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College Admissions as Conspiracy Theory

By *GARY M. LAVERGNE*

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 conundrum 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 assertions 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 filed 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. Soares, 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.

Soares'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, Soares 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.

Soares is also good at applying 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 cliché, "It's not what you know, it's who you know." Soares 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 directly 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 a sinister "alliance of equals." Similarly, in higher education, he sees "enrollment management" as 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 derisively call "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 commentary on affirmative action 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 racial 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 flagship institutions deny 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 imperiled 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 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 persevere. 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 attending flagships 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.

So it irks me to read four books telling me that my children are

"privileged" or that I'm 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 have fewer AP courses available, they have outdated textbooks, 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 delve 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 officers 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 prediction model that consistently accounts for a greater variance in the freshman-year GPA than the combination of those two independent variables, and that is how they are commonly used. Skewering the ACT and SAT is cheap and easy because no one likes tests — not even those who get high scores. Finding a standardized, usable, and more valid and reliable replacement is the hard part.

Readers should not assume that I am a shill for the testing organizations. I am a former employee of both ACT Inc. and the College Board, and I have no illusions about what their priorities are. In these books, not all of what the authors say about college-admissions testing is off-base. Sacks's and Douglass's coverage of the events surrounding the now infamous 2001 speech by then-president of the University of California, Richard C. Atkinson, calling for an end to the use of the SAT reasoning test, should be read by everyone in secondary and higher education. Like Atkinson, Sacks and Douglass advance the argument that admissions testing should reflect what a student can do with what he or she has been taught.

I repeat: Soares, Sacks, Schmidt, and Douglass produced four very good books. At the same time, while much of their focus is on class differences, a discussion of Bill Cosby's controversial views about causes for the troubled condition of young black America, or Juan Williams's devastating indictment of black leadership and a "culture of failure" in his book *Enough* (Crown Publishers, 2006), or the writings of Shelby Steele and John H. McWhorter about "white guilt" and going "beyond the crisis in black America" could have added controversial but important insights.

Does the single-parent birth rate in the different social classes explain differences in college-going rates better than admissions policies do? Or the crime rates of poor neighborhoods? Or the incarceration rates? Or the high-school-graduation rates? And what of those in the lower socioeconomic classes who do get in and are successful? Are they different? If so, how? Where are they from? Do they go to church? How much time did they spend studying while in high school? Listening to music? Watching television? Were they raised by both parents? Moreover, other than Soares's comparison of Yale and some European institutions after World War II and Sacks's chapter about "gate-crashers," there is little memorable discussion or elaboration of admissions routines that actually do

what the authors advocate.

I return to the two issues I started with. First, is the issue of access to highly selective colleges really one of injustice, or does it have to do with capacity? Harvard denies about 50 percent of the applicants who present perfect SAT scores. As Douglass points out, in America, expansion and growth of junior and community colleges is encouraged and expected so as to assure space for all who want to attend. Yet the state support that would be necessary to increase the number of elite campuses appears to be unthinkable.

While quoting the late Christopher Lasch, a prominent social historian, Schmidt reminded us that both sides of the affirmative-action debate are so focused on the question of who gains access to highly selective institutions that they fail to see how much we would all benefit if such a learning experience was made available to all. Admittedly, prestige and those "qualities which are incapable of objective measurement but which make for greatness," first described in *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) and reinforced by *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), cannot be created out of thin air. But maybe we can increase our capacity to satisfy the reasonable demands of highly qualified students. We must move away from the debate about "who gets in" to one about how to provide elite-like quality to many more. All sides of the access argument can easily present thousands of highly qualified students who could succeed in the environment of a demanding, highly selective university.

At the same time, too many people, on all sides affix too much of their self-worth on whether they get into their first-choice college. I have seen applicants and their parents collapse with grief after an unsuccessful appeal of an admission decision. We must ask ourselves why are those who are not getting in so crushed? The groups those families represent evidently feel no other institution can sustain their dreams. Is it because there is a real gulf between the educational experience offered by the highly selective compared with all other institutions, or have these people spent too much time reading *U.S. News and World Report* rankings and books about elite colleges only to become convinced that only a few institutions are worthy of attending? I wish I knew.

Second, and while this does not neatly apply to the books reviewed here, in this debate we should treat each other with respect and not descend into demagoguery: All parents, even the rich ones, want what is best for their children. The parents considered "privileged" in these books aren't spending their time forming alliances to

oppress others. What are they supposed to do? Not use what they have, nor do what they can, to achieve what is best for their children? Not long ago Sacks wrote in *The Chronicle Review* that "there are no easy answers or obvious villains." I wish all four of those authors had spent a little more energy saying that.

The authors are right: Compared with the general population, elite colleges are overpopulated with affluent young people, but it is undeniable that such students are qualified to be there and are successfully earning diplomas. We need more acceptable alternatives for all who have demonstrated they can perform at such a high academic level — at a probable cost of hundreds of billions of dollars. Instead, with each legislative session we watch general appropriations increasingly account for a lower portion of total revenue that supports our institutions.

But I refuse to despair. Right now I am writing a book about the 1950 Supreme Court case *Sweatt v. Painter*. In 1946, Heman Sweatt entered the room across the hall from the office that I now occupy in the University of Texas Tower and became the first African-American student to submit an application to the university's law school. Almost immediately the Texas attorney general announced that "Heman Sweatt will never darken the halls of the University of Texas."

Every time I think about what access to higher education was back then compared with what it is now, I marvel at how far we've come. I've had faculty members and administrators tell me that we've made "no progress" since *Brown v. Board of Education*, and I wonder how anyone can possibly believe that. Today I know of no selective institution, and certainly no public flagship, that does not have elaborate recruiting and outreach efforts that encompass the kind of schools Heman Sweatt came from. I wish at least one of those authors had conceded that, even if the results are disappointing.

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 what is right. I can't think of a single college where the same is not true. And every day I see thousands of "privileged" students sent to our campus by their once-underprivileged parents. It wasn't easy for many of them to get there. They don't deserve a guilt trip. For millions of us, social mobility is alive and well in capitalist America.

Or maybe I'm just a reflection of what Patrick Henry said in his famous "Liberty or Death" speech in 1775: "It is natural to man to

indulge in the illusions of hope."

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BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

Color and Money: How Rich White Kids Are Winning the War Over College Affirmative Action by Peter Schmidt (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007)

The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities by John Aubrey Douglass (Stanford University Press, 2007)

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)

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