



The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students, Anthony Abraham Jack, Harvard University Press, 2019, 288 pp., \$13.88 hardcover.

The Forgotten Man at Elite Colleges

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Elite colleges have an obsessive focus on diversity, but it's generally limited to diversity of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Their commitment to diversity of class is not as clear. Anthony Abraham Jack, a junior fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows and assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, examines this lack of class diversity and fills a research gap. In *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, Jack uses his own experience as a low-income student at Amherst College to

examine how low-income students at elite colleges struggle or succeed and how they differ from one another.

Elite colleges don't admit many poor students, and they tend to see the few that they do as identical to other students, offering them no specialized academic support. Jack offers a strong critique of this approach and argues that "admitting students and giving them financial aid is not enough to make an inclusive campus." It's the small ways that college officials ignore poor students and their difficulties that make it harder for these students to succeed, he argues.

Jack embedded himself at "Renowned University," an unnamed elite school in the northeast, and conducted in-depth interviews with about 100 low-income students. Jack's interviewees are mostly black and Latino, but there are some white (usually rural) students as well.

Jack argues that the class income divide between the majority-wealthy students and poor students is vast, but that this is accompanied by a gap in the cultural knowledge of how to succeed at college that is just as large and more important, at least for the more seriously disadvantaged poor. Indeed, Jacks discovers that low-income students must be further broken down into the "privileged poor" (PP), who

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come from poor families but attended elite high schools, and the doubly disadvantaged (DD), poor students who went to local schools that were “often distressed, overcrowded, and under-resourced.” The privileged poor, it turns out, learned elite norms during high school and can navigate elite colleges. The doubly disadvantaged have not, and struggle to adapt.

This divide matters a great deal. The PP self-advocate when they need academic help, network with professors, and easily navigate the elite college atmosphere, both professionally and socially. In turn, they can earn student awards or make connections for job offers upon graduation. The DD, however, get overwhelmed by the unspoken social and academic norms and miss those benefits.

For DD students, networking, making friends with wealthier and better acclimated students, or using office hours to obtain professorial assistance can be much trickier. Many DD students don’t pick up what the other students know until they’re close to graduation. PP students already learned these things as high school students and are closer to their elite peers as a result. The doubly disadvantaged often miss the greatest benefits of an elite education.

If PP and DD students don’t always get the same benefits, they often face similar struggles. Jack focuses on food insecurity during spring break as an

example. Renowned U had a policy of closing its dining halls during spring break, assuming that all students return home to see family or go on vacation. Students weren’t notified of the closure until a week or two before spring break, Jack noted. Administrators didn’t consider the low-income students who couldn’t afford to go home, had no home (or a home that could offer support), or were simply unwelcome at home. This lack of awareness on the part of administrators is a recurring theme throughout *The Privileged Poor*. With the dining halls closed, students limited themselves to one daily meal or went to a food bank until the halls reopened. Jack, who is not your run-of-the-mill disinterested scholar, lobbied the administration to keep one dining hall open for students, which they finally did after a year of lobbying.

That administrative oversight may partially come from having so few poor—or even middle class—students on campus. Racial diversity has increased at elite colleges, but income diversity has not; the black and Latino students who attend elite colleges and universities, like their white counterparts, are usually wealthy or upper middle-class.

Jack references William Bowen and Derek Bok’s 1998 book *The Shape of the River*, which found “the majority of black students at the twenty-eight elite colleges and universities they studied . . . came

from upper-income families.” The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* has noted as well that “41 percent of all black students at these twenty-eight campuses identified themselves as immigrants or children of immigrants,” presumably from Africa and the Caribbean, but also possibly from other countries with significant populations of those with African or Caribbean ancestry.¹ Nevertheless, high-achieving African American students who descended from slaves likely comprise no more than half of black students on elite college campuses, raising questions about who is benefitting most from racial preferences in admissions.

When lower-income students do get accepted, they are likely to come from elite environments—Jack’s privileged poor. “Over 50 percent of the lower-income black undergraduates who attend elite colleges get there from boarding, day, and preparatory high schools,” Jack writes. Based on data collected by Jack in a student survey, elite schools seem to rely more on schools with previous records of sending their graduates to an elite college, rather than recruit high-achieving students from low-performing rural and urban schools. Usually, those students get

targeted by scholarship programs that funnel them to elite schools, get recommended by teachers for the programs, or find them on their own. This siphoning off of high-achieving poor students into elite high schools could make it harder to recruit students from low-performing rural and urban schools. Without more research on the topic, Jack notes, it is difficult to say how many high-achieving students at low-performing schools—the proverbial “needle in a haystack”—exist.

Despite their relentless posturing as advocates for the disadvantaged—twenty-eight universities have declared themselves “sanctuary campuses”—college officials are mostly oblivious to the struggles low-income students from poor schools face getting into their schools and succeeding once there.²

As Jack highlights the failures of elite colleges, he misses an important implication of his argument: the failure of the diversity bureaucrats to actually help poor students. Jack portrays the university bureaucracy as a slow-moving beast, its holders of power unaware of the school’s flaws. Large universities can have dozens, if not hundreds, of diversity administrators, with many of them earning generous six-figure

¹“Most Black Students at Harvard Are From High-Income Families,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, News and Views, 2006, http://www.jbhe.com/news_views/52_harvard-blackstudents.html

²See David Randall, “The Campus Sanctuary Movement,” *Academic Questions* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 2019).

salaries.³ On the rare occasion when those sprawling offices get analyzed—such as when the University of North Carolina system was required by the state legislature to analyze the efficiency of its diversity bureaucracy—the result is a report from an outside consulting firm that recommends no cuts to the budget or in the number of positions.⁴

Cutting those administrators would be difficult, though. As the UNC system discovered, half of its costs were federally mandated. The diversity bureaucracy is about keeping colleges legally compliant, which makes it inflexible to respond to the needs of students. It was not designed to help poor students succeed in an unfamiliar and challenging environment. Economic diversity is shoehorned into the diversity bureaucracy as “a square peg in a round hole.”⁵

Elite colleges have blurred race and class, boosting racial diversity while resisting socioeconomic diversity, and to a certain extent, students and school officials seem to prefer it this way. Actual class diversity on campus is

uncomfortable and awkward. When Jack interviewed “Carol,” a wealthy black student, she talked about the “new familiarity” of her roommates at Renowned U. All of them were wealthy, all had traveled internationally, and all spoke multiple languages. Valeria, a Latina from a poor family, told Jack that “I associate diversity with being comfortable.” Jose, a Latino from a poor family, “equated diversity . . . with comfort or even safety,” and for him, meeting wealthy students conflicted with that.

This understanding of diversity, however, is inadequate. Is diversity really diversity if it’s familiar and comfortable? Diversity on campus is sold as something enriching, vital, and positive. But diversity is difference, and true diversity implies the confluence of a variety of backgrounds, beliefs, and values, which can arouse both positive and negative feelings.

Elite schools embrace a “diversity in name only” policy. When the campus atmosphere has less socioeconomic diversity, elite colleges serve the role of grooming children of the elite. This struggle with class diversity cuts to the heart of a conflict of visions at elite colleges. They’re seen, and see themselves, as avenues for socioeconomic mobility, yet they also perpetuate the elite of society. Elite colleges could make more of an effort to admit a freshman class that mirrors the socioeconomic differences of

³Mark Pulliam, “The Campus Diversity Swarm,” *City Journal*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.city-journal.org/campus-diversity-bureaucracies-16223.html>

⁴Anthony Hennen, “Just How Many Diversity Employees Does the UNC System Need?” James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, February 5, 2018, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2018/02/just-many-diversity-employees-unc-system-need/>

⁵Jedediah Purdy, “When Diversity Fails the Poor,” *The Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/when-diversity-fails-the-poor>

American society, assuming there is a large enough pool of qualified candidates from lower-income backgrounds. But this would take away from their status as an elite institution.

This might be one reason why the College Board, which administers the SAT and other college admissions exams, retreated from its plan to introduce an “adversity score” to accompany test scores. The adversity score was designed to assess the kind of neighborhood students come from, and included factors such as the portion of students receiving free or reduced lunch and the level of crime. According to a report on National Public Radio, “push back” from admissions counselors (and others) was swift. Zenia Henderson of the National College Access Network told NPR she feared college officials saying to themselves, ““Wow, this student comes from this kind of community and area, they might not be a good fit for our school.””⁶

Harvard and Yale know that if they want to attract the scions of the political and economic elite, they need to preserve an elite culture and have thus embraced their elitism—why preserve legacy admissions if not to perpetuate a ruling class? Yet now, even as college officials pay tribute to the racial and

gender hierarchies of oppression, they refuse to relinquish their economic elitism. Hence the demands for gender parity in faculty departments and on conference panels, the recruitment (via affirmative action admissions) of wealthy minority students, and the capitulation to student demands for “safe spaces” and other limits on free speech.

The public might tolerate an elite that recognizes its responsibility to society, but this tolerance ebbs when the wealthy and powerful lecture the lower and middle class on the sins of resisting social justice. Pronouncements about social justice and “equity” tend to fall flat on the ears of cashiers and truck drivers when coming from safely tenured professors, cosseted students, and unaccountable administrators of richly endowed schools.

The Privileged Poor is haunted by the question of what elite colleges owe to the public. Elite colleges could justify collecting massive public subsidies, accepting numerous tax breaks, and retaining more independence than public colleges by providing broad public benefits. They could educate qualified non-wealthy students to improve socioeconomic mobility and keep the elites connected to the public at large (though the book lacks a thorough evaluation of how many qualified poor students remain outside the circles of elite colleges). As the public perceives a hostile political

⁶Bobby Allyn, “College Board Drops Its 'Adversity Score' For Each Student After Backlash,” National Public Radio, August 27, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/27/754799550/college-board-drops-its-adversity-score-for-each-student-after-backlash>

culture on elite campuses with few non-wealthy students, though, they might question why the public should fund them. If elite colleges want to cloister themselves away from the public, perhaps they don't need taxpayer money.

To reconnect the elite schools with the broader public, Jack offers a number of policy changes. Some ideas, such as “significant and lasting efforts to transform public education” by throwing more state and federal money to K-12 education, has been tried and found wanting. Liberals have demanded more education funding for at least a half-century, and they have generally won these public policy battles. Yet the problems persist. Coming from a comparatively underfunded rural school district in Appalachia, Ohio, this writer would welcome changes in how states distribute education funds (though the courts have gone far in reducing the most egregious inequities). But adding more tax levies and unaccountable education funding is the status quo, not a transformative change. Expanding SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) eligibility to college students and increasing the award amount for Pell Grants, are hard sells to some conservatives, but it is a possibility with the potential to help low-income students.

Jack is spot-on, however, when he writes, “The greatest need is for

colleges and universities—especially elite ones—to review and revise policies that make life difficult for poor students or exacerbate the divisions between students from different backgrounds.”

It's not as if administrators don't know which students are poor; the federal aid form (FAFSA) ensures that the bursar's office has the intimate financial information of all students, and bursars are perhaps second only to the IRS in the quantity of personal information they possess. Simply asking poor students how the university makes it harder for them to succeed and graduate would be helpful.

Another change, desperately needed for a multitude of reasons, is the reform of freshman orientation. Instead of indoctrinating students with theories of white privilege and intersectionality, orientation programs could teach students how to take advantage of faculty office hours, why building relationships with professors matters, when to get academic tutoring, and how to deal with depression, stress, and anxiety. The doubly disadvantaged are left on their own to learn these things, and often do so too late. Colleges have a golden opportunity during orientation to give students the skills to succeed. Orientation should familiarize students with their new surroundings and the expectations therein; a crash course on study habits, networking,

and self-advocating could pay great dividends for low-income students.

Elite colleges could also provide more earning opportunities for low-income students. Relevant work-study programs, stipends for living expenses, or a student emergency fund to cover unexpected costs could do wonders, if paired with an orientation that includes instruction on basic household budgeting.

For too long, colleges have received the benefit of the doubt when they claim to drive socioeconomic mobility. Jack argues for more research on how and whether colleges serve as “mobility springboards,” a piece of commonly accepted wisdom that needs further scrutiny.

If activists and policymakers focus too much on poor students at elite colleges, however, they’ll miss the forest for the trees. Jack notes that “first-generation college students are disproportionately relegated to community colleges, for-profit colleges, and less-selective four-year colleges” where “resources are few, aid for students is scarce, and retention is low.” Elite schools might produce graduates who disproportionately find themselves in the commanding heights of education, politics, and industry, but they can have only a minor effect in pulling poor students into the middle class and beyond. The crucial arena is elsewhere.