inequality has remained a persistent problem, taking on much more complex and complicated structure of multiracial stratification. Much of this has been widely documented elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> What is equally important, in my opinion, is the larger context, the changes in the economy and the institution of higher education that must be addressed and incorporated into our work.

The economy has become significantly more unequal, reaching levels not seen since nearly a century ago.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in the Gini index for income, which has values ranging from 0 (complete equality) to 1 (complete inequality). The coefficient climbed from 0.386 in 1968 to 0.482 in 2017,<sup>3</sup> a change that many experts find alarming. A more intuitive way of representing the widening divide is to track the distribution of total income to the bottom 40 percent of households compare with the top 5 percent. Over this period, the share at the lower end shrunk from 15 percent to 11 percent, while the proportion going to the affluent expanded from 16 percent to 22 percent. The rich indeed have become richer, as the poor have become poorer. The last half century has also been unkind to the middle class. The typical household (the one at the median) experienced anemic increase in real income, averaging about a half of percentage point per year, only a fraction of the growth the two decades after World War II.

The institution of higher learning has also been transformed, paralleling economic disparity. Having a college degree has become considerably more important in the labor market. According to one study, the gap between individuals holding only a high school education and those with bachelor's degrees increased from 25 percent in 1973 to 42 percent in 2003 among males, and from 38 percent to 46 percent among females.<sup>4</sup> The "educational premium" has continued to grow, with recent college graduates earning approximately one and three-quarters as much as young high school graduates in 2017.<sup>5</sup> This earnings disparity has fueled a jump in college enrollment from 8.0 million in 1968 to 16.9 million in 2016,<sup>6</sup> with a concomitant escalation in the participation rates in postsecondary schools and programs among recent high school graduates from 54 percent to 70 percent. While the increase in attendance at institutions of higher learning can be viewed as a positive, it came at a high cost. The average for tuition, fees, room, and board climbed in real (inflation adjusted) dollars from less than 10,000 dollars for the 1968–9 academic year to more than 23,000 dollars in 2017–18, growing more than three times faster than median household income.<sup>7</sup> This forced many to borrow to finance schooling. One cohort study of college graduates found that more than seven in ten had taken out a loan, and more than six in ten were still in debt four years later, with an average balance of \$41,900.<sup>8</sup> By 2018, 44.7 million individuals had student loans totaling one and a half trillion dollars, a sum second only to home mortgages.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that the total will continue unless there is a major policy intervention.

Equally problematic is higher education's complicity in reproducing inequality.<sup>10</sup> There is no question that attending elite colleges and universities confers tremendous economic advantages, even to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. One study found that these institutions are the most effective in moving students from the bottom of the income ladder to the top. Unfortunately, the authors also found that "the top universities are largely closed to the poor" and accepting "fewer and fewer kids from poor families."<sup>11</sup> Instead, minority and low-income students are disproportionately concentrated in two-year community colleges, four-year institutions with few resources and questionable for-profit schools. Student debts are especially problematic for those from a disadvantaged background. According to the Federal Reserve Board, "borrowers who were first-generation college students are more likely to be behind on their payments than those with a parent who completed college," and among those under thirty years old, the former are more than four times as likely to be in the rear than the latter.<sup>12</sup>

Income and wealth disparities and competition for enrollment in elite colleges and university have produced a paradoxical politics. Rather than focusing on class inequalities, this nation has veered toward cultural wars, white nationalism, and subversion of civil rights. Economic angst, uncertainty, and losses have bred reactionary movements that undermine the progressive gains made in the 1960s, and exacerbate racial marginalization. This includes attacks on affirmative action and diversity programs within higher education. Ethnic studies have been relatively insulated from these attacks (so far), but must be vigilant to safeguard the victories rooted in the TWLF strikes. Moreover, those of us on campus share a common liability with communities of color beyond campus borders, thus must engage in the larger political battles. We must not hunker down behind the ivy walls during this era of the New Gilded Age and divisive racial scapegoating. We must redefine and adapt our mission within the broader macroeconomic and macropolitical challenges, else we are complicit through inaction.

Engagement can take on many forms. We should participate as individuals by lending support, volunteering time, and donating funds to worthy causes. These critical actions maintain and strengthen democracy and civil society. We can do more beyond personal efforts by drawing on the unique capacities that come with our profession within the academy. As faculty members of the academy we can contribute through research and teaching. Of course, colleges and universities don't have a monopoly on the production and transmission of knowledge, but we have the privilege of being paid to pursue these activities. Responsibility should accompany privilege. One core tenet of the early ethnic studies movement is that the academy and its members have a moral responsibility to engage in struggles to combat social, political, and economic injustices both on and off campus.

Three principles should guide community engagement. The first is that we should work in partnership with communities, starting with those that we have the greatest ties and commonalities. For AAPI scholars, both within and outside of Asian American Studies, this often means working directly with AAPI communities. Engagement should be done collaboratively, through meaningful and equitable partnerships that combine complementary strengths. The second principle is to extend the work with other communities of color and marginalized populations. The success of the TWLF strikes was due in part to a multiracial coalition. Coalitions must extend beyond just providing moral support to incorporating broader concerns into engaged scholarship. The third principle

is to influence public discourse and policies. Social change comes in different forms and from diverse sources. Grassroots efforts need to be matched with those aimed at informing and influencing elected officials and decision makers. Equally important, we need to reach a broader audience through traditional and social media, by framing narratives that give voice to those that have been excluded and ignored.

Many of the preceding points are not new nor original. They are echoed in the articles in this special issue of *AAPI Nexus*. The challenge is effective implementation by overcoming the many barriers identified by the authors. My fellow editors and I hope that this publication can further the continuing struggle to transform the academy in the 1968–9 spirit of “serving the people.”

## Notes

Please note the authors of this resource paper are listed in alphabetical order.

- <sup>1</sup> For a summary of the literature, see Paul M. Ong and Silvia R. Gonzalez. 2019. *Uneven Urbanscape: Spatial Structures and Ethnoracial Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For more details on AAPIs, see Paul M. Ong. 2016. "Asian American Pacific Islander Economic Justice." *AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community* 14(1): 30–48.
- <sup>2</sup> Piketty, Thomas. 2015. "About Capital in the Twenty-First Century." *American Economic Review* 105(5): 48–53; Saez, Emmanuel, and Gabriel Zucman. 2016. "Wealth Inequality in the United States since 1913: Evidence from Capitalized Income Tax Data." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131(2): 519–78.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1968 to 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplements, [www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/income-poverty/p60-263.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/income-poverty/p60-263.html).
- <sup>4</sup> Author's calculations of empirical findings from Economic Policy Institute. 2004. "The State of Working America 2004/2005," [www.epi.org/publication/books\\_swa2004/](http://www.epi.org/publication/books_swa2004/).
- <sup>5</sup> Economic Policy Institute. 2019. "State of Working America Wages 2018," [www.epi.org/publication/state-of-american-wages-2018/](http://www.epi.org/publication/state-of-american-wages-2018/).
- <sup>6</sup> National Center for Education Statistics: "Table 173," <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d00/dt173.asp>  
-- "Table 303.70," [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_303.70.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_303.70.asp); "Table 302.20," [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_302.20.asp?referer=raceindicators](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_302.20.asp?referer=raceindicators).
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_345.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_345.asp) and <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>. Inflation adjustment made using the consumer price index for February 1968 and February 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> Cominole, Melissa, Shepherd, Bryan, and Peter Siegel. 2015. "2008/12 Baccalaureate and beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B: 08/12). Data File Documentation. NCES 2015-141." National Center for Education Statistics.
- <sup>9</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SLOAS>.
- <sup>10</sup> Witteveen, Dirk, and Paul Attewell. 2017. "Family Background and Earnings Inequality among College Graduates." *Social Forces* 95(4): 1539–76; Bloome, Deirdre, Dyer, Shauna, and Xiang Zhou. 2018. "Educational Inequality, Educational Expansion, and Intergenerational Income Persistence in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 83(6): 1215–53.

- <sup>11</sup> Chetty, Raj, Friedman, John, Saez, Emmanuel, Turner, Nicholas, and Danny Yagan, 2017. "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility," NBER Working Paper No. 23618, revised version, December.
- <sup>12</sup> Federal Reserve Board. 2018. "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2017," [www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2018-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2017-student-loans.htm](http://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2018-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2017-student-loans.htm).

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