

The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students

Anthony Abraham Jack

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019, 288 pp.

In *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, Anthony Abraham Jack provides two critiques of selective private universities: (1) selective private universities are terrible at facilitating low-income students' success on campus, which stems from a combination of out-of-touch peers, faculty ignorance, and insensitive school policies; and (2) even when selective private universities implement programs to gain more low-income students, the programs often fall short of this goal. Jack's critiques are perceptive, and many recent grads will likely see parallels between Jack's observations and what they witnessed as undergrads, as I can attest with my experiences at UC Berkeley.

The Privileged Poor describes how selective private schools implement tuition-exemption programs to gain more low-income students. To eliminate costs as barriers to entry, universities such as Princeton and Stanford exempt students from paying tuition if their families earn less than \$125,000–\$160,000. On their school website, Princeton even proudly displays that 61 percent of students receive aid.

But these numbers are not as optimistic as they appear. In Princeton, families that earn between \$160,000 to \$250,000 are still exempt from a portion of their tuition. Essentially, "60 percent of students receive aid" means that 40 percent of students are so wealthy that they do not need any form of aid whatsoever.

According to the author, in an unnamed "renowned" university with similar statistics, only around 20 percent of students are truly low income. Yet, when we inspect the demographics of that 20 percent further, the numbers are even more troubling. Of these students, 50 percent are the "privileged poor,"—that is, low-income students who received scholarships to prep or boarding schools that paved their way into selective private schools. The other 50 percent are the "doubly disadvantaged"—students who went from underperforming high schools directly into selective private schools.

Similarly, UC Berkeley boasts of establishing a transfer program that prioritizes community college students. This approach seems like a promising way to increase the number of low-income students

on campus since more than half of California community college students are low-income students and students of color. Yet, only 26.4 percent of UC Berkeley's 2019 transfers are "underrepresented minorities," a term often used interchangeably with low-income students of color.

In a school that loves to discuss the injustices of inequality, the student demographics are still largely skewed toward the wealthy. My former professor and one-time secretary of labor Robert Reich once asked everyone in the class where they went to high school. Was it a prep or boarding school, a high-performing public school in a high-income area, or an underperforming public school in a low-income area? About 50 percent of students attended a prep or boarding school, 30 percent a high-performing public school, and 20 percent an underperforming public school. The demographics of the class reflected the fact that UC Berkeley only accepts 7.4 percent of students from the bottom 20 percent of income distribution but 54 percent from the top 20 percent.

Jack explains that such statistics are the result of colleges "hedging their bets," or ensuring admitted students will do well on campus. The unnamed "renowned" university in the book recognizes that the privileged poor understand and behave in similar ways as their wealthy peers, which facilitates success in university. On the other hand, the "doubly disadvantaged"—low-income students who went to underperforming high schools—often experience culture shock upon entering an elite university. The doubly disadvantaged students are less likely to assimilate and take advantage of their resources and therefore perform worse. Thus, schools recruit half of their low-income students from the same schools as their high-income peers even though that group makes up a small percentage of the low-income population.

The idea of hedging bets also explains why, despite the transfer program's ability to accept more low-income students of color, UC Berkeley still accepts a larger quantity of students from demographics that are already highly represented. Those students, they know, will have more success given UC Berkeley's established environment.

Jack's discussion of hedging bets also shines a light on the barriers to entry low-income students face even when tuition is free. Many private schools that have free tuition policies still have very skewed demographics. High-income students are projected to assimilate and perform better in university, and the school naturally wants students

to excel. Not to mention, high-income students have the resources to achieve higher SAT/ACT scores, which universities also use as indicators of future academic success. Free public college may encourage more low-income students to apply to university, but selective schools will still favor high-income students.

So, what needs to happen for selective universities to achieve a truly diverse student body? Students, faculty, and school administrators need to create the type of environment that low-income students can excel in so universities will no longer need to “hedge bets.”

Low-income students fail nonacademically and academically when they are not properly navigating a university environment shaped by the wealthy. Jack observes that low-income students often fail to navigate social expectations with students and faculty, which he dubs the “hidden curriculum.” The wealthy students wear expensive brands like Moncler, use “summer” as both a verb and a noun, and talk about the exotic vacations that they take during the school year, all of which low-income students find unrelatable. Professors expect students to attend office hours to build connections, which affects everything from students’ grades to letters of recommendation. Yet wealthy students often feel more comfortable making such connections. In terms of the insensitive policies the unnamed school implemented, Jack describes how the school closed down cafeterias during spring break, leaving low-income students who couldn’t afford to fly home scrounging for food. The school also made cleaning the highest paying job on campus, inadvertently encouraging low-income students to clean wealthy students’ dorms. Cleaning jobs ultimately put low-income students in an inferior position and perpetuated racial stereotypes.

At UC Berkeley, the K–12 education gap is exacerbated by students, faculty, and school policy. Students often ask each other their SAT scores to gauge who “lucked out” getting accepted and who deserved to be admitted—ignoring how those who could afford SAT classes actually got better scores. A low-income classmate in a freshman biology class failed his first midterm because he did not have a solid foundation in biology. The teacher failed him with no concern for why he failed. A first-year low-income transfer student who had no grasp of citations and plagiarism was also failed from an upper-level course. And since UC Berkeley is such a large school, many majors limit the number of students through GPA cutoffs. Low-income students often do not make the cut and study subjects

that they are not passionate about, which hinders their academic performance.

Overall, Jack does an excellent job of cross-referencing interviews with the privileged poor and doubly disadvantaged to argue that the campus culture of selective private universities serves the wealthy rather than the poor, which is why schools have a bias for wealthy students and the privileged poor in admissions. The book makes evident school administrators' astounding lack of awareness of—or lack of care for—the socioeconomic tension on campus. Administrators seem driven to fill diversity quotas or think they do low-income students a favor by admitting them. Those implications are hard, but necessary, to swallow. For low-income students to excel, “access” has to be synonymous with “acceptance.”

However, the book would have been more effective if the author were less repetitive and delved into other facets of socioeconomic tension. For example, wealthy students in both selective private and public universities often pretend to be low income. When those students effortlessly achieve high grades, students who are actually low income deem their failure as a result of their own shortcomings rather than their socioeconomic gaps. Painting wealthy students with a broad brush oversimplifies wealthy students and the ways they negatively impact low-income students.

Secondly, the author criticizes programs that recruit low-income students to prep or boarding schools, accusing them of siphoning money out of already bereft public schools and hurting the kids left behind. “Funneling poor youth into private schools is not social policy,” he writes. In reality, there is no evidence that underperforming public schools would perform better if low-income students in prep and boarding schools return with their funding. Often, underperforming schools are segregated as a result of segregated housing. As Richard Rothstein eloquently put it in his book *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, “Social and economic disadvantage depresses student performance; concentrating disadvantaged students in racially and economically homogeneous schools depresses it further.” Funneling more low-income students of color into private schools is not only important to vindicating the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*, but it is important for students' academic performance. Not to mention, bringing more students back to already overcrowded schools does not benefit any student.

Jack blames parents who want to give their children a better education for “leaving other students behind” and encourages them to remain in an underperforming environment with no concrete solutions or timeline for improvement. If Jack believes putting low-income students in prep and boarding schools means leaving other low-income students behind, does he also believe putting low-income students in elite universities means leaving other low-income students in state schools and community colleges behind? Does he want to eliminate low-income student representation in elite universities as he does in prep and boarding schools?

If higher representation of low-income students in prep and boarding schools leads to higher representation of prepared low-income students in elite universities, then access to private schools is crucial.

Finally, the author fails to make a strong case for why low-income students need to attend selective schools, despite their struggles. The premise of the book assumes the readers believe low-income students should be represented in selective universities. To some, the equity argument may be apparent. But to others, it’s counterintuitive to accept low-income students who tend to perform worse academically and have a hard time assimilating. Those students would perform better at less selective schools, the argument goes.

Despite foreseeable struggles, however, it is important for low-income students to attend selective universities to receive a boost in society and access to resources usually limited to the wealthy, and Jack should make that point clear. Socioeconomic diversity in selective universities is undoubtedly a critical element of upward mobility in the United States. Additionally, as a matter of principle, no school should be open only to students lucky enough to be born into wealth.

Jack has written an incredibly worthwhile book that every school administrator should read. He shines light on numerous improvements universities can make for low-income students to feel welcomed and excel. Many improvements, such as leaving cafeterias open for low-income students during spring break, are easy. Other improvements, such as preventing wealthy students from alienating low-income students through their preferred topics of discussion, are much harder. Jack’s broader K–12 solutions, however, contradict anti-segregationist principles and could harm low-income students’ ability to break into and excel at elite schools, which is evidently important to him.

Catherine Straus
Cato Institute