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For Black Americans, college degrees aren't about catching up — they're a matter of survival

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- The importance of higher education was not lost on me as the child of educators. In my family of five, we have three doctorates, a law degree, four master's degrees, and five bachelor's degrees.
- Still, a white family with the same level of education will, statistically, have three times more wealth.
- Though higher education is not the "great equalizer" and cannot close the racial wealth gap, it's still an essential tool for Black Americans to achieve upward mobility and give back to our communities.
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I was raised by educators.

Each summer, my mother — then a 7th grade social studies teacher, and now a middle school principal — refused to allow my sisters and me to partake in carefree, backyard adventures with the other kids in our neighborhood until we finished the homework she assigned us, often reading, writing a book report, or completing exercises in a math workbook to prepare us for the upcoming school year. My mother was often a student herself while working full-time, as she resolved to finish her doctorate in education (EdD) before I graduated from college. (I'm happy to report that she won that race.)

Growing up, my father, a history professor, would regale us with triumphant tales of escaping poverty in his youth. After applying to the University of the West Indies five times, and gaining admission with each application, he was only able to enroll after he won a scholarship. Otherwise, he simply could not afford to go. In the meantime, he taught at a local high school. Once my father completed his first degree, he earned a fellowship to complete a PhD in the US.

Higher education and the racial wealth gap

The importance of education for facilitating upward mobility was never lost on me as a child, and it is perhaps no surprise that I, too, became a history professor and one of my sisters became an elementary school teacher. (Sadly, another sister went rogue and became an attorney.)

Despite my family's academic achievements — including three doctorates, a law degree, four master's degrees, and five bachelor's degrees among the five of us — as Black people in the United States, statistically, a white family with a similar educational background is likely to have [over three times as much wealth](#). Being Black and degreed will not close the racial wealth gap because individual actions can only do so much to counteract 400 years of systemic racial oppression.

The onus cannot be on Black people to close a racial wealth gap that Black people did not create. [In 2016](#), the net worth of the median Black household was \$17,150, while that of the median white household was \$171,000. In other words, for African Americans to achieve wealth parity with white Americans, Black people would need to generate 10 times as much wealth as we currently have overnight, while white people's wealth remained stagnant. This is an entirely impossible feat and an unreasonable expectation that shifts the responsibility for overcoming racial oppression to those it victimizes.

Even when African Americans engage in activities that would theoretically increase their wealth, the disparity persists. The adage that Black people "have to work twice as hard for half as much" rings particularly true when comparing wealth across race and educational attainment levels.

The myth of higher education as a 'great equalizer'

As stated in the eye-opening report "[What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap](#)," published by the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, higher education is not the "great equalizer."

The authors explain, "On average, a Black household with a college-educated head has less wealth than a white family whose head did not even obtain a high school diploma." You read that correctly: The median net worth for Black families with a college degree is \$70,219, while it is \$12,000 *higher*, at \$82,968, for white households with less than a high school education.

Black people's low wealth levels have two significant implications for higher education: Black students tend to take on more student loan debt than their white counterparts, and Black graduates are more likely to default on their student loan payments. Not only are Black students more likely to finance their education with student loans, but they also have [more student loan debt than their white peers](#).

This problem cannot simply be solved by Black people [pursuing jobs with higher salaries](#). Even when African Americans pursue careers that might offer occupational prestige or higher incomes, such as becoming a doctor or a lawyer, the astronomically high price tags that are attached to medical and law school, coupled with existing undergraduate student loans, can catapult these aspiring professionals further into debt.

[More Black students](#) enter medical school with student loan debt than without, while the reverse is true for white students. According to the American Association of Medical Colleges, in 2016, approximately 62.1% of Black students entered medical school with prior student loans, while 37.9% had none. These figures are inverted for white first-year medical students: 35.8% had loans, while 64.2% did not.

Student loan debt has had a crippling impact on millennials, who simultaneously confronted the skyrocketing costs of college education, a post-recession economy, and [low wages that have not kept pace with economic growth since 1964](#).

While the student debt crisis has been severe across the board, it has been particularly harmful to Black graduates, who are more likely to default on their loans. The difficulty to pay back student loans may stem from a variety of causes, like needing to financially support parents and extended family, or being shut out of job opportunities that are commensurate with their education and experience [because of employment discrimination](#).

Why higher education still matters

It may be tempting to ask, "If higher education cannot close the racial wealth gap, then what's the point?" It is not a question of catching up, but of survival.

Black job applicants do not have the luxury of expecting the same opportunities as their white peers if they forego a college education. Research shows that Black Americans without college degrees [experience a 5% higher rate of unemployment](#) than white Americans without college degrees, while Black graduates from elite colleges and universities are [as likely to be interviewed for jobs](#) as white graduates from less-selective institutions.

In the face of persistent inequality, for Black Americans, degrees still matter. Higher education allows students to develop the critical thinking and analytical skills to successfully navigate the world in front of them.

For Black people, specifically, higher education can grant us an opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills that would allow us to give back to our communities, innovate in our chosen industries, and create a better, more equitable world. Higher education cannot single-handedly close the racial wealth gap, but at the very least, it can offer upward mobility that, otherwise, would likely be unattainable.

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This story is part of [Business Insider's "Inside the racial wealth gap" series](#).

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