

NONFICTION

Is College Merely Helping Those Who Need Help Least?

By Tara Westover

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THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST

How College Makes or Breaks Us

By Paul Tough

I am — to capitulate fully to the nomenclature — a “first gen,” meaning a first-generation college graduate. For me, as for many first gens, a college degree was transformative. If you’d met me when I was 10 — pulling copper from radiators in my father’s junkyard — you would have thought my trajectory was set. I certainly did. The shape of my life stretched out in front of me like a shadow, its terminal point determined absolutely by where I was standing at that moment. There would be marriage at 17 or 18. Children soon after. If I worked, it would be as a cashier at the local grocery store.

When I was 17 I enrolled in college and everything changed. History, philosophy, geography: A decade at the world’s best universities will lift you to new ground. The life I live now is not the life I was born to. I was propelled up to it, and the motor that powered my ascent was a university education.

This is our ideal of higher education: as an engine of opportunity. And data show that, when it works, higher education is exactly that. So why is it that The Chronicle of Higher Education recently called our system an “engine of inequality”? Has a college degree lost its transformative power, its capacity for lift?

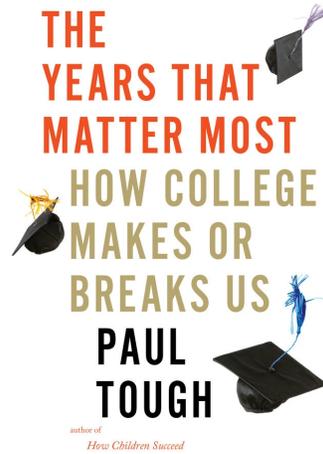
Put simply, no, it hasn’t. We live in a knowledge economy, and human capital has never been more valuable. The problem is distribution. As higher education has increased in value, that value has increasingly become captured by those at the top, so that today, whether you graduate from college is largely determined by your parents’ income. In the United States, 77 percent of children born into the top income quartile will earn a degree by age 24, but for the bottom quartile that number is a mere 9 percent. The implications are clear: The education system isn’t transforming the lives of those who need it most; it is dispensing ever more opportunity to those who need it least.

How it is that inequality has come to define higher education is the subject of Paul Tough’s new book, “The Years That Matter Most.” Tough has spent much of his career as a journalist documenting the injustices of our K-12 system. Here he turns his attention to the years after high school, to our colleges and universities, where we might hope those injustices are addressed. The news is not good. In chapter after chapter, Tough shows how higher education does not ameliorate the inequities of K-12. It magnifies them.

[What college admissions officers really want: Read an excerpt of “The Years That Matter Most.”]

Tough rests his case on research, but it’s the people in his drama who will stay with you. We meet Ned Johnson, a \$400-an-hour tutor in Washington, D.C., and Ariel, one of Ned’s teenage clients. We watch as Ned helps Ariel raise her score on the ACT test from a 26 (the product of work she’s done with three previous tutors) to a 32, out of 36. We then see Ned do the same with Ben, a low-income Haitian-American student brought to Ned by a wealthy benefactor.

We meet Clara, whose father takes a list of the 100 most selective universities in the country, draws a line under the top 30 and tells Clara she is only allowed to apply to schools above the line. (This becomes possible after Ned helps raise Clara’s score from a 27 to a near-perfect 35.) We meet Kim, a low-income student living in Appalachia, whose father, a Marine, abandoned her family when she was 7. Kim dreams of attending Cornell, and her test scores (sans tutor) could get her there, except her mother, who did not go to college and is dubious of its value, doesn’t want her to go.



We then witness the great sorting of America's youth: The wealthy congregate at the most elite universities; the middle class raid retirement accounts and bury themselves in student loans in order to attend increasingly budget-strapped state schools; and the poor — if they go to college at all — are exploited by a cadre of aggressively marketed for-profit institutions.

Two types of stratification are happening here. The most obvious is the concentration of wealthy students at a few top schools. Tough rightly calls out the Ivy League and its ilk for capitalizing on positive press while offering little in the way of actual change. It remains the case that in most of the Ivy League, at least two-thirds of every class come from the top income quintile, while those from the bottom quintile account for less than 4 percent. In some cases the imbalance is extreme. Several Ivies admit more students from the top 1 percent of the income scale than from the bottom 60 percent combined.

Tough also identifies another type of stratification that is less conspicuous but perhaps more consequential: not the inequities between the students, but rather the growing inequities between the institutions themselves. Until recently, the funding gap between our state colleges and our elite schools was fairly modest. But since 1990, that gap has exploded, so that elite colleges now have an endowment-dollars-per-student ratio of more than \$1 million, compared with less than \$35,000 per student at a typical college.

Tough proposes two explanations for this widening gap: politicians and donors. Since 2008, state legislatures have cut approximately \$14 billion in funding from public universities, or approximately 20 percent. These schools make up the difference with tuition hikes, which forces them to compete with one another for the small slice of wealthy out-of-state students who can pay double or triple fare. This is higher education reduced to free-market principles, a world in which universities behave more like businesses than schools, pursuing customers rather than students.

Meanwhile, philanthropic giving to the most selective schools has skyrocketed. As Tough points out, wealthy universities have wealthy alumni, who, after benefiting from an elite education, are even better positioned to donate large sums of money. This is the final cog in the inequality machine, an intense cycle of wealth concentration that Tough calls “unsustainable — and yet, at the same time, unstoppable.”

Some of the imbalances Tough describes are simply breathtaking. In 2009, President Obama asked Congress for \$12 billion to revitalize the country's community-college system. He didn't get it. But between 2013 and 2018, a lone American university — already the richest in the world — raised \$9.6 billion in a single fund-raising campaign. And so the machine turns.

The apparent weakness of this book is its forgettable title; the content, however, is indelible and extraordinary, a powerful reckoning with just how far we've allowed reality to drift from our ideals. It's difficult to overstate the importance of higher education to the present moment. As a country we are divided economically and politically, and education sits conspicuously at the center of both divides. Whether you have a college degree turns out to be one of the strongest predictors of both your political preferences and your income.

Reading Tough's book, you cannot fail to notice that these three factors are related — that we have allowed the inequities of our economic system to be reproduced in our education system, and that the result is poisoning our politics. We then ask ourselves why so many Americans no longer believe in college or degrees. Or facts. Or science. Why they perceive education as not *for them* but rather as a good distributed by the elites to elites.

On the other hand, there is not much motivation among people of means to reform education — to give less money to Princeton and more to Penn State, or to send both their taxes and their children to public colleges. But for those wondering why the American people have lost faith in higher learning, the answer is straightforward: If we want others to believe in public education, we first have to

believe in it ourselves.

Tara Westover is the author of "Educated: A Memoir."

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