College Admissions as Conspiracy Theory
By GARY M. LAVERGNE
The Chronicle of Higher Education
From the issue dated November 9, 2007

We in higher education have struggled to uphold a social contract that requires us to serve the public good when, at the same time, our success is often measured by the number and qualifications of the applicants that we exclude. We will never escape that paradigm because the demand for access to our best institutions is far greater than the supply. With growing frequency, reports that analyze admissions practices are highlighting the inequities inherent in selectively dispensing precious seats in the classrooms of elite colleges and universities.

Four books about access to higher education have recently been released, and each has much to say about what is wrong with college admissions. They all successfully support their themes and are worth the read, especially for those not familiar with the grave sociological impact of admissions practices.

Peter Schmidt’s Color and Money (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) does just what its subtitle says: It describes “how rich white kids are winning the war over college affirmative action.” It offers refreshing honesty, a disregard for political correctness, and the effective writing of an experienced and skilled reporter. (Schmidt wrote Color and Money while on leave from The Chronicle.) He is at his best during his provocative overview of affirmative action and the debates that led to the Supreme Court’s 2003 decisions in cases involving the University of Michigan.

Most disturbing is his declaration that, “unable to come up with solid evidence to back its claims that affirmative action yielded educational benefits, the higher-education establishment settled on an alternate plan: It would make such assumptions anyway, and use spin, exaggeration, and a false sense of certainty in its assertions to pull the wool over the justices’ eyes.” Schmidt doesn’t specifically identify who he means by the “higher-education establishment,” but if an individual or identifiable group did such a thing, it raises important legal and ethical questions. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor depended on studies that demonstrated the importance of diversity in higher education to declare unambiguously that educational benefits were “not theoretical but real.” For institutions that reinstated race-conscious admissions and used educational benefits as justification, Schmidt’s claim is an astonishing one.

Elsewhere Schmidt offers glimpses into the unintended tragic consequences of preferences: One-fifth of all students who borrow money to attend eventually drop out, leaving college as failures and in debt. Presuming those students met some criteria of financial need, they are the people all four authors strenuously argue should have greater access. Being an advocate for the underprivileged is a laudable goal, but when giving preferences, institutions should take great care not to do harm.

Schmidt also does a memorable job of pointing out the ironies: Affirmative action was saved in Michigan by representatives of the establishment — capitalist giants like General Motors, and admirals and generals in the armed forces who killed amicus briefs in support of it as an admissions policy. There is much more, but the book’s message is that working-class students, of all races, are shut out.

The Power of Privilege (Stanford University Press, 2007), by Joseph A. Sacco, an associate professor of sociology at Wake Forest University, is an excellent “sociological account” of a highly selective institutional gatekeeper: Yale University. The premise of Power of Privilege is that Yale and other Ivies and elite colleges and universities promote a meritocratic myth, but in fact are places that embrace and sustain privilege and affluence.

Sacco’s history of Yale admissions is tragically amusing. He chronicles an embarrassing past that includes Yale’s enthusiasm for the early SAT as a tool of eugenics and the college’s participation, until 1968, in the Ivy League practice of taking nude pictures of freshmen men to study the relationship between body type and ability.

Of all the authors, Sacco is the best at explaining the statistical applications of the numerical measures used in the admissions process and why a student’s ACT or SAT scores are not good predictors of his or her predicted freshman GPA at the most-competitive colleges. Students applying to those institutions are self-selected, largely through very high SAT scores. Because of the restricted pool of applicants, such colleges don’t need statistical equations to determine who gets in; they can safely place a great deal of weight on intangibles like personal characteristics because all applicants are highly qualified academically.

Sacco’s beware of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of “elite reproduction,” or the idea that human capital (what individuals do to improve themselves) is earned while cultural capital (the accouterments of privilege) is a gift as important as money and property. Cultural capital includes access to contacts that complement a person’s educational experiences; by way of cliche, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” Sacco argues that “elite colleges and their alumni families are partners in an association for the reproduction of educational privilege.”

In Tearing Down the Gates (University of California Press, 2007), Peter Sacks, an author and essayist, also applies Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Sacks argues that injustice, educational and otherwise, is the result of a social-class divide. Unlike the other books, Tearing Down the Gates uses the stories of real students facing different challenges common to their social and economic backgrounds.

He begins with a withering attack on the exclusionary nature of high-school honors courses and segregated classes for the gifted and talented, which he considers proxies for the affluent. Sacks views such segregation as “the sacrifice’s alliance of equals.” Similarly, in higher education, he sees “enrollment management” as a conspiracy of a “prestige-driven nature.” Undoubtedly, that is news to admissions offices, which spend a great deal of time, energy, and money reaching out to poor and minority students who have a reasonable chance of success at their institutions.

Sacks is more on target with his discussion of early-decision schemes, the winners of whom are students unconcerned about the availability of financial assistance and who have access to sophisticated and astute guidance offices. He also does well lambasting of the U.S. News & World Report rankings of colleges and universities, which he maintains are merely a measure of selectivity — not educational excellence of any kind. (Schmidt did the same in Color and Money and was equally effective.)

Sacks closes with an impassioned plea for readers to stop dwelling on race and gender in favor of embracing the more palatable issue of class differences — a powerful idea affluent right-wingers densify with “class warfare.” He urges middle-class and low-income people — both white and minority — to form a new coalition demanding greater access to higher education.

John Aubrey Douglass’s The Conditions for Admission (Stanford University Press, 2007) begins with a good history of the University of California system. Particularly memorable is his discussion of practices like the indefensible attempts by California universities to rank their feeder high schools, which led to large-scale protests once the rankings were leaked. Douglass, a senior research fellow at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California at Berkeley, is also insightful when he confronts feel-good terms like “disadvantaged” and “underrepresented” that defy precise definition. Like Schmidt’s, Douglass’s comprehensive analysis is not always politically correct: “The advocates of affirmative action...often manipulated the concept of the social contract as solely a matter of race and rational representation.”

Toward the end of his book, Douglass gets to the heart of the issue: The “politicization” of admissions is the natural outcome of increasing demand for a scarce public good. In 2004, Berkeley received 38,000 applications, more than 20,000 from students with GPA’s in required courses of 4.0 or higher, for an entering class of about 4,800. Every year selective and very selective institutions demand admission to thousands of highly qualified applicants, while college-bound Americans defy economic theory: Rising tuition and fees have not lessened the demand, desire, or passion for admission to those elite and flagship campuses. The point of the book is that our popular belief in the social contract that America has with its colleges, that such institutions exist for the public good, is impelled by dwindling government support.

The four authors do a good job, from each of their perspectives, describing the inequities in the admissions process. But a glaring omission in all the books, except Douglass, is the lack of any example or discussion of the effect of successful parenting, sacrifice, and instilling in children the value of an education and the courage to persever. I could not help but think of my own experience: a Louisiana Cajun from a poor rural household headed by a father with only a seventh-grade education and a mother who went no further than ninth grade. Both of my parents spoke better French than English. They could not contribute a nickel toward my college education. I married right out of college and greeted my bride with a National Defense Student Loan debt (a precursor to the Perkins Loan).

Since then we’ve had four children, each of whom worked 20 to 30 hours a week while attendingflagships as full-time students. Within the next two years, our family will have paid for six undergraduate and three graduate diplomas — all as a family with our collective earned income. Except for one son’s earned GI benefits, we never asked for or received a dime’s worth of scholarships, grants, or loans.

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So it is a misread to four books telling me that my children are "privileged" or that I am part of an "alliance of equals" oppressing the poor. In these books my children are "privileged" because my wife and I stayed married, have good jobs, paid attention to what our children did, bought them books, got involved in their schools, and shared the benefits of an education we earned — all of which resulted in our kids' not being poor and not getting Pell Grants (which apparently makes them rich). I don't remember seeing any distinction drawn between a "privileged" family like mine and one with five generations of Yale graduates in its lineage.

One also wonders why it is such an outrage to these authors that poor students don't do as well on standardized tests as their affluent peers — especially when, in different ways, each book expertly documents the undeniable inequality of opportunity the underprivileged face from birth to the college-admissions process. Poor students are far less likely to go to good schools, they are taught by fewer certified teachers, they are more likely to be malnourished and in poor health, they are more likely to face violence, and their parents are far less likely to be educated. Aren't disparate test scores evidence of inequality — rather than inequality itself?

In these books we also learn that the performance, persistence, and graduation rates of underprivileged students are not as high as those of other students, and, of course, that is tragic and unacceptable. The authors did not derive deeply enough into whether those differential rates were consistent with the ACT and SAT scores submitted by those students. Most likely, they would have discovered what many admissions officials already know: Test scores are useful, but in the real world of college admissions, trying to predict someone's freshman-year GPA is an extraordinarily difficult task, and no independent variable is so good that it can be used just by itself. Yet much of the criticism I've seen of test scores, in these books and in general, assumes that scores are all that matter in admissions decisions.

In an August issue of the American Sociological Review, Sigal Alon of Tel Aviv University and Marta Tienda of Princeton University argue that the ideal of equal opportunity can be best served if test scores are considered in admissions decisions but interpreted using an applicant's background information. Of course, that's true. I know of no admissions process that has ever used a test score as a sole criterion for acceptance, nor have I known anyone in admissions who has ever advocated such a policy.

Those in charge of the ACT and SAT have always been candid about how, for most institutions, the high-school record, whether GPA or class rank, is the best predictor of freshman-year GPA. Yet even the high-school record by itself performs only slightly better than test scores. To date, I have not seen a usable predictive model that consistently accounts for a greater variance in the freshman-year GPA than the combination of ACT and SAT scores. What is it that we are trying to measure? Are good students "better" than bad students? Or should we strive to make up for the blemishes of the first 18 years of life? No one knows.

Every day at 7 a.m., I walk through the shade of UT-Austin's Battle Oaks toward the Main Building and Tower, satisfied that inside are good people trying to do the right thing. I have had the privilege of being a part of the educational experience of three of those students, and I believe in the value of an education we have received. I am one of them, too, and I have no illusions that the performance, persistence, and graduation rates of underprivileged students are not as high as those of other students, and, of course, that is tragic and unacceptable.

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On the one hand, the books have been very clear in making the connection between access to higher education and the ability to attend college. The authors note that the decision to attend college is a crucial step in the process of upward mobility, and that access to higher education is necessary for students to have the opportunity to succeed in college. They also emphasize the importance of affirmative action and other policies that aim to increase access to higher education for underrepresented groups.

On the other hand, the books also highlight the challenges that underprivileged students face in getting into highly selective colleges. They note that the selection process for these colleges is highly competitive and that many students from underprivileged backgrounds do not have the resources or support needed to succeed in this environment. The authors argue that it is important to consider the context in which these students are coming from and to recognize that the educational opportunities available to them are limited.

In conclusion, the books provide a comprehensive analysis of the college admissions process and the challenges faced by underprivileged students. They emphasize the importance of access to higher education and the role of affirmative action in increasing opportunities for underrepresented groups. They also highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the college admissions process and the role of test scores in predicting college success. Overall, the books provide valuable insights into the complex issues surrounding college admissions and access to higher education.
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BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY


The Power of Privilege: Yale and America’s Elite Colleges by Joseph A. Soares (Stanford University Press, 2007)

Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education by Peter Sacks (University of California Press, 2007)