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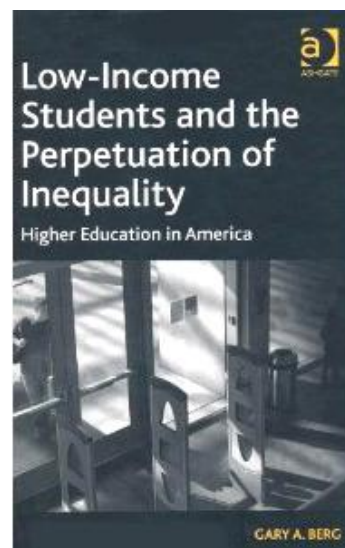
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Reviewed by Signe M. Kastberg
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I am quite jealous of Gary Berg's new book, *Low-income Students and the Perpetuation of Inequality*. Having written a similar book in 2007, I am impressed with the breadth and depth of research covered within the pages of this new publication. As the title suggests, Berg's book examines the role of higher education in the lives of individuals from low-income backgrounds.

Berg presents a synthesis of academic literature, qualitative interviews, classroom observations, and specific national and international data. Some of the primary topic areas include the following:

- The influence of family on college attendance choices
- Admissions biases against low-income students
- Financial aid policies hurt low-income students



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- Higher education funding and the privileging of the privileged
- Surprise: private colleges are more accessible for low-income students
- How the disappearance of affirmative action has affected admissions practices
- Transitions to college are thorny for low-income students
- College degrees have lower economic value than is generally believed
- Public policy drives educational policy, and blames the poor for being poor.

Gary A. Berg, PhD is Associate Vice President and founding Dean of Extended University at California State University Channel Islands. He is the author of numerous articles on higher education, public policy, and distance learning, as well as seven books including *Lessons from the edge: For-profit and non-traditional higher education in America* and *Why distance learning?: Administrative practices in American higher education*.

While it is almost trite for a scholar in this field to say it, as a key element to understanding this topic, it must be said: the poor are relentlessly stereotyped and credited for failure due to general lack of merit: laziness, stupidity, and lack of skill, motivation and work ethic. The reverse stereotype is also present: namely, that the rich have arrived at their privileged location due to intellect, morality, and talent. Berg explores multiple sources of these flawed public images over two centuries; books, movies, and articles have generally supported these stereotypes. As a society we have not moved very far forward in eliminating prejudices; we prefer to blame the victim and support that position with punitive policies designed to keep everyone in their appointed place. Higher education is no exception, and has tended to implement policies that reflect society's attitudes.

The major contribution of this book, in my view, is the amassing of both contemporary and historical data relevant to a scholarly exploration of the topic at hand. Berg's book reveals the complexity of intersections between social class, intelligence tests, equality, morality, vocabulary/language, geography, mobility, and luck. Many of these factors are at play in a collision between public and private spheres, perhaps most easily viewed through examining admissions processes at colleges and universities. While most of us would decry admissions based on eugenics, history shows that multiple biases in admissions have morphed over time to more covertly discriminate against various groups – women, Jews, non-whites, and perpetually those from lower income brackets. One example of the current covert nature of admissions bias at elite colleges that had previously escaped me was

the value-added sports that are present at high schools attended by the privileged: crew, horseback riding, fencing. Through legacy admissions policies, extra “points” are given to persons who have participated in such sports. Families who can afford polo ponies are more likely to donate to the college in future, as well; the admissions bottom line has a long view. In this manner, what masquerades as merit in determining acceptance to college appears more closely akin to the criteria for club membership.

Berg’s book raises the question of responsibility for the resulting inequality in higher education brought about by questionable admissions practices. Are these individual issues? Social issues? There are measurable concerns regarding skill deficiencies in certain groups with regard to adequate academic preparation for higher education. While flawed studies have previously attributed low-income persons with lower intelligence, more recent studies illuminate the biases in tests such as the SATs. In addition, high schools with limited resources are unable to offer a breadth of upper-level or advanced-placement courses that might otherwise add points to an applicant’s admissions score. In addition to specific academic preparation, more nuanced differences accumulate for those with a dearth of travel experiences or other cultural enrichment opportunities. “What did you do on your summer vacation” becomes a question of resources and cultural capital.

Berg also addresses the “tiered” system of higher education; that is, the relatively new community college, the state university, the private college, and so on. The likelihood of students from lower-income backgrounds being streamed into the community college (ie, a lower tier) is high; the likelihood of such a student even applying to a highly selective private college is slim indeed. Berg presents research suggesting that these students know better than to even try to go to an elite college; the deck is stacked against them and they know it.

Having arrived on campus, individuals must adapt to the middle-class environment of higher education; and through the biographical sketches shared in the book, Berg shows us how difficult a transition that may be for low-income students of various stripes: the non-traditional (older)

student, the recent immigrant, the student from an inner-city public school, the blue-collar worker, and others. The obstacles themselves are daunting; the intricacy of these barriers represents an altogether different level of challenge which cannot be surmounted by ordinary effort, nor effort without substantial resources. These include both inter- and intrapersonal challenges, structural barriers, problems with resource allocation, and possible family conflict. It comes as no surprise, then, that we find that these students drop out of college in greater numbers than other groups.

Through extensive historical research, Berg illustrates a continuum of increased (albeit limited) access to higher education, extending to a present situation of possibly over-educating the population in ways that are irrelevant to the needs of the society and measurably non-productive in increasing earnings for individuals. In short, the old adage that “to get a good job, get a good education” is true for far fewer people than we have been led to believe. While many Americans continue to believe in the power of higher education to increase social mobility, that belief is eroding as students from lower-income families leave college with a mountain of debt and with few or no job offers equal to the risks they have taken by amassing such debt. In fact, Berg demonstrates statistically that college has little economic benefit for the rich, who are going to stay rich anyway; nor for the poor, who stagger across the commencement platform under the weight of student loan debt and into a job market accessible primarily to those with an outstanding professional network – whether inherited or earned. The middle-class graduates may experience moderate movement in economic and social ranking, much the same as you might see changes in position in a school of fish. Some mobility; little true change. Thus, with the first-hand reality of declining payoff for the investment, American society is becoming cynical about the value of a college education. The facts on the ground suggest that higher education’s touted worth in terms of social mobility is little more than a chimera for poor students.

Berg offers cogent recommendations for further research that logically extend from the arguments put forth in the seven chapters of the book, and I hope a plethora of scholars will respond to the challenge to extend the current

work. The book offers numerous helpful appendices for the scholar eager to further explore the statistical underpinnings of Berg's assertions. I must offer a few criticisms, however. Berg suggests a possible audience of lay persons in addition to the target audience of scholars; however, most of the general public would be lost in the tables and graphs. While the qualitative interviews were robust (a total of 50 undertaken), the interviews were primarily with white persons, and with females. This, of course, is a consideration when the author discusses the problem of gender and race disappearing from the admission banquet table. As is so often the case with the publishing world today, there are a good number of proofreading errors throughout the book which detract from the reading experience. These are minor criticisms when considering the comprehensive nature of the book and what it has to offer academics and others who wish to learn more about this important topic.

In conclusion, I have many reasons to be jealous of Berg's new book; it illuminates some dark corners in my own work and I had numerous "ah hah" moments when reading it. I highly recommend this book to historians of higher education, as well as sociologists and public policy scholars. College counselors and school counselors would benefit from this information, and hopefully by extension their students. Certainly anyone interested in the plight of disadvantaged students and families will benefit from reading this timely, well-written, comprehensively-researched book.

About the reviewer

Signe M. Kastberg is Associate Professor in the M.S. Program in Mental Health Counseling at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY. She is a nationally certified and licensed mental health counselor and the author of *Servants in the House of the Masters: A social class primer for educators, helping professionals, and others who want to change the world* (2007). Her academic interests focus on social class issues, the healing power of African drumming, the relationship between quantum physics and spirituality, and issues in counseling and counselor education. She currently resides in Rochester, NY, with her two children and numerous pets.



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