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Addressing race and class on campus

► New book examines the role that socioeconomic background plays at elite universities ► Race affects experience of low-income students

About five years ago, a student handed Dr. Elizabeth Aries a manuscript and remarked on the expense of the required binder.

"How did you pay for it?" asked Aries.

"I bounced a check at the drug store," the student replied.

"I started to say, 'Wait. What are we doing here?' We're admitting students from low-income backgrounds, but we're not thinking about what kind of experience they're having here," explains Aries, from her home in western Massachusetts.

She quickly set out to investigate the role of class amidst the privilege of Amherst College. Her first study, "Race And Class Matters at an Elite College" featured 58 case studies on students from a vast range of backgrounds, from the children of the 1 percent to students that grew up in poverty. The sequel, "Speaking of Race and Class" — which will be released this month by Temple University Press — revisited almost all of the students at graduation, probing for changes in perspectives.

Among the thought-provoking outcomes, Aries discovered that white students from low-income backgrounds struggled to adjust to Amherst's culture more than African-American students from low-income backgrounds.

"Prep schools and day schools often target academically talented black students for scholarships. The majority of black students on our campus come from those schools, which is a culture very much like Amherst," says Aries. "The lower income white students are coming from public schools, because most private

schools aren't giving scholarships to low-income white students. They're coming from predominantly all-white communities in rural areas. They've never been exposed to extremes in wealth, and they don't have any organizations on campus to support them."

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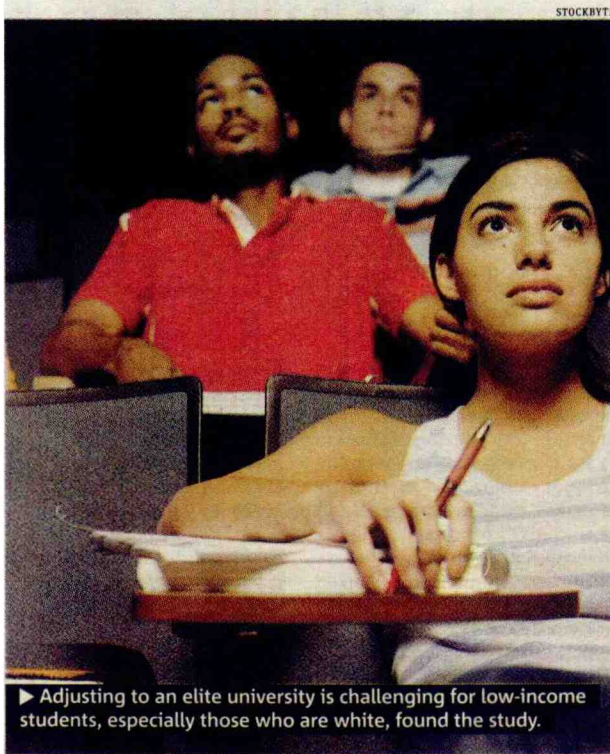
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What they found

At the conclusion of the four-year study, more than half the students said they learned a great deal about race in America while at Amherst. But only about a third of whites from affluent backgrounds reported a change in perspective.

"Depending on the field they're interested in, it's possible for affluent whites to go through without much contact with other races," says Aries. "If it's not a priority for them, they're not forced to confront it like other students."



► Adjusting to an elite university is challenging for low-income students, especially those who are white, found the study.

