

THE SUM OF US: WHAT RACISM COSTS EVERYONE AND HOW WE CAN PROSPER TOGETHER

by Heather McGhee

New York: One World, 2021. 448 pp. \$28.00 (cloth).

In one of the most striking passages of *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, Heather McGhee, the former president of Demos and current board chair of Color of Change, visits Oak Park in Montgomery, Alabama, to search for the remnants of the city's public pool. In the 1950s the pool was "the grandest one for miles, the crown jewel of a Parks Department" that also featured a zoo and community center (p. 25). Such public pools, like public education, were part of a strategy of national assimilation and community cohesion that strove to knit together an ethnically diverse populace into an American nation. However, in 1959, facing pressure to desegregate, the city chose to fill in the pool with cement rather than allow Black children to play in its waters. In protest against integration, the city council shut down the community center, the zoo, and every other public park in Montgomery and left the park system closed for more than ten years. Though the city eventually reopened the parks, it never rebuilt the public pool.

This was not a lone incident; the destruction of public pools, parks, and facilities in response to desegregation orders happened in cities and towns across the United States. As McGhee articulates, "the fight over public pools revealed that for white Americans, the word *public* did not mean 'of the people.' It meant 'of the white people'" (pp. 24–25). Pools rapidly became privatized luxuries, accessible within exclusive clubs (with white membership only) or in backyards. What they had once enjoyed, by design publicly and often for free, white people—the ones who could afford it—now paid hundreds of dollars to use. Whether Black or white, those who couldn't afford such fees simply no longer had access.

The story of the shuttering of America's public pools in response to integration, and the harm it caused to residents of all races, captures the central thesis of McGhee's work. McGhee makes it clear that, as "the descendant of enslaved Africans" and of generations of Black Americans denied their fundamental rights, she is "well aware that the ledger of racial harms is nowhere near balanced." She wrote this book, she explains, not to "shift focus from racism's primary targets." Rather, her goal was to draw "more people's eyes—and hearts—to the cause" of racial justice by illustrating the myriad ways in which racism harms all Americans (p. xx). Her message is clear: whether the inequities are economic, educational, political, or environmental, their origins and persistence can likely be traced to racism. In revealing these intersections, *The Sum of Us* illuminates the common aims between diverse causes with the hope of inspiring citizens to reach across movements and build power through cross-racial solidarity.

McGhee pursues this goal with focus and depth, walking readers through numerous rich examples of the ways racism hurts all but the wealthiest Americans—and even they, she argues, are negatively affected by racism’s corrosive psychological effects. Her examples include public policy on higher education, student debt, K–12 schooling, home ownership and residential segregation, health care, infrastructure, labor rights, environmental protections, climate change, mental health, and social and emotional well-being. While *The Sum of Us* is about the importance of public goods broadly, the issues and policy areas explored all intersect with educational equity in critical ways that readers of the *Harvard Educational Review* may find compelling. Alongside these descriptions of how racial divides rob us of our full potential, McGhee also offers examples of what she calls “the Solidarity Dividend,” the multifaceted benefits that cross-racial solidarity yields for individuals, communities, and the nation. She sees this dividend in the economic revitalization immigrants are bringing to rural communities, in the educational benefits to children of attending diverse schools, and in the success of minimum wage campaigns won through multiracial coalitions, to name just a few. If racism drains the pool of public goods, cross-racial solidarity nourishes our commons, ensuring everyone both contributes to and benefits from their plenty.

The sections of clearest interest to readers of this journal may be McGhee’s discussions of student debt and public education. McGhee opens chapter 3 with a history of government investment in public higher education. “Public commitment to college for all,” she explains, “was a crucial part of the white social contract for much of the twentieth century” (p. 41). In light of the astronomical tuition bills facing today’s college students and their families, the tuition costs she quotes are mind-boggling: \$617 at a four-year college in 1976 and free college tuition at CUNY and the University of California system, all made possible by significant government investment (pp. 41–42). Importantly, until 1980, five out of six public college enrollees were white. As the actual and proportional enrollment of students of color grew, however, “college affordability fell out of favor with lawmakers” (p. 42), and colleges began relying much more heavily on tuition dollars. As McGhee demonstrates by analyzing the messaging used by campaigners seeking to cut such spending, when “public” higher education no longer meant “just white,” support for government investment in higher education floundered, even as budgets for policing and mass incarceration grew. The impact of shrinking government support has been felt broadly. As McGhee reports, “student debt is most acute among Black families, but it has now reached 63 percent of white public college graduates as well,” totaling up to \$1.5 trillion dollars in 2020 and crippling Americans’ ability to buy a home, save for retirement, or plan for emergencies (pp. 42–43). In short, at a time when higher education is increasingly critical for competition in the global marketplace, racism’s drain on the public pool of funding for higher education is now leaving middle- and working-class fami-

lies of all races with lifelong financial burdens that hurt them and the economy. As McGhee repeatedly demonstrates, if we could embrace a definition of “public” that included all Americans, we would all be better off.

In chapter 7 McGhee makes a very similar argument about the impact of racism on access to high-quality public schools. She details how histories of redlining and inequitable school financing, coupled with racist perceptions linking whiteness with “good schools,” have resulted in the education system we have today: segregated districts in which high-income, mostly white families can afford to live in neighborhoods with well-resourced, high-performing public schools, while most other families, across races, are priced out of these neighborhoods. A study cited in the book found that “someone with average wages could not afford to live in 65 percent of the zip codes with highly rated elementary schools” (p. 180). In other words, high-quality public schools are only “public” for those with the deepest pockets. By failing to fight for access to good public education for all of America’s children, we’ve created a system that offers dramatically disproportionate resources to only the very, very few.

The issues and topics discussed in the remaining chapters, though not all directly tied to education, will likely be of interest to many readers because of their profound impacts on students and families, educators and the teaching profession, and school funding, resources, and safety. From the relationship between homeownership policies and rates of homelessness among students, to the consequences of union busting for educators and the working class, to the impact of climate disasters on vulnerable communities, the issues under discussion here are ones practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and activists in the field of education will find relevant and important.

The greatest strength of McGhee’s book is its strong, clear thesis. The metaphor she offers in the early chapters with the story of America’s public pools is carried throughout each chapter, and the examples she shares across topics convincingly illustrate her point. In this way, *The Sum of Us* acts as a kaleidoscope, showing the many ways the damaging effects of racism manifest across contexts. In tracing and analyzing these examples, McGhee gives us new language and a plethora of examples to challenge the narratives of racial and human hierarchy.

One thing I would have appreciated was hearing more of McGhee’s thoughts on how she hopes the tremendous historical excavation, contemporary research, and examples of cross-racial solidarity she has presented in this book will be used both to draw “more people’s eyes—and hearts—to the cause” of racial justice and to transform policy. I would have loved a quick summary of the organizations and initiatives McGhee believes are doing the most effective work in convincing people of the Solidarity Dividend and of ways folks convinced by her argument can join or help support these efforts. It would also have been valuable to hear about how she herself hopes to carry this work forward.

This said, *The Sum of Us* is an important book that will speak to audiences from a broad array of sectors, movements, and backgrounds. The work is particularly valuable for those who are seeking to further racial equity across public policy areas or who are striving to grow movements for racial justice by drawing in activists from other organizing efforts. McGhee offers us a better, truer story than the one of human hierarchy that has wrought so much harm across our communities, nations, and planet. This book champions human equality and the joy, strength, and prosperity we reap when we join together to honor it.

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#### WHEN COLLEGES CLOSE: LEADING IN A TIME OF CRISIS

by Mary L. Churchill and David J. Chard

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The United States higher education sector is on the edge of a precipice: for the first time in nearly three decades, it is estimated that the number of high school graduates—the bread-and-butter consumers of four-year college degrees—is going to decline nationally (Grawe, 2018). This grim projection has sounded alarm bells at many four-year colleges that heavily recruit traditional college-age students, especially small, regional, and nonselective colleges. For such institutions, shrinking applicant pools can spark a cataclysmic chain of events: fewer high school graduates means fewer potential students to recruit and thus lower enrollment numbers, which translates into less revenue and, ultimately, the institution struggling to stay afloat. A growing number of institutions are already in a precarious financial state (D’Amato, 2020), and enrollment changes in the secondary sector may be what pushes institutions to close or pursue arrangements like mergers to keep their doors open.

How can leaders, particularly at small colleges, help their institutions navigate this challenging landscape? Mary Churchill and David Chard’s timely book, *When Colleges Close: Leading in a Time of Crisis*, is a resource for precisely those senior higher education leaders whose colleges are “facing strong headwinds” (p. 3). Highlighting their own experience leading a small, private liberal arts college in the midst of declining enrollments and revenue shortfalls, Churchill and Chard offer an inside look at how higher education leaders can approach charting the future of their institutions when that future may mean no longer existing at all.

The book tells the story of Wheelock College, a small Boston college with a focus on training teachers and social workers, and how its leadership proactively addressed concerns about its continued viability by merging with Boston University’s (BU) School of Education. As told by Chard, Wheelock’s fourteenth president, and Churchill, the former vice president for academic