



New Book Discusses How Higher Education Helped Cause and Can Fix Our Current Crises

US colleges and universities have widened social divisions and exacerbated inequality

(Washington, DC, May 26, 2020) The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown US higher education into disarray, left the survival of some colleges in doubt, and brought to the surface the dangers of our nation's growing inequality and political polarization. A new book from authors at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) explores how higher education got into this vulnerable position in the first place. *The Merit Myth: How Our Colleges Favor the Rich and Divide America* concludes that America's colleges and universities perpetuate class and race hierarchies and sink the lower classes. Authored by CEW director Anthony P. Carnevale, CEW research director Jeff Strohl, and veteran education writer Peter Schmidt, the book offers a framework for system-wide change.

The Merit Myth cites that 60 to 70% of the growth in earnings gaps since the 1980s is tied to differences in access to and completion of college programs with real value in the labor market. The education gap between Whites, Blacks, and Latinos means that Whites are most likely to benefit from the college earnings premium—only 19% of Blacks and Latinos with high SAT scores go to selective institutions, compared to 31% of Whites with similar scores.

“Merit-based admissions are really only a smokescreen for the intergenerational reproduction of class and race privilege,” Carnevale said. “We’ve created a deeply entrenched upper caste. We need a reform agenda that will expand opportunity and increase social mobility.”

Some key themes of the book include:

- The philosophical underpinnings of the higher education system we aspired to create, which in turn formed two separate systems demarcated by race and class
- The inequalities in college preparation and access, which are rooted in racial and economic segregation in housing and schools
- An indictment of selective colleges for favoring the wealthy in their pursuit of money and prestige
- An examination of how the government subsidizes elite higher education as a luxury good for the affluent while denying non-selective colleges and their students the resources needed to ensure students graduate
- An overview of legal battles over education access that shows why relying on the judicial system to bring equality is a mistake

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The authors assert the need to increase the share of citizens who attain the education necessary for good jobs, upward social mobility, financial security, and full and informed political participation. One approach the authors propose is to levy government pressure to compel selective colleges to devote a larger share of their admissions slots and financial-aid dollars to low-income students.

“It seems unlikely that most selective or somewhat selective American colleges will reform themselves without being guided, coaxed, and prodded,” Strohl said. “The problem is that, by buying into a mad scramble for money and prestige, they have become obstacles to their own progress.”

Some of the book’s policy recommendations include:

- End the overreliance on the SAT and ACT, since GPA has been shown to be a better predictor of academic success
- Halt legacy admissions, as they do no more than perpetuate the prestige problem
- Require every college to have at least 20% low-income students (Pell Grant recipients)
- Strike a balance between class-based and race-based affirmative action
- Evaluate colleges based on their outputs—students’ income, ability to find a good job, and increase in social mobility—rather than their selectivity and the academic profile of their incoming class
- Treat high school, college, and careers as one system
- Improve career counseling, and elevate the role of these counselors in colleges

“Educational equity is our best hope for finding a new route forward as a country—one that will secure the health of our economy and democracy while ensuring dignity, opportunity, and political participation for our nation’s people,” Schmidt said.

Our higher education system neither provides the equal educational access championed by common-schools advocate Horace Mann nor maintains the sort of meritocracy that Thomas Jefferson envisioned. If the current dynamic persists, the fractures by race and class in the US will worsen.

For more on *The Merit Myth*, including ordering options, visit cew.georgetown.edu/MeritMyth. Proceeds from sales of *The Merit Myth* will help fund CEW’s efforts to promote educational reform.

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