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 TIAA Institute


The Education Trust

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Lincoln University

RACE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

There is a significant correlation between race and social mobility. Reports show that Black people in the United States are more likely to be born poor and remain poor than their White counterparts. Additionally, Black people are more likely than their White peers to experience downward mobility, even when born into a middle-class family.¹

Education, especially higher education, has been shown to ameliorate some of the racial disparities related to social mobility. However, most colleges that serve low-income and minority students have tended to focus on building subject-matter knowledge, often at the expense of developing essential skills like critical thinking, writing, and problem solving. This bifurcated educational system has produced two types of college graduates: those who are trained to do and those who are trained to think. While education focused on learning to do something specific may have served to move many out of poverty during industrial times, social mobility today requires not only doers, but doers who also can be thinkers.²

Today's marketplace is dynamic and global. Many of the jobs that will be available to college graduates over the next 5 to 10 years have not yet been created. In this context, social mobility requires college graduates who are prepared to retool as the marketplace warrants. College graduates must, therefore, possess the intellectual and interpersonal skills needed to navigate the uncertainty of the contemporary job market.

A liberal arts education continues to be the most powerful educational approach to developing a strong intellect and interpersonal savvy. The liberal arts' use of curricular and co-curricular opportunities as vehicles for honing important skills, such as writing and problem solving, along with developing interpersonal skills like leadership, ethics, and teamwork, will surely produce graduates able to thrive in today's economy, thus ensuring long-term success.

Social mobility remains an area of great racial disparity in this country. Education has the potential to lessen the gap, if and only if it focuses on training individuals to thrive in today's marketplace.

Presented by Brenda A. Allen, President, Lincoln University

In conjunction with this event, The Education Trust and TIAA Institute invited event participants to share their perspectives on social mobility, race, and higher education. Any opinions expressed herein are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of TIAA, the TIAA Institute, or Ed Trust.

ENDNOTES

1 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2016/10/21/6-charts-showing-race-gaps-within-the-american-middle-class/>

2 <https://www.aacu.org/resources/liberal-education/publications>