

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The Steve Fund

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY AND THE STEVE FUND PRESENT

Representation and Belonging, Post Affirmative Action:

Higher Education's Commitment to the Wellbeing of Students of Color

GEORGETOWN CONVENING SUMMARY

October 17–18, 2023





INTRODUCTION

On October 17 and 18, 2023, leaders at Georgetown University and The Steve Fund convened 80 mental health and higher education experts to discuss the mental health and wellness of students of color, especially implications for campuses following the US Supreme Court's ruling to end Affirmative Action in college admissions.

Throughout the meeting, the room was filled with energy and a willingness to lean into organizational missions to better support student belonging.

Day one consisted of a reception, dinner, opening remarks from The Steve Fund Chief Executive Officer David R. McGhee, and a panel facilitated by Georgetown University President John J. DeGioia. Day two consisted of three panels and accompanying table discussions among participants. This document summarizes the convening's key takeaways and major implications.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

The US Supreme Court ruling leaves openings for higher education institutions to remain true to their missions and visions.



Debo Adegbile, a partner with the law firm WilmerHale, clarified while campuses are not allowed to continue Affirmative Action in college admissions, students are still able (and can be encouraged) to articulate in their essays the ways in which race has impacted their lives through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise.

Additionally, this ruling is currently limited to the admissions decision and leaves room for institutions to meet their missions through student pipeline outreach and programming intended to increase the percentage of students from various identity groups (“yield”).





2

Diverse campuses benefit all students, not only specific student demographics.

There is a significant body of research focusing on the benefits of diversity, both for individuals and society. During the "Representation and Diversity" panel, Dr. Elizabeth Aries, from Amherst College, shared in her study on racism on campus, 80 percent of white students said they learned from racial diversity on campus, and over time their awareness of privilege grew.

Dr. Arthur Evans Jr., chief executive officer of the American Psychological Association (APA), underscored two critical points: (1) the APA's awareness, based on data, that it is erroneous to believe that the benefits of diversity accrue only to students of color; and (2) diversity helps develop more effective leaders of all races, because people who know how to lead diverse groups of people learn that skill in group settings with more diversity.





3

Access is not inclusion; policy and practice must be aligned to support students throughout their higher education journeys.

Panelists throughout the convening used metaphors sharing how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices can be poorly implemented. Dr. Anthony Jack, from Boston University, characterized poor implementation as "inviting a vegan to a southern BBQ . . . campuses would extend the invitation [of admission] but not do any preparation [for when students arrive]."

Key examples of poor implementation include closing dining halls over class breaks and, during COVID, removing access to on-campus jobs many marginalized students needed for living expenses, while holding open positions tied to more intellectual pursuits (aka "life of the mind" roles) able to be performed remotely but also served more dominant-culture students.

This means there is room for inclusive change on college campuses because the US Supreme Court ruling only focused on issues of access.

During the convening, story after story clarified many campuses still have work to do to ensure they are prepared to support student belonging and mental health. The higher education community must ensure campuses are creating spaces that allow students to be authentic to who they are, and policies and programs must be examined to ensure they achieve desired outcomes and effectively address cultural bias.

4



Belongingness and mattering are crucial to student mental health; creating student belonging is a job for everyone — both on campus and off.

Dr. Kevin Cokley, from the University of Michigan, outlined the definition of belonging: “Belonging means feeling like the institution is home and it is a part of the student’s identity . . . that you feel like you’re invited for appetizers, dinner, and dessert. Many students do not have that connectedness.” Creating belonging for students of color means they feel they are not just tolerated but embraced and celebrated.

Dr. Sherry Molock, from The George Washington University, spoke about belonging as a form of “just because” love, and making students feel when they are not there, they are missed. For many campuses, which may have strained relationships with their surrounding communities, significant work may need to be done to strengthen relationships and spaces outside the campus.

A final element receiving significant attention was affinity spaces. Dr. Charlene Brown-McKenzie, from Georgetown University, shared the concept of creating “Communities of Care” (1) providing students with a sense of place and a feeling that the campus belongs to them, (2) helping students create a sense of independence where there is space to take risks and be simultaneously challenged and supported, (3) providing students with access to resources that help them feel secure on their campuses, and (4) providing a broader sense of belonging and connection. She told the story of how the Black Student Alliance and the first Black affinity space on the campus grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. Georgetown is committed to protecting these spaces because of their core role in supporting student belonging.





5

As leaders and scholars, we must capitalize on asset-based framing versus employing a student deficit model.

Dr. Carlota Ocampo, from Trinity Washington University, facilitated a discussion focused on student strengths, and Dr. Marcia Liu, from Hunter College, expanded on these issues. She reminded attendees past affirmative action messages have often been characterized as framing the experience of marginalized students as "not enough"– not enough money, not enough intelligence, and generally needing support to compensate for what is missing.

Throughout the meeting, scholars talked about their own experiences with imposter phenomenon. They argued a strengths model would help ensure we acknowledge the many wonderful contributions diverse students make to campuses from the moment they arrive, exactly as they are.

Dr. Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, from UC Berkeley, reminded the room, "[We need to] create space for students to be experts. Need to foster environments where people's lived experience makes them an expert . . . and if students can invite in identity experiences, this can be a healing experience . . . but [we] cannot be tokenizing. We have to be mindful of intentions versus execution and delivery."



6

Campuses need to focus on mental health as much as they do on physical health.

This message was shared numerous times throughout the convening and was always met with head nods. There was universal agreement mental health and wellness require the same weight and priority as physical health. Campuses must be intentional and systematic about the role mental health plays in belonging for students, especially students of color.

Mendoza-Denton argued while higher education often is characterized by extreme ambiguity ("I'll know greatness when I see it"), ambiguity is the breeding ground of prejudice. The answer, then, is to focus on policies, practices, and details to remove this ambiguity. Campuses must ensure there are departmental handbooks and standards and regulations related to belonging. They also must provide places where community members can go when they have questions.

Experts suggested asking, "Who are your students and how do you meet them where they are?" Participants were reminded in some cases, students may not come to campuses (or stay) because they do not feel welcome. Instead, campuses might consider how to deconstruct the space not traditionally thought of as part of the student community. Campuses can serve as big tents with permeable borders, allowing for more frequent and authentic interactions including connecting alumni of color with students of color. Institutional leaders also might invite off-campus services onto campus, benefitting from the outreach budgets these community health agencies possess to better serve students.



7

Support and include families throughout the college process to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students during their collegiate careers and transition to their professional careers.

Students need formal and informal support networks to combat imposter phenomenon; mental health experts clarified the need to consider how students are seen before they even show up. This means potentially mining student information to know them better before they arrive on campus—an action notably not prohibited by the US Supreme Court ruling—and sharing with students and their families the message "*if* you choose us and when you choose us, here's how we will walk beside you." Furthermore, this helps prevent colleges and universities from making assumptions about the communities students belong to before they arrive on campus.

CLOSING

For many students, higher education represents a powerful opportunity to find spaces that feel like home and are sources of lifelong, eye-opening, and opportunity-building relationships.

While the US Supreme Court ruling on Affirmative Action may have a chilling effect on the perception of higher education, participants at this convening affirmed their commitment to ensuring all students, especially students of color, can find belonging in their college communities and attain their full potential.

The Steve Fund will continue to partner with leading higher education institutions, like Georgetown University, to convene experts in the field of mental health and wellness of students of color.





ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED

- American Council on Education
- American Psychological Association
- Amherst College
- Berea College
- Boston University
- Bucknell University
- Carleton College
- Clemson University
- College of the Holy Cross
- Dartmouth College
- Davidson College
- DePaul University
- Fordham University
- Georgetown University
- Georgia State University
- Gettysburg College
- Grinnell College
- Hamilton College
- Haverford College
- Hunter College
- Lafayette College
- Lehigh University
- Marquette University
- Northeastern University
- Pace University
- Queens College
- Reed College
- Rollins College
- Rutgers University–New Brunswick
- Smith College
- St. Olaf College
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The Catholic University of America
- The George Washington University
- The Steve Fund
- Trinity College
- Trinity Washington University
- Tufts University
- University of California, Berkeley
- University of California, Davis
- University of California, San Diego
- University of Detroit Mercy
- University of Massachusetts Amherst
- University of Michigan
- University of Pennsylvania
- University of Southern California
- University of Virginia
- Villanova University
- Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
- Washington and Lee University
- Wellesley College
- Wesleyan University
- Williams College
- WilmerHale

ABOUT THE STEVE FUND

The Steve Fund promotes the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color as they transition from adolescence into higher education, throughout their higher education experience, and as they transition into the workforce so they can attain personal, academic, and career success and achieve their full potential.

The Steve Fund works with colleges and universities, nonprofits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of the nation's young people of color.