

Grawemeyer Awards

Scholars citing racial effects of university funding cuts win 2024 education prize

By Denise Fitzpatrick

How can the nation's public universities do a better job educating students of color?

Two University of California sociologists exploring that question are cowinners of the 2024 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Education for their ideas in "Broke: The Racial Consequences of Underfunding Public Universities." University of Chicago Press published the [book](#) in 2021.

In the work, [Laura Hamilton](#) and [Kelly Nielsen](#) argue that decades of cuts in public funding for public universities have eroded schools' abilities to deliver a quality education to racially and economically marginalized students.

For years, public universities operated mainly with government funds, which have been tapering off since the 1980s. Most schools have had to trim costs and raise tuition. Many have turned to philanthropy, investments and other sources of private income to stay afloat, a trend that has penalized schools with the highest number of marginalized students, Hamilton and Nielsen found.

"Public universities have faced decades of austerity and were hit hard by COVID-19, but those primarily serving marginalized students are being literally starved for resources," Hamilton said.

In a study focusing on UC's system of nine schools, Hamilton and Nielsen found the two campuses with the highest number of such students, Merced and Riverside, received fewer system resources. Some underfunded universities struggle to provide basic services to students, who may wait a month or more for mental health appointments and compete with hundreds of their peers to schedule sessions with academic advisers.

"This pattern is not just restricted to the UC system," Hamilton said. "University wealth is nationally concentrated at schools that serve very few marginalized students."

Hamilton and Nielsen make a compelling case for rethinking the way we fund public universities, said education award director Jeff Valentine. "Their work raises important ethical and philosophical questions about what higher education is, what it should be and how a more equitable funding method can benefit everyone in our society."