

## **TOO MANY IN COLLEGE?**

**BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

A week or so ago, I had the privilege of participating in a conversation on NPR about college attendance. Sparked by a conversation in the Chronicle of Higher Education, a group of “experts” were opining that too many people are going to college. Too many? Conservative and racially biased Charles Murray (author of *The Bell Curve*) thinks that too few high school students have the cognition to successfully navigate college attendance. Marty Nemko says it is a cost-benefit thing. Sandy Baum says that everyone should have opportunity and access. Nobody mentions race, but I think it is the elephant in the room. Too many white folks are opining that too many people go to college, but their kids are in college. So do they really mean that too many black folks go to college? Are their objections really about reinforcing a class system?

Here is what we know about the benefits that come from college attendance:

- College graduates have lower unemployment rates than those who did not graduate from college.
- College graduates have higher lifetime earning than those who did not graduate from college.
- College graduates are more likely to vote, and to be civically involved than those who did not graduate from college.
- College graduates are more likely to contribute to philanthropic causes and to volunteer than those who did not graduate from college.

All in all, it seems that college attendance and graduation are value propositions for our society. Of course, the data I cite are average data, which means that everyone has a Diddy story of the high school grad or college dropout who made good, gave back, and all that. By and large, though, college attendance and graduation are worthy goals for our society to encourage.

At the same time, we have done poorly in fully encouraging college attendance and graduation. Forty percent of those 55-64 have either an AA or a BA degree, which means that the United States has the highest rate of college graduation for that age group of any country in the world. Fast forward 30 years and still 40 percent of 25-34 year olds have either an AA or BA degree. This means that our ability to produce college graduates has not improved in 30 years! While we are first for 55-64 year olds, we are tenth for 25-34 year olds. Canada, North Korea, and Spain are among the countries that top our college attendance for young people. They are investing in their educational systems, while we are ignoring ours.

To be sure, there are some young people who are simply not ready for college. But there have been too many barriers to the college attendance of African American students, both historically and contemporaneously. Historically black colleges mainly exist because white folk excluded us from matriculation. Even today, there are students who could not attend college but for the nurturing and remediation that comes with HBCU attendance.

My NPR colleagues said that students who are at the bottom of their high school class are among those who should not go to college. But many in the bottom half of their class are only there because of the poor quality of education that is delivered in inner city high schools. Many students come damaged and with educational deficiencies but are able to remedy their deficiencies with special programs that bring them up to speed. I don't think we should write off a single student, no matter where she fell in her high school distribution. Most young people who are willing to learn can learn if they are enthusiastically encouraged. This is the HBCU story.

I bristle at conversations that speak of restricting access to college, especially when the conversation is not viewed through a racial lens. The fact is that college opens doors for young people, and many young people of color need doors opened for them. If there are too many people going to college, there are not too many black people. I bristle at the notion that we would restrict college access when all evidence suggests that education not only transforms individual lives, but also can transform our world.

African American women play a vital role in the economic health of our nation, just as we did in 1909, when the NAACP was founded. Then, the colored women's club movement was in its ascendancy, with African American women voicing concern about both the uplift of the race and the adequacy of employment opportunities for African Americans. Today, African American women play key roles in advocating for social and economic justice.

Still, it is amazing that on economic matters, the more things change the more they stay the same. African American women are celebrating the appointment of the first black woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company in Ursula Burns. And, the rate of black women's business ownership is rising. Yet this recession is a reminder that economic justice has yet to be attained and that some of the challenges the NAACP faced in 1909 remain challenges today.