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**Abstract**

Framed by historical and contemporary discussions, this article reviews the principal foundations of meritocracy and uses the public University of California system as a point of departure for examining the connection between meritocracy and higher education within the context of the United States.

Through consideration of four dimensions that inform the concept of meritocracy?merit, distributive justice, equality of opportunity, and social mobility?this review examines the underlying tenets of meritocracy to better understand how higher education functions within it. In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Daniel Bell (1973) suggested that higher education would become a ?defensive necessity.? However, if colleges and universities are to serve as instruments for creating and expanding opportunity, then higher education must be more profound than simply being reduced to ?defensive necessity,? and it is important for researchers to examine more closely the theoretical concerns of meritocracy and the higher education implications. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Liu, Amy, E-Mail: amy.liu@ucla.edu