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Why colleges should consider developing inequality studies (opinion)

William A. Darity Jr., Malachi Hacoen and Adam Hollowell

5-6 minutes

Students, professors and administrators need a deeper understanding of how human disparities have developed, why they persist and how they evolve over time, write William A. Darity Jr., Malachi Hacoen and Adam Hollowell.

Many Americans imagine higher education as a place of social mobility -- an egalitarian pathway for reducing the gap between rich and poor. This viewpoint has been under public attack recently, with high-profile authors, including [Michael Sandel](#) and [Daniel Markovits](#), decrying stratification in higher education access and economic mobility.

Yet much of the recent critique has focused on inequality in higher education admissions or, to a lesser extent, higher education as a workplace. Much less is being written about the place of the study of social inequality in higher education curricula.

Indeed, the study of social inequality is more urgent than ever, especially if higher education is to fulfill its mission as a promoter of expanded opportunity and well-being. Students, professors and administrators need a deeper understanding of how human disparities have developed, why they persist and how they continue to evolve over time. They also need to understand how the forces of social inequality inform the habits and practices of colleges and universities today. To understand inequality is to understand the modern world and the forces that created it. More to the point, understanding inequality is precondition to overcoming it: that is, to healing the wounds of the past, generating social solidarity and rebuilding a more just society.

Duke University has created a new path for focused study of inequality in the undergraduate curriculum. We are excited to announce a new minor in inequality studies, a program of study that constitutes a collaboration between the department of history and the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity. The program, which the university will launch officially during the spring 2021 semester, is believed to be just the second of its kind in higher education in the United States.

The minor includes required courses on the history of inequality and social science research methods in the study of inequality, as well as focused undergraduate research in social inequality on topics such as entrepreneurship, social crisis, health disparities and reparations. It also includes elective courses -- such as Caribbean 1492-1700, Modern and Global India, U.S. Social Movements, and African Americans and the World -- that track processes generating inequality across periods in history and different global regions. Above all, the new minor in inequality studies will help undergraduate students acquire rigorous, analytical understanding of social inequality and integrate that understanding into their liberal arts education, as well as their social and professional engagement at Duke, in the surrounding community and in the wider world beyond.

We salute Cornell University's Center for the Study of Inequality, which has offered a minor in inequality studies for the past two decades. Our program advances this necessary work, most notably distinguishing itself through the minor's required core courses -- History of Inequality, Methods in Inequality Studies and the Global Inequalities Research Seminar -- which culminate in a capstone course and student production of original research on inequality. Advancing Duke's commitment to undergraduate research, the minor cultivates deep-rooted historical understanding of inequality and activates student capacities for addressing social problems through novel research.

At the Cook Center, we currently have five working groups exploring particular spheres of inequality in our society. We study voting disenfranchisement within our nominally democratic institutions, disparities in our health outcomes, the way our media creates and perpetuates narratives of inequality, and, as previously discussed, pathways to social mobility. The fifth working group focuses on education policy, especially early education disparities -- be they the divergent effects of racialized tracking, such as gifted

and talented programs, within nominally integrated schools or the similarly segregating outcomes that accompany the proliferation of charter schools. It would be naïve, however, to overlook the many manifestations of inequality within higher education itself, and every blinkered semester that passes represents an opportunity missed to start forging a more equitable future on our campuses and beyond.

Colleges and universities must evolve in order to provide the next generation of researchers with the necessary tools to address inequality. Other institutions have been inching in this direction, but our program goes well beyond the conventional redress they have offered thus far. We applaud our university for seizing the opportunity of this moment to expand its curricular pathways to include focused study of inequality for undergraduate students. As the leaders of this new cross-national program, we are thrilled to embark on this work and excited to see where the study of inequality will take us in the years ahead.