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Promoting Financial Literacy: A Path to Alleviating Social Inequality

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Introduction

Social inequality is a pervasive element of American discourse and daily reality. Specifically, since the 2008 financial crisis, there has been a well-intentioned focus on the rise of income inequality, its antecedents and effects. The associations of race, gender, and income with social inequalities such as access to healthy food options, quality healthcare, affordable education, and a safe living environment are well researched and documented (Beeghley, 2015).[4] While the existence of a link between social inequality and income is indisputable, the dynamics of the relationship between income inequality, race, and gender are complicated. The complexity manifests in the idea that income inequality is both a root cause of social inequality as well as an outcome. In other words, income inequality, or the unequal distribution of resources (income, wages, wealth, and other means) on the basis of gender or race, leads to inequity. Inequity, meaning unfair, unjust, and completely governable access to resources through institutional policies, is often a point of heated discussion. While social inequality and social inequity are often used interchangeably, they are distinct in that the institutional policies, programs, and initiatives that minimize social inequities will result in the alleviation of social inequality. The two do have irrefutable correlations. Consequently, it is often considered a classic chicken or egg problem, with one school of thought asserting that social inequity is the cause of social inequality and others suggesting that social inequality, frequently rooted in institutionalized racial and gender discrimination, is the cause of income inequality and its pertinent ills, including the perpetuation of social inequity. The logic of the former school suggests that corrective institutional policies will mitigate social inequity over time, which in turn will narrow race, gender, and income gaps. In this essay, the researcher recognizes that these issues, albeit intricate and multifaceted, need to be addressed through both institutional policies and educational programs.

Furthermore, the researcher argues that access to personal finance education is a key component in addressing these multi-layered problems. Specifically, because income inequality envelopes almost all other social inequality, the researcher presents a case in which financial literacy becomes the first step toward long-term financial capability and well-being. The researcher argues that only when income, whether low, medium, or high, is properly managed through at least a basic understanding of the financial savings and investment options available, will an individual or household begin the path to financial well-being. In addition, the researcher argues that although Catholic institutions have made some progress in the field of personal finance education, as a gateway to achieving financial well-being, there is opportunity to do much more. Accordingly, in the following sections we: (1) provide a definition of financial literacy, capability, and well-being and review the state of financial literacy in the United States of America; (2) examine the unequal nature of financial literacy within the context of income, race, and gender; (3) ascertain that the primary mission of Lasallian Catholic institutions is to provide education to the underserved[5], (4) examine how some NGOs in the Bronx section of New York City are addressing the issue of financial illiteracy; and lastly (5) discuss best practices, shortfalls, and recommendations on how the Lasallian mission can be better fulfilled by addressing the long-term financial well-being of the underserved and offer a feasible three-step proposal, in collaboration with financial literacy NGOs in the Bronx, to achieve this goal.

Understanding Financial Literacy in the United States of America

As a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent housing crisis, as well as the financial shock and turmoil witnessed by everyday Americans not directly connected to everyday happenings on Wall Street, Americans at all levels are concerned about their understanding of financial systems (Bucher-Koenen & Ziegelmeyer, 2014; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). In recognition, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 mandated the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) to directly engage the public, especially underserved populations, through initiatives, programs, and activities on financial education that are geared toward alleviating financial illiteracy. These programs are still in place even though some provisions of Dodd-Frank were rolled back by the House of Representatives in 2018. Practitioners, as well as researchers, have faced unexpected challenges as they cannot agree on the definition of financial literacy (Hung, Parker, & Yoong, 2009; Huston, 2010; Remund, 2010; Knoll & Houts, 2012). Huston (2010) summarizes research published on financial literacy between 1996 and 2008 and showcases the broad range of financial literacy measures used in the literature. Remund (2010) addresses this issue and groups the existing financial literacy definitions into five categories: knowledge of financial concepts, ability to communicate financial concepts, aptitude managing personal finances, skill in making financial decisions, and confidence in planning for future financial needs. In the essay, the researcher adopts the President's Advisory Council on Financial Literacy (PACFL) comprehensive definition of financial literacy as "the ability to use knowledge and skills to manage financial resources effectively for a lifetime of financial well-being" (President's Advisory Council on Financial Literacy, 2008, 10). In other words, financial literacy measures the ability of individuals to make well-informed personal finance decisions, such as saving for retirement or paying off credit card debt. This, by far, is the most popular definition as it has been adopted by twenty-two governmental agencies and eighty private organizations as well as experts in the field, including Knoll and Houts (2012).

Many institutions, including private banks and non-profit organizations, also make a distinction between and among financial literacy, financial capability, and financial well-being. While sometimes used interchangeably, there is an important distinction among the three.

Financial literacy can be thought of as knowledge and understanding of financial concepts and choices; financial capability as the ability to use that knowledge through understanding, confidence, and access to financial products; and financial well-being as the state in which people can meet their financial obligations, feel secure in their future, and are able to make choices that allow enjoyment of life (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, December 2018).

Practically, it can also be thought of as a linear and chronological progression – one needs to be financially literate to obtain financial capability and progress to financial well-being. In this essay, the researcher focuses on the first step to financial well-being for a number of reasons. First, it was found that, as is the case in income inequality, financial illiteracy is also strongly correlated with race and gender and hence it is a topic that must be addressed if the underserved populations Lasallian institutions hope to assist are to be placed on a path to financial well-being. Second, since income inequality is a key element of social inequality, research affirms that financial literacy is the first step in promoting income equality; and third, the researcher believes that both the Lasallian mission, along with Catholic teachings, have, in principle, the potential to alleviate social inequalities, especially income inequality, by promoting financial literacy. In fact, in this essay, the researcher will be discussing how a personal finance curriculum, built around the Lasallian mission and its core principles, in collaboration with local financial literacy NGOs, could help in promoting financial literacy, capability, and long-term well-being in disadvantaged and underserved communities.

Income Inequality, Gender, Race, Education, and Financial Literacy: A Stark Picture

Income inequality has been steadily rising across the globe, and the United States of America is no exception. The 2018 World Inequality Report "finds that the richest 1 percent of humanity reaped 27 percent of the world's income between 1980 and 2016. The bottom 50 percent, by contrast, got only 12 percent." While global income inequality is stabilizing slightly, as a result of rapid economic growth in places like India and China, the United States is witnessing the largest income gap in modern history. For example, in 1970, the top one percent of Americans earned 10.8 percent of the income and the top 10 percent earned 33.8 percent, while the bottom 50 percent earned 21 percent. By 2014, the gap between the top 10 percent and the bottom 50 percent had widened significantly with the top one percent earning 20.2 percent, the top 10 percent earning 47.7 percent, and the bottom 50 percent earning 12.6 percent (WID.world 2018).

As noted earlier, income inequality is also not gender or color blind. The Stanford Center for Poverty and Inequality reports persistent gaps in income earnings and poverty among men and women (Saez, 2018). Single women, for a host of reasons, are more likely to be below the poverty line and have lower incomes--due in part to inflexibility in work hours and family commitments. When men's and women's full-time work is compared, a woman still earns 80 cents for every dollar earned by a man. When broken down by race, the disparities are exacerbated. Compared to the earnings of a white man for the same work, African American women earn 61 percent, Hispanic women 53 percent, White (non-Hispanic) women 77 percent, and Asian women 85 percent on the dollar (Miller, 2018). In essence, no racial category has pay equity with white men; however, white women do earn a higher percentage than black or Hispanic men. For example, black men earned 71 cents for every dollar earned by white men in 2016; and Hispanic men earned 66 cents on the dollar.

Not surprisingly, poverty rates follow similar racial and gender trends. Poverty is highest among African Americans (22 percent) and Hispanics (19.4 percent) compared with whites (8.8 percent) (Wilson & Jones, 2017). Within this category, of course, white women are more likely to be in poverty than white men. African American and Hispanic women are more vulnerable to being below the poverty line than white women. The intersectionality of race with gender is complex, but in almost every comparable category (earnings, poverty, educational access, health access, employment opportunities, etc.), gender and race gaps persist. Moreover, those gaps are far wider and worse for women of color than for white women and in most cases, when it comes to racial bias and discrimination, it is almost always better to be a white woman than to be an African American or Hispanic man (Beeghley, 2015).

In the past, in the USA, education in general has been touted as a potential remedy for poverty and income inequality and government policy has been shaped by this belief (Employment and Training Administration, 1994). In support of this argument, there have been numerous studies showing that primary and secondary education has contributed to the alleviation of poverty in countries such as Nigeria, Tanzania, and South Sudan (Ateda, 2014; Lupeja & Gubo, 2017; Shimeles & Verdier-Chouchane, 2016; Aftab & Ishmail, 2015; Paraschiv, 2017). However, while education may alleviate poverty in general in certain areas, variable access to education is often a major contributor to income inequality (Mahmud & Akita 2018; Ludwig, 2015; Bloome, Dyer & Zhou, 2018; Zhou & Zhou, 2019; Rani, Krishnakumar & Bigotta, 2017; Yang & Qiu, 2016). Even when primary basic education is available, variability in the quality of that education may exacerbate income inequality (Hall, 2017).

As with antecedents of income inequality, there is an extensive literature that looks at the determinants of financial literacy or, more specifically, the factors that make an individual more financially literate than another. A critical finding is a well-established gender gap in financial literacy. Studies find that women are less financially literate in the USA (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2008; Lusardi, et al., 2009; Lusardi, et al., 2010, Atkinson, 2012; Annabi & González-Ramírez, 2019). The same trend for gender gap is confirmed worldwide (Atkinson & Messy, 2012), even though the overall level of financial literacy varies across countries (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011). Moreover, in line with social inequality research, there is also a race gap in financial literacy. Studies find that whites are more likely than African Americans and Hispanics to answer financial literacy questions correctly (Lusardi, et al., 2010; Annabi & González-Ramírez, 2019). Indisputably, there is a relationship between financial well-being and income. However, the first step must be financial literacy. Being that financial literacy is lower or lowest among women, Hispanics, and African Americans, in the next section the researcher offers a path to promoting financial literacy for these vulnerable populations.

Financial Empowerment and Commitment to Financial Well-Being: A View from Catholic Institutions

Many non-profit and government groups have instituted financial literacy programs (Mross & Reiter, 2019; Loomis, 2018; Jones, Petrie, & Murrell, 2018). In practice, there are many examples of how Catholic institutions have understood that "improved financial health is a gateway to other goals and dreams; it is closely tied to mental and physical health, family stability, education, and economic mobility" (Wolkowitz & Wilson 2017). For instance, in Fall 2019, Bismarck, North Dakota Public Schools planned to open a financial education center at the new Saint Mary's Central High School to address the financial literacy issues within the school. The program aimed to improve financial literacy and enhance business skills among the school's students (Emerson, 2017). Other Catholic institutions have already taken concrete actions, such as opening financial services branches or offering workshops. For instance, Cardinal Community Credit Union opened branches in Lake Catholic High School and Lakeland Community College in Ohio to address financial literacy with their students. Gradually, Cardinal's Lakeland branch grew to serve a larger community and is central to the Community College's financial literacy education program (Bonvissuto, 2014). Financial literacy workshops are also popular. Charge Debt Solutions and Shepherd's House provide free financial literacy workshops to single mothers, offering debt solutions, bankruptcy, credit, and counseling for home purchases to consumers and service members in need of financial literacy education, money management guidance, and help finding the right solution for their specific financial situation (PR Newswire, 2012). Another example is the Seton Center in Maryland. Under the guidance of Sister Salvatrice Murphy, the Seton Center has organized a series of workshops designed to educate the public and families in need of financial literacy (Stern, 2013). Catholic Charities has also illustrated a commitment to financial literacy by stating that they will make funds available to those who'd like to own a home or receive assistance with transitional housing or training in financial literacy (Solis, 2017).

In terms of research, few empirical papers examine the state of financial literacy within the context of Lasallian Catholic institutions and teachings. One exception is the work of Annabi, González-Ramírez, and Müller (2019), who surveyed undergraduate students at Manhattan College. Students were asked eight questions on various dimensions of financial knowledge about the concepts of liquidity, risk and return, diversification, numeracy, compound interest, interest rates and inflation, time value of money, and money illusion. Their main findings confirm that gender and race correlate with financial literacy among college students. Women scored lower than men, with women of color scoring lower than white women; Hispanic and African American men scored lower than their counterparts. Moreover, first-generation students scored lower on some financial knowledge questions, such as numeracy. It is important to note that, in following its Lasallian mission, Manhattan College actively seeks first-generation college students and often these first-generation college students are women, children of low-income groups, and children of immigrants.

These results clearly indicate that more should be done by Manhattan College to address the gender and race gap as it relates to financial literacy of students entrusted to their care, specifically women, minorities, and first-generation college students as well as members of their local communities. In the essay, the researcher advocates for financial education that targets the socio-economic groups that suffer most from financial illiteracy. Again, the researcher adopts the PACFL definition of financial education as

the process by which people improve their understanding of financial products, services, and concepts, so they are empowered to make informed choices, avoid pitfalls, know where to go for help, and take other actions to improve their present and long-term financial well-being (President's Advisory Council on Financial Literacy, 2008, 10).

The researcher believes the integration of a modern definition of financial literacy with traditional Lasallian principles is a natural fit. The researcher is informed by the Lasallian educational tradition based on the original teachings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, which focus on providing education for the less fortunate. During De La Salle's lifetime, "The educational establishment resented his innovative methods and his insistence on gratuity for all, regardless of whether they could afford to pay" and so he pioneered his own way (LaSalle.org, 2018).

He trained lay teachers and accepted that they wished to be educated but did not have the background or resources. De La Salle's teaching and example led to the development of the De La Salle Christian Brothers and a large network of schools guided by a common Lasallian mission. The current Lasallian mission is based on five core principles, represented by the five points of the Lasallian star. These include (in no particular order): concern for the poor and social justice, faith in the presence of God, quality education, respect for all persons, and inclusive community (Christian Brother's Conference, 2018). Within these five Lasallian Core Principles, there is significant overlap and inspiration for the promotion of financial literacy and promoting financial and social equality.

Manhattan College: An Example of a Lasallian Catholic College Living the Lasallian Mission

Manhattan College is a midsized Lasallian Catholic College in the Bronx section of New York City. Founded in 1853 and based on the tradition of John Baptist de La Salle, the mission of Manhattan College is to

> provide a contemporary, person-centered educational experience that prepares graduates for lives of personal development, professional success, civic engagement, and service to their fellow human beings. The College pursues this mission through programs that integrate a broad liberal education with concentration in specific disciplines in the arts and sciences or with professional preparation in business, education and engineering (Manhattan College, 2018).

In the Lasallian tradition, Manhattan College's curriculum contains multiple courses which use social justice as a component in the teaching and learning in many disciplines. In addition, the college promotes programs that engage students in issues of social justice to develop awareness of social and financial inequality so that students can address the needs of the poor and become conscious leaders and long-term decision makers.

For example, in Manhattan College's O'Malley School of Business, student engagement is encouraged through the *Passport Program*. As one of its aims, this program encourages students to perform volunteer work as part of their college experience. One signature volunteer experience that many students are involved in is the Internal Revenue Service sponsored, *Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program.* This program puts current Manhattan College students in direct contact with less fortunate members of the local community with the explicit intent of helping individuals file their tax forms. These types of programs help to fulfill a number of the Lasallian Core Principles. First, by lending assistance to people in need in the local community, the program attempts to aid them in improving their circumstances. This fits directly with the Lasallian Core Principle of "concern for the poor and social justice." In addition, students in this program learn valuable skills and gain experience in tax preparation, in line with De La Salle's mission of teaching others and "quality education." They also are given the opportunity to work one-on-one with marginalized populations from the local community, giving them valuable work experience, as well as an opportunity to develop "respect for all persons."

Financial Empowerment and Commitment to Financial Well-Being: A View from the Bronx section of New York City

Census data estimate the 2018 population of the Bronx to be 1,471,160, with fifty-three percent female and forty-three percent male. It also suggests that the Bronx is the most diverse region in the country (USA), with a majority of residents, 56.3 percent (based on 2018 estimates) to be of Hispanic origin and 35.3 percent to be foreign born, mainly from the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Mexico. More than 55 percent of households speak a language other than English at home. The national unemployment rate is 3.7 percent, while the unemployment rate in the Bronx is 5.3 percent, higher than that of New York City overall at 4.0 percent (Census.gov).[6] Over the last decade, unemployment in the Bronx has averaged well over 8 percent.[7] Table 1 highlights income and poverty rates for Manhattan, New York City, and the Bronx (Census.gov, 2018). Estimates for 2017 suggest the median household income of the Bronx to be US $36,593 and the median per-capita income to be US $19,721. This is compared to a median household income of US $57,782 and median per-capita income of US $35,761 for New York City as a whole. Based on 2017 estimates, the national poverty rate is 12.3 percent, while the poverty rate in the Bronx is 27.7. In light of the low income and high unemployment and poverty rates, more than 10 percent of the population is on some form of social assistance.

Table 1: Income and Poverty Rates for Manhattan (Census, 2018)

	Manhattan	**NYC**	**Bronx**
Median household income (in 2017 dollars), 2013-2017	**$79,781**	**$57,782**	**$36,593**
Per capita income in past 12 months (in 2017 dollars), 2013-2017	$69,529	$35,761	$19,721
Persons in poverty, percent	16.3%	19.6%	27.9%

The Bronx is also highly unbanked and/or under-banked. Unbanked means no one in the household has a bank account; and under-banked means, despite having a bank account, at least one member of the household has used alternative financial services in the past 12 months, falling prey to predatory lending practices (UNHP.org, 2018). Understanding the underlying link between unemployment, poverty, low-income, and financial stability, New York City institutionalized a number of initiatives on financial empowerment. Following the 2008 financial crisis, New York City recognized that

Financial stability is overall economic security that can sustain an individual or family for months and years, not just days and weeks. Income and income supports, such as housing subsidies and public benefits, are necessary but not sufficient for overall financial stability. A household also requires financial knowledge and access to affordable financial products and services to build cushions against financial shocks . . . .

Accordingly, New York City introduced the “supervitamin effect” or “the integration of financial empowerment (or stability) programming” and explained the role it plays in improving the outcomes of traditional social service programming (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2012). The Supervitamin effect suggests that all social benefits and assistance programs integrate financial literacy and knowledge for long-term efficacy.

In an attempt to understand how New York City’s financial empowerment initiatives work, the researcher profiles two non-profit organizations in the Bronx – University Neighborhood Housing Program (UNHP) and Ariva – both of which provide financial education and counseling. The organizations’ profiles assist us in understanding what needs are being addressed currently and where programs can be enhanced or improved as they both receive support from New York City’s financial empowerment initiatives.

University Neighborhood Housing Program (UNHP)

UNHP was founded in the Northwest Bronx in 1983 by Fordham University to assist in community-based preservation activities. In 1988, the Fordham University project joined forces with the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition to establish UNHP. The initial work lent funds and package loans in order to purchase dilapidated privately owned buildings, renovate them, and create community controlled affordable housing. The UNHP loan funds that were created in 1988 continue today, along with a host of other services. Their commendable mission now includes “resources for financial education, foreclosure prevention, free tax preparation, access to benefits and health insurance, and eviction prevention assistance” (UNHP, 2018). Based on a 2018 report published by UNHP,

The Bronx has both the lowest proportion of households with a bank account of any borough in New York City at 21.8 percent, and the lowest concentration of bank branches per person of any county in New York State. Those without bank accounts, and even some with them, often utilize fringe financial services such as check cashers and pawn shops that may be more convenient but are also high cost (UNHP, 2018).

Along with publishing a Banking Guide aimed at helping residents find the best banks and credit unions for their needs, UNHP offers preventive measures. It runs workshops aimed at educating members of the community on the hazards of using widely available predatory and fringe financial products such as Refund Anticipation Checks (RAC), pawn shops, rent-to-own stores, pricey prepaid debit cards, and high-fee check cashing in these neighborhoods. UNHP also works to mitigate the use of predatory services by offering topic-specific workshops, community resource fairs, and financial education opportunities. Community Resource Fairs grant on the spot assistance and an opportunity for follow-up to the attendees. UNHP also offers workshops around budgeting and money management to groups organized by other local nonprofits (UNHP, 2018).

UNHP not only offers financial education to help local residents avoid predatory services and address pressing financial concerns, it also offers two types of financial education opportunities: one-on-one coaching and a 5-week “Getting Ahead” group course. The Getting Ahead Program takes place one evening per week for five weeks and covers basic banking, financial goal setting, spending plans, debt management, and so on. Graduates of the course receive a copy of their credit report and score along with an analysis, as well as a certificate which can be used to access innovative products at local credit unions. Courses are free and available in English and Spanish languages. One-on-one financial coaching aimed at managing personal finances is built around useful topics such as student loans, debt management, budgeting, and planning for the future. The professional counselors are trained through the New York City Financial Empowerment Program, which aims to standardize and "professionalize" services. UNHP has served thousands of members of the community for decades and continues to do so.

Ariva

Ariva, headquartered in the South Bronx and servicing all five boroughs of New York City, was founded in 2003 to respond to the financial services and access needs of limited-income and low-wealth individuals. It provides free on-site financial counseling and tax preparation services to underserved populations and is committed to the principle that New York City neighborhoods should not be left vulnerable to "predatory financial services simply because they are poor or because of the perception that it is less profitable to do business in lower income communities" (Ariva.org, 2018). Ariva works to promote innovation, to provide access, and to inspire hope in low and moderate income New Yorkers in underbanked communities so that they can move from poverty to greater financial stability.

From its early days of providing free income tax preparation programs to a few hundred clients, Ariva has grown to providing free, comprehensive financial capability services to more than 12,000 New Yorkers each year. Services include financial education and counseling, free tax preparation through the *Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)* program, asset building support, and assistance with public benefits access. Based on data collected via tax preparations in 2016, 47 percent of Ariva's clients have an adjusted gross income of less than US $10,000; 88 percent earn less than US $30,000; and average gross income of clients is US $14,070. Reflective of New York City, ninety-five percent of Ariva's clients are low- to moderate-income and racially and ethnically diverse, breaking out as follows: African American, 35 percent; Hispanic, 58 percent; White, 3 percent; Asian, 1 percent; and Other, 3 percent.

Since Ariva's core mission is to strengthen the economic stability of low-income people and communities, programs operate in some of the City's poorest neighborhoods. For example, the Highbridge community of the South Bronx, where Ariva is headquartered, is located in the poorest Congressional District in the USA; it has a poverty rate of 39 percent. In addition to focusing services on underserved neighborhoods, Ariva also targets its programs to underserved individuals in communities throughout the City. Partnering with social service providers in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn (three of New York City's five boroughs), they deliver tax services and financial counseling programs to special populations including veterans, domestic violence survivors, formerly homeless, and at-risk individuals. Ariva is strategically located in communities to offer on-site services; hence, they are housed in banks, Credit Unions, and even the Mexican Consulate of New York City. In essence, they go to the clients as opposed to having the clients find them.

Both organizations provide critical services to thousands of clients with a limited staff and volunteers. While their long-term goal is the overall well-being of all their clients, they are strained and only able to provide basic financial training and education, such as how to avoid predatory services. On the flip side, both organizations have tremendous tacit knowledge of the communities they serve. They have bi-lingual programs and staff members who understand the unique circumstances of the communities they serve, whether immigrants, women, or domestic violence survivors. In the next section, the researcher outlines a plan to both enhance the crucial work of these organizations and gain from their tacit knowledge and experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Striving to bridge the financial literacy gender and race gap, as well as to promote social justice and equity, appears to be not only the mission of dedicated NGOs, but also the core mission of Lasallian Catholic institutions like Manhattan College. This mission to improve individuals' financial literacy has a very practical purpose: to raise financial capability and develop a path to financial well-being. Financial well-being is "the feeling of having financial security and financial freedom of choice, in the present and when considering the future" (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, May 2017). This is achieved through the following four elements: being able to control day-to-day finances, being able to absorb a financial shock such as unexpected medical expenses, being able to meet financial goals such as savings goals, and finally having the financial freedom to make choices that improve one's quality of life (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, May 2017).

In order to bridge the gender and race gap in financial literacy and achieve long-term financial well-being, the researcher advocates for the creation of a Financial Literacy Center at Manhattan College. This center could serve not only Manhattan College students, but also the surrounding community, which is severely underserved. The researcher draws their inspiration from the Lasallian Core Principles, as well as from current experiences of Catholic institutions launching financial education centers like, for example, Light of Christ Catholic Schools in Bismarck, North Dakota. The researcher thoroughly recognizes the importance of serving fellow human beings as a core mission of Manhattan College, which should not be limited only to Manhattan College students, but should include the broader Bronx community. To that end, the researcher proposes a three-step process. The first step consists of training student volunteers in mastering the different dimensions of financial knowledge: inflation, compound interest rate, numeracy, and so on. This training will take place through workshops offered by Manhattan College professors, during which they will rely on interactive platforms like the Practical Money Skills website. While education is helpful, imparting young adults with financial knowledge alone does not always result in financial capability as it needs to be coupled with access to financial policies, instruments, and services (Johnson & Sherraden, 2007). On the other hand, high school financial literacy educational programs centered around games were more effective in changing financial behavior and linked to a higher level of savings at middle age (Mandell, 2008). Practical application is a must. "There is no evidence whatsoever that courses in money management or personal finance, as they are now taught, improve the financial literacy of their students" (Gallagher, 2010). Consequently, our focus would be teaching soft skills, which include propensity to plan, confidence to be proactive, and willingness to take investment risks more than content knowledge about compound interest, bonds, and the like (Fernandes, et al., 2014).

Once student volunteers receive adequate training, the researcher can proceed to Step 2 of the proposal, in which they offer a monthly workshop to fellow Manhattan College students. Workshops will be dedicated to the following topics: credit card payments, student loan payments, checking account management, and savings planning. Students participating in the workshops will be discussing their personal finance issues and the student volunteers will help them understand how to navigate and better manage their personal finance case. It is imperative that such workshops target the gaps in financial knowledge identified by Annabi, González-Ramírez, and Müller (2019) among students at Manhattan College.

Once the structure and governance of the Financial Literacy Center is established, the researcher would be able to proceed to Step 3, collaborating with the Bronx's financial literacy NGOs, like UNHP and Ariva. Based on the experience gained at Manhattan College, student volunteers will help Bronx NGOs tailor financial literacy workshops to the underserved local communities. It is important to note that almost all financial education has been race and color blind. In essence, financial education, like most other areas of education, does not acknowledge the unique circumstances under which specific groups operate. As Pinto and Coulson (2011) argue, "the absence of open acknowledgement of women's realities through neutrality creates a false impression of economic equity" (Pinto and Coulson, 2011, page 68). Undisputedly, a one size fits all approach has proven inadequate in most arena--financial literacy is no exception. Communities in the Bronx that reach out to NGOs have their own distinctive backgrounds, cultural practices, and hardships--all of which must be researched and studied. For example, women, specifically minority women, have very different issues and circumstances than white women. Such groups must be understood before a universally accepted financial literacy program can be offered. Being gender neutral and color blind in such cases can lead to inefficient and ineffective programs that may even have harmful, unintended consequences. Fortunately, Manhattan College is uniquely positioned to understand these groups. There are faculty, programs, and resources at Manhattan College dedicated to helping students comprehend issues of racial and gender bias along with social justice. This grants Manhattan College a unique advantage as student volunteers at the Financial Literacy Center can be trained not only on financial knowledge and concepts, but understanding the diverse cultural, financial, and socioeconomic circumstances of the communities served before going out to serve others. More importantly, Bronx NGOs have a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the communities they serve. It is critical that the Financial Literacy Center engage this knowledge when developing its literacy initiatives for the larger community. Hopefully, a two-way dialogue based on experience on one end and research on the other, will assist in mitigating race and gender bias as opposed to perpetuating that status quo brought on by the one size fits all approach.

In conclusion, the researcher recognizes that social inequality and its damaging consequences are a daily reality for many Americans. However, the researcher also believes that as Lasallians we have not only the guiding mission to impel us, but a tremendous opportunity as well, to mitigate the harms brought on by social inequalities. The pathway to long term financial well-being begins with the will and a plan and, herein, we are fortunate to offer both.

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Endnotes

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2. Grishma Shah, who earned her doctorate from Rutgers University, is an associate professor of management and marketing at Manhattan College.
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4. Although this journal usually requires that all citations use the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) format, an exception has been made in this issue to allow citations to be made using the American Psychological Association (APA) format.
5. Given their mission and long history of focus on education, Lasallian Catholic institutions are prime candidates for promoting financial literacy and thereby mitigating social inequality.
6. As of October 2018.
7. As of 2017 Census estimates.