

OP-ED

THE OVERLOOKED MANDATE IN MLK JR.'S AMERICAN DREAM

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Universities must see themselves as 'vaults of opportunity'

In 1963, I was six years old, when my parents took me to the March on Washington.

My father, Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch, was director of the Religious Action Center of the Union for Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C. Martin Luther King Jr. and my father were friends. Whenever Dr. King was in Washington, my father invited him to share his office. It was in this office on Massachusetts Avenue that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted.

My father was among the organizers of the March on Washington. As he recalled in 2013: "The very concept of a March on Washington was viewed ... with hesitation... and trepidation. Even some of the most ardent supporters of civil rights feared that the March would lead to violence and would therefore be counterproductive"

But, my father always believed the march would be peaceful; so much so, that he took his six-year-old daughter to the historic event.

The most famous lines of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech are indelibly etched in the nation's conscience. The words resound from a deep place as if they are our own.

Yet perhaps the most well-known oratorical passage overshadows another part of Dr. King's speech, where he underscores the complexity of obtaining that American Dream. The words reverberate to this day:

"...we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution ... they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir...today that America ... has given the Negro (African Americans) a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

For many years, I have thought about these less famously cited words in Dr. King's soaring speech, especially the section: "...we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check ..."

As my own career has evolved, I have arrived at the conclusion that universities must be a catalyst in opening the “vaults of opportunity.”

A college degree is the most steadfast and reliable path to upward mobility. Yet today, there remains a startling high school and college completion gap based on income and race, further exacerbating a troubling social inequity. That gap is among the key reasons for the widening differential since 1970 in median household incomes between white and Black Americans.

At Oakland University, we are proud that from 2016 to the fall of 2022, the percent of Underrepresented Minorities (URMs) first-time-in-any-college (FTIAC) students have increased from 16.2 percent to 25.7 percent.

Oakland is among the 400 public colleges and universities that belong to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Working to expand student access, promote experiential learning and support applied research that advances economic development are the core of AASCU's mission.

Nationwide, public colleges and universities are committed to increasing social mobility opportunities for URMs and FTIACs. In addition to sharing values, AASCU-member institutions share best practices as a means to bring about positive, sustainable social change.

At Oakland, we are working to make college more affordable through scholarships, financial aid and the Golden Grizzlies Graduate program, which provides assistance to stop-out and current students dealing with debt.

States and communities with higher percentages of college graduates boast higher per capita incomes. The math is simple: College degrees generate prosperity.

Yet education and economics are only part of the broader equation when calculating the path toward greater equality. As Dr. King said often, there must be greater racial and cultural understanding. Dr. King's message of love and acceptance are cornerstones of a more equitable society.

Unfortunately, a hate crime occurs nearly every hour in the United States – and hate groups in the U.S. have more than doubled in the past 20 years, according to the Brookings Institution. Those distressing figures underscore the need for a conversation on college campuses that focuses on what unites us, and moves away from the many phobias, prejudices and obsessions that promote separate and unequal paths to the American Dream.

Last week, when we celebrated Martin Luther King Day, we honored a man who showed us that it is possible to make progress on the difficult issues of racial and social injustice. For the content of his message to be truly meaningful, however, we must acknowledge that we are far from achieving Dr. King's Dream.

If we hope to honor the promise of America eloquently articulated by Dr. King, universities must play a leading role. As we recommit to the principles of a “land of opportunity,” access to a college degree must be seen as an essential step in ensuring there are sufficient funds when the time comes to cash the check promising a better life.

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