EDUCATION

Elite Colleges Constantly Tell Low-Income Students That They Do Not Belong

Unwritten rules underlie all of elite-university life—and students who don't come from a wealthy background have a hard time navigating them.

CLINT SMITH MARCH 18, 2019

Harvard College (CHARLES KROPA / AP)

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When Disadvantaged Students Overlook Elite Colleges
ADAM HARRIS

They Bribed College Coaches. I Collected Cans for Cash.
BOBBI DEMPSEY

Last Tuesday, the Justice Department charged 50 people with involvement in an elaborate scheme to purchase spots in some of the country's top schools. The tactics described in the indictment were complex and multipronged, requiring multiple steps of deception and bribery by parents and their co-conspirators to secure their children's admission to the schools of their choice. The plot purportedly included faking learning disabilities, using Photoshopped images to make it seem as if students played sports that they did not actually play, and pretending that students were of different ethnicities in an effort to exploit affirmative-action programs. The alleged scheme was led by a man named William Singer, who called his business venture a "side door" into college. On Tuesday, Singer pleaded guilty to all charges.

The case, rightfully, has set off a wave of conversations about how the wealthy are able to lie and manipulate their way into the country's elite colleges and universities. But the scandal also provides an opportunity to interrogate how these universities are set up in ways that systematically amplify and exacerbate the class differences between their students. Students from low-income backgrounds receive daily reminders—interpersonal and institutional, symbolic and structural—that *they* are the ones who do not belong.

To understand the prevalence of wealth at top-tier schools, and how those schools often fail to adequately serve low-income students, it helps to turn to a book called *The Privileged Poor*, by the Harvard University professor Anthony Abraham Jack, published earlier this month. In the book, Jack combines his own journey as a low-income student from Miami who attended selective schools (Amherst College as an undergrad and Harvard for graduate school) and his two-year ethnographic research project, in which he interviewed and followed the lives of low-income students as they navigated life at an unidentified elite school he refers to as "Renowned University."

In the early pages of the book, Jack outlines how top colleges and universities are and have long been havens of the wealthy. In 2017, a team led by the Harvard economist Raj Chetty found that students coming from families in the top 1 percent—those who make more than $630,000 a year—are 77 times more likely to be admitted to and attend an Ivy League school than students coming from families who make less than $30,000 a year. Furthermore, the study found that 38 elite colleges have more students who come from families in the top 1 percent than students who come from the bottom 60 percent (families making less than $65,000 a year). In other research, Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, have documented how just 14 percent of undergraduates at the most competitive schools—places like Stanford, Princeton, and Columbia—come from families who make up the bottom half of U.S. income distribution.

While many top schools have taken steps to provide more access to disadvantaged students and become more socioeconomically diverse, they remain saturated with wealth. Most low-income students still receive their education elsewhere, disproportionately attending for-profit colleges, community colleges, and less-selective four-year institutions.

[Read: One way to stop college-admissions insanity: Admit more students]

The low-income students who do end up at these elite institutions are often treated as homogeneous in both policy and the scholarly literature, as if they all navigate these schools in the same way. This is one of the most important contributions Jack has made with his research—disaggregating the experience of low-income students at elite colleges.

Jack describes two categories: the privileged poor and the doubly disadvantaged. The privileged poor are students who come from low-income backgrounds but attended wealthy private high schools, giving them a level of familiarity with and access to the social and cultural capital that tend to make people successful at elite universities. The doubly disadvantaged are students who arrive at these top institutions from neighborhood public schools, many of which are overcrowded and underfunded. They are schools where these students have excelled, but that are ill-equipped to give them the sociocultural tools necessary to understand the nuances of how these elite colleges operate. For example, without being explicitly told, how would students know what "office hours" are, and that they are encouraged to use them? Many low-income students attending these universities are unfamiliar with what Jack refers to as "the hidden curriculum," those invisible rules and expectations that can lead some students to success while leaving others floundering. The book is full of examples like this, the sort of social capital that many students, faculty, and administrators take for granted.

But certain common experiences affect both categories of low-income students, regardless of where they went to high school. For instance, Jack's research documents how three out of four colleges close their dining halls during spring break. Many low-income students cannot afford to leave campus, much less go on vacation for break, and as a result take extraordinary measures to make sure they have enough to eat. Some students ration their food, skipping meals to make a limited supply last the entire break. Some students go to food pantries, leaving the campus of a school that might have a billion-dollar endowment to stand in line for a can of beans. One student Jack interviewed described how she increased her online-dating activity to secure meals on first dates where she expected the men to pay. "She was treating Tinder as if it were OpenTable," Jack writes. The closing of dining halls reflects a lack of consideration of what many of these students need to survive.

Jack refers to these formal university policies as "structural exclusion," and the dining hall is far from the only example. Many low-income students at Renowned University also participated in a pre-orientation program Jack calls "Community Detail," in which students administer janitorial services in the university dormitories. The program is offered during the summer and throughout the year as a stand-alone job. While the students are paid, many of them found that the work brought about enormous humiliation. These disadvantaged students were put in a position where they had to clean up soiled tampons, used condoms, and dried vomit from their classmates' bathrooms to complete their custodial obligations. Some of the students described the intense shame they felt as they sat in class alongside students whose toilets they had just cleaned. Having students who need money clean the bathrooms of their more affluent peers reifies existing class boundaries.

"Poor students come to this institution and the first thing that they see are dirty dorms they have to clean," said one of Jack's research participants. "I think it's really unfair that students who are lower-income go into Community Detail whereas wealthier students are doing Summit Seekers and going climbing. Or playing instruments. Or doing artsy thing with Vamonos Van Gogh." Or as another student put it, "Say I was to knock on someone's door. I'm like, 'Yo, can I clean your bathroom real quick?' I'm going to clean the toilet you just threw up on this past weekend when you were partying like crazy. Let me just clean that for you. And then just add the fact that I'm a minority reinforces that stereotype that all Spanish people do is clean and mow lawns."

Even well-intentioned efforts to provide opportunities for low-income students can inadvertently play a role in magnifying class differences. At Renowned, a program Jack calls "Scholarship Plus" allows students on financial aid to attend events on campus that they might not have otherwise been able to afford. (Not to be confused with the college support program of the same name, on whose board Jack serves.) A lot of the students Jack spoke with said that without the program, they wouldn't have been able to participate in many parts of campus life. However, the process of getting tickets to events made them feel acutely conscious of their class status. The system had two lines for tickets: one for the students who could pay, and another for the students who could not. What's more, the line for the students using the Scholarship Plus program was near the back door, and students entered the theater via a small side door rather than the main entrance used by their peers. And because of the socioeconomic realities of the United States, the main line was made up of primarily white students, while the Scholarship Plus line was made up of mostly students who were black and Latino. "It's embarrassing," said one of the students Jack interviewed. Another student said, "I was ashamed of what I was coming from. So being in that line, saying Scholarship Plus, I dunno. It was like being on a welfare line, or social services."

The examples of social and economic dissonance are plenty, and as Jack puts it, "Elite universities are now a bundle of confusing contradictions: They bend over backwards to admit disadvantaged students into their hallowed halls, but then, once the students are there, they maintain policies that not only remind those students of their disadvantage, but even serve to highlight it."

[Read: Why the college-admissions scandal is so absurd]

The students described in Jack's book are the students I was thinking of after news of the scandal broke. These low-income students—overwhelmingly students of color—arrive on elite-college campuses and are perpetually made to feel as if they don't deserve to be there, whether it's while cleaning a classmate's bathroom, stocking up on nonperishable food for spring break, or overhearing an offhand comment about how their acceptance was predicated on the color of their skin, or the lower socioeconomic status of their family. Meanwhile, many wealthy students for all intents and purposes have their parents buy their way into these schools through private-school tuition, test prep, donations to colleges, and myriad other advantages. And they rarely experience the same level of skepticism as to whether they have "earned" their place.

I have seen this sense of frustration and disillusionment in the eyes of undergraduates I've worked with at Harvard, young people who over the course of four years endure the psychological toll of navigating a school environment that both implicitly and explicitly tells them that the only reason they were admitted was an undeserved handout, that their place was not earned but is instead an act of charity, that they were given someone else's spot. But what this scandal demonstrates is that the very idea of our society—in the context of higher ed or otherwise—being a "meritocracy" was made up to justify and reify existing social hierarchies. It is not real. What is real is the advantages of wealth and race, which often combine to give people things that they have told themselves they deserve. What is real is that students who have done everything right are often the ones made to feel as if their place on campus is anything other than earned.

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