This past summer while demagogy – the historic scourge of democracy – once again raised its vile head in our country, I assumed two new public trusts: I moved to the University of California, Irvine as a faculty member and dean of the School of Education and I became chair of the American Sociology Association’s Sociology of Education section.

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Chair Notes
Welcoming regards from Section Chair, Richard Arum.

Sociological Perspectives
Sociologists provide insight into education policy issues facing the Trump Administration.

Book Announcements
New and upcoming books from section members!
The co-occurrence of these two roles is perhaps, not completely random. Consider, for example, my fellow U.C. education school deans: Prudence Carter, Berkeley; Tom Smith, Riverside; Marcelo-Suarez Orozco, UCLA. I confess that I was too busy to run a chi-square test, but on the surface there appears to be quite a few sociologists/anthropologists selected for such roles in California.

Since coming to U.C. Irvine, I have had the great pleasure of beginning to meet and work with a significant number of outstanding doctoral students. I am grateful that two of them, Miles Davison (Sociology) and Jake Kepins (Education), agreed to co-edit our section’s newsletter. Miles is currently studying restorative justice school disciplinary practices; Jake is researching school contexts and high school dropouts.

For the winter issue of our newsletter, we asked a few prominent voices in the sociology of education to reflect on the new administration and to articulate either advice or a set of concerns. Mark Berends (Notre Dame) reminds readers of the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in December 2015, which reversed the trend of growth in federal authority for elementary and secondary education, granting states greater autonomy in pursuing educational goals. On the new administration’s interest in expanding vouchers, Berends asks: how will states vary in their policies and what role will the federal government play in monitoring implementation? Sara Goldrick-Rab (Temple) also focuses on the new administration’s interest in privatization and worries about the implications for higher education students of renewed growth of the for-profit sector, the re-privatization of student loans and the potential downsizing of the federal Department of Education. Pedro Noguera (UCLA) provides, perhaps, the most optimistic view. Noguera highlights the changing demographic reality of our nation’s youth and holds out hope that “a sober confrontation with reality” might “compel a new administration to adopt policies that are consistent with the national interest.”

My own reflections on the election and its implications for education, co-authored with historian Joan Malczewski, can be found below. I sincerely believe that the work of members of our section has never been more important than it is today.

Some Broad Lessons Learned: Education and the 2016 Election

While the implications of the recent presidential election on U.S. education have yet to be realized, it is clear that large changes are likely to occur. If you could, what concerns would you voice or advice would you give to the incoming administration's department of education?

Sara Goldrick-Rab, Professor of Higher Education Policy and Sociology at Temple University

Educational policymaking is a difficult, complex undertaking and it is easy to create well-intended but ineffective changes to schools and teaching that do more harm than good. That’s why it is so important to have experienced leaders with a deep bench of knowledge both from practice and policy at the helm. Unfortunately, the nomination of Betsy DeVos for secretary of education suggests that President Donald Trump does not understand this. In case you missed it, this quick overview of her recent confirmation hearing will illustrate her lack of preparation for the position.

Rather than pursuing the development and scaling of thoughtful policies to stem the tide of inequity in American education, DeVos’s record—and Trump’s—suggests that this Administration will pursue efforts that advance private interests over public benefits. In my area of expertise, higher education, here are three predictions:

Prediction #1: America will be “open for business” when it comes to supporting and promoting enrollment in for-profit colleges and universities like the University of Phoenix. This will mean cutting the regulation and oversight advanced under the Obama Administration that was so badly needed to protect students. It will also mean defunding public higher education, reducing capacity and quality so that more students view for-profits as a “good deal.”
For an overview of the likely consequences of these moves, check out Tressie McMillan Cottom’s new book, Lower Ed.

Prediction #2: Federal student loans will be sharply curtailed and origination may even be returned to private banks. Some in the Administration think that loans should only be made to students deemed ready for college, or to students willing to commit to courses of study that match current projections for tomorrow’s job markets. On the surface, such proposals may sound good and people like businessman (and Democrat) Mark Cuban think they will make college more affordable. But they are wrong, since these changes interfere with the crucial, market-creating purpose of student loans: to capitalize those who don’t have capital. As Milton Friedman explained decades ago, it is the government’s job to ensure the nation has a sufficient stock of human capital. Providing loans helps students without financial resources obtain an education that they otherwise could never get. If the Administration goes this route college prices won’t fall, but fewer people will have debt and no degree because they simply didn’t attend college. And those people will be disproportionately black and brown.

Prediction #3: In the name of states’ rights and local control, the U.S. Department of Education will be dramatically downsized. This will greatly reduce our ability to ensure access to college for vulnerable populations and coordinate policies and practices to protect them. Unfortunately, even some Democrats—including Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and former CFPB ombudsman Rohit Chopra—are contributing to this effort to diminish the Department, calling for the transfer of responsibilities for the student loan program from ED to Treasury. When educational policies are treated as common financial products, despite clear differences between the two, then the equity-promoting aspects of those policies are put at particular risk.

The result of changes like these and many others will be a reduction in the quality and even quantity of education available to the masses of Americans without sizable financial resources. Many of those who disparage public education (an institution that DeVos calls a “dead end”) nonetheless rely on it, and they are at the most risk.
American society is in the midst of profound economic and demographic changes. By the 2043 demographers project that the US will become a minority-majority nation, a country where those currently categorized as racial minorities will comprise the majority of the US population. For a nation that once restricted citizenship to "free white persons" - thereby denying basic civil rights to indentured servants, free blacks, Native Americans and Asians - it is hardly surprising that reactions to changing demographics would be unsettling. In fact, there is considerable evidence that anxiety related to the shifting demographics played a role in tilting the recent presidential election in favor of Trump (Agiesta 2016).

Despite the angst and the apparent backlash against minorities and immigrants, the changes described in the HEW report have already occurred in four states: California, Hawaii, New Mexico and Florida, and will soon occur in others. Moreover, not all of the change in demographics can be attributed to immigration. Since 2008 14.6% of marriages in the US have been between individuals from different racial backgrounds, and births to children of mixed race and minority backgrounds have out-paced white births for several years. Since 2012, children from minority backgrounds have constituted the majority of children in our nation’s public schools, and since 2014 they comprise the majority of children in the US under the age of five.

At the same time that the racial and ethnic composition of American society is changing, disparities in income and wealth have grown wider and more pronounced than ever before. Inequality affects many aspects of life in American society, from access to transportation and healthcare, to internet services, employment opportunities and education. Poor and working class Whites (especially non-college educated) throughout America have also been affected by the growth in poverty and inequality. In fact, working class whites are the only segment of the US population that has experienced a decline in life expectancy and a rise in suicide rates (Chen 2016). While incomes and employment rates for Whites, particularly White men, continue to be significantly higher than those of Blacks and Latinos, it is important
to recognize that economic inequality is a problem that affects all racial and ethnic groups.

If the next administration is to fulfill its promise of “making America great again” it will have to adopt education policies that further equity, reduce racial segregation and assist schools in addressing the social needs of children. In 1964 when ESEA (Elementary Secondary Education Act) was adopted, this was the central focus of US education policy. President Johnson, a former teacher himself, understood that fighting poverty and expanding educational opportunities was essential to creating the “Great Society” he envisioned.

While such an approach may seem at odds with the rhetoric adopted by the Trump campaign, perhaps a sober confrontation with reality will compel a new administration to adopt policies that are consistent with the national interest. As poverty rates rose dramatically during the Great Recession of 2008, the percentage of children from families in poverty climbed to a high of 22%. Today, one out of two students in American public schools (approximately 52%) come from low-income homes—the highest percentage since the National Center for Education Statistics began tracking this figure decades ago.

Writing about the detrimental effects of inequality to future generations in his book Our Kids (2015), Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam writes: “Poor kids…are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids. For economic productivity and growth, our country needs as much talent as we can find... (p.16)

Race figures prominently in the opportunity gap mentioned by Putnam, and evidence shows that widening gaps in wealth and opportunity have a profound impact on educational achievement (US Department of Education 2014). This is why racial disparities in academic performance and growing economic inequality between racial groups must be addressed in a concerted manner. Furthermore, US courts have consistently ruled that immigrant children, including the undocumented, have the right to a public education, and that right has been upheld even when states have attempted to deny it.

For this reason the next administration will have to stop scapegoating immigrants and instead strategies aimed at reducing disparities in achievement by expanding educational opportunities and addressing the unmet social needs of children. To do any less will relegate another generation of American children to lives of poverty and will most assuredly imperil America’s future.
Mark Berends, Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame

Education in the Trump Era

Although many of President Trump’s ideas about education policy have yet to be realized, there are some who fear the downfall of public education in the U.S. In my view, there may be a potential good news/bad news story that unfolds over the next several years. Either story depends on implementation of educational policies over the next several years.

First, the possible good news. In December of 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which aims to increase educational opportunities among all students. With ESSA, testing and accountability remain, but the authority to implement the new law falls on states, which is a significant change from the federal oversight of the previous No Child Left Behind law. Because ESSA is put in place, we will have the opportunity to examine how states vary in the implementation of the Common Core (or other state standards), testing systems, teacher evaluation approaches (or those that build capacity), and accountability. We will also be able to continue to monitor how well certain groups of students are doing and whether achievement gaps are closing.

Next, the potential bad news.

At this writing, President-elect Donald Trump’s nominee for the U.S. Secretary of Education — Betsy DeVos — had her confirmation hearing. When asked the question about whether federal funds might be bundled with state funds to create vouchers that followed students to the public or private schools of their choice, she was all for it. Betsy DeVos is a champion of voucher programs — publicly funded scholarships that allow parents to send their children to any school (public or private, religious or nonreligious).

To date, voucher or scholarship programs have been limited to low- or modest-income families. But under the leadership of DeVos and the new administration, voucher programs may well expand to include many more American families. Some fear this expansion will wreak havoc on the public school system, which educates about 90 percent of our nation’s children. Whether expanded voucher
programs succeed or fail will depend first upon our policymakers, whose job will be to scale local programs to national size.

The president-elect is a strong proponent of giving education dollars directly to every American family: “The money will follow the student,” Trump said. “That means the student will be able to attend the public, private, charter or magnet school of their choice — and each state will develop its own system that works best for them.” In other words, federal, state and local funding may be bundled so that families — regardless of income — will receive the average per-pupil expenditure (somewhere between $12,000-$13,000) to choose where to send their children to school.

I imagine that Indiana is chomping at the bit to work with Trump given the state’s education policies, which have significantly increased school choice options in recent years. In 2011, the state instituted the nation’s largest voucher program in terms of participation, and over the last five years has nearly doubled its number of charter schools. Rumor has it that — with its Republican governor and governor-elect and a supermajority in the state legislature — Indiana is sure to follow Trump’s ambition to have “money follow the child.” Which begs the question: Will the policy work?

Some prominent scholars say yes. Expanding voucher programs, they argue, will increase competition for students among schools so achievement and other desirable outcomes will rise across the board. Other experts say no. Research to date, they point out, has shown some competitive effects but not large ones.

I would say it remains to be seen. We have never had an entire state implement a new choice “marketplace,” so it’s too early to tell whether or not it will work. In any case, if the new administration is going to pursue having the money follow the child — in a way that keeps the system from running into the ground — I urge policymakers to consider four essential provisions.

First, monitor student outcomes and do not limit them to achievement gains on state tests. Include high school graduation, college attendance, job paths after high school, and non-cognitive outcomes like engagement in school, motivation, grit, civic participation and civility.

Second, hold schools accountable if they fail to provide what they promise. The lives of children — particularly vulnerable children — are at stake.
Third, provide bussing and transportation so that students can get to the school that fits their needs. In larger cities, transportation costs may include the subway and city bus system. In smaller cities and less-populated areas, public school bussing should be provided. Without transportation consideration, children in poverty may not be free to exercise the expanded choice that the policy seeks to provide. This could further segregate low-income students and students of color into certain schools.

Fourth, require that the enrollment in participating schools, particularly those in urban areas, be 25 percent poor or historically disadvantaged minority students. About one in five children in this country are living in poverty, and children of color (Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos) comprise about 40 percent of the nation’s students. Because segregation in public schools is as bad now as it was in 1954, at the time of Brown vs. Board of Education, this requirement may go further than any federal policy in decades to integrate our schools. Research shows that such integration helps all students. It is the right thing to do.

Fifth, pay attention to tuition rates among private schools. On the one hand, some private schools may not want to participate over time and thus raise their tuition rates to become cost-prohibitive to voucher students. For these schools, some sensible caps on tuition increases will make sense. On the other hand, many Catholic schools have tuition rates that do not cover the costs to educate children, forcing them to come up with donations and other funding sources to stay open. These schools may need the leeway to raise tuition rates sufficiently so that they can welcome voucher students without financial burden.

With these provisions in place, the education system in this country might be successfully “disrupted” — a goal toward which individuals such as Secretary-elect DeVos strive. What’s more, with all schools taking in all types of students, we can address the pressing issues of segregation that have contributed to the increased inequality in this country.

We can no longer afford to make education solely a local issue. Any new choice system that is scaled up across the country will need to have some sensible restrictions that serve all students well. The future depends on it.
The Diversity Bargain and other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions and Meritocracy  
Natasha K. Warikoo

We’ve heard plenty from politicians and experts on affirmative action and higher education, about how universities should intervene—if at all—to ensure a diverse but deserving student population. But what about those for whom these issues matter the most? In this book, Natasha K. Warikoo deeply explores how students themselves think about merit and race at a uniquely pivotal moment: after they have just won the most competitive game of their lives and gained admittance to one of the world’s top universities.

What Warikoo uncovers—talking with both white students and students of color at Harvard, Brown, and Oxford—is absolutely illuminating; and some of it is positively shocking. As she shows, many elite white students understand the value of diversity abstractly, but they ignore the real problems that racial inequality causes and that diversity programs are meant to solve. They stand in fear of being labeled a racist, but they are quick to call foul should a diversity program appear at all to hamper their own chances for advancement. The most troubling result of this ambivalence is what she calls the “diversity bargain,” in which white students reluctantly agree with affirmative action as long as it benefits them by providing a diverse learning environment—racial diversity, in this way, is a commodity, a selling point on a brochure. And as Warikoo shows, universities play a big part in creating these situations. The way they talk about race on campus and the kinds of diversity programs they offer have a huge impact on student attitudes, shaping them either toward ambivalence or, in better cases, toward more productive and considerate understandings of racial difference.

Ultimately, this book demonstrates just how slippery the notions of race, merit, and privilege can be. In doing so, it asks important questions not just about college admissions but what the elite students who have succeeded at it—who will be the world’s future leaders—will do with the social inequalities of the wider world.
How Solidarity Works for Welfare

Prerna Signh

Why are some places in the world characterized by better social service provision and welfare outcomes than others? In a world in which millions of people, particularly in developing countries, continue to lead lives plagued by illiteracy and ill-health, understanding the conditions that promote social welfare is of critical importance to political scientists and policy makers alike. Drawing on a multi-method study, from the late nineteenth century to the present of the stark variations in educational and health outcomes within a large, federal, multiethnic developing country – India, this book develops an argument for the power of collective identity as an impetus for state prioritization of social welfare. Such an argument not only marks an important break from the dominant negative perceptions of identity politics but also presents a novel theoretical framework to understand welfare provision.
Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream
Sara Goldrick-Rab

If you are a young person, and you work hard enough, you can get a college degree and set yourself on the path to a good life, right?

Not necessarily, says Sara Goldrick-Rab, and with Paying the Price, she shows in damning detail exactly why. Quite simply, college is far too expensive for many people today, and the confusing mix of federal, state, institutional, and private financial aid leaves countless students without the resources they need to pay for it.

Drawing on an unprecedented study of 3,000 young adults who entered public colleges and universities in Wisconsin in 2008 with the support of federal aid and Pell Grants, Goldrick-Rab reveals the devastating effect of these shortfalls. Half the students in the study left college without a degree, while less than 20 percent finished within five years. The cause of their problems, time and again, was lack of money. Unable to afford tuition, books, and living expenses, they worked too many hours at outside jobs, dropped classes, took time off to save money, and even went without adequate food or housing. In many heartbreaking cases, they simply left school—not with a degree, but with crippling debt. Goldrick-Rab combines that shocking data with devastating stories of six individual students, whose struggles make clear the horrifying human and financial costs of our convoluted financial aid policies.

America can fix this problem. In the final section of the book, Goldrick-Rab offers a range of possible solutions, from technical improvements to the financial aid application process, to a bold, public sector–focused “first degree free” program. What’s not an option, this powerful book shows, is doing nothing, and continuing to crush the college dreams of a generation of young people.
Connecting in College: How Friendship Networks Matter for Academic and Social Success

Janice M. McCabe

We all know that good study habits, supportive parents, and engaged instructors are all keys to getting good grades in college. But as Janice M. McCabe shows in this illuminating study, there is one crucial factor determining a student’s academic success that most of us tend to overlook: who they hang out with. Surveying a range of different kinds of college friendships, Connecting in College details the fascinatingly complex ways students’ social and academic lives intertwine and how students attempt to balance the two in their pursuit of straight As, good times, or both.

As McCabe and the students she talks to show, the friendships we forge in college are deeply meaningful, more meaningful than we often give them credit for. They can also vary widely. Some students have only one tight-knit group, others move between several, and still others seem to meet someone new every day. Some students separate their social and academic lives, while others rely on friendships to help them do better in their coursework. McCabe explores how these dynamics lead to different outcomes and how they both influence and are influenced by larger factors such as social and racial inequality. She then looks toward the future and how college friendships affect early adulthood, ultimately drawing her findings into a set of concrete solutions to improve student experiences and better guarantee success in college and beyond.
Why Afterschool Matters
Ingrid A. Nelson

Increasingly, educational researchers and policy-makers are finding that extracurricular programs make a major difference in the lives of disadvantaged youth, helping to reduce the infamous academic attainment gap between white students and their black and Latino peers. Yet studies of these programs typically focus on how they improve the average academic performance of their participants, paying little attention to individual variation.

Why Afterschool Matters takes a different approach, closely following ten Mexican American students who attended the same extracurricular program in California, then chronicling its long-term effects on their lives, from eighth grade to early adulthood. Discovering that participation in the program was life-changing for some students, yet had only a minimal impact on others, sociologist Ingrid A. Nelson investigates the factors behind these very different outcomes. Her research reveals that while afterschool initiatives are important, they are only one component in a complex network of school, family, community, and peer interactions that influence the educational achievement of disadvantaged students.

Through its detailed case studies of individual students, this book brings to life the challenges marginalized youth en route to college face when navigating the intersections of various home, school, and community spheres. Why Afterschool Matters may focus on a single program, but its findings have major implications for education policy nationwide.
Introduction to the Editors

Jake Kepins is a PhD student at the University of California, Irvine, School of Education. His research interests lie at the confluence of economics and sociology. In particular he is interested in high school dropouts, their life outcomes and how social and educational contexts influence human capital investment decisions.

Miles Davison is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine and a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow. Miles’ current research focuses on the use of restorative justice programs as a response to racial disparities in school discipline.

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