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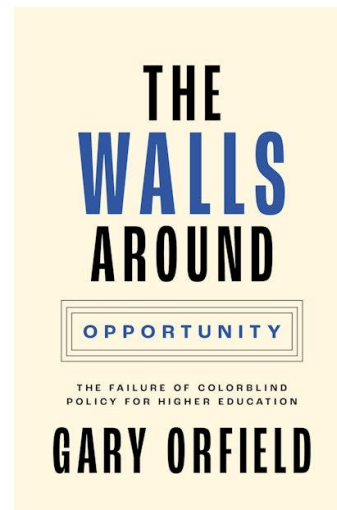
Orfield, G. (2024). *The walls around opportunity: The failure of colorblind policy for higher education.* Princeton University Press.

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While I was reading Gary Orfield's well researched book on the failure of colorblind admission policy to solve the problems of social justice and equality of opportunity in higher education, I was "assaulted" by the daily news of the Trump administration's war on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) at all educational levels in our society. Orfield originally published this book in 2022, but he added a new Afterword in 2024 when the paperback version was released. Thus, Donald Trump had been elected to a second presidential term but had not yet been sworn into office when the updated book was printed and released. I doubt that Orfield could have predicted the sweeping Executive Orders focused on DEI, student loan programs and Pell grant reductions. When the latter is coupled with the administration's attacks on curriculum, academic freedom, hiring and firing practices at universities and massive cuts to research programs and grants, this book seems almost completely out of touch with 2025 America. That is not to say that Orfield's concerns, his in-depth discussion on the lack of a fair playing field for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students and some suggestions in the last chapter that might lead to solutions have been overtaken by recent events. The problems of higher education have become so magnified in the second Trump administration that Orfield's concerns will not get the attention that many of us believe they merit.



To prove this point, I reference just two of many recent newspaper articles, a *New York Times* book review of Richard D. Kahlenberg's *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges* (Traub, 2025) and a *Wall Street Journal* piece by J. L. Riley (2025) adapted from his recently published book, *The Affirmative Action Myth*. These books and reviews all address affirmative action, color blind admission policies and issues of diversity and inclusion, albeit from strikingly different perspectives. Each one references the Supreme Court's landmark 6–3 decision, *Students for Fair Admission V. Harvard* (2023), written by Chief Justice John Roberts, declaring that affirmative action violates the

Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. At issue in these books is the intersection between race and class with a healthy dose of American idealism on what is truly “fair” thrown into the mix. For Orfield, this intersection is also conflated with history, culture, and demography.

Gary Orfield is a Distinguished Research Professor of Education, Law, Political Science and Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles with research interests in the study of civil rights, education policy, urban policy, and minority opportunity. He was co-founder and director of the Harvard Civil Rights Project and now serves as co-director of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA. His central interest has been the development and implementation of social policy, particularly the impact of policy on equal opportunity for success in American society

(<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/about-us/staff/gary-orfield-ph.d>). He has co-authored or co-edited 12 books since 2004, all centering on issues of social justice and education. He has presented numerous academic papers on social justice and education and testified as an expert witness for several of the court cases he references throughout this latest book. To sum up succinctly his research, Orfield believes in the transformative power of American schools, particularly colleges and universities, to improve lives, but is concerned that they are doing far too little to address the racial divisions and stratification in our society.



To explicate his beliefs in this book on the failure of color-blind admissions policy, Orfield first lays out his beliefs about our racially stratified society, then delves into the history of how we generally have had policies of exclusion throughout U.S. history (Chapters 1-3), follows with the “glimmer of hope” of the Civil Rights Revolution and War on Poverty (Chapter 4), and explains how “color-blindness” policy has led to four decades of increasing inequality (Chapter 5) before wrapping up with two chapters (6 and 7) proposing ideas for changes that might yield significant gain and strategies to enact these possible solutions. The book closes with two commentaries, one by James D. Anderson, Dean Emeritus of the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and one by Stella Flores, University of Texas at Austin, and Orfield’s new Afterword that focuses on the Supreme Court’s rejection of affirmative action. There are extensive endnotes and a bibliography to back up the claims in the book.

The demographic, historical, and cultural issues that Orfield discusses are not new and have been well documented in many books. The contribution of this work may be that the information is collected into one place. That being said, a stronger editing job might have made the book both shorter and less repetitive. It reads like a compilation of a series of academic papers and presentations with each chapter representing one or more of these papers. Thus, I found myself rereading similar data points repeatedly. None of the information is incorrect; some is just redundant.

The book becomes significantly less tedious in Chapters 6 and 7 when the discussion moves to methods of addressing the problems Orfield identifies. His understanding of the complexity of poverty, demographically racially and culturally segregated neighborhoods and segregated schools, teacher quality and retention in poverty schools, the damage wrought by solutions such as vouchers and school choice that turned out to exacerbate the issues, are all clearly explained. While Orfield specifically states in his Foreword that the book's purpose is not to provide answers, the final chapters do point to some programs and ideas that could start to improve the chances for minority, poor and ignored or excluded groups in our society. He does touch on issues as to why some groups, particularly children of Asian immigrants, have been more academically successful, which is one of the mainstay objections for people who argue against racial preferences. Additionally, he focuses much of his attention on the importance of the need for excellent high schools to prepare a pipeline that would help ensure success when minority (all non-white, middle class and above) students do stretch to enroll in higher education as well as the support structures that need to be in place once these students enroll and enter higher education. Most federal monies over the years have been distributed to pre-school and elementary school programs, and Orfield's focus on the importance of high school for preparing students with critical thinking, critical listening, and critical reading skills was quite refreshing. Yes, the Carnegie Report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), and a series of books did focus on high school in late 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Goodlad's *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools*, Lightfoot's *The Good High School*, Oakes' *Keeping Track*, Powell et al.'s *The Shopping Mall High School* to name a few). However, there really has been no significant, lasting change from these books or from the programs like "No Child Left Behind" or the "Race to the Top." Now, May 2025, with the Department of Education on the chopping block and Pell Grants and student loan eligibility and costs being rewritten to pay for massive tax breaks, Orfield's pleas for race conscious programs to assist minority groups in attaining the American Dream seems to have been regrettably overtaken by events. Despite all the data presented and the convincing arguments that Orfield makes, for education, this is a clarion call for action at a time when federal policy offers no hope. Sad, but reality, nonetheless.

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About the Reviewer

Barbara Slater Stern, Ed.D., is a professor emerita in the Department of Middle, Secondary and Mathematics Education at James Madison University. She taught Advanced World History and AP United States History for 12 years as well as Black History and European Culture Studies during her high school teaching career. At the university level, beginning in 1995, she taught a variety of courses including Foundations of American Education, Methods of Teaching Secondary Social Studies, and Curriculum Theory and Issues. Prior to full retirement in 2021, she wrote and co-wrote numerous journal articles and book chapters on technology in social studies education, the history of teaching history, and teaching controversial social issues. She served for 3 years as associate editor and 6 years as editor of *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, the journal of the American Association of Teaching and Curriculum. Barbara has published two books on social studies education.



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