

PETER SACKS

Tearing Down the

Confronting the Class Divide in American Education

EDITOR'S NOTE: *At the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the 2009 Frederic W. Ness Book Award was presented to Peter Sacks for his book Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education (University of California Press, 2007). The following is based on the presentation made there by the author.*

When we Americans talk about access to a college education, we tend to narrow the acceptable boundaries of the conversation. We ask why the cost of college has gotten so out of control compared to the costs of other goods and services, and we sometimes talk about the closely related subject of financial aid. But very rarely do we discuss the dramatic changes to the financial aid system that have made college increasingly unaffordable to the very students who need financial aid most. In researching my book *Tearing Down the Gates*, I came to the conclusion that, despite the oft-repeated rhetoric to the contrary, the American education system actually helps perpetuate inequality of opportunity.

Increasing class stratification

Colleges and universities have been vigorous advocates of diversity, but on the whole they have not been as vigorous as advocates for addressing inequality of educational opportunity. Although affirmative action programs in admissions and financial aid became the primary tools for achieving diversity, it would be a mistake to conclude that the affirmative action movement was fueled by higher education's drive for social justice or its desire to remedy inequality. After the civil rights battles, affirmative action morphed from a social justice remedy to an educational rationale, based on the notion that diversity of cultures, races, and points of view all contribute to the

educational mission of the university. As a result, institutions of higher education have seen diversity primarily through the lens of race, ethnicity, and gender—a limitation that, regrettably, has hampered the drive for a deeper and perhaps more meaningful kind of diversity. Because the diversity movement has narrowly focused on race, and not necessarily justice, the movement has left intact the very mechanisms in admissions and financial aid that institutions have long employed systematically to sort potential students by class.

In terms of enrollments at America's most selective colleges and universities, the class divide in higher education had become quite extreme by the end of the twentieth century. When Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose (2003) examined the socioeconomic distribution of freshmen enrollments at the most selective 146 colleges and universities in the United States, they discovered that more than 90 percent of the freshmen came from families in the top half of the socioeconomic distribution. Just 10 percent came from families at the bottom half of the socioeconomic distribution. Even as race-based affirmative action policies have been expanded over the years, class has become a more formidable barrier to access than even race. Carnevale and Rose found that 22 percent of the freshmen at the most selective colleges and universities were from underrepresented minority groups, compared to just 3 percent from low-income families.

Notwithstanding these disparities, some observers will contend that anybody who really wants to go to college can still gain admission to some college or university in America. But just how true is this contention? It seems hard to fathom, given our persistent belief that, in America, educational opportunity is widespread, but the chance of getting a bachelor's degree by age twenty-four has improved only for those from families in the upper half of the nation's income distribution. In 1970, just 6 percent of high school graduates from families in the bottom income quartile attained a

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bachelor's degree by age twenty-four. This statistic essentially flatlined in subsequent decades, and remained at 6 percent in 2002. The number of students from lower-middle-class families—those in the second-lowest income quartile—who attained a bachelor's degree also stagnated during this period, remaining at 10–15 percent. In contrast, students from upper-middle-income families—those in the third income quartile—saw their prospects nearly double, from 15 percent to 28 percent. And for students from the highest income

families, the prospect of attaining a bachelor's degree by age twenty-four improved significantly—from 40 percent to more than 70 percent (Mortensen 2008).

Over the past twenty or thirty years, the American higher education system has become deeply stratified along class lines. Whether a high school graduate goes to college, and where he or she goes to college, powerfully depends on his or her class status at birth and during childhood. That is, one's prospects for post-secondary education depend significantly on

whether one's parents went to college, on the family's annual income, and on financial wealth. What is more, the correlations between class status and prospects for success in higher education have become even more pronounced in recent decades.

One glaring aspect of class stratification in American higher education is the growing concentration of poor and working-class students at the bottom of the educational pyramid, in community colleges. Four-year colleges and universities have become more exclusive domains for America's upper-middle class and above. In the early 1970s, public four-year institutions enrolled 40 percent of all Pell Grant recipients; by 2001, this figure had dropped to just 31 percent. Private four-year institutions enrolled 22 percent of Pell Grant recipients in the early 1970s, but only about 13 percent a quarter of a century later (Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman 2004). Where did these lower-income students end up? If they went to college at all, they increasingly wound up going to public community colleges.

Community colleges represent a conundrum in terms of creating meaningful educational opportunity for students of modest means. Admirably, two-year colleges have, by definition, greatly expanded access to college, and those students who attain associate's degrees or who transfer to four-year institutions to attain a bachelor's degree are better off than they would be without community colleges. What remains a controversial question, however, is whether community colleges have made a sufficient difference for a sufficient number of people.

The vast majority of community college students—some 63 percent—would like to earn at least a bachelor's degree, but relatively few actually do so. In fact, of students who start at a community college and expect eventually to transfer to a four-year institution, just one in five will have earned a bachelor's degree six years later (Hoachlander, Sikora, and Horn 2003). Thus, when we talk about the land of equal educational opportunity, what we're really saying is that anybody has a shot at college because of the large number of relatively inexpensive, open-admission community colleges. We have, in a sense, created a system of educational reservations by separating the low-class masses from the higher-class elites who matriculate at four-year colleges and universities

and, thus, obtain the credentials necessary for coveted leadership positions in our society.

The SAT and college rankings

Higher education appears to be reaching a critical historical juncture: the end of the SAT era may be at hand. Only by understanding how this particular version of meritocracy came to be, and why it is no longer suitable for American society, can we go forward in creating new, more broadly defined systems of merit that select individuals less by class, race, and ethnic origins and more by their real-world talents, motivations, accomplishments, and achievements.

The story begins with a series of historical accidents, starting with the invention of IQ testing in Europe. Next came the importation and subsequent commercialization of mental aptitude testing in the United States. The uses of IQ testing technology were pushed to extremes in Europe and the United States, shaped in part by a eugenics ideology holding that certain individuals with deficient bloodlines—variously including Poles, Italians, Jews, Africans, and so on, depending on the historical period—were cognitively doomed to an intellectual inferiority that no amount of schooling could remedy.

The SAT is a direct descendent of this ideology. So, too, are the countless IQ and other aptitude tests still used by scores of elite private and public schools to identify the supposed best and brightest students for admission. As a norm-referenced test, the SAT has never been about solving meaningful problems using math or science, but rather about how many multiple-choice questions one could answer in a given period of time compared to other test takers. In other words, the SAT is primarily a sorting device, not an educational tool. Using the IQ test as a sorting mechanism was emphatically not what Alfred Binet intended for the early IQ scale he developed for French schoolchildren. Yet that's exactly how we Americans commercialized Binet's invention.

The founders of the SAT believed that scientific testing would legitimately reward the best and brightest with coveted spots at the best universities. Thus, the cocktail of American meritocracy: take the American fixation with mental testing of the standardized variety, add the commercial interests behind standardized testing, and then mix in a bit of an unspoken

elitist superiority. The result is a powerful brew of pseudo-meritocracy. The SAT has long been a tool for the intentional exclusion of unwanted classes and races—a point not widely enough understood. Early mental testers clearly recognized the close correlation between the economic and social class of a student's family and his or her performance on the early IQ tests. In his writings about the development of his IQ scale, Alfred Binet himself remarked on how the children who did best on his test were the sons and daughters of physicians, professors, and lawyers.

The conflict between the elitist tendencies of American education and the egalitarian spirit of our democracy has also been evident throughout the history of the SAT. Because the SAT was born from the IQ testing movement, its backers have had to battle for its legitimacy over the years in the face of changing public sentiments about the compatibility of IQ testing and education in a democratic society. One adaptation, for instance, was to change the name of the test from the Scholastic Aptitude Test to simply the SAT, an attempt to sever the test—if just in name only—from its IQ testing bloodlines.

Despite occasional flare-ups that challenge the hegemony and the utility of the SAT and similar admissions tests, the SAT—and, increasingly, the ACT—has remained the linchpin of selective admissions systems in American education. We came to believe that how a student performs on the SAT is synonymous with how smart he or she is and how well he or she will do in college. Over the years, a pseudoscientific legitimacy has flowered around the SAT enterprise, creating its own self-perpetuating and self-serving ideology of merit.

What, alas, did the SAT sort for? The entrance exam's amazingly successful run as a commercial enterprise has had little relationship to any meaningful definition of merit. We've known for many years that, compared to other assessments of learning, the SAT is a relatively weak predictor of academic success in college. The SAT adds little value to what admissions officers can glean from high school grades, writing samples, and other assessment tools that predict performance in the real world, including the classroom. So if the SAT

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is not a particularly useful correlate to academic performance, then what explains its longevity for selective college admissions? The early adopters of the SAT saw it as a useful tool for excluding certain kinds of people based on race, religion, and socioeconomic background—and for doing so

under the legitimating guise of meritocracy. Today, that rationale has been superseded by a less intentional but no less flawed and damaging means of exclusion.

Despite the rhetoric extolling colleges and universities as democratic enterprises dedicated to servicing the public good and rooted in egalitarian values, these institutions are businesses that operate within a competitive marketplace. They are strange businesses, to be sure, but they're money-maximizing enterprises nonetheless. Colleges and universities don't maximize profits, but they are very much in the business of maximizing institutional prestige and endowments. Endowment building and prestige are reliant on the higher education marketplace's determination of relative "quality." This determination is almost entirely based on selectivity in admissions, which, in turn, is wholly a function of the average SAT score of entering freshmen.

Thus did the dominant paradigm of individual merit and college quality evolve from historical accident, commercial ambition, and political ideology. And from this paradigm was born a modern-day prophet, who trumpets the notion that colleges can be ranked based on this particular prophet's determination of academic quality. Because the essential ideology of the SAT was already in place and widely accepted, this prophet—in the form of a weekly newsmagazine we all know as *U.S. News & World Report*—had simply to collect the data and rank the colleges.

If you think that a lot more goes into the determination of America's "Best Colleges" than SAT scores, then you need only to consult the research showing that a college's average SAT or ACT score correlates almost perfectly to its *U.S. News & World Report* ranking. One such study concluded that "once the average SAT/ACT score is taken into account, the other so-called 'quality' indices have little additional influence on where an institution

falls on the list” (Kuh and Pascarella 2004, 53). Hence, the college rankings game, referred to by *U.S. News & World Report*, further entrenches the dominance of SAT (or ACT) scores as the primary measure of college quality. Instead of measuring what colleges actually do for students, in an educational sense, once they arrive on campus, the current rankings paradigm says that a good college is one that admits students with high SAT scores and that turns away those with modest SAT scores.

We are left with a system that is dominated by privilege, elitism, and money. More often than not, a marginally bright rich kid can get into a top college because of a well-trained SAT performance. And more often than not, the creative genius from an impoverished family is lucky to attend a community college—or even to go to college at all.

To be sure, some colleges and universities are devising new kinds of admissions tests, some of which seek to measure so-called “noncognitive” characteristics that are not captured by tests such as the SAT. And we’re finding that these new tests actually do a pretty good job of predicting college success. Recently, too, the National Association of College Admissions Counseling (2008) released a landmark report calling on colleges and universities to rethink their reliance on admissions tests like the SAT. There are also efforts underway to create better indicators for consumers about college quality than traditional rankings from the likes of *U.S. News & World Report*.

Yet despite these efforts, the old paradigm remains the dominant paradigm. It is highly resistant to change because, so far, there has been little incentive for the educational establishment to change. This brings us to the subject of financial aid, and particularly those aspects of the financial aid system that rarely receive public attention.

Trends in financial aid

All selective colleges want certain students as their customers. These students primarily include the sons and daughters of affluent professionals. They attend excellent schools, live in safe and attractive neighborhoods, and—most important—score reasonably well on the SAT. Colleges covet such students not because they believe the SAT is the final word on the potential for success in college, but

rather because these students and their SAT scores enhance the prestige of the institution. Colleges want these students so badly that they’re even willing to pay for them. Under the guise of “merit,” colleges have drastically increased the amount of scholarship money they offer high-scoring students. Indeed, the most-coveted students rarely pay full tuition—the “sticker price” that colleges advertise.

The tuition hikes we all hear about are borne in dramatically different ways by students from different economic classes. Mounting evidence shows that the lion’s share of the merit awards and steep tuition discounts have been directed to wealthier students—those who would go to college even without the merit aid—at the expense of need-based scholarships to lower-income students. Unfortunately, need-based financial aid from other federal, state, or private sources has not made up for the dramatic shrinkage in institutional aid for lower-income students. In fact, many states have created their own merit scholarship programs, and most of the funds are also going to wealthier students.

As a result of these perverse trends in financial aid, the dream of a college education has become increasingly unattainable for students from families earning low and modest incomes. As evidence, consider the class disparities in net college costs as a percentage of family income. To send a child to a four-year public university in 1999, a family in the lowest income bracket faced a net cost equivalent to 39 percent of the total family income. By 2008, the net cost had risen to the equivalent of 55 percent of family income. By contrast, in 1999, a family in the top income bracket faced a net cost equivalent to just 7 percent of the total family income; by 2008, that burden had increased to 9 percent (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2008).

The interrelated trends in affordability, financial aid, and college admissions practices have created an American higher education system that is increasingly hostile to lower-income students and families. Moreover, these students and families often lack the social, cultural, and economic capital on which colleges and universities place such high value in their admissions and financial aid systems. What do I mean by “cultural capital”? Consider the tenth grader who doesn’t have a computer at home, whose parents don’t read

magazines or newspapers and don't expose the child to a world beyond his or her neighborhood. Or consider the family that doesn't know what the FAFSA is or even what the SAT is.

Instead of being a great democratic force for rectifying economic inequality, colleges and universities have played an important, if unwitting, role in worsening inequality. Despite our belief that education is a great equalizer, our education system tends to be a procyclical rather than countercyclical force for addressing inequality. We have created institutional rules of the game that reinforce huge disparities in educational opportunity. The vicious cycle is rarely broken.

Following the prevailing business model, the most ambitious colleges and universities have sought to improve their position in national rankings by tightening admissions standards and reallocating financial aid to students from relatively affluent backgrounds. Yet ongoing demographic and economic trends have made this business model increasing unsustainable for individual institutions. By 2013, for example, fully half of all high school graduates will come from families earning \$50,000 a year or less. Just 15 percent of high school graduates will come from families earning \$100,000 or more—the sort of families traditionally targeted by selective colleges (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2008). In order to avoid steep and possibly fatal declines in enrollments, colleges and universities that rely mostly on tuition revenue will have to reform their admissions and financial aid policies to make them less hostile to lower-income students. Yet an era of severe retrenchment in taxpayer support has only served to fan the fires of elitism at our best public universities. To the grave detriment of first-generation and low-income students, these so-called “public” universities have cut enrollments and raised admissions standards.

The macroeconomic implications of these trends are not pleasant. We are fostering an increasingly class-bound education system in which only a small segment of the population can realistically hope to earn postsecondary degrees. If we continue along this path, the United States will become a second- or even third-tier economic power. Indeed, this decline has already begun. In terms of educational attainment, we are entering a period of stagnation. Unlike recent cohorts of college-age people in



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many European and Asian countries, who are earning postsecondary degrees at far higher rates than previous generations, recent cohorts of Americans are no better educated than previous generations (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2008). This is just one of many educational and economic indicators that demonstrate the urgent need to shed the last vestiges the old paradigm. We must tear down the gates and make higher education more inclusive, rather than more exclusive. □

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