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An Educational System Built to Promote Success or Suppress?

In today's society, attaining a college degree is viewed as one of the most critical components of living a successful life. Since the civil rights movement, the U.S. has continually strived to reduce the racial inequality present in the educational system. While the proficiency gap between blacks and whites has shrunk substantially over time, the gap between low and high income students has yet to change. Today, the proficiency gap between low and high income students is almost twice as large as the gap between black and white students (Porter). This can be seen as a positive trend when arguing that racial inequality in the U.S. has become less prevalent. However, it also demonstrates America's failure to recognize the quality of education low income students are receiving and its ineffectiveness in closing the educational proficiency gap. In a country where equality is promised to all, it is difficult to observe such a large discrepancy between the education of varying social classes. This growing discrepancy is extremely concerning and necessitates immediate attention. Ultimately, low income students are left alone when navigating the college process. Personally, I was fortunate enough to go to a private school where college advisors held our hands every step of the way. Even with plentiful assistance, the process was still extremely overwhelming at times. I cannot imagine navigating this tumultuous process alone. Low income students are failing to attend college at alarmingly high rates due to a lack of access to necessary resources for applying to college.

Low income students are ultimately doomed from the start. Since real estate taxes comprise a majority of the funding for public schools, students from impoverished neighborhoods are subjected to the poorly funded schools in their communities (Duncombe). Underfunded schools lack necessary resources to aid students with the college application process such as college advisors and preparatory courses (Duncombe). Multiple studies have demonstrated that access to college advisors and prep courses is guaranteed to increase standardized test scores and improve college essay writing (Olson). One may think, “if I can't get any assistance in school at least the government will help me with financial aid.” Government backed financial aid often functions as a deterrent rather than assistance. The five page, one hundred and twenty eight question application is daunting for an adult; for an impoverished student lacking financial literacy, it is nearly impossible to complete (Asher, 4). The FAFSA application also requires an abundance of detailed parental financial information, something many impoverished students simply cannot attain. Without any assistance, an overwhelming number of low income students essentially give up due to the complexity of the application process (Asher, 5).

In the following essay I will include three separate arguments as to why impoverished students are failing to attend college, offer solutions for each one, and refute the common counter arguments to my issue. The arguments will be discussed in the following order: the inadequate amount of college advisors in highschools around the country, the lack of affordable college preparatory courses, and lastly the unnecessarily tedious financial aid form (FAFSA). Through these arguments, I will illustrate how the current educational system is flawed and why this issue demands immediate attention.

One crucial issue within the flawed educational system is a lack of student counselors, specifically in regards to the college admissions process. Most public high schools in the U.S. lack even one staff member dedicated strictly to college counseling. Instead they employ student counselors who, according to a 2017 study by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, only spend about “20 percent of their time on college admissions” (Mckillip, 51). This miniscule portion of time seems even smaller when looking at the national average counselor to student ratio of 1 to 464 (Mckillip, 51). These statistics demonstrate that highly impoverished students who likely require the most assistance only receive about 20 minutes of counseling a year (Mckillip, 52). Multiple studies have proven the benefits of a positive student-to-counselor relationship within the context of college admissions. Students who “reported more school-level guidance in terms of the school’s assistance in filling out college applications, financial aid forms, [and] writing essays” were more likely to enroll in post-secondary school than their lower income counterparts in poorly funded schools (McKillip, 52). Unfortunately, studies demonstrate that large numbers of low income students “leave high school inadequately counseled” (McKillip, 53).

A solution to the inadequate number of student advisors in highschools would obviously be employing more professionals, as well as more effectively educating the existing ones. Some research suggests that “pre-service education programs for school counselors do not emphasize preparation for college counseling” (Mckillip, 51). Therefore, before employing more student advisors, academic authorities must ensure that the current ones are adequately equipped to help students apply to college. Some political figures argue that it would be extremely difficult to employ more advisors because the funding is simply not available. Ironically, “state level

government mandates for counseling”; however, when looking at the actual numbers of counselors in schools, the state government “appear[s] to have little impact on the availability of college counseling at the school level” (Mckillip, 53). Governmental authorities preach for more counselors while neglecting to take any productive steps towards providing them. The government clearly recognizes the extent of the issue so they should be able to reallocate funds towards aiding America’s massive amount of low income students.

Another obstacle faced by low income students is the lack of college preparatory courses, which provide necessary tactics for standardized testing and writing college essays. Because the college admissions system recognizes how far individuals will go to attend their dream school, the system charges exorbitant amounts of money for preparatory courses (Olson). Therefore, students who can afford these expensive college preparatory courses have an unfair advantage over students who cannot; “ultimately, the SAT becomes a test biased toward those who have more wealth over those who cannot afford to buy prep resources” (Olson).

These expensive preparatory courses can provide a large advantage to higher income students. According to a recent study, without additional support, low income students who normally do well in their highschool courses score lower on standardized tests than their higher income counterparts (Duncombe). When it comes to writing the college essay, recent studies demonstrate that the prompts are “misleading” and “students who are unfamiliar with postsecondary culture may be at a particular disadvantage” (Warren, 44). Today, students who are unfamiliar with post secondary culture are predominantly poor. The same study showed that low income students who participated in a preparatory course that taught proper methods for a college essay wrote substantially better essays than unassisted low income students (Warren, 45).

This proves that the academic system favors students with preexisting knowledge of the college essay. Yet the only way to attain this knowledge is to attend preparatory courses, which low income students obviously cannot afford.

Possible solutions to assist impoverished students in gaining access to college preparatory information include incorporating prep into a curriculum or offering volunteer led courses. Some schools have begun including college preparatory courses in their curriculum in hopes of alleviating some of the obstacles low income students face. A study done by McDonough found that schools can prepare students for college at a much higher level if they start the preparation process in the 9th grade (McKillop, 52). KIPP NYC College Prep High School has designed a two year college preparatory curriculum for low income students and has shown significantly higher college admission rates than any other school with an impoverished majority (Santos). KIPP's focus on college preparation has sent 96 percent of its students to college as opposed to 45 percent of their low income peers around the country (Santos). The importance of college preparation for low income students in attending college at higher rates must not be underestimated. Although KIPP is currently using a two-year plan rather than the recommended four-year plan, they are already seeing a tremendous improvement in low income students attending college. As the curriculum continues to develop and shows continuously higher rates of impoverished students attending college, more institutions will hopefully adopt this method. This is a necessary step for shrinking the educational proficiency gap between low and high income students. Another solution would be either one-on-one volunteer tutoring, or volunteer led college preparatory classes. There are a plethora of volunteer tutoring options for highschool and college courses (Brooke). Therefore, it should be relatively simple to find volunteers willing to

tutor students on standardized testing and college essay writing. Even if low income students are supplied with all the essential resources in high school, they still have to figure out how to afford a college tuition.

For low income students to afford post secondary school, they must submit a free application for federal student aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA form, which is five pages long and includes one hundred and twenty eight questions, is utilized to calculate a student's expected family contribution (EFC); this determines how much aid an individual qualifies for (Feeney, 65). Campuslogic, a company that deals with the financial aid process of over 500 universities around the country, found that 30 percent of students from the lowest income quartile submitted their FAFSA application after the March 1st deadline (Korn). This is extremely concerning because federal aid is granted on a “first come first serve” basis (Hess). Consequently, low income students often fail to receive the aid they qualify for because they cannot submit the application before the deadline due to systematic obstacles.

The initial problem with FAFSA is that a large number of low income students are unaware of how to access and complete it due to its extremely confusing nature. The unnecessary complexity of FAFSA “may deter other academically-prepared but financially-needy students from entering college in the first place” (Kofoed, 2). Researchers note “that the FAFSA is longer and more confusing than the average tax return” (Kofoed, 2). This demonstrates that although FAFSA was created to aid everyone in need, the government is still trying to weed people out, which contributes to the corrupt and faulted nature of the educational system (Korn). Furthermore, the grueling FAFSA application requires students to know very detailed information about their parents’ finances. FAFSA’s demand for detailed parental information

“ignores the fact that for some students it is very difficult to obtain [this] financial information” (Feeney, 67). Many low income students have absent or incarcerated parents, which makes it extremely difficult to obtain parental financial data. FAFSA wrongfully assumes parental support in low income families, “which unfortunately is not always the case for students seeking financial aid” (Feeney, 67). Due to FAFSA’s complexity, researchers “point to the FAFSA as a barrier to financial aid, and thus college access for many low-income students” (KoFoed, 3). In addition, half of all low income students who do complete the form are selected for “verification, which is similar to a tax audit” (Megan). This process requires the submission of even more detailed financial information to supplement the already onerous FAFSA document. The verification process does nothing but place “additional burdens on vulnerable families” approaching the strenuous college process (Megan). Sadly, FAFSA’s arduous and demanding nature prevents many impoverished students from submitting it by the deadline or completing it at all.

The Commonbond claims that the most recent version of FAFSA has new features that “promise to make it the most user-friendly version yet” (Fried). The new version provides access to the FAFSA form on any mobile device and an improved interface that specifies if the questions need to be answered by the student or parent (Fried). While these changes provide middle and high income students with a smoother form completion experience, they do not alleviate any of the challenges faced by low income students. A more user friendly experience does not provide a student or parent with financial literacy and does not address an impoverished student's biggest obstacle, the ability to readily obtain parental financial information (Asher). A possible solution to this issue would be to allow data sharing between the IRS and the

Department of Education (Asher, 7). This way, students would no longer have to struggle with manually inputting their parent's financial information. With this type of system, all of the information gathered by the IRS [would] be transferred directly to the FAFSA document "with a simplified one-click transfer process" (Megan). Even if low income students were not given additional resources in highschool, a simplified FAFSA document would still partially alleviate the struggle experienced by thousands of impoverished students.

Although a student may be economically disadvantaged, money has no effect on an individual's academic capabilities. In a country where equality is promised to all, such a vast educational gap between low and high income students simply should not exist. Our society has proven that it can substantially shrink the proficiency gap between races in terms of education; why not do the same for socio-economic classes? The issue of low income students failing to attend college is extremely urgent and demands immediate attention. Countless studies prove that without additional support, the majority of low income students quickly fall behind their higher income counterparts. Ultimately, the current educational system values wealth more than an individual's academic capabilities. As society progresses, research demonstrates that a high school diploma alone will soon become invaluable while a college degree is becoming the most crucial aspect of living a financially successful life (Porter). Therefore, constructive change to the current educational system is necessary to prevent poverty and to further advance society.

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