

# The higher education crisis

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***The road to college is steep and costly for all, but for some kids, the challenges are even greater.***

For most high school seniors (and their long-suffering parents), the holiday season is definitely not the most wonderful time of year. Soon-to-be graduates are deep in the throes of trying to figure out their next steps after graduation while their parents are busy trying to navigate costs, expectations, and lots of drama. Although not all students plan to attend college after high school, more students are pursuing a college education than ever before. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), almost 20 million students attended either a two- or four-year college this past fall, the highest enrollment rate ever.

**Inequities along the way**

While the road to college is not easy for anyone, it can be especially challenging for low-income students. A recently released book about college admissions and the pursuit of equity in higher education sheds light on just how fundamentally inequitable higher education can be. *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us*, by Paul Tough, looks at the many factors that affect a student's journey from high school to college and how different the playbook is for students who come from poverty.

Tough's earlier best-selling books about grit and character created a market for serious and well-researched books about education that are also accessible to most readers. In other words, you don't have to be a policy wonk to learn a lot about education from Paul Tough. With this book, he focuses on the unsavory truths about the college admissions process and how it undermines efforts to make higher education more accessible to low-income students.

In a *New York Times Magazine* adaptation of the book, Tough introduces us to Angel Pérez, a well-meaning enrollment director from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Pérez knows all too well the struggle of low-income students because he managed to lift himself out of the depths of poverty and attend some of the best schools in the country. Throughout the article, we see how Pérez's efforts to make Trinity more diverse and reflective of today's student population are foiled by a system driven by money, rankings, and an institutional hierarchy that talks a lot about change but remains ever the same.

Tough hones in on issues many of us know well: the lingering inequities of standardized tests like the SAT and ACT; the outsized influence of the *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings; and the almighty algorithms that help ensure colleges and universities always meet their tuition targets. Taken together, these powerful forces form a virtually insurmountable elitist wall around higher education that calls into question the very nature of how institutions assess a student's performance and potential. We all may want to believe that U.S. education is a meritocratic endeavor, but the facts on the ground indicate otherwise. Starting with the admissions process and continuing right on through their years on campus, the inequities students of color and those who come from poverty face are formidable.

Both the College Board and *U.S. News and World Report* have made efforts to address these criticisms. For example, the College Board made a range of free test-prep resources available online after studies showed that wealthier students had a competitive edge because of the many test-prep resources their families could afford. And earlier this year, the College Board introduced its Environmental Context Dashboard (ECD), a new product designed to help colleges incorporate contextual information about a student's social background in addition to their SAT scores. The ECD would assign a score to an individual student based on his or her high school and neighborhood, thus giving colleges a more complete picture of that student's academic journey. Unfortunately for the College Board, the ECD quickly became known as an "adversity index" and prompted a tidal wave of negative feedback from parents, educators, and the media. The College Board wasted no time in responding to the concerns, quickly changing the dashboard's name to Landscape and sharing information about data usage and methodology. We shall see how many colleges actually use Landscape and whether it will help change the culture of college admissions.

*U.S. News & World Report* has also made an effort to respond to critics who say their methodology for ranking schools favors elite institutions. This year, *U.S. News* introduced a “Top Performers on Social Mobility” category and incorporated the proportion of first-generation collegegoers in their graduation rate rankings. Long-standing critics said these changes were superficial at best and did little to create a more comprehensive and fair ranking system. For now, at least, the power and influence of these rankings remain intact. As Paul Tough points out in his book, there is a reason the *U.S. News* rankings are the *bête noire* of college admissions offices everywhere.

### **A lack of policy solutions**

With all of this focus and attention on college access and equity, you would think the U.S. Congress would be making more progress on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). Alas, that is not the case. Months (years!) of discussions and negotiations have not produced any meaningful results, and the general atmosphere on the Hill is, well, not conducive to compromise. Republicans and Democrats have been fighting over a range of issues, in particular funding for historically black colleges and universities and other minority-serving institutions. Democrats will do nothing until that issue is resolved. Republican Senator Lamar Alexander (TN), chair of the Senate education committee, introduced a cluster of bills in late September that would update and severely trim the current HEA, but his proposal is unlikely to go anywhere until some of the larger funding issues and plans for student financial aid are settled.

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All of this inaction is playing out against a backdrop of mounting student debt. According to the Federal Reserve, student loan debt in the U.S. has now reached \$1.6 trillion. When the words “trillion” and “debt” are used in the same sentence, one would think it is time for serious action, but the Trump administration seems to believe otherwise. Aside from a plan floated earlier this year to cap student loans (an idea most experts agree would do little to address the root causes of the debt crisis), the administration has offered no real plan to address the crisis. The one concrete step the administration did take actually works against students who are trying to avoid the curse of student debt. Earlier this year, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos repealed the Obama-era gainful employment rule, which was developed to better protect students from predatory for-profit education providers. With its repeal, the secretary actually made it easier for profit-hungry education providers to take advantage of unwitting students.

When looking at all these issues comprehensively, it’s hard not to believe U.S. higher education is a hot mess. But should we expect anything different when our nation’s level of income inequality is at an all-time high? According to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau this fall, income inequality in the United States is higher than it has ever been since the Census Bureau started tracking such data more than 50 years ago (Telford, 2019). That kind of disparity has clearly fueled both the student debt crisis *and* the need for colleges and universities to maximize

tuition dollars even if it means accepting fewer qualified low-income students. Looking ahead, it seems that if our country has indeed evolved into a knowledge-based economy, then we better get our act together when it comes to making higher education a feasible goal for most students. But righting this ship is going to take leadership, vision, and commitment, none of which seems to be present within the current administration and Congress. We have an opportunity in 2020 to bring some new ideas and energy to the problem. Let's hope U.S. voters help deliver us from this mess we are in.

## **References**

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