The Engagement Gap: Social Mobility and Extracurricular Participation among American Youth

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Participation in extracurricular activities is associated with positive youth outcomes such as higher education attainment and greater future earnings. We present new analyses of four national longitudinal surveys of American high school students that reveal a sharp increase in the class gap in extracurricular involvement. Since the 1970s, upper-middle-class students have become increasingly active in school clubs and sport teams, while participation among working-class students has veered in the opposite direction. These growing gaps have emerged in the wake of rising income inequality, the introduction of "pay to play" programs, and increasing time and money investments by upper-middle-class parents in children's development. These trends need to be taken into account in any new initiative to monitor mobility. They also present a challenge to the American ideal of equal opportunity insofar as participation in organized activities shapes patterns of social mobility.

Keywords: extracurriculars; social mobility; inequality; social capital; youth; education; social class

Public education was originally designed to be a great equalizer in American society, redistributing opportunities to children from less advantageous backgrounds and thus increasing social mobility. From the Common School movement of the 1840s to the GI Bill of the 1940s, reformers sought to level the playing

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field, enhance economic productivity, and strengthen democratic citizenship by making education available on a mass scale. Despite these hopeful beginnings, recent evidence suggests that schools may no longer be narrowing the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

Over the past two generations, the difference in educational achievement between the children from poor families and that of children from wealthy families has grown substantially. Whether we look at standardized test scores, college admission, or college graduation, the achievement gaps between children from upper-middle-class families and children from working-class families are steadily increasing. Today, the income gap in test scores is 40 percent larger than it was three decades ago (Reardon 2011). For high-income students, the college graduation rate increased by 18 percentage points over the past two decades; in contrast, the graduation rate of low-income students grew by only 4 percentage points (Bailey and Dynarski 2011). Moreover, wealthy students make up an increasing share of the enrollment at the most selective and prestigious four-year institutions (Reardon, Baker, and Klasik 2012), while low-income students with similar test scores and academic records are more likely to attend two-year colleges (Alon 2009; Hoxby and Avery 2012).

Discussions and debates about the state of education in America often focus on standardized test scores and "core competencies," but a great deal of evidence suggests that it is not only what happens inside the classroom that matters for children's outcomes. That is, participation in extracurricular activities (e.g., chess club, yearbook, soccer) has been shown to be no less important than test scores for predicting educational attainment and accumulated earnings 10 years later (Lleras 2008). Simply put, participation in extracurricular activities is closely correlated with children's futures.

Activities, such as chess clubs, yearbook committees, and soccer teams, promote important noncognitive skills—in particular, teamwork, "grit," and leadership—that are associated with educational attainment and higher returns in the

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labor market (Kuhn and Weinberger 2005; Cunha, Heckman, and Schennach 2010; Borghans, Ter Weel, and Weinberg 2014). Moreover, participation in activities has become an important proxy for qualities that are hard to measure, such as ambition and curiosity. Colleges seek to admit students who not only test well but who also exhibit a diversity of interests and willingness to learn new things. Being part of the synchronized swimming team and playing a friction harp reflect a diversity of interests and thus are rewarded by university admissions officers. Playing lacrosse or squash is indicative also of cultural capital, because it signals that a student will fit well at an elite institution (Rivera 2012).

In theory, public schools provide equal opportunities for civic engagement and character building for all children in the form of extracurricular activities. In reality, participation in these voluntary activities varies widely across social class. Children from upper-middle-class families are much more likely to join school clubs and sports teams than their working-class peers (Beck and Jennings 1982; Marsh 1992; Marsh and Kleitman 2002). It is troubling but hardly surprising that students from wealthy families are more likely than other students to participate in organized activities. However, it is alarming that this class gap in civic and social engagement has grown over the past two decades.

We raise this issue here because if a new initiative to monitor mobility were indeed undertaken, it should allow us to examine the role of extracurricular opportunities within the mobility process. To make the case that the role of extracurricular activities matters for mobility studies, we present new analyses of four national surveys of American high school students, analyses that will reveal a sharp increase in the class gap in extracurricular involvement. We find that since the 1970s, upper-middle-class high school seniors have become increasingly active in school clubs and sport teams. In contrast, participation among working-class students has veered in the opposite direction. In the 1990s, involvement in school clubs plummeted among working-class students and has continued to decrease ever since.

Examining the differences among high school students with respect to extracurricular activities offers a glimpse of tomorrow's socioeconomic and civic landscape. Given that these factors predict important outcomes—including educational attainment and civic and political participation later in life—the consequence of the current gaps might be an even more polarized and unequal society than we have now, where children from upper-middle-class families become more socially and civically engaged while working-class children become more disconnected and disengaged (Silva 2013; Wright 2014). Furthermore, if class increasingly predicts participation in activities that in turn predict educational attainment and future income, in effect we may be witnessing a vicious cycle that shapes patterns of intergenerational mobility.

Extracurricular Participation and Life Success

School clubs and sports teams have been a fundamental part of the American high school experience since public high schools were built across the nation

(Coleman 1961). Extracurricular activities, including athletics and student government, were viewed as a way to promote character, build "soft" skills, and cultivate a sense of unity among students from different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (O'Hanlon 1980). While these goals appear to be threatened, at least with respect to social class (Beck and Jennings 1982; Marsh 1992), it remains true that extracurricular activities yield a wide array of benefits for participants.

The skills and social networks built through participation in organized activities have been shown to enhance educational achievement and promote well-being, healthy choices, and prosocial behavior (Marsh and Kleitman 2002; Eccles et al. 2003). Participation in interscholastic athletics teaches perseverance and a strong work ethic while increasing the level of social capital available to student-athletes via coaches, teachers, and academically oriented peers. Team sports also teach students how they can work together to achieve a common goal. Student-athletes have higher test scores (Broh 2002), lower dropout rates (McNeal 1995), and higher rates of college enrollment and completion (Troutman and Dufur 2007). Chess clubs, debate teams, school bands, and student councils similarly cultivate leadership skills, encourage initiative, and allow youths to develop emotional competencies and social skills.

The apparent effects of participation in organized activities extend well beyond high school. Involvement in high school extracurricular activities is associated not only with educational and occupational attainment but also with political and civic engagement in adulthood as well as mental and physical health much later in life (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Putnam 2000; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Hart et al. 2007). The benefits of extracurricular participation are even stronger for students who assume a leadership role. Team captains and club leaders are more likely than other students to occupy managerial occupations as adults and to command a higher wage premium within managerial occupations (Kuhn and Weinberger 2005). Participation in extracurricular activities, then, has implications for social mobility and adult success.

When studying the effects of extracurricular participation, concerns about potential endogeneity arise. For example, students who are more extroverted, ambitious, curious, or determined might be more likely than others to join clubs, while these same traits might also be rewarded later by the labor market. This problem has been well-documented in the existing literature, and recent studies have addressed it to varying degrees using different econometric approaches and research designs. Notably, Stevenson (2010) found that increased sports participation due to Title IX has a positive effect on female college attendance and labor force participation by using male participation rates as an instrumental variable. Similarly, Kosteas (2010) used information on siblings' clubs participation as an instrumental variable when studying the effects of participation on earnings. He finds that participation in both athletics and academic clubs has positive earnings effects comparable to more than half a year increase in years of education (see Barron, Ewing, and Waddell [2000]; Eide and Ronan [2001] for other instrumental variable studies showing positive effects of sports participation).

Data

We appreciate that our claims about the importance of extracurricular activities for mobility have not been fully embraced by mobility scholars. If we want to make a persuasive case for monitoring these activities within any new mobility initiative, it is useful to present results that speak to the role of extracurricular activities in explaining changes in mobility.

We do so with data from the series of high school cohort studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The four cohorts that we use are (birth cohorts are given in brackets) the National Longitudinal Study of 1972 [1954], High School and Beyond [1964], the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 [1974], and the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 [1986]. Each cohort study collects information from students, parents, and school administrators. These data include information on student attitudes and experiences in high school and on important downstream outcomes such as labor market experiences and postsecondary education enrollment and attainment.

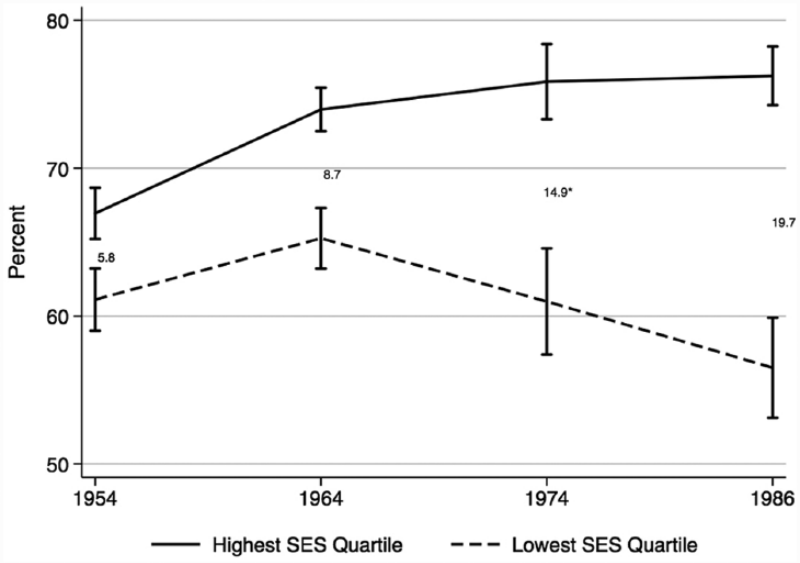
The NCES surveys include information on several types of school-sponsored activities. The general categories include service clubs (e.g., AFS, Key Club), student government, academic honor societies (e.g., National Honor Society), journalism clubs (e.g., school yearbook, newspaper, or literary magazine), music and drama clubs (e.g., school band, school play), academic clubs (e.g., for art, computer, engineering, foreign languages, science, math, psychology, etc.), hobby clubs (e.g., photography, chess, Frisbee, etc.), and vocational clubs (e.g., Future Farmers of America, Future Teachers of America). In addition, the surveys ask about participation in various sports teams, including football and cheerleading.

We measure the class gaps by comparing extracurricular participation among the top and bottom quartiles of the socioeconomic status (SES) index for each cohort.[1] Our analytic sample is limited to non-Hispanic white high school seniors; this approach serves to emphasize that the gaps we find are driven by social class and not by race or ethnicity.[2] We further limit the sample to respondents with nonmissing data on SES and extracurricular participation.[3] Participation estimates, social class gaps, and changes in those gaps over time are all estimated using sampling weights to account for the complex, clustered sampling designs.

Rising class disparities

National surveys show that class disparities in involvement with the school orchestra (or the French club or the soccer team) have steadily increased over the past three decades. Figure 1 shows the percentage of high school seniors who reported participating in at least one school-sponsored, nonathletic extracurricular activity. The solid line shows the observed percentage among the students in each survey's highest SES quartile; the dashed line shows the trend for the students in the lowest SES quartile. The thin vertical lines show the 95 percent confidence intervals. All of the within-survey class gaps displayed in the figure

FIGURE 1
Participation in One or More Extracurricular Activities (Excluding Sports) in Twelfth Grade, by Class and Birth Cohort



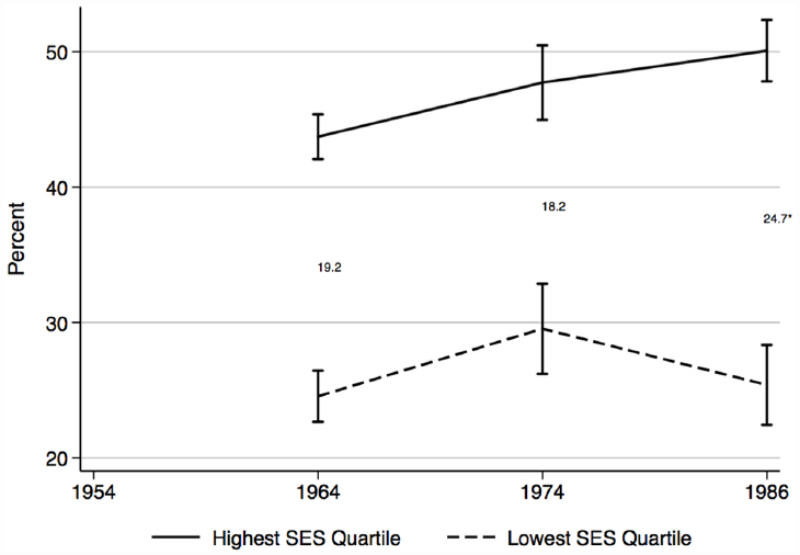
SOURCE: Data from NCES cohort studies (National Longitudinal Study of 1972 [NLS72], High School and Beyond [HS&B], the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 [NELS:88], and the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 [ELS:2002].
NOTE: Non-Hispanic whites only. An asterisk (*) indicates that gap is significantly different from previous survey.

are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level; class gaps that are statistically distinguishable (at the $p < .05$ level) from the class gap among the previous cohort are marked with an asterisk. For students born in the mid-1980s, participation among high-SES students trends steadily upward and plateaus at about 75 percent, whereas working-class participation increases between the first two cohorts but thereafter drops off to about 55 percent.

This general pattern of participation by social class holds when we focus on the nine individual types of extracurricular activities. There are two exceptions: student government, where upper-middle-class participation decreases while working-class participation is flat (but at a lower level); and vocational clubs, where working-class participation decreases steadily while upper-middle-class participation remains constant (at a lower level).

Class disparities have also increased in the context of participation in high school sports. Figure 2 shows the percentage of high school seniors who reported participating in at least one team or individual interscholastic sport. The participation rate of upper-middle-class youths increased from about 44 percent to almost 50 percent between the birth cohorts of 1964 and 1986. The participation

FIGURE 2
Participation in One or More Sports in Twelfth Grade, by Class and Birth Cohort



SOURCE: Data from NCES cohort studies (NLS72, HS&B, NELS:88, ELS:2002).
NOTE: Non-Hispanic whites only. An asterisk (*) indicates that gap is significantly different from previous survey.

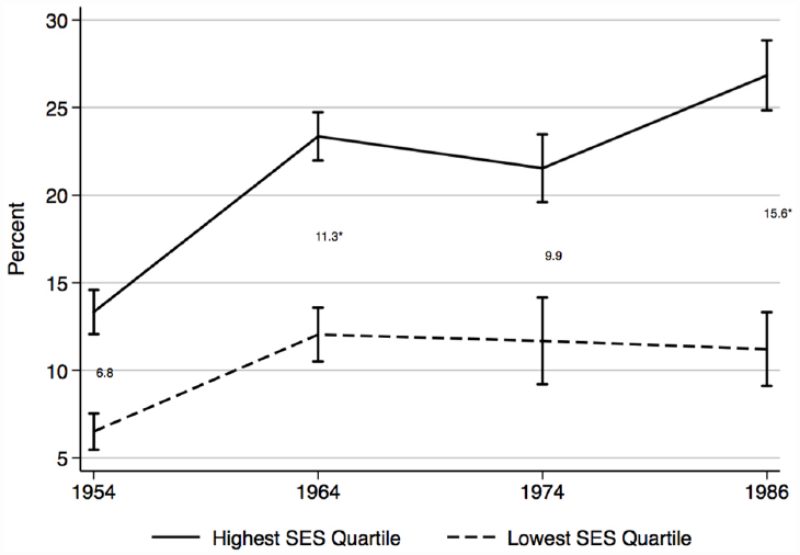
rates of working-class youths were lower, yet they kept pace with upper-middle-class youths born between 1964 and 1974. The participation rate of working-class youths born in 1986 dropped to the level of their counterparts born in 1964—at just less than 25 percent.

Figure 3 shows the class gap for twelfth graders who report being team captains. Again, upper-middle-class youths show increasing participation over time. The proportion of upper-middle-class youths who are team captains almost doubles, from 13 percent among the birth cohort of 1954 to 25 percent for those born in 1986. The decreasing percentage of working-class team captains—from 12 percent to 11 percent between the cohorts of 1964 to 1986—is less dramatic than in the cases of sports and club participation, but the class gap has nonetheless grown significantly.

How to Explain the Growing Gap

What explains these growing class gaps in extracurricular involvement? One part of the explanation lies in rising income inequality. The economic distance between the top and bottom rungs in the United States has been growing steadily since the 1970s, with high-income families pulling away from the median (Piketty

FIGURE 3
Percentage of Twelfth Graders Who are Team Captains, by Class and Birth Cohort



SOURCE: Data from NCES cohort studies (NLS72, HS&B, NELS:88, ELS:2002).
NOTE: Non-Hispanic whites only. An asterisk (*) indicates that gap is significantly different from previous survey.

and Saez 2003; Western, Bloome, and Percheski 2008). Simply stated, rising inequality means that wealthy families have more money to invest in their children. Money helps families to pay for piano and ballet lessons, for science camps and traveling soccer teams, and for music instruments and sports equipment. In addition, not worrying about "making ends meet" every month allows parents to take time off from work to attend recitals and lacrosse games.

Not only do wealthy families have more money than before, they are also using it differently. Rich families now invest an increasing share of their income and time in providing learning experiences for their children. Consumer expenditure surveys show that, since the early 1970s, spending on child enrichment goods and services has increased to a far greater extent for families in the top income quintiles than for those in the bottom quintiles (Kaushal, Magnuson, and Waldfogel 2011; Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013). Despite the rise of consumer culture, parents have reduced their spending on toys, clothes, and games. Instead, much of the growth in spending has come from greater investments in books, tutoring, and lessons in sports and arts.

Moreover, college-educated parents who are wealthy invest relatively more time in reading to their children and in taking them to playgrounds, museums, and soccer practice (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004; Ramey and Ramey 2010). Compared with less-educated parents, college-educated parents report

spending about six more hours per week playing with their young children and engaging them in educational or organized activities (Ramey and Ramey 2010).[4] Children of college-educated parents spend at least three more hours per week on organized activities than do children of less-educated parents (Mahoney, Harris, and Eccles 2006). These seemingly small differences amount to large gaps. By age six, upper-middle-class children will have spent 1,300 more hours than working-class children in places other than their homes or day care, such as libraries, movie theaters, restaurants, and parks (Phillips 2011).

Low-income parents, too, have increased the time and money they invest in the development of their children, but not to the same degree as wealthy parents have. Since 1975, the increase in time spent with children is twice as large for college-educated than for less-educated parents (Ramey and Ramey 2010).

What is driving upper-middle-class parents to invest ever-greater amounts of time and money in extracurricular activities? Two factors account for this phenomenon: vast changes in the American economy's structure and an increasingly complex college landscape. In our contemporary, knowledge-based economy—which favors workers with college and advanced degrees—the four-year degree is a prerequisite for (though not a guarantee of) secure middle-class life (Powell and Snellman 2003; Kalleberg 2009). Meanwhile, blue-collar jobs now pay less and offer fewer benefits and less security than they did a generation ago. In the wake of falling blue-collar wages, demand for a college degree has soared; these trends have spurred competition in admissions, especially at the most selective four-year colleges and universities (Alon 2009; Hoxby and Avery 2012). The proliferation of college rankings (as published by *US News & World Report* and others) has increased public awareness about the range and stratification of colleges. The University of Chicago accepted only 8.8 percent of its more than 30,300 applicants in 2013, while the Harvard and Stanford admission rates dipped below 6 percent (Abrams 2013). The competition for elite college slots is now more intense than ever.

To make sure that their children stand a chance in the competition for college admission, upper-middle-class parents invest both time and money in building their children's "resumes" with the aim of making them look "measurably talented" and interesting to admissions committees (Lareau 2004; Ginsburg 2007; Stevens 2009). Ramey and Ramey (2010) refer to this increasing investment in early childhood as the "rug rat race," whereby upper-middle-class parents are driven by the belief that early childhood experiences largely determine future educational and economic success. For working-class parents not in tune with the dynamic economy and college landscape, knowledge about cultivating their children can prove to be elusive.

Neighborhood segregation also affects the availability of and attitudes toward extracurricular activities for children. Extracurricular sports and clubs are largely social activities whose availability depends a great deal on others' engagement in them. Note also that little leagues, theater clubs, and local swim teams are public goods available only when communities choose (and can afford) to invest in the facilities that sustain them. This means that an increase in the income segregation

across communities will amplify household-level differences in the expenditure on and participation in certain extracurricular activities. Income segregation has, indeed, increased in America concomitantly with the growth in income inequality. Since the 1970s, middle-income neighborhoods have been disappearing. More than a third of all families now live in either affluent or poor neighborhoods, twice as many as in 1970 (Reardon and Bischoff 2011). Affluent and low-income families are now less likely to live near one another, which leads to increasing disparities in such public resources as parks, pools, libraries, services, and—in particular—schools.

It is widely recognized that where one goes to school matters a great deal for extracurricular participation. As a cost-cutting measure, many schools have reduced or even eliminated their sports programs, and such schools are the ones that low-income kids are more likely to attend. Thus, one part of the explanation is differences in extracurricular offerings. High schools with wealthy students offer twice the number of team sports as schools that serve mainly low-income students (Putnam, forthcoming).

As schools face pressure to tighten their belts, test scores and academic "core competencies" take priority over seemingly more frivolous activities such as sports and clubs. Schools across the economic spectrum have been pressured to reduce spending, but they have responded to that pressure in different ways. Poorer districts may simply cut back on their offerings, thus depriving students of chances to develop the soft skills that would prove so valuable in the future. In contrast, affluent districts have maintained or even expanded their extracurricular offerings by turning to private donations from parents and local community associations (Reich 2005). Whereas wealthier parents can pool private donations to build a new running track or send the school band to Japan, less-affluent parents cannot make up for the loss of public funding for extracurricular activities. Data collected by the National Association of Independent Schools show that the median amount of annual giving raised per school increased 63 percent from $548,651 to $895,614 over the last decade (Anderson 2012). In New York City, the median amount raised increased 268 percent during this period.

Even more importantly, in many school districts the introduction of "pay to play" programs has transformed school sports into a luxury that only wealthy families can afford. Conservative estimates set the cost of each activity at $600; this would be roughly $2,400 annually (or at least 15 percent of income) for a bottom-quintile family with two kids doing two activities each. Indeed, when fees were introduced, one in three sports-playing kids from homes with annual income of $60,000 or less dropped out because of the increased cost, as compared to one in ten kids from families with incomes over $60,000 (Putnam, forthcoming). And even in districts offering waivers, the stigma of applying for a waiver may dissuade many parents from doing so. The increased prevalence of pay-to-play fees, combined with the disproportionate impact of these fees on bottom-earning families, appear to have contributed to widening the class gap in sports (and other pay-to-play activities).

Conclusion

Extracurricular activities have long been seen as a way to enrich the public sphere by helping raise young children to be leaders and citizens who participate in democratic governance, exhibit teamwork and grit, and bridge both social and economic divides. For this reason, investing in children's extracurricular activities was once a shared, public concern—important not only for the individual child's life chances but also for the nation's unity and prosperity. Yet shrinking social networks and cuts in public spending have since rendered investment in children's activities a private decision, the responsibility of parents alone (Silva, Snellman, and Frederick 2014). The growing gap observed in extracurricular opportunities is another hallmark of the trend toward privatizing childhood: it is evident that concern for the well-being of children generally has shriveled to the point where such concern applies only to one's own offspring.

Extracurricular activities are often dismissed as being less vital than test scores and reading levels (or even as frivolous), but there is considerable research demonstrating the fundamental importance of such activities to children's life chances. Playing soccer or marching in the school band is not simply a fun activity; these activities teach valuable lessons in teamwork, communication, and perseverance—all of which pay off later in the workplace. For children from less-advantaged backgrounds, the social connections and character traits gleaned from extracurricular activities may offer the key to upward mobility and a secure middle-class life. Furthermore, participation in such activities may plant the seeds of future political participation, setting children on a path toward social connectedness and civic involvement rather than isolation and disengagement (Putnam, Frederick, and Snellman 2012).

That class-based inequality in social and civic engagement has nearly quadrupled in three decades is startling and presents a challenge to the American ideal of equal opportunity. The growing class gaps in extracurricular activities are therefore an urgent social concern. Upper-middle-class children are being groomed—through private investment and cultivation—to thrive in the competitive, knowledge-based economy that they will inherit. Moreover, these children will enter adulthood as practiced citizens ready to participate in democracy and to collaborate with others. However, their working-class peers are missing out on these opportunities as public funding has dwindled and concern for their well-being has been relegated to the private sphere. These low-income students are losing the chance to develop grit and perseverance, work alongside others, build valuable connections with mentors, and learn how to lead. As a result, their ability to climb the economic ladder may be jeopardized. Living up to our national creed of equal opportunity requires closing the extracurricular gap as swiftly as possible.

It follows that any new initiative to monitor mobility should allow scholars to examine how extracurricular activities contribute to mobility and trends in mobility. More importantly, we should also consider how the growth in the "engagement gap" might be reversed. If we are concerned with enhancing social mobility,

the increasing socioeconomic gap in extracurricular participation calls for urgent action from schools, parents, and policy-makers.

Notes

1. The SES index combines measures of income, parental education, and parental occupational status, although the precise calculation of the index varies slightly between the four cohorts. We find similar results using other markers of social class, such as family income or parental education (results not shown).

2. The same results hold when using the full sample that includes twelfth graders of all race-ethnicities and in models that control for race. We lack sufficient statistical power to do within-race-ethnicity analyses for black, Hispanic, or the residual race-ethnic category because of small sample sizes of race-ethnic minorities in the top SES quartile, an average of 268 per group per survey, especially in the earlier cohorts.

3. The growing gaps are robust to multivariate analyses that control for race-ethnicity (results not shown).

4. See Ramey and Ramey (2010, Fig. 3).

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