

**The Social Construction of College Access:  
Confronting the Technical, Cultural, and Political Barriers to Low Income Students  
of Color**

Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers, Martin Lipton, & Ernest Morrell

Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access  
UCLA

August 2000

Chapter prepared for William G. Tierney & Linda Serra Haggdorn, eds., *Extending Our Reach: Strategies for Increasing Access to College*

When Californians outlawed affirmative action, the University of California (UC) system launched an “Outreach” initiative aimed at creating a diverse pool of high school graduates who are eligible and competitive for the university in a race-neutral admissions environment. A blue ribbon Task Force outlined a four-pronged approach focused on schools in low-income neighborhoods with a history of sending few students to UC. The approach included a) student-centered academic development programs; b) school-centered systemic reforms; c) recruitment and yield activities, and d) research and evaluation that would sharpen our understanding of the challenge and suggest new approaches. The state legislature, eager to minimize the political fall-out of the state’s affirmative action ban, funded the Task Force’s recommendations rather generously. Estimates of new outreach funds to the UC range from \$38M to more than three times that figure, depending on who’s counting and what programs are included.

However, the funding was tied to a challenging accountability requirement: By 2002, UC would need to demonstrate 1) a 100 percent increase the number of graduates from UC Outreach partner schools who are eligible for admission to UC, and 2) a 50 percent increase in the number of graduates who are competitive enough to gain admission to the system’s most selective campuses. To be admitted to a UC campus, students must rank in the top 12.5 percent of the state’s high school graduates, as determined by a combination of grade-point averages (GPA) in a set of college-preparatory course requirements and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. Applicants to Berkeley and Los Angeles must satisfy even more rigorous requirements. For freshmen entering UCLA in 2000, for example, being “competitively eligible” meant scoring among the top 25 percent of the nearly 40,000 applicants, most of

whom met the basic eligibility requirements. Not surprisingly, few students from “educationally disadvantaged” high schools currently meet this high standard.

In the two years following its launch, the UC Outreach leadership focused its resources and energy designing and implementing programs that would enable a more diverse groups of high school graduates attain meet the eligibility criteria. However, it has become increasingly clear that Outreach confronts far more than the technical challenges inherent in program development and delivery, as extraordinary as those challenges are. The low UC admission rates among African American and Latino students is a profound social phenomenon that is deeply rooted in politics, norms, and practices that lie far beyond the reach of even the most sophisticated technical strategies.

This paper uses UCLA’s outreach as a case to illuminate the cultural and political challenges of college preparation programs, as well as their more technical dimensions. We begin by describing UCLA’s comprehensive approach and laying out its conceptual underpinnings. We then use social theory to examine the cultural and political challenges that even these well conceived and generously funded strategies can not touch. We argue that a lens of social theory helps us see the cultural and political forces that translate conventional conceptions of merit into college eligibility, and enables sharp inquiry into how the ideology of merit holds in place the current, uneven distribution of opportunities to learn. However, we also argue that social critique, while liberating, is not in itself a sufficient grounding for new Outreach strategies that construct and support a broadened view of college preparation and merit. Accomplishing a needed reconstruction of merit and the accompanying redistribution (or less threateningly, an even distribution) of high quality teaching and learning will likely require that social theory be broadly integrated with new

understandings of cognitive and socio-cultural theories of learning. Those theories permit us to reexamine and redefine what constitutes academic promise, high quality teaching, high quality knowledge, and high quality learning. To illustrate this perspective, we offer an example of an exploratory project at UCLA that tackles the cultural and political dimensions of outreach, alongside its efforts to meet the more technical challenges. We argue that such projects are necessary to stretch the conceptual and programmatic boundaries imposed by the technical emphasis of many current reform and outreach efforts.

We conclude, however, with an additional challenge. Any new construction of college eligibility will inevitably bring enormous political resistance, as California's recent rejection of affirmative action illustrates. Consequently, a penetrating critique and a pedagogy grounded in socio-cultural theories of learning, as liberating and educationally enriching this may be, will do little to expand college access absent a theory for political action. Moreover, such a theory must inform efforts to gain legitimacy for a broadened conception of merit and official recognition of it in the college admissions process.

#### The Technical Challenge: Implementing a Theory of Action

UCLA Outreach programs touch students in 47 high schools and many of their feeder schools in seven school districts. The bulk of the activities are of two types. Those loosely called "student centered," consist of targeted efforts to help the most promising students in partner schools meet UC requirements and to provide top students with the extra boost they may need to become "competitively eligible" for Berkeley and UCLA. In all 47 schools, selected students receive academic advisement, and those who seem to have strong UC prospects receive an individualized learning plan designed by UC Outreach staff. In a smaller number of schools, the Career Based Outreach Program (CBOP) supports students

more intensively as they seek to become eligible and competitive for UC admission. They are mentored by trained UCLA undergraduates (CBOP Fellows) who are themselves students of color seeking to increase their prospects for admission to graduate school. These undergraduate “Fellows” provide CBOP high school “Scholars” instruction in a Personal Academic Learning System (PALS) that teaches learning tools to enable students to be optimal learners in less than optimal schools and helps students realize that they must be responsible for their own learning and pathway to college. Saturday Academies for CBOP Scholars focus on developing critical reading skills, college-level writing competence, math and analytical thinking, computer skills, research in the sciences, and preparing for college entrance exams. Weekend residential programs at UCLA —called “academic boot camps”—engage the CBOP scholars in completing the steps in complex, college-level assignments such as writing a college level research paper.

The second type of Outreach strategy, called “school centered,” seeks to improve the quality of college preparation that a group of designated “partner” k-12 schools provides to *all* students. The Partner schools are high schools and their feeder schools in the low-income neighborhoods of color in Los Angeles, and Partnership activities focus on all grades, K-12.. The goal is for UCLA faculty and Outreach staff to work collaboratively with educators at the schools to build school’s capacity to ready students for college as well as to work directly with students themselves. So, for example, Outreach’s direct work with students overlaps with teachers’ professional development. One strategy, “instructional coaching,” brings expert teachers affiliated with UCLA together with teachers at Partnership schools. The coaches work one-on-one with Partnership teachers in their classrooms, helping them hone their knowledge and skills as they work with their students. During summer/intercessions

teachers and their expert partners collaborate to refine the teachers' instructional skills while providing students with academic enrichment and college preparation. In all such activities, the focus on student work is paramount. Another strategy is to use student work from high performing schools to calibrate expectations at some of the traditionally lower performing schools. UCLA's Outreach staff also provide assistance to administrators as they develop new programs and change structures that support college preparation—i.e., extend school days; expand academic course offerings and requirements; summer bridge programs, and connections with community colleges. Partnership college “coaches” assist counselors and teachers to foster a college-going culture. Data teams at each school examine patterns of coursetaking and achievement. Parent seminars provide parents with knowledge and skills to help them navigate the college- readiness process with their children.

UCLA grounds this multidimensional set of outreach strategies in a “theory of action” drawn from research about college-readiness and further refined from experience.

Specifically, the campus has relied on evidence from research on college-going behavior and on the relationships among school structure and social organization, curriculum, teaching practices, and student achievement. This literature, combined with considerable prior campus experience, led UCLA's outreach leadership to identify six conditions essential for students to gain admission to and success at UCLA:

- *College-going culture*—where adults and peers see college-going as expected and attainable, and where they see the effort and persistence that preparation for college requires as normal (values, beliefs, and expectations)

- *Rigorous academic curriculum*—A-G courses, honors/AP courses, engagement with significant subject matter (access to knowledge)
- *High-quality teaching*—well-qualified teachers, instruction that engages students in work of high intellectual quality (opportunity to learn)
- *Intensive academic and college-going support*—academic tutoring, SAT prep, coaching about college admissions and financial aid, support beyond the classroom including access to the “hidden curriculum” of the college track)
- *A multicultural, college-going identity*—confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing one’s own identity and connections with one’s home community (bridging students’ multiple worlds; identity development).
- *Parent/community connections re: college-going & academics*—parent seminars on curriculum, teaching, and college going (access to knowledge about college preparation and to college-savvy social networks).

Each UCLA outreach activity must show how it contributes to one or more of these six conditions in the schools and communities in which we work.

This is noble work, and certainly, it can profoundly affect the schools and students who the programs touch. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that Outreach will not meet its goal of significantly increasing the diversity of the university’s study body if limits its efforts to these interventions—as extraordinary ones as they may be. Efforts to mold low-income Latino and African American students into applicants who fit the university’s current narrow constructions of eligibility are not likely to bring significant new diversity to the university. The prevailing definition of eligibility represents far more than a culturally and politically neutral standard of academic

excellence that is operationalized through culturally and politically neutral measures such as coursetaking patterns, grades, SAT scores, and so on. At root, eligibility reflects social decisions shaped by cultural traditions and political struggles over how “merit” is defined, what indicators or proxies of such merit are legitimate, and the relevance of merit and its indicators to success in the university and to the larger social good.

### Cultural and Political Barriers: Through the Lens of Social Theory

A social theory lens reveals the cultural and political contexts that frustrate and obstruct efforts to both increase the capacity of schools in disadvantaged communities and to prepare students at these schools to gain admission to and succeed in the UCs. Among the most salient features of this context is the prevailing and largely unquestioned ideology of merit. Members of privileged groups employ this ideology of merit as the moral and rational foundation and leverage for maintaining their competitive advantage in university admissions. This ideology conflates the ability to profit from educational opportunities with prior achievement in the traditional academic curriculum, as gauged by conventional measures. Moreover, it positions students with this prior achievement as more *deserving* of those opportunities. Thus, not only does the definition of merit advantage youngsters from mainstream cultures and middle-class status, this ideology supports—it is not too strong to say, requires—the structural inequalities that plague Outreach schools, including the uneven distribution of curriculum and teaching quality.

### The Social Construction of Merit

In this post-affirmative action period, we must decide who is worthy of admission to the university according to criteria that advantage students lucky enough to be born into privileged families and/or into cultures with long traditions that match what we call merit.

However, because Outreach seeks changes that are fundamentally redistributive—that is, they would know how the schooling system allocates its most precious resources, opportunities to prepare for college—it challenges, even disputes, traditional and deeply felt beliefs about which students “deserve” the best that schools have to offer and which schools should offer the best opportunities.

In a 1999 New York Times column asked a number of scholars to define merit in relation to college admissions. Harvard historian, Stephan Thernstrom responded with a fairly conventional view:

There are doubtless many forms of merit in the eyes of God. But selective institutions of higher learning are best advised and best equipped to judge applicants on the basis of academic merit, as measured by grade point averages adjusted for course difficulty, class rank, and scores on standardized tests. These indicators allow us to predict with considerable confidence who will flourish in college or graduate school and who will barely scrape by or drop out. But some groups earn higher grades and have better academic records than others. . . . groups with fewer high achievers will inevitably be underrepresented. Pretending that such applicants have academic skills they lack does nothing to resolve the real problem, and indeed deflects attention from it.”

In contrast, our UC colleague sociologist Jerome Karabel invoked Michael Young’s 1958 British satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, reminding us that Young argued that “the real consequences of meritocracy are to leave intact the vast inequalities of a traditional class society, while convincing both the winners and losers that they deserve their lot in life.”

Karabel also asserted, that

“Meritocracy’s dirty little secret is that the content of “merit” in any society is defined by the powerful. . . . In the United States today, the prevailing definition of merit is a strange mishmash of grades, test scores (especially standardized multiple choice tests), extracurricular activities and that elusive quality called “character,” a criterion that was introduced at America’s leading universities only in the 1920’s when “too many” Jews succeeded in meeting the academic qualifications. The demise of affirmative action in California and elsewhere has generated calls to redefine merit, and such a reconsideration is long overdue.”

Karabel's rendering of merit reflects quite different assumptions than Thernstrom's about more than just the nature of merit. Karabel's answer reflects a social theory that asserts: a) that human knowledge of everyday social life is socially constructed, rather than objective scientific fact (Berger & Luckman, 1966); b) and, specifically, that conceptions of merit are socially constructed and deeply felt cultural ideologies rather than scientific discoveries.

Social theorists argue that ideology refers to the ways in which culturally based meanings serve, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain asymmetrical relations of power (Gramsci, 1971; Thompson 1990; Lewotin, 1992). When the majority of the people ruling internalize such meanings, they appear as "common sense." In the case of merit, then, common sense notions explain what might otherwise seem contradictory—a juxtaposition of an ideology of equality and meritocracy with the reality of extreme inequality in our society.

Nicholas Lemann's fascinating book, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999) documents the 20<sup>th</sup> century evolution of "meritocratic" college admissions. He recounts how "mental testers" and college presidents worked to make the SAT and other objective measures of merit the means for securing positions in the best colleges, instead of family wealth and privilege that had traditionally governed admissions. Neither the test developers nor college officials objected to social sorting per se, but both sought a sorting process grounded in innate ability, rather than in inherited privilege. Many believed that objective measures of human ability—such as the SAT—were essential to finding and cultivating the human resources necessary for modern, industrial society. They argued further that equality of opportunity required a "meritocracy"—a social system in

which the race for social rewards is fair. Those who reach the finish line first must be faster and thus more meritorious runners than those who come in last. Those not winning educational advantages and elite status must lose because of their own deficiencies (inability to run fast). Such a system constituted an apparently fair and “natural” sorting process for determining who should become society’s elites.

Today’s meaning of intelligence remains very close to that of the early mental testers. There was one constructed by elite groups who, because of their political, economic and social power, were able to frame their definitions of intelligence as “common sense.” Today, the ways of knowing of white, wealthy, and thus most powerful Americans not only remain more valued, they continue to be acted upon by k-12 schools, universities, and society as if they are a function of innate ability. The logic remains so pervasive and has such explanatory value that we still find tolerable, if unfortunate, the large gaps in college admissions between upper-class, white Americans and lower income applicants and applicants of color. Cloaked in the aura of science, testing’s persistent stratifying effects continue to make deep, unquestioned sense to many in society. The cultural capital of white and wealthy families masquerades as meritorious “natural” ability, rather than as a function of social privilege. Nothing in most outreach approaches promises to change this.

#### Cultural Politics and College Eligibility

Social constructions such as merit aren't merely shared beliefs. They shape and are themselves reinforced by social structures and individuals' decisions about how to act. As Mehan (1992) has noted, "Culture is not merely a pale reflection of structural forces; it is a system of meaning that mediates social structure and human action" (Mehan, 1992, p. 3). Thus, conceptions of merit actively relate to structural forces in the political and economic

life of the larger culture as well as those in school, and the conceptions are salient as educators decide how to organize curriculum and how to respond to students.

University attendance brings credentials with extraordinary exchange value in terms of high status occupations, middle class income and lifestyle—outcomes that many Americans fear are becoming unattainable without a college degree. So, it shouldn't be surprising that many are loath to alter the current construction of eligibility that favors their children.<sup>1</sup> The heightened stakes raise the anxiety levels of powerful parents and educators who see any effort to democratize access to the high-status curriculum as jeopardizing the chances for their own children who in earlier years would have had a smoother path toward a place at the top of the social structure. Given increasing competition families who can will employ the full range of resources, knowledge, and associations at their disposal to enhance their children's chances of capturing the available slots. The result will be an ever-escalating standard for eligibility. With no planned increases in the proportion of high school graduates in the state (currently 12.5 percent) that will be admitted, the competition for UC admissions is a zero-sum game. Put bluntly, the bonds between differentiated schooling and social stratification may prove too strong for Outreach to break.

For example, families who are resolved to ensure their children's competitiveness for the university provide direct support to their children and use their resources and influence to increase the capacity of their children's schools. So, we shouldn't be surprised that as student-centered programs seek to bolster students' academic prowess with tutoring and

---

<sup>1</sup> While "powerful groups" is a necessarily imprecise term, members of such groups are more likely than members of "less powerful" groups to be white, wealthy, have children who attend schools that send students to elite universities, have personal and professional associations with others who are similarly powerful, have themselves attended universities, and so on.

bridge programs beyond the school day and year, advantaged families increasingly will provide similar help at their own expense. As we extend our academic support programs to middle schoolers, advantaged families will begin even earlier. As we make popular SAT prep programs more widely available, advantaged families will seek more intense and longer-lasting preparation. As we increase our hands-on assistance with preparing college applications, advantaged parents will increasingly turn to private college counseling services. While some might see this competition as helping all students be smarter, few university officials see such intense pressure as improving young people's preparation for actual college-level work.

At the same time, to the extent that we help our school partners pursue effective college-going cultures and curricula, we can expect that wealthier and more powerful parents will push their schools to better position their children at the top of the new educational hierarchy. While not a firm equation, hard work plus privilege will usually trump hard work alone. Relatively advantaged schools will face far fewer obstacles as they upgrade their programs. As outreach brings a college-preparatory program to a broader, more diverse range of students, the backlash may well bring new, more intense forms of differentiation within the college preparatory track both in outreach and more advantaged schools.

We've already seen how Advanced Placement (AP) classes with their strict entrance requirements and test-driven curricula have become a required part of the upper college-preparatory track, especially in high schools in affluent neighborhoods. Since the mid-1980s, the AP program has grown dramatically. In California in 1988, 39,040 public high school students took 56,668 exams. By 1998, these numbers had grown to 87,683 students taking

145,000 exams. As a consequence, participation in AP (or other weighted honors courses) has become essential for students seeking admission at UC's most competitive campuses.

However, the growth in AP opportunities for well-off white and Asian students has outdistanced those for Latinos and African Americans. AP courses are generally limited to those meeting strict entrance requirements, rather than being available to all students. Schools serving poor and minority students typically offer few or no AP classes (especially in critical gate-keeping subjects like science and mathematics), whereas schools in more affluent communities can offer 15, 20 or more. Some schools in low-income neighborhoods claim that they simply don't have students qualified to take these courses. In mixed schools, restrictive admissions usually bring vastly disproportionate enrollments by race and social class, with few low-income students or African Americans and Latinos participating. Often AP classes are confined to selective magnets or choice programs, essentially separate schools on large urban high school campuses. In overcrowded, multi-track year-round high schools, AP courses are often restricted to one of the school's many tracks, permitting only those students enrolled in the right track to participate. Most telling, in what a *Los Angeles Times* story called an "academic arms race," we see that as "educationally disadvantaged" schools increase their AP offerings, more advantaged schools add even more. These schools can more easily increase the breadth and rigor of their academic offerings, partly because they are more likely to have teachers prepared to teach advanced courses.

Clearly, as Outreach works to create UC student bodies that reflect California's diversity, it confronts powerful cultural forces bent on preserving the status quo. These responses are not limited to politically conservative parents. Some of the most anxious are highly educated liberals, many who support affirmative action. Unfortunately, in a stratified

educational system where children's life chances depend so heavily on their ability to secure places in good colleges, such parents may have little other choice. This is the climate in which outreach must operate and for which Outreach has no mandate to change.

### A Countervailing Case

In what follows, we offer the experiences of high school students, teachers, and UC Faculty in an innovative summer course. This course was part of a larger project exploring how UCLA Outreach might simultaneously address the technical, cultural, and political challenges to college access for low-income African American and Latino students. In partnership with a local school district, UCLA offered an introductory summer seminar for high school students, in the field of the sociology of education, ED 001—Special Topics in Sociology of Education.<sup>2</sup> The seminar invited a group of working class Latino and African American youth to read seminal works in sociology of education and participate in a set of mini-research projects around the broad theme of "Race, Class, and Access in American Education." While all of the student participants had recently completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade at a local high school, they represented a fairly broad

---

<sup>2</sup> Our data about the seminar is drawn from a) interviews with students and their teachers; b) student work products from the seminar, and c) interviews with the UC faculty members who served as panelists for the presentation about the quality and depth of the student understanding and student work. It also draws upon an extensive analysis of digital videotapes from the summer seminar. During the seminar, we managed to capture footage from every aspect of the process. This footage includes large group meetings, discussions of pertinent issues and literature relating to the sociology of education, research planning, students involved in data collection and analysis, and preparation for the concluding presentations. During the succeeding Fall semester at the traditional high school, we recorded observations of the students in the project class which meets each morning at 7:20, in their traditional classes, in outside of class activities, and informal interviews.

range of academic backgrounds. Roughly one third of the students had high GPA's, one third mid-range, and one third low.<sup>3</sup>

The summer seminar stemmed from the premise that high school students' actual engagement in the activities, protocols, and scholarly dispositions required of researchers would be a valuable "readiness" experience for their eventual success as students at a research university. By expanding and elevating the rigor and conceptual content of social studies coursework typically offered to high school students—particularly those students lacking a record of competitive academic success—a research seminar demands college level work from participating students. Such engagement can enable high school students to produce work products that meaningfully demonstrate their preparation for university work.

Over the course of three intensive weeks of study, the high school students worked in five-member teams to produce a piece of original research that they presented to a panel of UCLA faculty members with expertise in the area of educational sociology. For example, one research group studied the impact of Hip-Hop music and culture on high school students in urban America and its implications for how teachers might approach the conventional curriculum. This group read social theorists such as Freire and Bourdieu on the relationship between popular culture and the canonical curriculum. They disseminated a survey to high school students and conducted interviews with teachers, friends and family, and undergraduates at UCLA. Another research group sought to make sense of different manifestations of student resistance at their high school. The group drew upon a conceptual framework on student resistance developed by

---

<sup>3</sup> For our purposes here, we are defining high GPA as 3.0-4.0; mid-level as 2.0-3.0; and

Professor Daniel Solorzano that distinguishes between different sorts of resistance—from self-defeating to politically transformative. Through surveys, interviews, and conversations with politically active students, this group attempted to locate different models of student resistance that fit into Solorzano’s typology.

During the three weeks of the seminar, student participants spent an hour each day with the whole group and two hours in small groups with their research team advisor. All of the advisors had experience working with urban youth as well as conducting research in areas of urban schooling. During the two hour research team meetings, the students discussed concepts and readings relating to the Sociology of Education, learned the various aspects of the research process, prepared interview protocols and surveys, analyzed transcripts, and prepared presentations of their findings.

On the final day of the seminar, the students presented their work to a panel of university faculty involved in research relating to the Sociology of Education. Each student research group guided the panel through a set of power point slides outlining a research question, literature review, methodology, findings, and policy implications. They then fielded questions and comments about their research from the faculty panel and public audience. Several faculty members remarked that the quality of student research compared favorably with research conducted in their undergraduate sociology or sociology of education courses. Speaking after the session, Professor Daniel Solorzano, offered this assessment:

I think they were able to grasp this field called the Sociology of Education generally. And then within the field they were able to... look at a particular area within the Sociology of Education and as a potential area for research and eventually an actual area of research. ... Once they were

able, in a very short period of time, to understand what research meant, they seemed to grasp the epistemology of research, the epistemology of theory, the epistemology of concepts, of method, et cetera. They were able to understand what they meant and pull it all together in a short period of time. ... That's what really stuns me, ... I mean, it's not like we have a group of our graduate students and we're talking about them. We're talking about 10<sup>th</sup> graders.<sup>4</sup>

#### A New Technology of Learning: Apprenticeship in a Community of Practice

Like other Outreach projects, the research seminar designed a program aimed at supporting students' development of the knowledge and skills that would prepare them for college-level work. However, rather than accepting the technologies of teaching and learning curriculum as neutral and apart from the normative and political dimensions of college preparation, the project embraced an understanding of learning that challenged accepted notions of college 'readiness.' The seminar posed student learning as a form of apprenticeship within the research community of educational sociology. Following Lave and Wenger, we understand a community of practice as a site of learning and action in which novices and experts come together around a shared enterprise, in the process developing a whole repertoire of activities, common stories, and ways of speaking and acting. (Wenger, 1998, Lave, 1996, Lave and Wenger, 1993). Communities of practice—for example, research groups, members of twelve step programs, or artisan communities—constitute reality in a particular manner and encourage specialized ways of acting and thinking. Learning occurs constantly in these communities as people participate in activities that are more and more central to the core practice.

According to Lave and Wenger's theory, the summer seminar sought to place high school students in the role of "legitimate peripheral participants" within the broader

---

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Daniel Solorzano, August 28, 1999.

community of practice of sociology of education research that was focused on the theme of access and equity. As novice researchers, the high school students forged competence by participating with university faculty and graduate students in authentic and valuable work. “Apprentices, reasons Lave, “learn to think, argue, act, and interact in increasingly knowledgeable ways, with people who do something well, by doing it with them as legitimate, peripheral participants” (Lave 1997, p. 19). The students’ emerging competence thus arose in the process of being inducted into the research university’s community of practice. Critically, this view of student development stands in stark contrast to the logic of college admissions that presumes demonstrations of competence must precede induction.

Understanding learning through a community of practice lens reshapes the relationship between high school students and college level work. Most college preparatory programs seek to transmit a body of college-sanctioned knowledge and skills that young people ultimately will need to succeed at the University. Yet, transmission does not necessarily lead students to acquire college-ready skills. This drop-off between what is taught and what is learned is greatest when students feel alienated from the college preparatory curricula or college itself—when they cannot see a clear relationship between the curriculum and who they are or hope to become. Conversely, a curriculum guided by a community of practice lens encourages high school students to acquire college-level skills and knowledge by participating as (novice) members in the work of research universities. Hence, student researchers in the seminar gradually appropriated the tools of the research community. We mean by this that the students increasingly

understood and internalized the language, culture, and purpose of research as they synthesized existing literature and ideas with their own experiences and concerns.

The changing relationship between the high school students and college level work can be seen in a field note from a class session mid-way through the three-week seminar.

*The entire class of 20 students is assembled in a seminar room on the third floor of Moore Hall—UCLA’s education building. The long tables are in an L shape and there are students on both sides of the tables with binders (which contain their summer readers) and notebooks. The groups are preparing a small portion of their presentation to share with the rest of the class. The assignment calls for the students to explain, in a one-paragraph statement, why they feel that their project should be funded for further research. The research team advisors sit off to the side and watch the students work. After the groups finish writing, the group studying school-family relations volunteers to read its paragraph which addresses the group’s research problem and question. Teresa reads for her group. She looks down on a yellow legal pad that is filled to about half of a page. As Teresa reads rapidly, Imani can be seen in the background taking notes. When Teresa finishes, Tanya can be heard near the camera saying, “Yeah, that was good,” as the students clap. Tanya volunteers to read for the hip-hop group: “The hip-hop group should be funded because it’s amazing how young (she makes the sign for quotation marks) “minorities” can find a bunch of information about social reproduction in the school curriculum. We should share with other people so they can learn about how it relates with students and teachers and teachers can become more in touch with their students.”*

A week and a half into the seminar, Tanya already has developed a different relationship to the research university than most high school students. She demonstrates facility with critical research terminology such as “social reproduction,” she recognizes the distinctive ways that researchers communicate, and she sees the work of the research university as a significant player in her own future.

Importantly, the seminar did not merely acculturate high school students to the prevailing culture and practice of a research university; it also created a context for students to influence the work of the university. A case in point was the research group examining student resistance. By testing Solorzano’s resistance rubric against their own

experiences in schools, the student researchers developed new ways of understanding student behavior that informed Solorzano's thinking. "They really did help me make sense of this concept of resistance. ... I guess they brought these new eyes to look at this. And I liked the idea that they looked at that area around the [rubric's] margins. ... My graduate students [and I] felt that the quadrants were more fluid, but we never talked about, what does it mean at that marginal area?"<sup>5</sup> Professor Solorzano's experience echoes Lave and Wenger's claim that novices can play a critical role in promoting learning within the broader community of practice because "naïve involvement invite[s] reflection" from more expert members of the community." (Lave and Wenger, 1993, p. 117).<sup>6</sup> The student researchers thus demonstrated their 'readiness' to shape, as well as participate within, the research university.

The Cultural Task: Constructing and Appropriating a Countervailing Ideology of Merit.

The technology of learning employed in the summer seminar points towards an understanding of merit that is far more in keeping with the ideal of a research university

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Daniel Solorzano, August 28, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the summer seminar tapped another important element of learning through legitimate peripheral participation—namely the opportunity for members of the community of practice who are neither novice or expert to hone their understandings through interactions with novices. Hence, graduate students who also served as research team advisors spoke of how explaining methods clarified terms pushed forward their own understandings. For example, one reported, "It forced me to be much more explicit and to kind of decide what are the things that I'd learned about interviewing, you know, in classes, and stuff, meshed or didn't mesh with what my actual experience was and what of that I really wanted to convey to these younger people, as far as beginning the process themselves." Another said, "Working with young kids forces you to be more honest and clear than you're used to as an adult, and we operate with a certain ambiguity as adults, and even in our intellectual community. You know, that we accept multiple meanings of terms and use them interchangeably, in a way that makes the language ambiguous. One being the sociology of education, which I may have never seen defined, you know, in one or two sentences, and these kids are asking me, well,

than prevailing markers of college readiness. Students' performance in conventional college-preparatory and advanced high school courses often bears scant resemblance to high-level intellectual work in research universities. That is, rigorous high school classes rarely engage students in the process of creating or discovering new knowledge—the defining characteristics of a research university. As UCLA Chancellor Albert Carnesale reasons: “A great university is a community of scholars in which the frontiers of knowledge are explored and expanded, ideas and issues are debated, problems are formulated and solved, information is exchanged, and minds are opened. (Carnesale, 1998).

By including young people in the work of a research university, the seminar challenged two notions undergirding the logic of college admissions—that students must demonstrate readiness before, rather than through, participation, and that student performance on standardized assessments is the most meaningful (and non-biased) indicator of readiness or merit. The seminar allowed us to explore whether participation within authentic tasks enables students to demonstrate preparation for research universities by engaging in research themselves. Instead of using canonical knowledge, mainstream culture, and middle class language habits and skills to screen out students of color, the seminar challenged conventional notions of merit and college preparation by assuming that students' own cultures and experiences could be drawn upon to construct highly valued knowledge.

In this process, students themselves, many of whom began by sharing the generally low estimation and relevance schools placed on their experiences and cultures,

---

what's the sociology of education. You know, and I had to come up with a definition,

began to become convinced that their “backgrounds,” instead of being a deficit or barrier to rigorous learning at school, in fact could be an asset. This experience raises a serious challenge to prevailing understandings of student motivation. A new conception of merit transformed these students’ engagement with high-status knowledge for the duration of the seminar. Their “merit,” rather than being conferred prior to their starting the seminar or judged and awarded at the end, was instead indistinguishable from their successful participation. Hence, the seminar enabled the students to construct—for themselves and the broader research community—an existence proof and a convincing demonstration of a socially just conception of merit.

#### The Political Task—Converting Countervailing Forms of Merit into Access

We conclude, however, with an additional challenge. Any new construction of college eligibility will inevitably bring enormous political resistance, as California’s recent rejection of affirmative action illustrates. Consequently, a penetrating critique and pedagogy grounded in socio-cultural theories of learning, while liberating and educationally enriching, can do little to expand college access unless it is tied to a theory of political action. Our work with the summer seminar not only highlights the importance of political action, it hints at possible directions for political change. What follows is thus an initial attempt to sketch out a theory of political action based on the lessons of the summer seminar.

A theory of political action around college access needs to inform attempts to instantiate new ideas about merit within college admissions. Such change requires a widespread shift in public understandings of merit and college readiness. For new understandings to emerge, different constituencies must sense that their prevailing ‘common sense’ is problematic, that the existing system conflicts with their values and interests, and

---

and it took me all night, and I came up with it.”

that a viable alternative exists. Hence, what is needed is a politics from the ‘ground up’ that engages multiple constituencies in reexamining the meaning of college readiness.

Our summer seminar laid the groundwork for such a politics by creating a site that challenged long standing beliefs—of high school students, university researchers, and community members—about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to participate meaningfully in college-level research. It encouraged a group of working class Latino and African American high school students to view their lived experience as a potential resource for university work. Further, it enabled a cohort of university faculty to recognize the distinction between traditional markers of college readiness and the skills required to participate in university research.

Needless to say, the limited scope of the seminar’s work bounded its political impact; only a relatively small number of students and faculty members directly participated in the seminar. Yet, future efforts might play a more expansive political role with wider participation of community members. In addition, the student research products offer a powerful tool for communicating new ideas about merit to members of the broader public. Hence, the knowledge that students construct in demonstrating readiness, ultimately becomes a source for the social and political reconstruction of college access.

## References

- Berger, P.L. & Luckman, T. (1966). *The Social Construction Of Reality: A Treatise In The Sociology Of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.
- Carnesale, A. (1998). Address to the UCLA Faculty.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections From The Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Lave, J. (1996). Teaching, as learning, in practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3(3), 149-164.
- Lave, J. (1997). The Culture of Acquisition and the Practice of Understanding. David Kirshner and James Whitson, eds. *Situated Cognition: Social, Semiotic, and Psychological Perspectives Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997, pp. 17-35.*
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lemann, N. (1999) *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Lewontin, R.C. (1992). *Biology As Ideology: The Doctrine Of DNA*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Mehan, H. (1992). Understanding inequality in schools: The contribution of interpretive studies. *Sociology of Education*, 65(1): 1-20.
- Solorzano, D. (1998). "Critical Race Theory, Racial and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experiences of Chicana and Chicano Scholars." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, 121-136.
- Thompson, J. B. (1990). *Ideology and Modern Culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- “What the Deserving Deserve and Whether They Get It.” *New York Times*, October 23, 1999