'The Privileged Poor' reveals that other higher education scandal

May 12, 2019 10:00 AM
By Glenn C. Altschuler

Twenty years after a few dozen elite colleges and universities provided no-loan financial aid packages to students from low-income families, the children of middle- and upper-class parents remain over-represented in the undergraduate population of these institutions. At the most competitive colleges, about 14% of undergraduates come from the bottom half of the economic pyramid.

In the second most competitive tier, it’s 16%. Students from families with annual incomes of more than $630,000 are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League school than those from families earning $30,000 or less. Many highly selective colleges have more undergraduates from families in the top 1% than from families in the bottom 60% (making less than $65,000).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, many economically disadvantaged students continue to struggle after they arrive on campus. Drawing on interviews with 103 students at an (unnamed) elite college and his own experiences as a scholarship student at a private high school and an undergraduate at Amherst, Anthony Abraham Jack, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explains what it means to be a poor student on a rich campus.

After “bending over backward” to admit disadvantaged students, Mr. Jack argues, colleges and universities, often unconsciously, maintain policies that remind these young men and women of pre-existing class differences and, at times, exacerbate them.

He claims as well that low-income students who have attended private high schools (whom he refers to as “Privileged Poor”) are much better able to navigate the social side of college life than those who attended public high schools (whom he calls “Doubly Disadvantaged”).

Jack’s interviews revealed considerable anger and resentment, especially among Doubly Disadvantaged students. In contrast to the Privileged Poor, who were used to interacting with affluent students, many Doubly Disadvantaged perceived their peers’ clothing, restaurant preferences and vacations as evidence of an insurmountable gulf — and withdrew.
Feeling uncomfortable about meeting with professors and administrators, the Doubly Disadvantaged accumulated less “cultural capital” than the Privileged Poor.

Other aspects of college life, Jack points out, left all low-income students feeling stigmatized and humiliated. “Forced” to take work-study jobs as janitors because of the relatively high wages (which they could send home) and flexible hours, some of them sensed that the rich kids, whose bathrooms they were cleaning and whose soiled tampons and used condoms they were picking up, viewed them as “the help.”

Although financial aid recipients appreciated the provision of five free tickets to campus events, they experienced separate lines and separate entrances at theaters and lecture halls as a “poor-door” welfare policy, a “shaming thing.” For students trying to make ends meet and unable to go home for spring break, closing all cafeterias on campus (and supplying an online guide of inexpensive places to eat) was an unexpected stressful slap in the face.

Some readers of “The Privileged Poor,” I suspect, will take issue with Jack’s claim that he is not “telling the story of spoiled kids lamenting that they have not been given everything they want.”

That said, Jack does make a compelling case that access is not the same as inclusion. And that institutions of higher education should take hidden injuries of class seriously and not treat lower-income students as a homogenous group.

Fortunately, several of Jack’s common sense recommendations, including summer orientation programs for first-generation college students, opening a dining hall during spring break, providing alternatives to manual labor, and designing technology for undergraduates to swipe their IDs and enter concert halls, have been adopted by a number of colleges.

Unfortunately, “The Privileged Poor” does not address the academic performance of Jack’s students — or examine race as an independent variable.

Jack does not indicate whether grievances subsided as students reached their junior and senior years. Nor does he investigate the post-graduate careers of the Privileged Poor, the Doubly Disadvantaged, or compare them with those of other students at “Renowned” university.

As Jack reminds us, adopting no-loan policies was a bold step to remove economic barriers to access. Alas, however, his book also demonstrates that America’s colleges, and, more generally, American society, must do more to overcome the structural inequities — social and cultural differences that comprise “the bleak reality of living with empty pockets in deep-pocketed institutions.”

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