

Solving the Human Capital Conundrum

Are problems/issues that are associated with Black American education (the formation of human capital) as complex as they seem? Whether they are as complex as they appear or not, “human capital” is important and it requires considerable attention when developing a long-term strategic plan (LTSP) for Black Americans. However, we would like to suggest that the situation is not so complex, and that we can solve the conundrum by addressing four critical aspects of education for Black Americans: (1) Environment; (2) performance/achievement; (3) distribution; and (4) evolution.

Environment

The “nature versus nurture” controversy will persist. Most scholars agree that both are important in the process of human capital formation. Hence, a LTSP for Black Americans must address the environment out of which Black American youth come to pursue education. The LTSP component on family (“Comprehending the ‘Art’ and ‘Science’ of Family”) discusses aspects of family formation that will help ensure that the environment for shaping Black American students is favorable. But homes are just one of three important environments that contribute to the formation of human capital.

The second environment is the community; i.e., the “cultural capital” that characterizes the breadth and scope of life possibilities. The LTSP component on economics and business (“Making our World”) discusses efforts to improve conditions in Black American communities. Such improved conditions will affect the environment favorably and, thereby, create better human capital formation outcomes.

The third environment is educational institutions. Here, we are not only concerned about the physical environment, but about the resource environment in which Black Americans learn. For example, at the elementary and secondary school levels, there are the public versus charter schools issue. There is the question of whether Black American students learn more effectively with Black versus non-Black teachers. For Black males, should more effort be dedicated to providing instruction using male versus female teachers? At the higher education level, there is the question of whether Black American students benefit more from attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or historically White colleges and universities. The latter question presupposes that HBCUs should continue to exist—a topic that should also be examined.

There are other environmental questions/issues that need to be explored when building a LTSP for Black Americans. Developers of the plan must flesh them out.

Performance/achievement

If one considers aggregate statistics without analysis, one is likely to conclude that Black Americans are performing inadequately when it comes to human capital

formation. Data from the 2006 *Current Population Survey*, which are produced by the U.S. Census Bureau, indicated that, for the Black population over 18 years of age or older (25.6 million), 9.1 million or 35.5% completed high school. For the Black population 25 years of age or older (21.6 million), 2.7 million or 12.5% completed undergraduate degrees. Given that high school completion and undergraduate degrees are fundamental requirements for successful participation in the world of work today, the number of completions and the percentages do not bode well for Black Americans' success in creating or capturing gainful employment.

Such a conclusion, however, may be somewhat hasty. As Dr. R. L'Heureux Lewis of City College of New York noted in a recent broadcast on Rev. Jesse Jackson's "Keep Hope Alive" radio program, it is important to conduct extensive analyses and realize that Black Americans are performing at a higher level than would be indicated by existing conditions. We cannot forget that Black Americans, on average, have considerably less education and wealth than White Americans, and that we have access to considerably fewer resources than White Americans. Clearly, wealth, parental education, and access to resources are huge contributors to educational performance/achievement.

Therefore, we should not denigrate or minimize our level of educational performance/achievement, but we should speak positively about it and voice hope for the future. But, "hope is no strategy." What are logical and acceptable levels of educational performance/achievement? A LTSP would answer this question. It would fully specify, on a short- and long-term basis, what the performance/achievement should be given continuing improvement in Black American human capital formation, wealth, and access to resources.

About one further point we should be very cautious: We must ensure that Black American students undergo functional educational (human capital formation) experiences. That is, the system in which we place Black Americans to obtain an education should not just transmit theoretical knowledge; the learning must be truly functional. It is great to know the theory, it is better to be able to apply it. If Black students obtain function educations, then we will have, for example, doctors who can truly heal, sociologists who can actually transform our communities, and psychologists who can make our minds completely whole.

Distribution

By distribution is meant how Black American human capital is distributed across disciplines or valued skills. One could assume that Black Americans should self-align their educational achievement and skill formation with that of the broader society. That is, there should be the same medical doctor-to-population ratio for Black Americans as for White Americans. Obviously, this is not a wise assumption for Black Americans given the high incidence of disease that we experience. As noted in the LTSP component on health ("Producing and Preserving our Health"), Black Americans should make an effort to over produce medical doctors in the near term to account for

this high incidence of disease, then phase down this doctor-to-population ratio overtime as disease among Black Americans declines.

Consequently, a LTSP for Black Americans should chart a program of human capital production that is based on the needs of the broader nation and of Black Americans, specifically, going forward. Notably, the number (percentage) of Black American scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, dentists, economists, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, and teachers to the population will be determined, in part, by the extent to which Black Americans realize plans to establish our own state. Clearly, the number (percentage) should be adjusted as history unfolds and as needs change.

The LTSP should be specific about the tools that are available and that can be developed for identifying and/or creating initial and later interest in specific disciplines and skills and nurturing that interest so that Black American youth can fulfill their aspiration. We comprehend that, if Black youth see only painters or gardeners in their communities (their cultural capital), then they are likely to aspire to develop those skills and to perform those occupations. We must also respond to the fact that, because there are almost no Black Americans in certain disciplines/occupations (e.g., investment bankers and astronauts), to the extent that they are important to Black America's development, we should create an appetite among Black youth to train for and to capture such disciplines/occupations.

Evolution

Many scientists subscribe to Darwin's "theory of evolution by natural selection." The idea is that Black Americans' educational emphasis and focus should evolve naturally—not be shaped intentionally based on a specific vision or set of visions. There is good reason to argue against the "natural selection" approach. As man moves through the 21st century and beyond, he is likely to gain increasing potential for envisioning and shaping his future. It is, therefore, logical for Black Americans to play a leading role in efforts to determine how existing disciplines should evolve and in bringing new disciplines and sub-disciplines into existence.

For example, the information technology industry began with what is now recognized as basic hardware and software. Later there evolved the capacity to increase the magnitude and speed with which calculations could be made and to develop forecasts and to solve complex strategic games. Now we have entered the world of "artificial intelligence" (AI). Given history, we know that AI is not an end-state. Hence, a key question is "What is on the horizon?" This is the question that Black American scholars should continue to ask and to answer in all of their respective disciplines.

A LTSP for the formation of Black American human capital must, therefore, include a process and timetable that is designed to assist Black American scholars stay on the cutting-edge of their disciplines and to evolve new disciplines and sub-disciplines as required. Of course, certain new areas of scholarship will be directed at meeting the

needs of the broader society; however, Black American-specific disciplines and sub-disciplines should also come to light.

Conclusion

We cannot over emphasize the importance of the education (human capital formation) component of the LTSP for Black Americans. When we develop this component of the plan, we should take care in considering environmental, performance/achievement, distributional, and evolution issues. In addition, we must ensure that the education (human capital formation) component of the plan is seamlessly integrated with all other plan components. When we are successful in these respects, then we will have a LTSP that facilitates Black American progress through the stages of development that are required to achieve all of the specific and overarching goals that we define for ourselves.

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