

Demography is (Not) Destiny

Sonny Ramaswamy, NWCCU President

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

In the 1970 book "The Real Majority," Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg wrote about the role of the changing demographics in America on electoral outcomes. One of the chapters in the book was entitled, "Demography is Destiny—Unyoung, Unpoor, and Unblack."

Since then the phrase "demography is destiny" and its counterparts "demography is not destiny" and "zip code is not destiny" have become part of the American zeitgeist and have been used by many others, including yours truly, in multiple different contexts, particularly in regards to the significant changes we have seen in the demography of America and its exacerbating impacts on the deeply dividing bimodality of America in regards to wealth, home ownership, economic and social mobility, crime, health outcomes, educational outcomes, and myriad other aspects of society.

In a previous essay in The Beacon (<https://tinyurl.com/syn96wb>) I wrote about the raison d'être of higher education is to promote economic and social mobility. In another essay (<https://tinyurl.com/wqj6dlp>) I lamented the situation of my Uber driver, a first generation, female student of color from a poor background, who was struggling with three jobs in the gig economy after graduating with a four-year degree, saddled with student loans and having to provide support for her family. During her time on campus she was not given the support she needed and deserved, a fundamental right for a tuition-paying student, nor was she armed with knowledge of traversing the 21st Century American economy.

Students that come from underserved backgrounds struggle while in college because they're often the only one of their kind, lack the knowledge of the values and mores of college, do not receive advise, support, and mentoring, are not provided the help to develop social networks and connections, and lack the financial resources, thus, necessitating their having to hold down multiple jobs, which only exacerbates their inability to make the social connections on campus. Against all odds if they do graduate—across the United States approximately four out of ten students of certain demographics graduate in six years—all of these same factors contributed to the dismal situation of my Uber driver, i.e., no social networks, no connections, no opportunities for economic and social mobility. Because of her demography, my Uber driver's destiny is doomed.

The experiences of some institutions such as, for example, Georgia State University, offer tantalizing possibilities for other institutions to emulate by creating an environment in which, regardless of their demography, every student graduates on time and has excellent post-graduation outcomes. The "secret sauce" of Georgia State and others' outcomes for their students lies in focusing on the fundamentals—advising, offering experiential learning

opportunities and inculcating core competencies, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills, helping with finances, helping create social networks, ensuring food security, offering housing, day-, and health-care support, inculcating transferrable skills —combined with single-minded use of data-informed predictive analytics and other digital tools.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and others have stepped up to work with non-governmental, academic, and non-profit entities to address the disparities and solve the problem of poor outcomes because of one's demography.

Through its Intermediaries for Scale initiative, the BMGF is providing significant financial support to 12 organizations, including the Northwest Commission on College and Universities (NWCCU), to transform institutions of higher learning to promote student success and close equity gaps. Through a companion initiative, the Postsecondary Data Partnership, the BMGF is working with the National Student Clearinghouse, academia, accreditors such as NWCCU, and other organizations to help create the infrastructure to allow data-informed analytical capacity to determine progress in student outcomes, which can help mitigate potential impacts of one's demography at birth.

The vision is that these efforts will help American higher education to take action to create an equitable future for ALL students, regardless of their demography.

NWCCU's vision and 2020 Standards for Accreditation are singularly focused on supporting our family of institutions to promote student success and close equity gaps, thus, contributing to overcoming the constraints of one's demography.

Once and for all we hope that demography is not destiny.

Our vision is reminiscent of the poignant poem, *If My Blackness Turns to Fruit*, by E. Ethelbert Miller:

Dear America, my love, if my blackness turns to fruit, do not pull it from the vine.

Let it grow from earth to sky untouched by hateful hands.

So sweet my juice, my jazz, my blues, so sad but true.

Dear America, my love, look behind your prison walls. Count the black seeds behind bars, the cells where nothing blooms.

Can hope flower from despair?

Yes, America, my love. Resistance comes, and then the rain.