Nine-year-old LINDA BROWN, the student at the center of Brown v. Board of Education, standing in front of the segregated Monroe Elementary School in Topeka, 1951.

Photo by Carl Iwasaki/
The Life Images Collection/ Getty Images
The 2014–15 academic year began shortly after the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, the landmark legislation that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. It was signed into law by President Lyndon Baines Johnson on July 2, 1964, 10 years after the Supreme Court handed down its decision in Brown v. Board of Education, outlawing segregation of public schools.

Throughout this academic year, USC Rossier faculty members have been commemorating the Civil Rights Act through events and seminars. John Brooks Slaughter, a member of Rossier’s faculty and chair of its Diversity and Inclusion Committee, spoke about the anniversary of the Civil Rights Act at the recent conference “College Admission 2025: Embracing the Future,” sponsored by Rossier’s Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice.

Slaughter is known throughout American academia for his contributions to education and science. He currently holds joint appointments at USC Rossier and USC Viterbi School of Engineering. He was the first African-American director of the National Science Foundation, was chancellor of the University of Maryland College Park and president of Occidental College. He received the 2014 Reginald H. Jones Distinguished Service Award, the highest honor conferred by the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering. Slaughter is widely acknowledged for his commitment to increasing diversity in higher education with a special focus on STEM disciplines. In March, President Barack Obama announced that Slaughter is among only 14 recipients of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring.

In this excerpt from his presentation, Slaughter connects America’s painful past with regard to race with an image of the future that resonates in USC Rossier’s vision: “a world where every student—despite personal circumstance—can learn and succeed.” In sharing his personal memories of growing up in Topeka, Kan., during the fight for civil rights, Slaughter makes the connection between a challenged past and an aspiring future.

remembering the past, embracing the future.
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TODAY’S COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ARE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO PURSUED HIGHER EDUCATION IN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS. They come from many different backgrounds. They have different goals, different aspirations, different fears, different needs, and it requires a great deal of sensitivity on our part to address these needs.

Back in the 18th century, Edmund Burke reminded us, “Those who don’t know history are destined to repeat it.” And at the dawn of the 20th century, W. E. B. DuBois told us that the problem that America would be facing in that dawning century was the color line. How prescient he was. The same words could be used to describe the problem that America is facing at the dawn of the 21st century.

What can we make of Trayvon Martin in Winter Gardens, Fla., or Eric Garner in Staten Island, N.Y., or Michael Brown in Ferguson or Tamir Rice in Cleveland? Their stories prove that we are not yet living in a post-racial society despite what many pundits and politicians want us to believe.

It seems to me as I think back over my life that I’ve always been interested in issues of admissions and enrollment for minority students. As a 17-year-old freshman in college, I wrote a paper that was titled “Racial Discrimination in Public Higher Education.” I delved into the sagas about George McLaurin at the University of Oklahoma, Heman Sweatt at the University of Texas and Lloyd Gaines at the University of Missouri. McLaurin was required to sit in a hallway outside the doorway to listen to the instructor and to eat in a separate room outside the main cafeteria. The students were told not to speak to him. These were the kinds of problems that students faced in the early 1950s.

I was particularly fascinated by the story of Lloyd Gaines, who disappeared in March 1939, never to be seen again, just months after the Supreme Court ordered the University of Missouri to either admit him or to develop a separate law school for black students.

I followed the story of Autherine Lucy, who fought to enter the University of Alabama. After being admitted in 1952, she had to withdraw as a result of the threats and the vitriol she experienced from members of that campus community.

I also tracked the paths followed by Charlayne Hunter, now Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the radio and television reporter, and Hamilton Holmes, who each enrolled at the University of Georgia in 1961.

I was particularly captivated by James Meredith’s
courageous journey to enroll at the University of Mississippi and face then Governor Ross Barnett, whose lips so eloquently described by Martin Luther King Jr., “dripped with words of interposition and nullification.”

I knew Jimmy Meredith. I knew him when he was a young airman stationed at the air force base in my hometown of Topeka. He came to our home nearly every Sunday afternoon, about dinnertime, in order to enjoy my mother’s fried chicken and hot rolls, but also to pursue his interest in my younger sister Sally. I found him to be a strange young man, somber and withdrawn. I was astonished 10 years or so later to find that he was the same James Meredith who integrated Ole Miss and who, in 1966, was shot by a white gunman as he led a 220-mile march from Memphis, Tenn., to Jackson, Miss., to encourage black voter registration. He survived his wounds, and today a statue of him commemorating his role is located on the Oxford campus.

In 1982, I was invited to be a commencement speaker at the University of Mississippi. I was shocked when I came to the stage and sat next to the chair of the university’s board of regents, who turned out to be a black dentist from Yazoo City, Miss. I thought about the changes that had taken place in that state, in that university over that period of time, from Jimmy Meredith to the black dentist being chair of the board of regents. What a major transition. It shows what can be done over time when people of goodwill and good faith decide to work together.

I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN TOPEKA. Kansas was one of those states that permitted, but did not require, municipalities to operate segregated schools. Several of the largest towns and cities in the state did so. Topeka chose to have segregated elementary schools, and I attended Buchanan School, one of the four black elementary schools along with McKinley, Monroe and Washington. The six junior high schools and Topeka High School were “integrated,” but the high school operated separate athletic teams and all social events were segregated.

Topeka was a town of approximately 68,000 people at the time I was growing up in the 1940s. African-Americans were not allowed to eat in any of the restaurants or sit at the Woolworth’s or drugstore counters to have a Coca Cola. They could not stay in any of the town’s hotels or go to the movie theaters unless they were willing to sit in the upper balcony in a very small section reserved for black movie viewers. We did have our own swimming pool, but we had to share space with the frogs in order to swim.

We were the only black family in our neighborhood, and most of the friends that I played with on a day-to-day basis were white. We developed strong bonds, strong relationships. We would play baseball and visit each other’s homes, and we would walk to school together. Except that we would say goodbye to the white students three blocks from our home, at Clay School, and my sisters and I would walk on another six blocks to Buchanan School.

We couldn’t quite put our fingers on it, but we knew something was wrong. And we were very much aware of the circumstances that would end up leading to the famed decision known as Brown v. Board of Education.

One of the officers of the Topeka NAACP who had brought that case forward was Lucinda Todd, who was my first cousin. She was much older than I, so I called her Aunt Cindy. She would come to our home often on Sunday afternoons and tell us of the progress of the case. In fact, she was the first person to attempt to enroll her daughter in one of the white elementary schools, Randolph School in Topeka. Nancy, her daughter, was denied admission. But Thurgood Marshall, who led the case, decided that it would be better to have a male plaintiff, which is the reason that Oliver Brown and his daughter, Linda Brown, became the named plaintiffs even though Lucinda Todd was the first person to make that effort.

Elisha Scott ran the law firm that assisted Marshall. I knew his two sons, Charles and John, who were both attorneys. Another young attorney was Samuel Jackson, who was my baseball coach and remained a good friend. He later became one of the first persons appointed by President Johnson to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr. He later was deputy secretary of the Housing and Urban Development Department in Washington, D.C., under George Romney.

Sam once told me the story of how when he was meeting with President Johnson to see if he would be nominated to be a member of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Johnson had asked him, “Can you be loyal to me, given the transgressions that I did upon minorities in Texas as a young man?”
Sam talked about how conflicted Johnson was over civil rights, and so much of that was apparent in the way in which he ultimately led the fight to bring about the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

I also knew Arthur Fletcher, who was a football player at Washburn University in Topeka. He was the person who developed the Philadelphia Plan, the Affirmative Action Plan that insured contracts for minority workers in Philadelphia under the leadership of the Nixon administration. In fact, it was Nixon’s first foray into Affirmative Action.

WAS IN COLLEGE WHEN THE BROWN DECISION CAME DOWN, ON MAY 17, 1954, AND I REMEMBER IT VERY VIVIDLY. It overturned the court’s 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision that allowed states to segregate public schools. The unanimous decision of the Warren Court stated, “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal and a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.”

Subsequent to the decision, very little improvement occurred. As a matter of fact, the South became even more intransigent. Many of the public schools were converted into private schools in order to restrict admission. In September 1957, you may remember, the Little Rock Nine in Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., had to get past Orval Faubus, who wanted to prevent black students from entering. It was only after President Eisenhower brought in federal troops that they were able to enroll.

In March 1961, President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, which called for affirmative action in hiring and employment practices. That was the first reference to the words “affirmative action.” Then, of course, on July 2, 1964, we finally had the Civil Rights Act.

It’s considered one of the most important legislative achievements in American history. The long road to passage of that legislation involved individuals of all backgrounds, white and black, old and young, able and disabled. Ordinary Americans became civil rights leaders. All of them marched, held sit-ins, staged boycotts, sang and participated in freedom rides, all for the purpose of ending segregation and discrimination.

These protests brought much attention to the injustices against black Americans and underscored the need for legal change. On the evening of June 11, 1963, President Kennedy delivered a nationally televised address pledging his administration’s support for this far-reaching Civil Rights Bill, but after his assassination in November it was left to President Johnson to bring it into effect.

Johnson proclaimed that this bill would promote “a more abiding commitment to freedom, a more constant pursuit of justice and a deeper respect for human dignity.” When President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law 50 years ago, he rightly recognized it as a groundbreaking moment in the history of the United States. Although its adoption did not resolve all of the issues, or settle the cause of civil rights, it was a major change in the course of the direction of this country.

On the night he signed it, President Johnson noted, “Our generation of Americans has been called on to continue the unending search for justice within our own borders. We believe that all men are created equal. Yet many are denied equal treatment. We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights. Yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights. We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings—not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin…. But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. The principles of our freedom forbid it.
Morality forbids it. And the law I will sign tonight forbids it.”

Not only was it truly groundbreaking, it prevented or prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or national origin by government agencies that receive federal funds. It permitted the attorney general to file lawsuits to desegregate schools. This action, as President Kennedy had put it, was a matter of simple justice.

Education was one of the major targets of this Civil Rights Bill. Today, we need to think of education as a civil right. According to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, we are still addressing situations that would have been all too recognizable to those who enacted the bill a half-century ago.

The secretary reminds us that “discrimination continues to affect students of many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. It also impacts English learners, students with disabilities, female students and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.” So, 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, there’s still a lot of work to be done to make education accessible, welcoming and equitable for everyone.

Martin Luther King Jr., in the manner in which he did so often in his powerful and mellifluous prose, gave us the words that should provide us with both comfort and purpose as we face the challenges yet ahead of us. King once delivered a masterful speech in which he informed his audience that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” There can be no greater role than justice in all of our endeavors, and it is my hope that all of us here, entrusted with the lives and futures of so many young people, keep that as our sacred calling.

A few days after delivering his keynote speech on his personal recollections of the Civil Rights era, John Brooks Slaughter co-hosted a Rossier faculty meeting at the Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum in Culver City (MCLM). The MCLM is a hidden gem of Greater Los Angeles that arose from the collecting passions of Mayme Clayton, a long-time librarian at USC and UCLA who amassed an extraordinary archive of books, pamphlets, photographs and historical manuscripts that document African-American history.

Slaughter, along with Associate Professor Alan Green and other members of Rossier’s Diversity and Inclusion Committee, invited faculty members to MCLM to ponder the influences of history on their roles as educators in the 21st century. The off-site faculty meeting proved to be a powerful and sobering experience, as captured in one of many reflections recorded on poster boards: “The photos remind us how important our history is for understanding the present.”

“This visit,” said Professor Estela Mara Bensimon, “has given us an opportunity to better understand the roots of racism.” Bensimon is co-director of Rossier’s Center for Urban Education (CUE) and recently authored, with CUE co-director Alicia Dowd, Engaging the Race Question: Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education (2014, Teachers College Press).

The previous week, CUE had released another new book, America’s Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education, authored by Bensimon, Dowd, Keith Witham and Lindsey E. Malcolm-Piqueux. Published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), it includes a foreword by AACU President Carol Geary Schneider that begins with an epigraph from W. E. B. DuBois: “Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental.”

—Matthew C. Stevens