

and privatization of public institutions became the dominant economic philosophy” (166).

In truth, the picture is neither so simple nor so dire. State support for higher education has indeed decreased. But federal support in the form of Pell grants, subsidized loans, and loan forgiveness has grown significantly. Means-tested programs, government-funded healthcare, and other entitlements have grown even faster. The federal government has made substantial efforts to improve education for women and girls, children with disabilities, and English learners. State governments have redirected spending for K–12 schools to reduce the gap between rich and poor districts. The 1979 *Bakke* decision gave a green light to extensive affirmative action policies. University leaders have fought tooth and nail to preserve their authority to use racial preferences in admissions. Morel seems oblivious to these many policy changes, most of which were the work of liberal Democrats, not the neoliberal privatizers he claims have dominated politics for the past half-century.

Morel paints this Manichean image of politics to support his claim that student activism was crucial for the survival of the TD program. TD students who bravely took over school buildings succeeded in expanding their program, despite hostile school administrators and state legislators. Their protests, he insists, brought results, not reaction.

In assessing the consequences of student activism, it helps to distinguish the insular world of the university from the real world of politics. Many university administrators have a near-religious commitment to affirmative action, generally favoring programs to help those students succeed. They are more comfortable accommodating than confronting student protesters. Within this realm, the type of student activism Morel celebrates does, in fact, work.

But outside the ivory tower things are different. Especially in red states, universities are in particularly bad odor, subject to budget cuts and many novel and troubling restrictions. The more universities move to the left, the more their support in the outside world declines. Morel does not discuss the growing cultural divide between the campus and the world of ordinary politics—a divide that became so apparent in the fall of 2023.

Toward the end of the book, Morel argues that the sort of pragmatic, incremental reform that produced TD and similar programs cannot succeed without fundamental political change: “Under existing conditions, higher education is incapable of serving as a vehicle for upward mobility, and, therefore, incapable of serving as a tool to address growing concerns of inequality” (158). This fatalistic conclusion is squarely at odds with the more convincing, more optimistic story Morel tells in the first half of his book. There he shows that there are many things colleges can do to help disadvantaged students overcome the deficiencies of their previous education. And there are

many more things that public schools can do to make sure that they are prepared for college once they enter. We should not wait for the revolution before providing minority students with the support they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Response to R. Shep Melnick’s Review of *Developing Scholars: Race, Politics, and the Pursuit of Higher Education*

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— Domingo Morel 

I want to thank *Perspectives on Politics* for the opportunity to participate in a Critical Dialogue and to Professor Melnick for engaging with my book.

I begin by focusing on Melnick’s critique of my claim that race provides the explanation for the emergence of *secondary admissions policies* in specific university majors. He argues that several reasons other than racism can help explain why universities developed secondary admissions criteria, particularly for teacher education programs. But Melnick ignores the evidence in the book.

I collected data on the GPA requirements needed to enter business, education, engineering, and nursing majors at every public institution of higher education in the United States. The book shows that, after controlling for several variables, the strongest predictor of increasing GPA requirements at public colleges and universities is the increasing enrollment of Black students. I also rely on historical evidence to show how testing requirements to enter and graduate from teacher preparation programs were designed to displace and then prevent Black teachers from entering the profession. Those same requirements to enter teacher preparation programs and then to become a licensed teacher are still with us today. Indeed, Melnick cites a 2023 study by Kilbride and colleagues to support the argument that it is not racism but “the amount of time required to complete” teacher preparation programs that lead students of color to drop out at a higher rate than white students in Michigan. But here too, Melnick ignores the racial dynamics of the “Tracking Progress through Michigan’s Teacher Pipeline” study; its report shows how “low pass rates among Black candidates on Michigan’s teacher licensure test may contribute to additional losses of prospective Black teachers before they reach the certification stage” (2).

Melnick also writes that my book does not discuss several programs that successfully support students of color at the City University of New York (CUNY) and in Texas nor did I compare these programs to the University of Rhode Island’s Talent Development initiative. Although it is important to note that my book is not an evaluation of the TD program itself but rather a historical

analysis of the political factors that led to its creation and survival, I do write about the most successful college admissions and support program for students of color in CUNY's history. The SEEK program, which was created in 1966, was one of the pioneers of what I refer to as *community-centered affirmative action programs*. Thousands of students have participated in the program to date, and research has shown how students in this program have been able to transition out of poverty. However, over the decades, SEEK has been undermined by attacks on its admissions policies and funding by the same neoliberal forces that Melnick dismisses in his review.

By ignoring the analysis of the SEEK program, Melnick misses a major part of my argument. Programs like SEEK

at CUNY, TD at the University of Rhode Island, and many of the programs Melnick lauds in his review were created because communities of color demanded opportunities; often, those demands required protest. The protest movements that created these opportunities for students of color in the 1960s were not limited to college campuses. These programs were created because of political pressure within and outside the universities. Although Melnick sees my conclusion that political change is necessary for higher education to meet its promise as "fatalistic," I instead view the argument that college access requires social movements beyond the university as optimistic—and consistent with the vision of the activists who first created these opportunities in the 1960s.