

The Social Determinants of Health and the Pursuit of Educational Justice

There is significant growth in the racial and ethnic diversity across students at all levels of higher education, mirroring the growing diversity of the U.S. population. Unfortunately, however, there are inequities in learning outcomes across all higher education students. What causes this? And what can be done to address this disparity? The answers lie in understanding the social and environmental factors that influence one's life and thereby drive learning: the Social Determinants of Learning (SDOL). These non-cognitive factors can position individuals to succeed, or not. We are proposing a new framework for educators designed to address the inequities in learning outcomes and expand learning opportunities to support the academic success of all students.

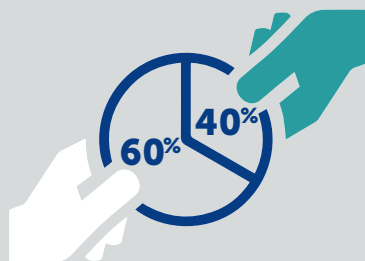
The Problem

Racial and ethnic disparities have plagued education for centuries. Yet, as our country becomes increasingly diverse, equitable education remains elusive. These inequities have come into sharper relief during the pandemic and have been exacerbated.

Structural inequalities across systems of labor, housing, education, voting, healthcare and justice have resulted in employment, income and educational attainment disparities.



Structural racism contributes to the unemployment rate of Black/African Americans being twice as high as whites, pre-2020 pandemic.



Although more whites experience poverty, Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely to live in poverty.



Structural racism contributes to the academic achievement gap and results in a lower educational attainment for some groups.

Under-resourced schools are one of our nation's most significant examples of structural racism and could contribute to inequities among students in bachelor's programs during the first year in college. Persistence rates differ across ethnic groups, as do federal loans and grants. There are inequities in the amount of student loan debt for college graduates. These differences are likely associated with communities where there is insufficient school funding due to lower local property taxes, which may result in unequal learning opportunities.

The Connection Between Health & Education

Health and education are inextricably linked. Americans with more education tend to live longer, healthier lives. There are numerous social determinants that can affect this symbiotic relationship. Education is a key social determinant that is linked to health across the lifespan in several ways:



The quality and length of one's education crosses over other social determinants of health, impacting an individual's future well-being related to employment and economic factors (McGill, 2016). A large scale, national study by the Centers for Disease Control (Rasberry, et.al., 2017) found high school students with greater academic performance had significantly higher prevalence of protective health-related behaviors and significantly lower prevalence of health-related risk behaviors compared to students who were not passing their courses.

Equitable education for all has far reaching implications, across nursing education and higher education in general. Further development and testing the SDOL framework will support the goal of equitable education for all.

The Solution

The work of educational justice begins with denouncing racism, embracing just principles, identifying and addressing the underlying, unjust and avoidable social causes disadvantaging learners, and creating the necessary conditions for student success. A conceptual framework rooted in the context of systemic racism can promote a shared understanding and language for advancing educational justice.

The Social Determinants of Health framework serves as a foundation from which to build a Social Determinants of Learning framework. The relationship between health and education are clear. Healthy People 2020 (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020) addresses social determinants of health and identifies access to educational opportunities and quality of education as key social determinants in addition to access to health care services.



The Social Determinants of Learning Framework

Work aimed to correct injustices in the U.S. public educational system begins with understanding root causes. “Social determinants” are defined as socially imposed forces, which are the causative factors that have implications for or influence one’s life. Those barriers would need to be assessed and addressed for the student to move forward and progress. Social Determinants of Learning attributes may also be identified in positive terms, and in those cases, would be protective in nature.

The desired outcome of a SDOL framework is self-determined, accountable, confident and courageous students who engage faculty and fellow students in order to build intellectual and social capital as a means to employment and a poverty-free future. The U.S. will have achieved educational justice when this outcome becomes the norm.



About Chamberlain University



For over 130 years, Chamberlain University has been a pioneer in health education—dedicated to preparing healthcare professionals for extraordinary futures. Chamberlain offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs online and on campus in nursing, public health and social assistance. Chamberlain is one of the largest nursing schools in the U.S. and has 23 campuses across 15 states. The university is built on the simple truth that every student can succeed where there is a culture of belonging, strong student and faculty relationships, the right learning resources and a commitment to personalized learning pathways. Through expanded access to underrepresented communities and purposeful development of our whole student body, we’re committed to cultivating a diverse community of change agents whose careers work to address injustice and advance the critical drivers of health equity for all.