Royel Johnson:

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash, and all Indigenous nations, tribes, and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore:

In three, two, one.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family. Welcome back to another episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast focused on purposes, politics, and practices of higher education. I am your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, associate professor of higher education and social work at the University of Southern California, and director of the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates. Mouthful.

Shout-out to the Rossier School of Education, specifically my Dean, Pedro Noguera, for being a sponsor this year of the podcast. I have the privilege and fortune of working with my dear friend and colleague who needs no introduction, but we'll introduce her anyway. Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Thanks, Royel. Hello, family. I'm calling you family because if you've gotten to this episode of the podcast, we've probably either been in your home, your car, your office, or on a walk with you, so basically whether you know it or not, we're friends.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, associate professor at Old Dominion University in the Higher Education and Community College programs. We are excited about today's episode, as we discuss various elements of purpose, politics, and practice in higher education. Today, we have some dynamic scholars and experts in the area of college admissions and access. Royel, why don't you let the people know who's joining us today?

Royel Johnson:

Join us in welcoming our special guest, Dr. Julie Posselt, associate professor of higher education at the University of Southern California, and associate dean of the USC Graduate School, and my colleague at USC. We also have Dr. Kimberly Griffin, professor and dean-

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Royel Johnson:

... of the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. We have Arthur Kelly, who is program specialist at Access College Foundation, and Dr. Liliana Garces, who is the W.K. Kellogg

professor in community college leadership at the University of Texas, Austin. Let me just say, this is like an all-star group-

Felecia Commodore:

I mean, it's superstar.

Royel Johnson:

... of scholars and practitioners who I would want on any team-

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Royel Johnson:

... tackling issues related to access and equity in higher education.

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely. Before we jump into our roundtable conversation, we do have a little fun activity that we do with all of our guests, and we call it This or That. We are going to give you each two options to choose from, and you will simply pick one, just one that you most prefer.

Julie, I'm going to start with you. I'm going to apologize ahead of time because I should know how to pronounce this and I probably don't, but I'm going to give you two names and you tell me which camp you land in. Bordo versus Foucault?

Julie Posselt:

Oh, Bordo. 100%.

Felecia Commodore:

There we go. There we go.

Royel Johnson:

Easy. Good choice.

Felecia Commodore:

I knew that was going to be the answer.

Royel Johnson:

For Kim, as a yogi, cobra pose or pigeon pose?

Kimberly Griffin:

Oh. Pigeon.

Royel Johnson:

Okay.

Julie Posselt:
Yes. Can I answer for you?

Kimberly Griffin:
Pigeon.

Felecia Commodore:
All right, yeah.

Kimberly Griffin:
It hurts, but we need it.

Julie Posselt:
It hurts in all the right ways.

Kimberly Griffin:
All the best ways.

Royel Johnson:
Yes, all the good ways.

Kimberly Griffin:
All the best ways. All the best ways.

Felecia Commodore:
Only pigeons-

Kimberly Griffin:
It's such a dynamic pose.

Royel Johnson:
It is.

Kimberly Griffin:
You can move so many ways in pigeon.

Felecia Commodore:
Only pigeons I know are in Philadelphia that eat all the soft pretzels and can't fly, so that's the pigeon pose I have. Arthur, we have a question for you.

Arthur Kelly:
Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

Individual institutional applications, or common app?

Arthur Kelly:

I'm going to go with the common application.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay, okay. Say more.

Arthur Kelly:

That might not be the popular, but common app.

Royel Johnson:

We were just talking about this, how students brag that they've been accepted to a hundred institutions across the country like that's a badge of honor.

Arthur Kelly:

I'll even go a step further. I'll even say the Black common application as well.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, yes.

Royel Johnson:

Oh, yeah, yeah. All right.

Felecia Commodore:

Now I might, can meet you halfway there.

Arthur Kelly:

All right.

Royel Johnson:

Okay, Liliana. We have a fun one for you. Who has the best dissenting opinions, Sonia Sotomayor or Ketanji Brown Jackson?

Liliana Garces:

And, and both of them.

Royel Johnson:

Both.

Felecia Commodore:

Justified.

Liliana Garces:

I would say this latest threat, it was a team effort. It was a team effort. They complemented each other quite well.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Liliana Garces:

Ketanji Brown Jackson, she had the statements.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

She did.

Felecia Commodore:

I don't know that I've ever read a footnote before that I felt like I needed to cite. It was very good.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, very powerful.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay. Thank you all for that. I'm going to deal with my feelings about common app. On today's episode, Royel and I are going to get into the hot and heavy of a topic that has recently been at the center of our news cycle, and that is college admissions and access. Get ready as we discuss with our panelists the myriad of forces that are impacting access to higher education. Who has it? Who's being denied? How are we navigating this tricky question of who gets to go to college and where will they go?

We're getting into all of the things today, folks, including the recent affirmative action decision, lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and other imminent shifts that pose challenges to expanding college access for underserved populations, including reflections and practical strategies for individuals and institutions committed to advancing equity.

Royel Johnson:

To get things started, maybe if you can just tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you are engaged in as it relates to our conversation for today.

Liliana Garces:

As it relates to the topics that you mentioned?

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Liliana Garces:

Engaged in trying to ... Helping those on the ground who are trying to give meaning to the affirmative ... to the race-conscious admissions decision. Trying to shape how it's interpreted and guide implementation, and engage in thinking about what areas of research are needed, and coalition building, moving forward to address the negative impacts that it will most certainly have.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you.

Arthur Kelly:

I'm Arthur Kelly. I work for a non-profit organization here in South Hampton Roads, Access College Foundation. We help students get into college. One of the biggest barriers that we do, that we knock down is filling out the FAFSA form for parents and students. Helping students navigate that process from FAFSA to any verifications that they have to have, independent, dependent verifications. We walk them through that process.

We are in 30 high schools in the South Hampton Roads area. We also have an early awareness program, and we are also on 13 college campuses in the State of Virginia. It says, that statement we have to work twice as hard to get half as much. The affirmative action suit, it just affirms that there's still going to be a lot of barriers that we have to overcome. I'm talking about Black and Brown when I speak of that, but minorities in general. That is my take on that, but obviously, we can go more into depth on that subject.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you.

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you.

Julie Posselt:

As a higher education professor, but also just with how I choose to use my tenure, I direct two research practice partnerships that are both focused on increasing equity and diversity in selective sectors of higher education, especially graduate education and STEM disciplines. As a big part of that, I've been taking my research and building community with others who are doing research in higher ed, including Kim and Liliana, to develop models of admissions, mentoring, recruitment that are aligned with values of equity instead of in conflict with them as the inherited modes of them has been.

At this very moment, there's so much work, so much sense-making that needs to happen around the Harvard and UNC decisions, which I like to call the Harvard and UNC decisions, instead of the SFFA decisions, to center the institutions that are pushing for equity and diversity, and standing up for it, so yeah, that's the center of my work right now. Today, my team participated in training 16 people to advance Dr. Griffin's model of equity-minded mentoring with faculty around the country, which I'm super proud of. Yeah, the people who are assembled today, they are my favs in the field.

Royel Johnson:

Likewise.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Kimberly Griffin:

Dr. Posselt, I'm honored that you would use my work in that way. Scholar Dr. Griffin thought about this from the perspective of my work on graduate diversity and faculty diversity, and while some of it is related to admissions and hiring, I focus more on building equitable and just communities so that folks can thrive in those environments. Understanding this decision and how it relates to efforts to do that has been my primary focus, and talking to people about what it signals and how this ultimately makes folks feel, and gets in the way of, or maybe doesn't always get in the way of our work around creating equitable and just environments for everybody.

As a newish dean, one year in, I've had three layers of thinking, so I thought, certainly, about my campus and our efforts to be a diverse and equitable community. How does this decision have implications for the decisions that we make about who and how we admit students? I thought about my specific community in my College of Education that serves a lot of students of color, how they might be feeling, what they might be thinking.

Then, I was thinking outwardly. As educators, we're being prepared to go out into the field and work with students and families in schools and communities, so what does this mean for them? How do we message to all of those communities that our goals are still the same and that we're still invested in the same goals to achieve as a community, but one of our tools has been taken away?

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, before we jump into the more recent and contemporary event, I wanted to ask, what is the state of college access in the United States? What are some persistent equity gaps in the area of college access that we should be aware of?

Arthur Kelly:

Yeah, so there are still significant barriers, and that's the take, and to just segue from the affirmative action cases, they were really affirming action. This is why action needed to happen for students of color to be able to be accepted and to make a diverse campus, to turn institutions from PWIs to MSIs, minority serving institutions. Now that action is looking like it's ceasing but there are still a lot of barriers that are going on, so socioeconomic disparities, affordability, racial and ethnic disparities, geographic disparities, information and guidance.

The state of our union, I would say, is not solid as we think. I'm telling my students now that you really need to focus on skills. A college degree will not guarantee you a job, so I'm encouraging them to really look at the trade factor, the apprenticeship programs, something that can give them those soft and hard skills that they need to make a living.

Julie Posselt:

Yeah. Arthur, I agree with you 100%. I think, to my earlier comment about choosing Bordo, the whole system is set up for inequity, to preserve and reproduce inequities. The system is not set up for equity or opportunity right now. The imposition of state and now Supreme Court-level affirmative action bans, I think, are really important to highlight that people have been working in the context of having these constraints.

A lot of the research I've been doing since about 2013 has been trying to understand, what do people do on the ground to try to sustain or increase diversity in the presence of these legal constraints? It's so encouraging that there still is so much more that we can do than what we can't and yet, that doesn't necessarily help the fact that the system is set up to perpetuate privilege, to perpetuate inequality.

In graduate education where I study a lot of the inequities, you have seen improvements for women, especially white women, and you have seen sustained progress at the master's level for students from pretty much all racial and ethnic groups, but at the doctoral level, there's very persistent gaps for Indigenous and Black students relative to white and Asian students, especially in STEM. There's whole fields that, every year, don't even award a single degree at the doctoral level to Black or Indigenous people. That's just embedded and that's something that affirmative action alone could never have taken care of. It's going to require much deeper systemic change.

Kimberly Griffin:

Just to add to that, I think a lot about aspirations and potential of kids in communities of color right now, and how those aspirations and that potential is not well-assessed and does not at all align with how we select people for institutions, how we select people, whether we're talking about undergrad, grad, faculty, that I think we often look to students and think like, "Well, how do we have to fix them? What preparation do we need to give them so that they can gain access to these institutions?" and there's nothing wrong with them. We're asking them to navigate and be admitted to systems and structures that have been set up in ways that don't recognize their gifts.

I'm just particularly aware of we have tests and we have metrics, and they don't measure the right things. They measure the things we can measure, or that are easier to measure. That's just perpetuating these gaps that we see over and over again. We haven't really addressed the structure or system at all, much to Julie's point.

Liliana Garces:

Yeah, and in some respects, the practice of what I call race-conscious admissions because it's really not the robust affirmative action that we used to have, it was kind of a Band-Aid to a system that didn't really question itself and its fundamental structure in perpetuating these inequities, and we're presented with an opportunity to that potentially happen now. Whether it's going to be realized or not is another question, and there's greater challenges right now that the law is also presenting that I'm sure we can get into in more detail later, but those are challenges that are coming from the law that are really being bullies and threats to educators who are trying to do their work.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm. We asked that question because there's so much discourse around like, over the past 34 years, we've really expanded access and opened up the doors of higher education, but it's like for who, and under what conditions, and where? I think you all contextualized some of the persistent challenges, especially for selective institutions, and majors, and so forth.

How did COVID impact issues of access? I know that, for some folks, we're in this post-COVID moment already, but there are still persistent sort of impacts that COVID has and will continue to have on issues related to preparation and access for college. Can you talk a little bit about what impact COVID is having?

Arthur Kelly:

I think the scriptures talk about the sin that follows after, and it's something that has caused a rift in everything that we do moving forward. The result is the loss of affirmative action. All of this is leading, and one thing that I do have to say, and I'm sorry if I get off-script on this one, is they did not take into consideration legacy.

I'm in the State of Virginia with one of the founding institutions, William and Mary, College of William and Mary, and I just think about all the legacy that has come from that institution, but that was strucken down as a part of that case. We really need to look at that, but as far as COVID, it made us do things a lot differently.

A lot of people are benefiting from COVID. You get to work from home. I was always looking for a stay-at-home job, but then COVID allowed us to have that. When it comes to colleges, it allowed parents to really see what goes on on a daily basis, especially in the communities that I service. I have worked at a school with a senior cohort of 300, but only graduated 115.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, wow.

Royel Johnson:

Wow.

Arthur Kelly:

You would think that students are tech-savvy and because they're tech-savvy that they can really use a computer, but I really learned something about the computer process. Navigating through the computer is our modern way of saying knowing how to work a room, knowing how to talk to folks, and knowing how. You have to be able to know what questions to ask the computer to get the answer that you need.

I'm finding that a lot of students, they struggled through that virtual process of COVID and now that we're doing a lot of things virtual and we're trying to get back with schools not taking the SAT, as it being test-optional, could be a good thing, but it could hurt students as well. A lot of different things in that aspect as far as what COVID did, so I would say the sin that follows on after.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Mm-hmm.

Kimberly Griffin:

COVID exacerbated inequality. COVID was a spotlight. There were certain new dynamics that were created, but in many ways, it made already existent gaps, existing problems wider, bigger, more

persistent, more difficult to deal with, and there were these strategies that people were trying to adopt to see like, could we shift it a little bit? How can we re-equalize things? Sometimes, that got it, addressing the underlying inequality, but sometimes, similar to what Liliana mentioned, like the Band-Aid that's going to get us through this next season.

I was particularly interested and continue to be particularly interested in the interventions that were supposed to be short term to promote equity and doing research now on, are they working and should we keep them? Should they not just be COVID interventions? Colleges saying, "Oh, well, we'll be test-optional now for undergrad and grad admissions." Did you really lose anything? How are those students doing now? Did you need that test to begin with to be able to determine who gets a seat at your institution or not?

I do think it's complicated, for sure, whether or not we should let go of tests, and what they tell us and what they don't, but I think it's interesting to look at, particularly in light of what the Supreme Court has had to say. All the schools that decided to go test-optional during COVID, are they going to stay that way? Because it allows you to broaden access to some degree, or at least signal to students, "Hey, you should apply here. We're going to try and engage in a holistic process that's really going to look at the full range of your achievement," and then get a sense of, do those students perform any differently? It does provide us an opportunity to get a sense of which interventions will continue to work.

Royel Johnson:

Your point around exacerbating inequities, it makes me think about how many school districts were able to send computers home to kids to engage in learning, how many parents weren't able to stay at home because they still had to work. They were first responders, and they couldn't supervise their kids at home while they were engaged in the learning process, or there were just so many inequities that COVID seemed to exacerbate if you were already struggling with issues of affordability and access. How about others?

Julie Posselt:

Yeah. I was thinking, as Dr. Griffin was speaking, about one of the patterns that my team found. COVID dropped just as my team was starting a series of interviews with admissions decision-makers that were moving away from tests already. Then we followed up with them, and one of the interesting thing is that we saw those that were more equity-minded at the start of the pandemic were more likely to interpret struggling students whom they admitted without test scores as a function of the pandemic.

Those that dropped test scores and then the students struggled, it was about the students. I think the inferences that people are making right now about whether students admitted with or without tests are doing okay have a lot to do with that equity mindset that they begin with just as much as they have to do with what the selection criteria were. Especially if those same mindsets then permeated the mentoring interactions, the kind of way curriculum was delivered during the pandemic, what teaching looked like online.

Yeah, it was just really interesting to be working closely with people on the ground that all said they were committed to DEI issues, but once you got really deep with them, you could see that they were interpreting the pandemic in really different ways, and then interpreting their students' experiences and struggles during the pandemic in different ways too.

The good news is 90% of the people that we followed have decided to keep GRE scores optional or fully eliminate it, so they have seen that they don't actually need it as a criterion. And that one out of our

sample that has decided to really stick with it, it's very clear that that's on its way out too, and that they're just pandering, at this point, to a couple of particularly loud people on their faculty.

Arthur Kelly:

Dr. Posselt, do you find, or anyone can answer this, with that decision, the affirmative action decision, I know that a lot of schools are test-optional now on the undergraduate and the graduate level, like you said, GRE scores, but with them eliminating that aspect of race, do you think now they're going to push to say, "Well, what can differentiate a student that has the same GPA and have like-organizations and everything like that?" Will they need to require test scores again? The reason why I say that, is that another push, is this affirmative action push going to bring back schools requiring test scores to really see the merit of a student?

Julie Posselt:

I hope not.

Arthur Kelly:

Okay.

Julie Posselt:

Actually, I don't think so. I do think, if anything, this is a moment where ... Shout-out to Art Coleman and EdCounsel for acknowledging that there's a whole spectrum of different responses that might happen and that should happen, and that one of them doesn't actually have to do with considering student race at all. It's about making changes to the systems to remove barriers that are in the systems that remove disparate impacts and then make the system just a little bit more fair.

I think it is a moment where the SFFA decisions and the loss of being able to consider race explicitly will make people pay more attention to the criteria that were contributing or adding to racial inequalities like test score requirements. Liliana, I defer to you and your judgment on this.

Liliana Garces:

Well, I think you're totally right. It is a moment for institutions to reassess what they have in place that exacerbated inequities that then required this kind of race-conscious approach. Back to a point that Dean Griffin was making earlier about students' potential, and their merit, and an opportunity for institutions to think about how to better capture that potential, and what makes a student meritorious, and what they're going to be contributing to the institution that is beyond what is captured in the current system.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm usually the person that does this and brings the big, bad capitalism into the room. I think just from my experience in admissions, which was a while ago and what I've seen some institutions do, I don't think test scores are going to come back as prevalent from the admissions side, because a lot of schools are very scared of enrollment issues because we have the enrollment cliff that we keep talking about. I like to call it a high curb. Not quite as detrimental as a cliff.

I think what we may see, and I think it's already happening at institutions, is the use of optional test scores to determine who gets certain types of aid. The financial aid packages or scholarships, if you submit test scores and they reach a certain cut level, will give you money. You might get in without

those test scores, but you may not be eligible for certain types of aid. I think that creates a different kind of barrier of access for students, especially when we think about who may be the populations who will be less inclined to include test scores if it is optional.

I did have a question as we were thinking about the COVID-19 impact. I'm interested in hearing from you all, especially you, Dean Griffin, because you're in an administrative role, is really, one of the things that I think I've seen or strategies, I guess, I'll call it ... You can probably already tell how I feel about it. That institutions, after having to, many of them go online during the, quote, unquote, the height of the pandemic, and now have tried to transition back into the classroom, is using all that technology infrastructure they built to start these online versions of their institutions, and really selling them as access points. But really, when you look at it, it's a business model to generate income, like extra revenue for the institution.

I was curious if you have thoughts around that. Are these new online programs or arms of institutions really access points, or are they just money-makers, or can they be both?

Kimberly Griffin:

I think they can be both. I believe in the potential behind high-quality online instruction, and I think what we saw is we can do learning online. We can do it. There are certain things that don't translate nearly as well as if you're in a classroom. Now does that mean that we should have no online programs or no hybrid programs? I think that there's space for that. I think there's space for really thoughtful instructional design, really thoughtful engagement of technology to communicate information.

I think one of the things we learned from the pandemic is that in-person, high-touch contact learning isn't going anywhere either. I don't think that it's a replacement by any means. We've been thinking creatively about like, okay, how do we think about the realities of the world that we're in? What did we learn from the pandemic about what can be transmitted relatively well online? How can we build and develop classrooms? I recently got to spend time in a Hy-Flex classroom where some folks can be in person and some folks can Zoom in, and it actually feels like you were all in one classroom together. How can we leverage that type of technology to really promote greater access?

I know that a lot of those online programs often have a higher price point, so if it's going to promote more access, then we need to keep the price point low as well. There's lots to consider there, so I don't think it's a panacea by any means, but I think there's some potential there.

Royel Johnson:

Well, let me just say, when I was at Penn State, we had what's called World Campus, which was the online university that the university conducted. I taught in the World Campus program for higher education, and the amount of preparation and time that it took for me to even just get ready to teach this class, the thoughtfulness around the construction of the syllabus and the rubrics, and there was lots of conversations about how do we mirror the academic experience that no matter if you're teaching, you're taking the class online or residentially, that you're still getting the same sort of curriculum experience in terms of the quality of the education.

There was even a vice president or director of student affairs for the World Campus, and thinking about how do we engage students beyond the curricular as part of the co-curricular. I've been impressed with what some institutions have been able to do in creating a really robust, high-quality learning experience online.

Felecia Commodore:

Mm-hmm. I've seen various-

Royel Johnson:

Oh. Sounds like a skeptic.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm not a skeptic.

(singing)

I think there are certain institutions that are putting thought into it-

Royel Johnson:

Oh, for sure.

Felecia Commodore:

... and other institutions that are building their own University of Phoenix, and so that-

Royel Johnson:

I'm sure there's some shoddy programs. Yeah, for sure.

Felecia Commodore:

That's why I asked the question.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

I do governance. We've been talking about it, so let's get into it. SCOTUS, the Supreme Court of the United States recently banned the use and consideration of race in college admissions. Reflecting on this decision, its impact and its influence on the work that you do, could you all share how you've been thinking through the decision since it's come out?

Liliana Garces:

I just want to start by, yes, the decision says that race-conscious admissions is no longer permissible, and it's for both public and private institutions. It ends up, the decision ends up reversing 45 years of precedent. We can attribute this pretty extraordinary, even if it was anticipated, outcome to the composition of the Court. You have three justices, just in 2016 when the Court last considered the case, had dissented in an opinion that had found the practice constitutional. It was Roberts, Alito, and Thomas, and they were joined by at least three other justices. All had been appointed by former President Trump, and then they formed this new majority.

The decision itself says it doesn't overrule prior cases, but for all practical purposes it does. It uses a rationale in the majority opinion based on arguments that had been presented to the Court in the past and rejected, had only been adopted in dissenting opinions. When you think about why we have this outcome, it is solely because of ideological perspectives on the Court. That's something that, I think, just

fundamentally as a trained lawyer, as somebody who has worked really a lot within the legal system to make sure that it advances opportunity, it just really undermines the very fundamental principle of stare decisis, this idea that the Court has to follow its own prior rulings, that it's that, that its precedent not ideology that guides and informs legal outcomes. That's a very fundamental principle that fosters reliance on the justice system, on the legitimacy of the Court.

I think that's really important to keep in mind as we continue to think about the decision, and as administrators and others in higher education and K-12 context try to move forward as they understand the parameters of the decision. Because on just basic moral grounds, given what we know about from the research, the potential outcome of the decision might be that which is really undermining quality of education for all students, undermining access, undermining the role of institutions in helping promote a healthy, multi-racial democracy. That in thinking about the practical application of the decision, any kind of interpretation that goes beyond the parameters of what it covers extends that damage, and we can't let happen.

Arthur Kelly:

Yeah, wow. Thank you. That was awesome. I'm not a lawyer by any means, but pretty much, I'm just going to say it as I can. It was a slap in the face. I think the statement says history is best qualified to reward all research. That precedent just changes what was known, that the reason why there had to be affirmative action was because something was wrong within the system.

Pretty much, that decision is saying that, "Everything is fine now. We can go back to normal," and that's the problem. The normalcy is the complacency. Saying that, "Everything is fine. We have bridged the gap. Black and Brown students have access just like anyone else now. They don't need any special consideration" is a slap in the face to all the data that we have and everything. I'll land my plane there, but yeah, slap in the face.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, I'd like to ask you a question because I know that, at least on my timelines, and Twitter feeds and things, particularly those of us who are supporters or advocates for HBCUs, there became this conversation around whether or not we should ... I'm going to say I think we should always be encouraging students to apply to HBCUs, but there became this conversation, should we be pushing students, Black students particularly, to now be focused more so on going to HBCUs or applying to HBCUs instead of PWIs?

I'm curious, as someone who's on the ground, working with students, particularly Black and Brown students, do you feel that this decision is impacting how you advise students to apply to schools, or how they should be engaging in the college search process, or has that not really changed that much? How has this affected that practice?

Arthur Kelly:

To all my scholars, please don't beat me up when I say this.

Felecia Commodore:

We're not violent around here.

Arthur Kelly:

Not violent. Okay.

Royel Johnson:

SNIC.

Arthur Kelly:

In some talks, we're pulling out the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one. When I'm talking to a student, we're looking at, how much can you make for what you're trying to be, and do you actually have to go to college to be that? Those are the conversations that we're having. Yes, going to college is fine, and if you get a full ride to an institution, go right on ahead, but if you have to come out-of-pocket for something that you might not be guaranteed a job from, we really need to look at some other aspects, and I encourage students ... Obviously, HBCUs. I encourage students to go where they feel comfortable first, but in addition to that, go where you can make a living.

You have to focus on faith, family, friends, and finances. If you can get to that route by being an electrician, you don't have to go to school but I encourage, go to college, per se, but I do encourage HBCUs and other institutions to really look at bringing trade into their institutions, offering a two-year program within a four-year school, an expedited program where students can start earning money after two years. I really encourage institutions to look at that model because it can help a lot of Black and Brown students out, and they not have to come out-of-pocket for four years, or they can just start working after two years after getting their certification in something.

Kimberly Griffin:

A few days after the decision, maybe a week after the decision, I participated in a panel hosted by the Congressional Black Caucus, and it was about the impact of the decision on Black students and Black families. One of the questions that we got was, "What do we tell students now? What do we tell their families now? Should they not even apply to these institutions? Are HBCUs the only option? What should we say?"

I landed not too far from Art in terms of, think about all these institutions that are making really good ... I was very proud of the number of statements I saw as the decision came out of like, "No, we're invested in equity and justice. We're going to do this work. We're going to do this work. Y'all have taken away a tool, but we're going to do this work." A year from now, check in with that institution. What work are they doing? How are they showing you that this is an environment that you want to be in, where you're going to feel supported, where you're going to feel like you can thrive? Let the institution show you that, and that may be an HBCU. That may be a predominately white institution, or a historically white institution.

I think that HBCUs are amazing institutions, but don't receive enough resources, and if one of the outcomes of this decision is that we funnel more resources into those institutions, that's a good outcome. The solution isn't, "Well, we'll send all the Black students to HBCUs now." That is not a solution, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Kimberly Griffin:

I think there's a lot of both-and here. I think one of the unintended consequences is the decision feels like it is a message to students and families that you're not wanted. That is not, I would never want a student to take that message away. It's our role as institutional leaders to let students know like, "No,

you are wanted, and we're trying to figure out how to work within the context that we're in now." Context has changed. We're still working within it, and our goals are still the same. Our values are still the same. We need to be real, real clear about communicating that to students and families.

Julie Posselt:

Mm-hmm. I appreciate that so much, Dean Griffin. I think a lot of universities said a lot of really beautifully communicated things in summer 2020. The record since then is probably a pretty good indicator of what truth we can take away from the messages that are being sent in the wake of these decisions but also, yeah, giving things a little bit of time to play out.

My read is that the universities that were courageous before are going to be courageous now, and the universities that were cautious before are going to be cautious going forward, perhaps even more so. Yeah, I think that should absolutely play out in the space of college choice. Kelly Slay is doing some of the best work in the country right now on this. I hope as her work and others go forward that's paying attention to the two-way street of admissions decisions and student decisions that we start to see this become the market that that it should be for minoritized students.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, and I think the institutions, that the persons who were bringing these cases forward were fighting about, they weren't bringing cases forward about trying to get into Bloomsburg University, or in the middle of nowhere Pennsylvania. It was the Harvards, the Michigans, these schools that call themselves Public Ivies. I don't know where that came from. It's the weirdest thing ever.

I think to Kim's point, this messaging of like, it's these institutions that you shouldn't, quote, unquote, be able to just get into. The institutions that are more accessible, our regional, comprehensive institutions, our regional public institutions, our PBIs, or HBCUs, aren't really in this conversation because they're enrollment-sensitive, most of them.

It's really these elite institutions that we know, to a point you shared earlier, Julie, is perpetuates elitism or perpetuates these barriers of access into certain echelons or portions of society that we're trying to seemingly keep people out of or shrink access to. I think that's an important point to remember as we think through what this means for students because it really is particular types of institutions that I think the conversation is about.

Liliana Garces:

Institutions that are providing the training for the future leaders in our country-

Felecia Commodore:

Exactly.

Liliana Garces:

... in positions of power and influence.

Felecia Commodore:

Exactly.

Liliana Garces:

That's why it is such a contested space. Not to say that other institutions aren't doing that and are actually meeting great needs of our democracy and creating those leaders, but it is absolutely critical that we send the message-

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Liliana Garces:

... to students of color that they belong in these places that even where they don't see themselves reflected that they deserve every chance and opportunity to be there, that they have valuable contributions to make, and that it is critical for our democracy for them to be there.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Liliana Garces:

In some respects, I think the decision is also a challenge to institutions to better assess that talent and that potential, and to connect it to their mission.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Liliana Garces:

The point that Dr. Posselt was making around the institutions that were defending, will continue and those that may not, I think it's a slightly different challenge that we're facing now because what the decision ends up doing is creating this open door, this open invitation for ongoing challenges and threats of litigation. To the extent that we see any representation of students of color at these selective spaces, the challenges will continue and they'll continue on the grounds that somehow, race was impermissibly used in an admissions practices.

That's going to require a whole nother level of resources and courage to not turn back what the decision itself still allows to be possible, which is to consider race in connection to an applicant's experience and how that experience may be related to race, but it's connected to their skills, or knowledge, or the value that that experience brings to the institution, and its goal, and what it's trying to serve.

That we don't misinterpret the decision as saying that you can never, that you just can't think about race at all, which is where I think administrators and those on the ground are going to be really trying to

debate and think that, "I just can't ... I have to be blind to it," in some respects because you also have words in the decision saying that you can't ... That you're saying the essay is this backdoor to consider race in ways that we're telling you that you can't, and in trying to make sense of that, there's some ambiguity.

When you combine that with the ongoing threats and letters from Edward Blum, the architect of these challenges to universities, saying that the decision applies even more broadly than it actually does, people are going to default to ... It's very rational to just default to a place of caution and think that it's a broader prohibition than it actually is. That's going to take, I think, a lot of of coordinated strategy to make sure that people are not defaulting to that place of caution.

Felecia Commodore:

A quick legal question. Does this also open the door, under certain ideologies ... If our government, our legislators at the federal level subscribe to a certain ideology, does this open the door for them to use federal funding to further push this? If you are an institution that's found to be in violation, could we then cut your federal funding or things? I'm just wondering if that opens the door to that?

Liliana Garces:

Well, I think that there's the threat of just litigation to say that, yes, there's the possibility for no ... You could lose federal money. You don't even need people in federal government for that. You just need the letter that says you would be in violation of Title VI. Yeah, so I think that's really the reality that's facing institutions, and it's more heightened for those that are in states that have anti-CRT, anti-DEI legislation, who are in it and being attacked from all fronts. That's a challenge that we really need to rise to, and that leaders need to lead from a place of values and courage-

Felecia Commodore:

Courage.

Liliana Garces:

... that I haven't quite seen yet, to be honest.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Mm-hmm.

Royel Johnson:

Kim mentioned earlier that, the word tool, so we think about race-conscious admissions as one tool for fighting back against the impact of white supremacy. What are some other tools that we have at our disposal to challenge white supremacy and efforts to thwart education access?

Julie Posselt:

Maybe this is an overly expansive definition of tool, but I think we need better, stronger, new coalitions more than ever, in part for their creativity, in part for the solidarity that they bring, and the potential to

send strong messages that there's unity in a moment of what looks like chaos. That's very meta, and I think it's one of the best things that we can do is to come together across lines of difference that typically separate us.

Royel Johnson:

I think that's such a good point because we always talk about the attacks on CRT as sort of a well-funded, strategic effort on behalf of a coalition.

Liliana Garces:

I so wholeheartedly agree with that, and the importance of coalition, and the importance of really lifting the fact that we all benefit in really directly attacking this narrative of scarcity and the zero-sum game that is so fundamental to the decision and to the tactics that seek to divide us, and that appeal to that sense of fear, and that if you somehow gain something, I am losing something. That is just not the case. We are all gaining, and we need to provide examples of that coalition and take the narrative back to show that it is not a zero-sum game, that we all benefit from opportunity.

Felecia Commodore:

Can I trouble that a little bit though?

Liliana Garces:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

I do agree that most of us are gaining, but I do think there is a contingency of people that feel like they are losing power or they're losing their access to power. I think that might be a little true and probably a good thing. I don't know. How do we fight that narrative? Because I think we do often say like, "All tides will rise," or, "We all gain," but isn't there a group that is going to lose the privilege that they've had for so long? Is that what we're fighting also?

Liliana Garces:

I think it is the minority. I don't think it reflects the majority. I think that when we have large groups ... This perspective, it's racialized. It plays out, I think, along racial lines that somehow you're going to lose something, but when it's that minority group dictating the opportunities for the rest of us, including white individuals or individuals who've been racialized as white, that ... I know. I mean, it's a great challenge in tackling that, but I just don't want to see ground to the fact that we shouldn't have a minority rule.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, so thinking about how we empower the silent majority, right?

Royel Johnson:

You're losing something that white supremacy undeservedly affords you too, right?

Felecia Commodore:

No, absolutely. I'm saying that's their messaging though. I think they've done a very good job at getting that messaging across in ways that I don't the majority has been empowered to get that message across.

Arthur Kelly:

If I could just say something. When I was a senior in high school in 2003, and I'm telling my age now, I got into an institution. I won't name the name. One of my white friends did not get in and she told me, she's like, "How did you get in? You got in, oh, because you're Black." Now, I didn't know what affirmative action was. I didn't know anything about that, but it has carried with me and, as you can see, I'm talking about it today.

It stuck with me that she said that, and pretty much, when we're talking about the position of power, it seems to me that the playing field was getting closer to level and one side is not happy about that. I don't have any legal ramifications to say it, but I would just say it from experience that something had to change because now the trope is, "Well, you got in because you were Black," but the thing is, what is not being said was for umpteenth years, those students got in because they were white, and that is where we have to understand the dynamic of power shift.

I'm hoping that, through the years, that it does not have any adverse effects, but it will. Also, the psychology of all those students that got in under the affirmative action case, now their legitimacy may be questioned of, "Well, they only got in because they were Black, and they only got this because they were Black." I hope we can bring some clarity and shine a light onto that aspect, the psychology of everything as well.

Kimberly Griffin:

Removing race-conscious admissions doesn't take that assumption away.

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Kimberly Griffin:

Right?

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Kimberly Griffin:

That assumption isn't going anywhere. I think that's what I've been sitting here, quietly wrestling with. Not the loss of power but how folks have framed it as, "You took it from me. It was mine."

Felecia Commodore:

Right, right.

Kimberly Griffin:

Right? Like that it was something that was stolen from me, and, "Surely, you couldn't be ..." I think that's one of the tensions and difficulties for me in the decision, that it leaves so much room for, "You surely couldn't have been as talented as I am." Like, "There's no way you could explain the representation of this student other than considering their race because, surely, they could not have been as talented as ..."

To your question about tools, I think back again to the comment I made earlier about potential. We have no measures for potential, and that we need new tools. We need more sunlight on what admissions actually is, and what it's about, and who gains access to these spaces, and that it was never ... There is no ranking in any admissions office of who's the smartest-

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Kimberly Griffin:

... to who's the least smart, and we stop at number whatever. There's no such a thing and it never was that. I think until we are more clear and consistent about what admissions is and we have better tools for assessing what schools are really looking for, high-potential individuals who are going to come together and create a rich learning environment for everybody, then we're going to get caught up in this discussion about, "Well, who deserves, and who took my place?" when a 4% admit rate is ridiculous.

It's ridiculous, and to feel like that's yours and surely would have been yours had not been for this student who we considered race and how that played a factor in their life is just so troubling to me at just a very deep level. There are times when I just don't have the words for like, what do we do about that part? What do we do about that part?

Felecia Commodore:

I think you all have brought really good points in thinking about coalition building and messaging. Then I think also, and which is one of the reasons we were really excited we were able to have Arthur here, I think there's an opportunity to bring together the folks that are on the ground doing access work with these high school students, or with these folks who are trying to get access into higher education as well as admissions counselors, because as a former admissions counselor, when I started to study higher ed, I was like, "This is not how admissions ..." It depends on the institution. There's so many contextual things and science behind it that sometimes isn't, I don't know, always represented in the work.

I appreciate the work that Dr. Posselt is doing because I think it breaks apart that mystery for us a little bit. I would love to see more coalition building between the folks who are studying this stuff and the folks who are doing the work because I think they can empower each other. That's why I appreciate the partnership work that people are doing, and the participatory action work that folks are doing.

We did have one final question. Thank you all for this conversation. I think it's been really rich and we've been wrestling with a lot of things. We've been wrestling with access for like 20 years now, and so I don't think it's going anywhere.

Royel Johnson:

Only 20?

Felecia Commodore:

Look, I'm trying to act like I'm young. Anyway, we did have one final question for everyone and that is, what keeps you engaged in this difficult yet important work?

Liliana Garces:

It's others like you who are here. I think my fellow fighters, others who are here in the fight, coconspirators. At the end of the day, my family and community, and just wanting to make things better for my daughter.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, yeah.

Kimberly Griffin:

My little guy, wanting things to be better for him. Shout-out to Jeff Milam, who always told me, "The beauty's in the struggle," that there's so much richness in the work. I am still hopeful. I'm still hopeful. I still believe. I came to this work because I believe in equity and justice in education, so I still believe. I believe in the work, beauty in the struggle, and I do truly hope things are better for my son.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Mm-hmm.

Julie Posselt:

Yeah, working in community is undoubtedly the number thing that keeps me engaged. I think Liliana and Kim, we've known each other for more than a decade, and yeah, I hope we get old together in this fight, and I believe we'll need to be. Being a part of the struggle, contributing to something much older than I am or my child will even be, and knowing that, hopefully, on the other end of it we'll be closing that arc of justice.

Royel Johnson:

Mm-hmm.

Felecia Commodore:

Mm-hmm.

Arthur Kelly:

What keeps me going, the quote says, "Once a task has begun, never leave until it's done. Be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all." That is my model for life. I will continue this work, whether it be in non-profit sector, whether it be in higher education, whether it be in the community. I will continue

advocating for students that look like me and students from underserved populations. I want everybody to be great, and I hope that everything that someone touches turns to gold.

Felecia Commodore:

Nice.

Royel Johnson:

What a beautiful way to end. This has been an amazing conversation. It's an honor to be in community with you all today. Thank you for agreeing to venture in this conversation with us and for the work that you individually and collectively do within your spheres of influence to advance equity.

Thank you to our guests, Doctors Julie Posselt, Kimberly Griffin, Liliana Garces, and Mr. Arthur Kelly for joining us today and making us think about, what exactly is college access and how can we make it more equitable? How do we strategize against those forces opposing equitable access to post-secondary education?

Felecia Commodore:

At the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called Scholar Soundtrack, as we reflect on what musical selection rang in our minds as we think about today's conversation. The song that came to mind today was Move by Beyoncé because really, we all should be working together to deconstruct and demand that the barriers created to provide opportunity to higher education be moved and eliminated. It is more important and more imperative now than ever.

(singing)

Well, that was today's song for our Scholar Soundtrack. You'll be able to find a playlist of these songs along with the syllabus for today's episode and all the episodes in the ASHE Presidential Podcast Series, and there's still more to come.

Royel Johnson:

Buckle up and get ready for the conversations to come. You don't want to miss this. Join us next week as we continue to discuss the purposes, politics, and practices of higher education with Doctors Tia Caldwell and Dominique Baker. Till next week, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felecia.

Royel Johnson:

Until next time, be fearless.

Felecia Commodore:

Be fearless.