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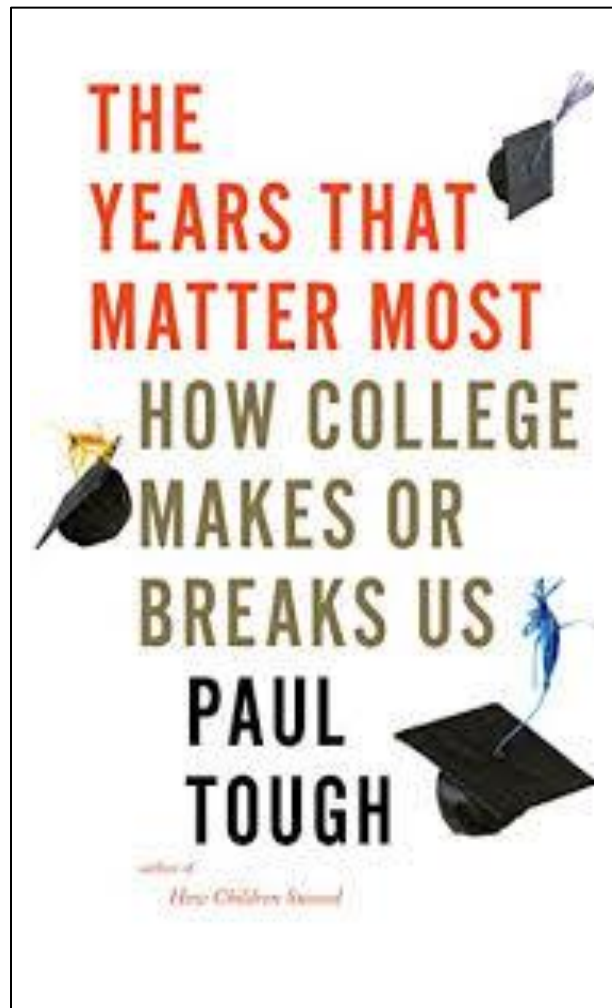
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In his recent book, *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us*, acclaimed author and public speaker Paul Tough unravels the tangled story of America's loss of social mobility since the promising gains of the GI Bill after World War II. While acknowledging that lack of social mobility for underrepresented groups is a persistent problem, Tough deftly moves through 75 years of social and institutional history in revealing how higher education in the United States has – without intending to – increasingly closed doors of opportunity to underprivileged students.

Written for parents, education leaders, students, and anyone who works in higher education, Tough's book unfolds slowly and clearly, melding history with specific examples of inequity within higher education from around the nation. Tough writes,

The particular set of decisions we have made in creating our current higher education system—and those include individual decisions, institutional decisions, and public-policy



decisions—have produced a mobility engine that functions incredibly well for a small number of people.... the ones who benefit most from the system tend to be wealthy and talented and well connected. The ones who benefit least tend to be from families that are deprived or isolated or fractured or all three. (p. 328)

One of the most compelling issues Tough raises is the disparity created by America's adherence to standardized tests as indicators of "readiness" for college. Created initially as a tool to allow a small number of bright, middle-class students to enroll in Ivy League colleges, Tough's book traces how the SAT was reborn in the early 1990s as a tool to measure learning in high school and to open the college gates to more diverse students. Competing with ACT Inc., the College Board took action to make the SAT more representative of traditional school learning than of "pedigree," and to offer free SAT preparation to every student. In spite of these well-meaning efforts, Tough reveals that the SAT's actions backfired, creating a scenario in which well-to-do students across the United States surged ahead of all other students in SAT scores and admission to elite institutions. Additionally, the average SAT score of universities' incoming classes is one of the most heavily weighted factors in the *U.S. News and World Report's* list of top schools – meaning that admissions' practices continue to prioritize SAT scores to protect their standing in the list and attract high achieving prospective students.

In revealing the multifaceted issues at play in admissions policies, Tough helps readers understand the terrible dilemma faced by enrollment managers and admissions directors across the country. Held captive by the widely revered *U.S. News and World Report's* rankings, and navigating budget losses that never recovered after the recession of 2008, institutions have turned to "big data" to

choose their incoming class. Predictive analytic – including mathematical models that mimic modern business management tactics – help schools to recruit the appropriately achieving and financially secure "customers." For higher education leaders (and matriculating students), Tough presents an unflinching view of the implications of big data on students' ability to have equitable access to college. Tough writes: "Changes in the economy, in technology, in demography, and in students' habits and preferences have combined to transform the admissions game into a fickle and unpredictable contest.... the applicant pool is going down, tuition discounts are going up, and small colleges are going bankrupt" (p. 154).

During his six years of research for the book, Tough traveled to 21 states and interviewed more than 100 students. Each chapter features insights from students who are navigating college ambitions within a complicated landscape largely hidden from them, their parents, and their guidance counselors. In addition to students' own narratives, some of which span several years, Tough shares salient research on inequity in higher education, referencing Anthony Abraham Jack's (2019) work on underprivileged students who struggle to acclimate to elite colleges and Lauren Rivera's (2015) sociological study of social class and upward mobility.

Throughout the chapters, Tough presents the financial, social, and academic minefields facing underrepresented students who succeed in enrolling in college only to find themselves on campuses that are in many ways toxic to their cultural backgrounds and identities. In the early chapters, Tough highlights that even students from wealthy homes experience crippling anxiety and pressures as they navigate their families' expectations for college success. In later chapters, Tough gives several examples of colleges and universities making headway in the equity gap. Featuring

University of Texas Austin, DePaul, Trinity, Arrupe College, and exemplary nonprofit professional schools, he shares approaches that have made strides in increasing both diversity of applicants and underserved groups' retention and graduation rates. His examples show how a visionary leader or faculty member can influence students' success on a large scale with measures including focused supplemental instruction, peer mentorship, and wrap around supports that bolster students' confidence in their ability to "make it."

University faculty and student success leaders will appreciate Tough's candid treatment of the immense challenge of supporting diverse students' social and academic needs. Rather than promising results from any single approach, Tough acknowledges the truth that many schools grapple with: "On the one side you've got predictive algorithms and corequisite programs and experimentally designed belonging interventions... but on the other, there is the psychological minefield of being an American eighteen year old, and the particular strengths and burdens and complexities each one brings to campus" (p. 236). Tough's stories illustrate the challenge while making it clear that small

steps do move mountains for underprivileged students' futures.

As a parent, faculty member, and long-time leader of student-success-and-retention programs at a public, land grant university, I was intermittently disheartened and uplifted by Tough's compelling picture of higher education. He makes it clear that the landscape is changing rapidly for American citizens who do not successfully complete a college degree. Indeed, college-educated adults have never had a steeper economic advantage, earning 84% more in a lifetime than those with a high school education only (p. 255). Tough closes his book by considering the question he opens with: if social mobility is a defining feature of American success, how do we recapture our moderate success following World War II in reshaping the purpose of higher education for the future of our children and our country? And, at what point will we realize that a college education is – now more than ever – a public good rather than a private endeavor? Tough's illuminating and compassionate picture of the steep hill to success for our nation's low-income and working-class students will undoubtedly shape conversations on campuses and in families for the next generation.

References

- Jack, A. (2019). *The privileged poor: How elite universities are failing disadvantaged students*. Harvard University Press.
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About the Reviewer

April Heaney directs the Learning Resource Network at the University of Wyoming. Her research focuses on exploring the characteristics and life experiences that influence students as they enter college, as well as the programs and networks that mean the most to their success.

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