Asian-Americans

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Oct 3rd 2015 | From the print edition

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"I saw people less qualified than me get better offers," says Mr Wang. "At first I was just angry. Then I decided to turn that anger to productive use." He wrote to the universities concerned. "I asked: what more could I have done to get into your college? Was it based on race, or what was it based on?" He got vague responses—or none. So he complained to the Department of Education. Nothing came of it. "The department said they needed a smoking gun."

In May this year Mr Wang joined a group of 64 Asian-American organisations that made a joint complaint to the Department of Education against Harvard, alleging racial discrimination. That follows a lawsuit filed last year against Harvard and the University of North Carolina by a group of Asian-American students making similar charges. The department rejected the claim in July, but another two...
complaints have since been filed by Asian-Americans, one against Harvard and one against nine other universities.

On October 3rd 1965 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act into law, sweeping away a system that favoured white Europeans over other races. One of its main consequences was the beginning of mass immigration to America from Asia. By most indicators, these incomers have done better than any other ethnic minority group. Indeed, they have long been described as the "model minority": prosperous, well-educated and quiescent. But there are problems, as a result of which they are becoming somewhat less quiescent than they once were.

Before the 1965 act, the experience of Asian-American immigrants had not been entirely happy. The largest mass lynching in American history, in 1871, in which 17 Chinese were murdered; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration; the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans in the second world war, when relatively few German- or Italian-Americans were interned: all were symptoms of a racism that was reserved not just for African-Americans.

Things changed after the war. The Chinese and Indians were seen as allies, and the internment of Japanese came to be seen as wrong. As the civil-rights campaign changed attitudes to race, the new immigration act enabled people to be admitted on the basis of skills and family relationships. Asia's large population and fast-developing economies have meant an abundant supply of skilled aspirant Americans. In 2013 the numbers of both Chinese and Indian migrants overtook Mexicans for the first time.

Asia being a big place, Asian-Americans are a various lot, who came at different times, for different reasons and with different levels of education and prosperity. The Japanese mostly arrived before the second world war, the Chinese from the 1980s onwards. The Indians and Chinese are on average well educated and prosperous, whereas the (small numbers of) Cambodians, Lao and Hmong are struggling. The Japanese—the only Asian group mostly born in America and more likely than not to marry a non-Asian—are closer in attitudes and educational level to the American population as a whole. But on average Asian-Americans are unusually well educated, prosperous, married, satisfied with their lot and willing to believe in the American dream: 69% of Asians, compared with 58% of the general public, think that "most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard."

It is their educational outperformance that is most remarkable: 49% of Asian-Americans have a bachelor's degree, compared with 28% of the general population. Whereas Asian-Americans make up 5.6% of the population of the United States, according to the complaint to the Department of Education they make up more than 30% of the recent American maths and physics Olympiad teams and Presidential Scholars, and 25-30% of National Merit Scholarships. Among those offered admission in 2013 to New York's most selective public high schools,
Stuyvesant High School and Bronx High School of Science, 75% and 60% respectively were Asian. The Asian population of New York City is 13%. Surging immigration is likely to increase the disparity between Asians and other groups, because recent immigrants are even more highly qualified than earlier cohorts. 91% of recent immigrants from Asia have a bachelor’s degree, compared with 30% of recent non-Asian migrants.

Why do they do so well? Amy Hsin of the City University of New York and Yu Xie of the University of Michigan examined the progress of 6,000 white and Asian children, from toddlers through school, to find an answer. They rejected the idea that Asians were just innately much cleverer than whites: there was an early gap in cognitive abilities, but it declined to insignificance through school. The higher socioeconomic status of Asian parents provided part of the explanation, but only a small part. Their data suggested that Asian outperformance is thanks in large part to hard work. Ms Hsin and Ms Xie’s study showed a sizeable gap in effort between Asian and white children, which grew during their school careers.

When the researchers asked the children about their attitudes to work, two differences emerged between Asian and white children. The Asians were likelier to believe that mathematical ability is learned, not innate; and Asian parents expected more of their children than white ones did. The notion that A- is an “Asian F” is widespread. Another study, by Zurishaddai Garcia of the University of Utah, shows that Asian-American parents are a lot likelier to spend at least 20 minutes a day helping their children with their homework than any other ethnic group.

In “The Asian American Achievement Paradox”, a study based on interviews with young Chinese and Vietnamese in Los Angeles, as well as Mexicans, whites and blacks, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou argue that it is not just what happens at home that matters. They point to “ethnic capital”—the fact that these groups belong to communities that support education—as part of the explanation.

The Asian-American interviewees recall weekly their parents dangling the PhDs of cousins and neighbours in front of them. Being part of an entrepreneurial society helps. The four-inch-thick Southern California Chinese Yellow Pages, which lists Chinese businesses, offers thousands of listings for Chinese-run SAT prep and tutoring services. Close links to the motherland are also an advantage, to parents at least. Children who rebel may be threatened with being sent to stay with family in China, and they know from relations there that teenagers in America, even Asian ones, get off relatively lightly compared with those in China.

Thanks to such pressures and hard work, many Asian-Americans do end up in top universities—but not as many as their high-school performance would seem to merit. Some Asians allege that the Ivy Leagues have put an implicit limit on the number of Asians they will admit. They point to Asians’ soaring academic achievements and to the work of Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford of Princeton, who looked at the data on admissions and concluded that Asian-Americans need 140 SAT points out of 1,500 more than whites to get a place at a private university, and that blacks need 310 fewer points. Yet in California, where public universities are allowed to use economic but not racial criteria in admissions, 41% of Berkeley’s enrolments in 2014 were Asian-Americans and at the California Institute of Technology 44% were (see chart).

Racial prejudice of the sort that Jews faced may or may not be part of the problem, but affirmative action certainly is. Top universities tend to admit blacks and Hispanics with lower scores because of their history of disadvantage, and once the
legacies, the sports stars, the politically well-connected and the rich people likely to donate new buildings (few of whom tend to be Asian) have been allotted their places, the number for people who are just high achievers is limited. Since the Ivies will not stop giving places to the privileged, because their finances depend on the generosity of the rich, the argument homes in on affirmative action.

Several states have banned the use of race as a criterion for admission to their public institutions and there have been several lawsuits against affirmative action. One, brought by Abigail Fisher (who is white) against the University of Texas, has been ricocheting between the Supreme Court and lower courts for seven years; in June the Supreme Court agreed to hear her appeal. In September, 117 Asian-American outfits under the umbrella of the Asian-American Coalition for Education filed a brief to back Ms Fisher. That case's outcome will bear on the one brought by the group of Asian students against Harvard and the University of North Carolina. Given that several Supreme Court judges, including John Roberts, the chief justice, are unsympathetic to affirmative action, the court seems quite likely to rule against it.

Too successful by half
For the moment the court has taken the view that universities may take race into account, but racial quotas are not on. The Ivies deny running a racial quota. But in its comment on the Asian groups' complaint, Harvard defends the use of race as a criterion in admission—a class that is diverse on multiple dimensions, including on race, transforms the educational experience of students from every background and prepares our graduates for an increasingly pluralistic world—and describes its admissions process as "holistic", meaning it takes into account considerations wider than mere test scores.

Many Asian parents think this is wrong. They woke up a long time ago to the need to counter the stereotype of the maths-nerd Asian who does nothing but work, and encouraged their children to diversify—into music, debating, charity work, sports, everything that is supposed to increase students' chances of admission. But many who have excelled in those areas, including Mr Wang and Irene Liu, a student from Massachusetts with a similarly stellar CV, were rejected by the Ivy League. Ms Liu's mother, Tricia, says: "I feel angry about it. We came for the American dream: you work hard, you do well. This just doesn't add up." Irene has accepted a place at a top Canadian university, and is happy about it. Her mother isn't: "It breaks my heart that she's going abroad. If she had gone to Harvard, I could have brought her dumplings."

Mr Wang doubts that Asians, in reaction, are likely to slack off. Asian parenting, he says, "isn't getting more relaxed. It's probably getting stricter, because parents realise they're going to have to work even harder. Standards are rising for everybody, but they're rising faster for Asians than for everybody else." As Arnold Jia, a 14-year-old from Short Hills, New Jersey, points out, the problem becomes circular. "To counter affirmative action we have to work harder than everybody else," he says. "And that reinforces the stereotype."

But the Asian-American community is unwilling on the whole to oppose affirmative action. It tends to vote Democratic, and many of its members recall the years when they were a despised, not a model, minority: So those who dislike the way the system works tend to argue for it to be adjusted, not abolished, and some say that Asians should actually support it.

It is true that although Asian-Americans do remarkably well at school and university, and have high average incomes, in the workplace they are under-represented in top jobs. A "bamboo ceiling" seems to apply. Asians do well in the lower and middle levels of
companies and professions, but are less visible in the upper echelons. Buck Gee, Janet Wong and Denise Peck, Asian-American executives who put together data from Google, Intel, Hewlett Packard, LinkedIn and Yahoo for a report published by Ascend, an Asian-American organisation, found that 27% of professionals, 15% of managers and 14% of executives were Asian-American (see chart).

A similar effect is visible in the law. In 2014, whereas 11% of law-firm associates were Asian, 3% of partners were. Recruiters at the top firms typically throw out applications from all but the top universities and scan the remainder for their extracurriculars, says Lauren Rivera of Northwestern University. "They're particularly interested in sports, such as lacrosse, squash and [rowing] crew. When you look at the demographic base of these sports, Asian-Americans are not heavily represented."

At the very top of the tree, Asian-Americans are invisible. According to a study of Fortune 500 CEOs by Richard Zweigenhaft of Guilford College, in 2000 eight were Asian-American, and in 2014 ten were, whereas the women's tally in the same period rose from four to 24. Academia, similarly, is stuffed with Asian-American professors, but among America's 3,000 colleges there are fewer than ten Asian-American presidents, says Mr Gee.

High-flying Asian-Americans, like the three authors of the Ascend report, suggest that cultural patterns may contribute to the group's under-representation at the top. "There's something in the upbringing that makes Asians shy," says Mr Gee. "Engineers are nerds, but within that self-selected group of nerds, Asians are even more nerdy." "We're brought up to be humble," says Ms Wong. "My parents didn't want to rock the boat. It's about being quiet, not making waves, being part of the team. In corporate life, you have to learn to toot your horn." "There's a natural order of human relationships in Confucianism," says Ms Peck. "You don't argue, you don't contradict authority." Asian-Americans are a large, diverse group exposed to a range of influences, but those who do reflect such patterns may be less likely to bid for leadership, even if they are highly qualified. The comparative prominence of South Asians, who are less likely to be told not to "rock the boat"—for instance, Indra Nooyi at PepsiCo and Ajay Banga at MasterCard—is cited as anecdotal evidence.

Mr Gee, Ms Wong and Ms Peck, who run training courses to help Asians get promoted, recommend that they should network harder. But another study suggests that Asians may find getting mentors particularly tough. Researchers at Wharton Business School, Columbia University and New York University wrote an identical e-mail to 6,500 professors, ostensibly from students wanting to meet the academic. White men got notably more responses than other groups; Asian-Americans of both sexes got fewer. Since the ivies produce a disproportionate number of CEOs, Congressmen and judges, the apparent bias against Asian-Americans at leading universities may also keep Asians out of leadership spots. "The ladder is being pulled away from our feet," says Tricia Liu. "If we can't go to the Ivy League universities, how can we get the positions in Wall Street, or Congress, or the Supreme Court?"

As Jerome Karabel's study of Jews and the Ivy League ("The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale and Princeton") shows, it was only when Jews had gained political power that the Ivies stopped discriminating against them. And Asian-Americans are under-represented in politics as well as in business. Only 2.4% of the 113th Congress were Asian-Americans; by one count, fewer than 2% of state legislators are.
Where is Senator Kim?
South Asians, though less numerous than East Asians, are more visible. Nikki Haley, governor of South Carolina, and Bobby Jindal, governor of Louisiana, both Indian-Americans, are the only Asian-American governors in the lower 48 (David Ige, a Japanese-American, is governor of Hawaii). The contrasting political traditions of India and China may also be a factor. "We come from the largest democracy in the world," says Sayu Bhojwani, who runs the New American Leaders project, which helps train immigrants to flourish in politics. "We're prepared for it in the way that East Asians are not."

In China, by contrast, "We went through the cultural revolution," says Chunyan Li, a former employee of the Chinese finance ministry, now a professor of accountancy at Pace University in New York. "There's a lack of trust in politics."

Perceptions that Asian-Americans are being treated unfairly, especially in the workplace, may push more of them into politics. Andrew Hahn, a Korean-American partner in Duane Morris, a law firm, says, "I used to be a Twinkie, or maybe a banana—yellow outside, white inside—but once I hit the legal profession, I became a radical."

College admissions—and the lawsuit against Harvard—may provide a spark to fire Asian-Americans into becoming more assertively political. Many in California were infuriated last year by a bill to rescind the state's ban on using race in university admissions promoted by a Hispanic state senator. A Change.org petition and 36 organisations, 26 of them Asian-American, opposed the bill, and it was dropped. "There's a growing community angst," says Mr Hahn of the belief among Asian-Americans that they are being discriminated against. "What's next? Law school admissions? Employment?" He organises political fund-raisers, and says that the coffers have opened. "Hedge-fund money, private equity, lawyers. They're giving huge sums ... It took the Jews half a century to get where they are," he adds. "I hope it doesn't take us that long."
Alcoholics Should Quit Smoking To Stay Sober

New research suggests that people with a history of alcohol problems who continue to smoke are at a greater risk of relapsing.

Researchers at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health and the City University of New York found that adult smokers with a history of problem drinking who continue smoking are at a greater risk of relapsing three years later compared with adults who do not smoke.

"Quitting smoking will improve anyone’s health," Renee Goodwin, lead author of the study and an associate professor in the Department of Epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health.
"But our study shows that giving up cigarettes is even more important for adults in recovery from alcohol since it will help them stay sober."

For the study, researchers collected and analyzed data from more than 34,600 people with a past alcohol use disorder enrolled in the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) who were assessed at two time points, three years apart, on substance use, substance use disorders, and related physical and mental disorders.

They found that daily smokers and nondaily smokers had approximately twice the odds of relapsing to alcohol dependence compared with nonsmokers. The relationships held even after controlling for factors, including mood, anxiety, illicit drug use disorders, and nicotine dependence.

Researchers said it is unclear why smoking makes alcohol relapse more likely, but the study's authors point to past research on the behavioral and neurochemical links between smoking and alcohol, and the detrimental effects of smoking on cognition.

The findings are detailed in the journal Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research.
Offering too many choices can hurt community colleges and their students

By Jay Mathews  October 1 at 8:00 AM

Community colleges are a popular starting point for U.S. college entrants. But if you follow 100 average newcomers at these institutions designed to get students what they need in two years, you will discover after three years that just 16 of them will have earned the associate of arts degree or certificate they wanted. After six years, just 34 will have some kind of credential. Forty-six will have left school altogether.

These disquieting facts are provided by Judith Scott-Clayton, an assistant professor of economics and education at Teachers College Columbia University, in her recent paper "The Shapeless River: Does a Lack of Structure Inhibit Students' Progress at Community Colleges?" The same message is delivered in even more detail by her Teachers College colleagues Thomas R. Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars and Davis Jenkins in their new book "Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success."

Their analyses are clear and well-written, if perhaps too academic for general readers in a hurry. So let me sum them up: For years American colleges have bragged about the nearly limitless choices they offer to students. Recreational science, medieval poetry, industrial engineering, American sign language, Southeast Asian history — if you are into something, the colleges say they have professors who can handle it.

Choice is king, particularly at community colleges enrolling students looking for something that will get them a job.

And yet, Scott-Clayton, Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins and many other experts say, that huge selection in the community college catalog is part of the reason why students find it so hard to get where they want to go.

Psychological research shows that "the number of complex program options students must choose from . . . can cause decision paralysis, arbitrary decision outcomes, and dissatisfaction," Scott-Clayton said.

Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins point to City University of New York's Guttman Community College, which opened in 2012, as a model for the new, limited-choice community college. All students take the same first-year core curriculum. The second year they have only a few programs to choose from, based on a study of available jobs in the city. These pathways include business administration, applied science, information technology and urban studies.

Restricting choice is risky, and it can hurt enrollment. Scott-Clayton said Guttman is able to get away with it because it is in a huge city where "students' choices remain unconstrained at other community colleges."
But something has to be done. “For many students at community colleges,” Scott-Clayton said, “finding a path to a degree completion is the equivalent of navigating a shapeless river on a dark night.” Choices can be overwhelming, she said. Students must decide “which program to pursue, which courses to take within it, when to take them, how to pay for them, and whom to approach if a problem or question arises,” she said.

The Teachers College scholars agree that advisers and counselors are needed to get each student on the right pathway, but their number “is limited by extraordinary high caseloads, which average one advisor/counselor for up to 1,500 students,” Scott-Clayton said. One national survey discovered that less than a quarter of community college students were assigned a specific person they could contact for assistance, and less than half had any college staff other than their course instructors who knew their names.

One of the most active efforts to reorganize distracting choices is led by the advocacy organization Complete College America. I have mentioned their push for remedial programs that accompany, not precede, for-credit courses so that students who need help can get it while they tackle hard assignments. Scott-Clayton noted that Tennessee’s Colleges of Applied Technology have incorporated structured programs, block schedules and other devices that reduce choices and have significantly raised their graduation rates.

These efforts are relatively new and have little research yet to rely on. They often look different inside the colleges than they do to outsiders like scholars, and journalists like me. In the next column in this series on community colleges, I will let one insider describe what she is seeing and hearing.

Jay Mathews is an education columnist and blogger for the Washington Post, his employer for 40 years.
Press Release
CUNY Dominican Studies Institute awarded history grant

New York – We are proud to announce that the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute (CUNY DSI) has been awarded a Latino Americans: 500 Years of History grant.

Latino Americans: 500 Years of History supports the American public's exploration of the rich and varied history and experiences of Latinos, who have helped shape the United States over the last five centuries and who have become, with more than 50 million people, the country's largest minority group.

The cornerstone of the project is the six-part documentary film Latino Americans, created for PBS in 2013 by the WETA public television station and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The award-winning series chronicles Latinos in the United States from the 16th century to present day.

In collaboration with the national initiative, Latino Americans: 500 Years of History, CUNY DSI has organized a series of events to tell the story of Dominican veterans of World War II (WWII).

This collaboration will expose, for the first time, a two-year research project undertaken by CUNY DSI that uncovered over 200 Dominican men and women WWII veterans who served in various U.S. military branches.

Many Dominicans received medals and other recognitions for their courageous actions in combat. After returning from war, many raised their lives, once again, to bring democracy to their homeland.

The CUNY DSI's series will honor and recognize Dominican WWII veterans through an exhibit, a scholarly panel, and the screening of five episodes of the documentary Latino Americans. These events will highlight both Dominican and Latino veterans while serving in the military, as well as their contribution to society after they returned from the war.

These events, free and open to the general public, will be held at

CUNY Dominican Studies Institute
Archives and Library
NAC Building, Room 2062
The City College of New York
Bronx Community College Hoping to Expand Hall of Fame for Great Americans

@dnilocal //www.dnainfo.com/new-york/local

UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS — For the first time in 30 years, the long dormant Hall of Fame for Great Americans (https://www.loc.gov/hall fame/; Page=PhotoGallery) could be electing new luminaries to grace its open-air sculpture garden in The Bronx.

The country's original Hall of Fame, located on the grounds of Bronx Community College (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/places/bronx-community-college), has not had an election for new "Great Americans" since 1976. The officials at the college are hoping to change that as part of a campaign to more aggressively promote the site that honors leaders like Thomas Edison (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/people/thomas-edison), Abraham Lincoln (https://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/abrahamlincoln) and many others who helped shape American history.

"What we want to do is to go back to the beginning and really relaunch the attention of our community to such a great thing we have in our community here," said Bronx Community College President Thomas Goodavage.

"I'm sure there are people that live in The Bronx that don't even know anything about it."

The Hall of Fame launched around the turn of the 20th century, when it was built as part of New York University's (http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/tags/new-york-u) expansion into The Bronx, according to the book "The Bronx: The Ultimate Guide to New York City's Beautiful Borough" (http://www.amazon.com/Bronx-Beautiful-Boroughs-Residents-Collection/dp/B00357753K/ref=as_li_hotp?ie=UTF8&camp=14286&creative=387355&asin=B00357753K&linkCode=as2&creativeASIN=B00357753K&tag=dnainfo-20&linkId=U77m5dpTTc8YD5V6k6VtAM).

NYU Chancellor Nancy Y. Whitman MacCracken encouraged any American or American organization to nominate members for the Hall of Fame. For a time, elections were held every three years, according to the book. Each inducement was honored with a bronze portrait bust that was unveiled with great fanfare near where the person had worked or lived.


NYU was facing serious financial difficulties at the time and sold its Bronx campus to the State Dormitory Authority, which gave it to CUNY (http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/tags/cuny). The last induction to the Hall took place in 1976, after which a dispute between the two colleges prevented any further elections, Ulman said.

"When NYU gave up the campus, they wanted to take the busts in the Hall of Fame with them and display them Downtown," he said. "Everybody... who knew about this at the Bronx Community College went up in arms."

"NYU said, 'OK, the heck with the expense. We're through,'" Ulman continued.

The Hall remains open to the public, and although BCC has occasionally used it for
History and sociology classes, the school has started ramping up its efforts to highlight the Hall of Fame.

The first major event celebrating the Hall of Fame will take place when BCC participates in Open House New York Weekend (http://www.ohny.org/weekend/overview), an Oct. 10-11 event that will include tours and talks at selected sites throughout the city.

The college will have a presence at an event that weekend to discuss the Hall of Fame, according to BCC Director of Campus Planning Robin Ackerman.

BCC is also working on a $10 million campaign to renovate Gould Memorial Library, which is the neo-Classical Hall of Fame colonnade surrounds. A portion of the money would go toward developing space in the library where new members to the Hall could be added.

The college would ideally start looking for new members again in a few years, although officials acknowledged that restarting the balloting could be a delicate process and would involve discussions with NYU.

"We want to make sure that we don't anger any vet," said Karl A. Nowe Williams, executive legal counsel for BCC. "Knowing that our campus has a history, that our campus has a history, and we never want to be disrespectful of anyone's legacy."

NYU spokesperson John Beckstrom (http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/people/john-beckstrom) said in an email that discussion of the Hall of Fame has not come up in years, and no one has talked to the school recently about new plans for it.

"But given NYU's historical connection to the Hall of Fame," he continued, "we've certainly been open to hearing what our colleagues at BCC have to say."

Reinstating elections could also bring some much-needed diversity to the Hall, which is currently dominated by white males, according to Ackerman.

"That's always an issue. Who does it represent?" she said. "And that would certainly be part of what Peers Community College could bring to the Hall of Fame."

She suggested civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/people/martin-luther-king-jr) as fitting new possible additions to the Hall.

Ackerman said she believes it's the perfect time to restart elections and rekindle interest in the Hall of Fame, given ongoing renovations at the campus and the educational opportunities it would offer for the growing immigrant community in The Bronx.

"We've got to let them know why the country is what it is today," he said.

"Historically, we need to keep this alive. Have your opinion on being featured?"
Gov. Cuomo, help CUNY now

BY JESSICA SIEGEL / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS / Thursday, October 1, 2015, 4:14 AM

At the end of August, Gov. Cuomo issued an exultant press release trumpeting the fact that four City University of New York colleges made it into the top five “Best Bang for the Buck” colleges in the Northeast as determined by Washington Monthly.

“New York has a long and proud tradition of providing a high-quality affordable education through our public colleges and universities,” he said. “I am proud of these CUNY campuses and this well-deserved recognition.”

Those of us who teach at CUNY — and I can proudly say I teach at Brooklyn College — find that statement galling. Not only have faculty and support staff like secretaries and janitors been working without a contract for six years, but the past 25 years has seen a steady defunding of CUNY by the state.

A Daily News headline a few weeks ago — “Kids Flock to CUNY Schools” — touted the fact that CUNY is educating 278,000 students, an all-time high, and a jump of 42% from 2000. These young people are 75% black, Latino or Asian; more than half of their families make less than $30,000 a year. And 42% of them are the first in their families to go to college.

As faculty, many of us get to know those students well. We understand the lives...
behind the statistics that make the work they do in our classes — English, biology, education, philosophy or business — even more impressive. We get emails apologizing for an absence to go to a funeral or to ask if it is okay to bring a child to class because they have no childcare.

One young man would arrive late to my morning journalism class after working until 11 p.m. the night before at Target. Other students run between a couple of jobs and school.

A woman who had been quiet in class told me, after much hesitation, how her family was being harassed by their new landlord to get them out. She ended up representing them in housing court.

But as a group, CUNY students don’t complain. They are hesitant to put their problems in your lap or ask for extras or sympathy. And that’s why so many of us enjoy teaching here. The state doesn’t seem to appreciate that.

Our contract issues are just part of the long-time state disinterest in CUNY. In 1990-91, at senior colleges like Brooklyn, the state contributed 74% of the budget while tuition added 21%. In 2014-15, state aid had dropped to 53% and tuition support rose to 46%.

Tuition contributed 22% of the budget in 1990-91. In 2014, it almost doubled to 42%.

But there is more. In 1975, CUNY had 11,500 full-time faculty. As of fall 2014, there were 7,686. The rest of the teaching is done by 12,000 adjuncts, some rushing from one campus to another, cobbling together a poverty-level salary from about $3,000 a class. Many don’t have time to meet with students after class.

What all this means is that our students — through tuitions that have gone up 58% since 2011-12 — are contributing a much larger portion of the money that keeps CUNY going, and getting less for it.

Yes, this is a national phenomenon. Sandy Baum, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, cites figures from the College Board’s Trends in College Pricing that in 2001-2, public colleges received 44% to 62% of their funding from state governments. By 2012, it had fallen to 27% to 51%.

But New York, in some cases, has an especially bad case of the funding flu. Cuomo recently said that the city should increase its spending on CUNY rather than have the state contribute more. In either case, our students’ rising tuition is not being used to hire new professors or increase the number of sections of courses so that class size will be reduced.

Searches for new faculty are being canceled, courses are required to have larger class sizes to be run and colleges are figuring out ways to cut.

The Assembly and Senate passed a bill in June designed to ensure that the state does more to meet its obligations to fund CUNY. It is up to Cuomo to sign it. You can’t on one hand brag about the outstanding public education New York offers and not put money where your mouth is.

Siegel is assistant professor of journalism, English and education at Brooklyn College.
PSC/CUNY plans 'wake-up call' for chancellor

By Jeff Waggoner on September 30, 2015 at 11:24 AM

In its ongoing fight for a new contract, the faculty and staff union, the Professional Staff Congress at CUNY, plans an 8 a.m. Thursday "wake-up call" at what the union described as Chancellor James B. Milliken's CUNY-funded, $19,500-a-month Manhattan apartment.

"A year into the job, Milliken apparently still hasn't woken up to the crisis of academic quality brewing at CUNY, where the faculty and staff have worked six years without a raise," said Fran Clark, PSC/CUNY's communications coordinator. "CUNY's academic departments are struggling to recruit and retain faculty, professors and advisers are less able to give student the attention they deserve, and tuition has gone up every year," Clark said in an email to the State Worker.

He said hundreds of faculty and staff dressed in academic robes, joined by CUNY students, will have "hundreds of alarm clocks ringing in unison," calling on Milliken to deliver a fair economic offer to their union and settle the contract.

The PSC/CUNY represents more than 27,000 faculty and professional staff at the City University of New York and the CUNY Research Foundation, Clark said.

Categories: FEATURED, PSC-CUNY, STATE EMPLOYEES
My brush with campus intolerance

September 30, 2015 by CATHY YOUNG /

Empty lecture hall at a college (Credit: iStock)

Last week, I had a firsthand experience with campus intolerance when some Canadian college students decided they didn't want me speaking at their school.

The Canadian Association for Equality, a group that champions a balanced approach to gender issues, including those affecting men, invited me to give a talk on gender and victimhood at the University of Toronto and the University of Ottawa.

Shortly before the first event, a comment urging violence against feminists at the University of Toronto was posted on an online forum. Amid an intense reaction to the threat, university administrators felt it was inadvisable to hold my event on campus; the venue was moved to a nearby hotel. One student activist wrote on a Tumblr blog that "chasing these misogynists off campus is a victory."

In Ottawa, where the talk went forward at St. Paul University, things were a bit more eventful. About a dozen protesters in red scarf masks gathered outside the building to chant slogans denouncing "rape apologist scum" (a slur hurled at people who talk such heresy as presumption of innocence). An organizer's invitation to the protesters to come in and attend the talk as long they promised to behave was scornfully rebuffed.

As the event was about to start, the fire alarm went off -- presumably pulled by a demonstrator -- which forced a brief evacuation. In the end, the police made the protesters move across the street and I was able to give my talk without further trouble. I fared better than some previous CAFE
speakers, who were effectively shut down by students using a variety of methods — fire alarms, loud music and chants just outside auditoriums, verbal harassment of attendees — to fight what they regard as "hate speech."

The United States has a much more robust free speech tradition than Canada, which does not have an equivalent of the First Amendment and does have hate-speech laws. But "politically correct" campus intolerance in this country has emerged as a cause for serious concern as well, and not just among conservatives. The Atlantic, a premier liberal magazine and website, has published two major stories on the dangerous trend of students demanding to be "safe" from ideas they consider not just offensive but emotionally damaging.

President Barack Obama addressed the issue at a town-hall meeting last month when he warned against the notion that college students "have to be coddled and protected from different points of view." He said, "Anybody who comes to speak to you and you disagree with, you should have an argument with them. But you shouldn't silence them by saying, 'You can't come because I'm too sensitive to hear what you have to say.' " How depressing that this even needs to be said.

Some left-wing commentators, such as Angus Johnston, a historian who teaches at CUNY and champions student activism, think current concerns about freedom of campus speech are a hypocritical attempt to silence campus protest. In a recent blog post, Johnston complains that speech defenders don't support "the rights of left-liberal students to speak intemperately or aggressively."

Yes, intemperate and unpleasant speech should be defended, whether it comes from left-wingers or, say, anti-abortion demonstrators. But Johnston gives away his game when he mocks the notion that campus speakers should not be "subjected to challenge or disruption." Challenge is good. But disruptions and protest tactics so aggressive as to cross the line into intimidation are not legitimate speech. They are ways to suppress speech, and they should be denounced by any liberal worthy of the name.

\textit{Cathy Young is a regular contributor to Reason magazine and Real Clear Politics.}
The Future of Work: The Forces Against Organized Labor

The latest entry in a special project in which business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace.

RUTH MILKMAN • 2 HOURS AGO

As low-wage, precarious work proliferates and economic inequality grows, working people in the United States need collective bargaining as much as ever. But precious few have access to it: By 2014, union membership had dwindled to 11.1 percent of the U.S. labor force, and to only 6.6 percent in the private sector. Strikes have also declined precipitously. This is not because workers have lost interest in labor organizing: survey after survey suggests that a large majority of them would vote for a union in their workplace, given the opportunity. Sadly, few get that opportunity these days, and when they do, employers typically go to great lengths to intimidate them into voting no.

Contrary to popular belief, de-unionization is not primarily due to globalization or new technology: Successful attacks on organized labor have affected many place-bound, low-tech industries, like construction or hospitality, nearly as much as manufacturing. The primary driver of labor's decline is the growing power of corporate employers who are fiercely determined to weaken unions where they already exist and to prevent their emergence elsewhere. That determination is reinforced by the ideology of market fundamentalism, for which both unionism itself and governmental protection of the right to organize are anathema.

Ruth Milkman is a distinguished professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center and research director of CUNY's Murphy Labor Institute.
Henry Dumas Wrote About Black People Killed By Cops. Then He Was Killed By A Cop

OCTOBER 01, 2015 6:03 AM ET

BEENISH AHMED
"A young black man, Henry Dumas, went through a turnstile at a New York City subway station," wrote Toni Morrison in the invitation to a posthumous book-launch party she threw for the writer in 1974, six years after he died. "A transit cop" — who was white — "shot him in the chest and killed him. Circumstances surrounding his death remain unclear. Before that happened, however, he had written some of the most beautiful, moving and profound poetry and fiction that I have ever in my life read."

In the nearly 50 years since Henry Dumas was killed, not much more has come to light about what happened on the night of his death. No witnesses came forward to testify. Police records were lost in a bureaucratic shuffle. Harlem, where Dumas moved as a young man after growing up in rural Arkansas, had erupted in large-scale protests over the police killings of black and brown men several times before the writer was killed. But Dumas’ death hardly made the news. With so little information to draw from, it’s as if the last pages of his life were torn out.

Dumas’ final scene echoed a theme he turned to again and again in his writing: violent confrontations between white men and black men. The work he left behind — short stories that range from hard realism to science fiction, an almost finished novel, volumes of poetry, and even a few accompaniments to the work of the mystical jazz legend Sun Ra — contains biting, sharp depictions of racial tension in America that, in an almost unbelievably eerie way, speak to his own fate.

It is, of course, a fate that many black men and women would continue to suffer under dubious circumstances — from Robert Bandy in 1935, James Powell in 1964, 10-year-old Clifford Glover in 1973, and LaTanya Haggerty in 1999 to the more recent deaths of Michael Brown, Janisha Fonville, Eric Garner, Tanisha Anderson and Freddie Gray, to name only a few.

"His work and, in fact, his death, investigated and illustrated the ways in which black lives were at best peripheral to most white people — especially those running and policing the country," says James Smethurst, a University of Massachusetts, Amherst professor who has written extensively about 1960s and ’70s black writers. Much of Dumas’ writing is considered to be a part of the Black Arts Movement — the artistic manifestation of the Black Power struggle of the 1960s — an effort that Smethurst believes has a lot of resonance with the Black Lives Matter movement. While interest in Dumas has increased somewhat in recent years, he says, "We still have a long way to go before he gets the sort of attention he deserves."

'The People Get Tired Of Dying'

One of the only known accounts of the night Dumas was killed comes from an obituary in The Amsterdam News, a black-owned newspaper in New York City that was
founded in 1909. "Police said Dumas and an unidentified man were scuffling in the subway when the officer walked up to them and attempted to stop the fracas," the obit reads. "Police said Dumas, resentful at the interference, slashed the officer who shot and killed him."

Without the benefit of photographic evidence or firsthand witnesses to accompany the official police report, it is impossible to know the full story of what happened that night. It's also impossible to take in Dumas' story without acknowledging that the track record of believability, when it comes to official accounts of black deaths at the hands of law enforcement, isn't a clean one.

Dumas wrote stories that echo cases like that of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy in Cleveland who was killed seconds after a police vehicle pulled up to where he was playing. "When a Negro boy is shot and killed by policemen who do not check the situation before pulling their guns, the people get angry. It is a simple law of nature. ... The people get tired of dying," says one of Dumas' characters in a short story called "Riot or Revolt."

Published most recently in a 2003 collection of Dumas' work called Echo Tree, that story follows a young black man named Harold through the aftermath of violent public protest across Harlem:

"The police barricades squatted on the sidewalk surrounding each place where mobs had struck.

"Harold stood on the ramp in the middle of Seventh Avenue and 125th Street and surveyed the area which the night before had swarmed with police and angry Harlemites. A youth had been slain by the police in Brooklyn."
Those who have studied Dumas' life and work believe the fictional LeMoor Brothers' Bookstore in that story was modeled on the real National Memorial African Bookstore, which stood a short walk from the 135th Street subway station where Dumas was killed. Owned by Lewis Michaux, a bookseller and black civil rights leader who encouraged his neighbors to read the books he stocked on African history, culture and philosophy even if they couldn't afford to buy them, the store attracted figures like Malcolm X, Langston Hughes and Muhammad Ali.

Not unlike Dumas' LeMoor, Michaux had a lot to say about black Americans' struggle for power. "We've been neglected for three hundred years," he told a New Yorker reporter in 1966. "As much as I hate to see what's going to happen, I believe that when the Negro knocks this time and nobody open the door, he's just going to knock it right down."

In "Riot or Revolt," city officials stop in to speak to the owners of LeMoor Brothers' Bookstore, which had been left untouched by the looters who ravaged nearly every other store on the street. The officers want to know what made his shop so exceptional, but its owner, Micheal LeMoor, takes issue with the fact that city officials seemed to visit Harlem only when its frustrated residents reached a breaking point:

"You want to come visit here and get the notions about things being better, while right now some disrespectful guardian of the citizens beats a black man's head in. It doesn't matter if he's guilty or not anymore. Your honor, what you are facing is the full anger of a man who has been under attack for years. Unless you call off the attackers, be they merchants, disrespectful policemen, or the American majority, then the black minority is going to tear your house down."

While "Riot or Revolt" may have been closely inspired by actual people if not actual events, other Dumas stories are imaginative forays into allegorical fables and otherworldly realms. Dumas' vast range captivated many of his fellow writers, before and after his death. The poet and civil rights activist Haki R. Madhubati called him "a poet of complex melodies," and Amiri Baraka called him an "Afro-surreal expressionist" who delivered "a new blackness."

"I was impressed with his boldness of language and his boldness of breadth," Maya Angelou said in a 1988 interview published in an issue of the Black American Literature Forum dedicated entirely to Dumas' work. "Dumas continued to set us up for the loneliness, aloneness, and desperation, sometimes even desolation. But he never leaves us there. With him as our guide, we're always brought through to a better place."
'Part Invitation, Part Consolation'  

By the time Dumas died, just a few of his poems and short stories had been published in small literary journals, geared toward a black audience. Writers and critics who knew him say he would have followed the uphill trajectory of his friends — including Robert Pinsky and Baraka — had he lived.

"I think he would’ve been a lot more famous in some respects if he had been able to live and write for 50 more years," says Smethurst, the University of Massachusetts professor. "What if Toni Morrison had died after she wrote The Bluest Eye and only had a few stories?"

In fact, Morrison played a role in inspiring what Smethurst calls the "cult" of Dumas. She first encountered Dumas in the form of a slim collection published posthumously by Southern Illinois University, where he taught an experimental program during the last year of his life. Then an editor at Random House and the author of The Bluest Eye and Sula, Morrison was struck by the circumstances of Dumas' death and wanted to publish more of his writing.

Random House had recently committed itself to publishing more minority writers. Through her position there, Morrison would shepherd through the work of several of the era’s most notable black writers and activists, from Toni Cade Bambara and Gayle Jones to Angela Davis and Huey P. Newton.

But she knew that generating attention for Dumas, a writer who was not only practically unknown but also deceased, would not be easy. To create hype for the collections she wanted to release — a book of poetry titled Play Ebony Play Ivory and a short story collection called Ark of Bones — Morrison organized a release event with a glamorous guest list comprising the most renowned black writers of the time.
"He was thirty-three years old when he was killed," Morrison wrote in the announcement for the party, a note that was described as "part invitation, part consolation" in a recent New York Times profile of Morrison. "But in those thirty-three years he had completed work the quality and quantity of which are almost never achieved in several lifetimes."

'Creative Writing Slave'
In 1934, Dumas was born to Appliance Porter, a 19-year-old housekeeper in Sweet Home, Ark., a small town just outside Little Rock. His father, Henry Dumas Sr., or "Big Henry" as he was called, was largely absent from the life of his son, and his mother worked long hours. With his parents often away, Dumas spent much of his time in the fields where his aunts and uncles picked cotton, milked cows and shared stories.

While his cousins were busy playing sports, Dumas' family recalled to Dumas biographer Jeffrey B. Leak, he preferred to spend his time examining insects or developing skits in which he played all the roles. When Dumas was 10, he and his family followed the course taken by thousands of other black families during the first part of the 20th century by moving north. Dumas brought with him to Harlem an intellectual curiosity that impressed his teachers at his integrated Manhattan high school.

It may have been there that Dumas' individual struggles became part of a more complex struggle: one in which black people searched for belonging in spaces where they were neither warmly welcomed nor explicitly barred. It's unclear when he began to take up writing seriously, but his move to a more racially diverse environment may have had something to do with it. Beneath his senior photo in the 1953 High School of Commerce yearbook someone — perhaps even Dumas himself — chose to inscribe this description of him: "Creative writing slave."
After a brief stint at the City University of New York that ended with what Leak notes might have been "a crisis of confidence," Dumas joined the U.S. Air Force within a year of his high school graduation. Tours of Saudi Arabia and Mexico deepened his interest in sketching worlds that blurred black-and-white interpretations of race.

At the age of 21, Dumas returned to the U.S., in 1955, and married Loretta Ponton, a beautiful young secretary he had met by chance on a snowy evening on the street in New York just before enlisting. The daughter of a Baptist deacon, Loretta held strong Christian values and a traditional sense of familial responsibility. While Dumas shared her beliefs during the early years of their marriage, he would veer from them in coming years.

One of just a few black students at Rutgers University, where Dumas studied from 1958 to 1965 and where the couple's two sons were born, Dumas' commitment to his writing, curiosities about the Nation of Islam, engagement with the civil rights movement, plus alcohol and drug use began to drive a wedge between him and Loretta.

He also had several affairs with white women. Lois Wright (nee Silber), with whom he had an affair that lasted three years, recalled in a letter to Dumas' friend and fellow poet Jay Wright (whom she would later marry) that the two could only venture out to select spots in New York; the jazz clubs Dumas frequented weren't welcoming to Wright, and she resented Dumas' friends for referring to her as "the white chick."

"For Dumas, crossing racial divides represented possibility and opportunity for both himself as a black man, but also from an imaginative standpoint," Leak, whose biography of Dumas, Visible Man, came out last year, said in an interview. "I think he thought that if you can cross boundaries in the social realm, then you can cross other boundaries in the literary realm. In both spaces, he found it to be even more complicated than he had anticipated."
Dumas explores those complexities in "Will The Circle Be Unbroken?," a short story in which three white musicians and critics want to enter a black jazz club, arguing they should be let in because they know a lot about the genre. The black patrons finally agree to let them in, but warn that use of an ancient, rare horn may be too intense for their "uninitiated" ears. The music "vibrated the freedom of freedom" for its black listeners, but when the set ends, consternation rises when the three white people are found dead. They had been slain by music that wasn't meant for them.

For many, the story offers a look at some of the central questions of the civil rights movement: What did it mean to be black? How could black identity adapt to an integrated world? What racial boundaries should remain unbroken?

In an essay on the story for a 1988 issue of the Black American Literary Forum dedicated to Dumas' work, an acquaintance of Dumas' put it this way: "Black people had a feeling of always being on stage for white folks." Dumas' story on the jazz club held that the work of black artists should be guarded and protected, a notion that still resonates in a world where it's been said many times that black cultural products are valued while black lives are not.
Jazz And Honey

On no one, perhaps, has Dumas made a greater impression than Eugene Redmond. An accomplished poet in his own right, Redmond has spent the past four decades editing and promoting the work of Dumas, even though the two men knew one another for only just under a year. Redmond met Dumas when the older writer came to teach English at an experimental college at the University of Southern Illinois in Redmond's hometown of East St. Louis in 1967. "We bonded quickly," Redmond told me in a phone interview from the house of Loretta, Dumas' widow.

The 77-year-old has served for decades as the literary executor of Dumas' estate and was staying with Loretta for an annual commemoration of Dumas' life and work that he helps organize every year on the anniversary of the shooting. Bringing together Dumas' friends and family over poetry readings and jazz performances, Redmond, a Pushcart Prize recipient and the author of 25 books of poetry, has carried the torch for Dumas alongside his own teaching and writing career.

"Every time I stepped into a classroom after I met him, I had a turntable," said Redmond, who said he picked up on Dumas' tradition of playing music 15 minutes before each of his classes began. "Every class that I taught, I published the students in a spiral-bound or saddle-stitched booklet. I got that from him." Redmond fondly recalls eating raw honey and listening to jazz with Dumas, to whom he attributes his love of some of the era's greatest musicians, from Miles Davis to John Coltrane. "At the time," Redmond said, "he seemed to be at the farthest most forward point of what black expression, black culture, and black people were all about."

In his day-to-day life, Dumas insisted on making space for himself — and forcing others to acknowledge his right to exist. "He would even walk around East St. Louis and other places, and ask, 'Do you see me? Feel my arm. I'm here, ain't I?'" said Leak, who conducted many interviews with those close to Dumas for his book. "His point was: We're not invisible. The idea is a direct corollary to Black Lives Matter, the idea that flesh and blood do matter, and we're going to insist on being seen and being heard."

Redmond hopes the Black Lives Matter movement will help introduce Dumas to a whole new audience and help bolster the foundation that the movement rests upon. "You gotta have someplace to come from before you know where you're going," he says.

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This Year’s MacArthur ‘Genius Grant’ Winners

The list of winners include a modern-day alchemist, an environmental health advocate and the creator of the musical ‘Hamilton’

By BEN KESLING
Sept. 29, 2015 12:46 p.m. ET

Here’s the list of this year’s MacArthur Fellows, recipients of what’s known as “genius grants.” The $625,000, no-strings-attached grants from the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation are paid out over five years to artists,
scholars and others who “show exceptional creativity in their work and the prospect for still more in the future,” according to the foundation.

**Related**

- MacArthur ‘Genius Grant’ Winners Include Modern-Day Alchemist (http://www.wsj.com/articles/macarthur-genius-grant-winners-include-modern-day-alchemist-1443469262)

**Patrick Awuah**, a 50-year-old education entrepreneur in Accra, Ghana, began his career as a Microsoft engineer before launching a project to revolutionize higher education in his home country. In 2002, he founded Ashesi University, based on American-style colleges that stress critical thinking over rote memorization. In a decade, the school has established itself as one of the best in Ghana and most of its graduates stay in Africa where many have launched information-technology businesses.

**Kartik Chandran**, 41, is a modern-day alchemist, working to take wastewater and separate it into clean water, fertilizer and sources of energy. The Columbia University associate professor in the earth and environmental engineering department works not only on large projects but on scaled-down treatment projects so villages in the developing world, as well as skyscrapers in Manhattan, can have their own waste-treatment plants.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates**, a journalist with the Atlantic magazine, writes about race and identity in the U.S., including the issue of reparations. Last year, the 39-year-old’s work had renewed attention as questions of black identity and policing became international news in the wake of Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Mo. His latest book, an essay addressed to his son, documents the experience of a black man in America today.

Environmental health advocate **Gary Cohen** works to make sure that as doctors focus on patients, they don’t lose sight of broader damage to the environment done by hospitals through harmful cleaning agents, incineration of waste and the use of harmful substances in medical devices. Mr. Cohen, 59, co-founded Health Care Without Harm in 1996 to propose practical solutions to these problems. Since its founding, the group has all but eliminated the use of mercury-filled thermometers in the U.S., slashed the number of waste incinerators in the country and worked to export his mission abroad.

**Matthew Desmond**, a 35-year-old sociology professor at Harvard University,
studies the impact of eviction on the lives of the urban poor. He argues that eviction can be a cause, rather than just a symptom, of poverty. His extensive study of these issues in Milwaukee showed that women are more likely to face eviction than men, and that women who report domestic violence were more likely to be evicted due to a local ordinance that classified these as "nuisance calls."

Chemist William Dichtel, 37, pioneered the development of a type of polymer that looks like a microscopic scaffold with incredibly high surface area. The Cornell University associate professor's breakthroughs promise to revolutionize the design of photovoltaic devices and batteries. Despite his advances, much remains unknown about how these substances work at the molecular level.

Michelle Dorrance founded Dorrance Dance/New York where she has combined tap dancing and choreography to renew American dance styles. The
36-year-old mixes the sound of tap and swooping, choreographed dance in a way that envelops the audience in long, ensemble-based pieces novel to the form.

Weaving themes of gender, sexuality and family dynamics throughout her work, Nicole Eisenman, 50, has pushed to return the human form to a central place in art, a place it often ceded to abstraction in the 20th century. Be it through painting, drafting or sculpture, the New Yorker's work looks forward while still referencing past masters.

LaToya Ruby Frazier, an assistant professor in the photography department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago uses photo and video to document social inequality and changes that have attended postindustrialism. The 33-year-old focuses on Braddock, Pa., an old steel town, where her portraits become social commentary on transformation, decline and how people live in this once-thriving city.
Ben Lerner, an English professor at the City University of New York, Brooklyn College, writes poetry, novels and essays examining the intersection between art, politics and economics. Mr. Lerner, 36, blends styles and genres in a way that captures contemporary America.

Mimi Lien, 39, is a set designer for theater, opera and dance in New York who draws on architectural training to create large immersive sets that wash over the audience as well as traditional scenes bounded by the proscenium. From pictures of decadence to those of stark simplicity, Ms. Lien’s sets amplify the work of those on her stages.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, a playwright, composer and performer fuses traditional storytelling with contemporary musical styles to create a new, contemporary style. The 35-year-old’s musical, “Hamilton,” combines street culture with a founding father to create the popular piece.

Dimitri Nakassis, 40, is an associate professor of classics at the University of Toronto who breathes new life into understanding of prehistoric Greek society by using knowledge of an early Greek script and combing through civic records on ancient tablets. He has determined that Mycenaean society, once thought to be oligarchic, was likely more egalitarian—along the lines of other Greek city-states.

John Novembre, 37, is an associate professor in the department of human genetics at the University of Chicago where he has developed new data analysis and visualization techniques to better understand genetic diversity and how that relates to demographics. He has shown the link between recent, broad population growth and the rise of rare and harmful genes.

Computer scientist Christopher Ré, an associate professor at Stanford University, created a computer system called DeepDive that can analyze data buried in hard-to-quantify things like images and illustrations and make connections between them. The 36-year-old’s work makes big data more accessible to everyday users.

Marina Rustow, 46, studies Jewish life in the medieval Middle East. The history professor at Princeton University examines original documents to question the relationship between subject and ruler in medieval states, specifically how people from different religious backgrounds related to the Fatimid caliphate.

Juan Salgado, chief executive officer of Instituto del Progreso Latino in
Chicago, works to help immigrants overcome barriers to success in the city through job training and other programs. The 46-year-old pioneered a charter school in the city that provides two years of support for graduates once they leave school to ensure their success.

Beth Stevens, 45, is a professor in the department of neurology at the Harvard Medical School where she studies how neurons talk with each other in the brain. Among other projects, she studies how the brain prunes and repairs damaged connections to maintain itself.

Lorenz Studer, a stem-cell biologist, is pioneering the large-scale generation of neurons that can be used for transplantation to treat Parkinson’s disease and other neurological ailments. Dr. Studer, 49, directs the Center for Stem Cell Biology at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

Alex Truesdell, 59, works to bring affordable tools and furniture to children
with disabilities. The founder of the Adaptive Design Association, Inc., provides workshops and classes to help designers make things like steps for children to get in and out of wheelchairs.

**Basil Twist**, 46, has long been known in New York as an innovative puppeteer whose work ranges from hand-held puppets to life-size marionettes. Using techniques from around the world, Mr. Twist has worked on operas, plays and other forms.

**Ellen Bryant Voigt**, 72, is a poet from Cabot, Vt., who draws on her childhood on a farm and conservatory piano training to create lyrical poems that often reflect on the natural world.

Economist **Heidi Williams**, a 34-year-old assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology focuses on the causes and consequences of health care research and policy. For example, she argues that the current patent system is partly responsible for a lack of development of certain kinds of cancer-fighting drugs.

**Peidong Yang**, 44, a chemist and professor of energy at the University of California, Berkeley, is a pioneer in the field of nanowires. The ultrathin wires can be used for things like artificial photosynthesis when a web of them are combined with a system of bacteria, which feed off carbon dioxide and promise to help provide a new source of renewable energy.