

BOOK

The Years that Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

“Does college still work? Is the system designed just to protect the privileged and leave everyone else behind? Or can a college education today provide real opportunity to young Americans seeking to improve their station in life?”

The Years That Matter Most tells the stories of students trying to find their way, with hope, joy, and frustration, through the application process and into college. Drawing on new research, the book reveals how the landscape of higher education has shifted in recent decades and exposes the hidden truths of how the system works and whom it works for. And it introduces us to the people who really make higher education go: admissions directors trying to balance the class and balance the budget, College Board officials scrambling to defend the SAT in the face of mounting evidence that it favors the wealthy, researchers working to unlock the mysteries of the college-student brain, and educators trying to transform potential dropouts into successful graduates.

“Economists and sociologists have a name for the process of finding a new place in society . . . social mobility. In its most basic definition, it means moving from one social or economic class to another. Economists can measure how mobile a society is by calculating how likely it is that a child born into any given rank of family income will rise or fall from that station as an adult, and while they differ on exactly what degree of mobility is best, they generally concur that a certain amount is a positive force in a nation’s overall health. A society in which people can aspire to rise above their birth is a productive and ambitious one.”

“While upward mobility may be good for a nation, it is rarely a smooth and straightforward experience for an individual. Upward mobility is not simply a question of earning more money than one’s parents. It is also, for many people, a process of cultural disruption: leaving behind one set of values and assumptions and plunging into a new and foreign one. It can be disorienting and emotionally wrenching, shattering family ties and challenging deeply held notions of identity and purpose.”

“In sharp contrast to other ages and other cultures, mobility in the United States today depends, in large part, on what happens to individuals during a relatively brief period in late adolescence and early adulthood. If you are a young American like Shannen Torres, the decisions you make about higher education – and the decisions that are made for you – play a critical role in determining the course of the rest of your life.”

“Tocqueville found much to admire in the United States, but he was puzzled by Americans’ embrace of the idea that social class should be fluid.”

“Tocqueville observed a social order that, in contrast to the comfortable stability of Europe’s class system, was always in flux. Fortunes were made, and fortunes were lost. ‘Wealth circulates with inconceivable rapidity, and experience shows that it is rare to find two succeeding generations in the full enjoyment of it,’ he wrote. ‘New families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away.’”

“The relative chaos of the American class system was disorienting to Tocqueville. If the rich could so easily become poor and the poor could so easily become rich, how could anyone know where he stood? In European nations, ‘aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king,’ Tocqueville wrote. And that chain, he believed, was a good thing. It kept a society bound together. The United States had lost the cohesion that comes with an aristocratic tradition, he warned: ‘Democracy breaks that chain, and severs every link of it.’”

“‘In America,’ Tocqueville wrote, ‘most of the rich men were formerly poor,’ and this remarkable fact, so shocking to a European, remained true throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Cornelius Vanderbilt’s father was a lowly ferryboat captain. John D. Rockefeller was the son of a traveling salesman. Andrew Carnegie was the son of a poor millworker. Henry Ford grew up on a small farm. The emerging American ideal of the self-made man extended beyond these titans of industry to include western settlers, California gold miners, Texas wildcatters, and all manner of merchants and inventors and entrepreneurs. They embraced the idea that in the United States, upward mobility was available to all, the natural product of a person’s ingenuity, appetite for risk, and willingness to work hard.”

“Young adults who didn’t have a college degree were almost four times as likely to be living in poverty as those who did.”

“It sometimes felt as though the country was splitting into two separate and unequal nations, with a college diploma the boundary that divided them.”

“Chetty is a leading figure in a relatively new movement in economic research known as big data, in which increasingly powerful computers employ nimble analytical tools to carve up massive amounts of information. The results of the big data revolution have, over the last decade or two, transformed everything from gene sequencing to baseball scouting to presidential campaigns. Chetty’s mission for most of his professional career has been to find ways to use big data to better understand American social mobility: how it works, whom it benefits, and how its machinery has changed and evolved over time.”

“Why couldn’t Chetty bid on the contract himself? He contacted John Friedman, a friend and colleague then at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and together they worked up a formal bid and submitted it to the IRS. It was rejected. They decided to try again, this time adding to their team another top young economist interested in mobility: Emmanuel Saez, who was at Berkeley. And this time they made an innovative sales pitch: their bid for the job was \$0; they essentially told the IRS they would do its work for free.”

“The report was centered around four important discoveries. First, using the IRS data, Chetty and his team found that students who attend ultraselective colleges in the United States are much more likely than other students to become very rich as adults. Young people who attend “Ivy Plus” institutions – meaning the Ivy League colleges plus a handful of other institutions with similarly elevated selectivity rates, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Chicago, and Stanford – have about a one in five chance of landing, in their midthirties, among the top 1 percent of American earners, with incomes over \$630,000. People who attend “other elite” four-year colleges (including Davidson) have about a one in eleven chance of hitting the top 1 percent. Students at community colleges, meanwhile, have about a one in three hundred chance. (Students who don’t attend college at all have about a one in a

thousand chance.) The kind of college you attend, in other words, correlates strongly with what you'll earn later on."

"Poor students who attend Ivy Plus colleges wind up with household incomes of about \$76,000 a year, on average, as young adults. Rich students who attend Ivy Plus colleges wind up earning about \$88,000. That's more than the kids who grew up poor, but not a ton more. There is a similar effect at almost every college: kids who grow up rich earn only a bit more than their college classmates who grow up poor. Attending the same college eliminates almost all the advantages that those who grow up with family wealth have over those who grow up in poverty."

"Third, the researchers found that attending an elite college seems to produce a greater economic benefit for students who grow up poor than it does for students who grow up rich."

"Higher education actually works! It can propel students from all backgrounds into the upper reaches of the American economy. Sending poor students to elite colleges is an especially good investment – they benefit more than their wealthy peers do."

"At Ivy Plus colleges, on average, more than two-thirds of undergraduates grew up rich, and fewer than 4 percent of students grew up poor. Elite college campuses are almost entirely populated by the students who benefit the least from the education they receive there: the ones who were already wealthy when they arrived on campus."

"The American system of higher education has the potential to be a powerful engine of mobility, able to reliably lift young people from poverty to the middle class, and from the middle class to affluence. But in reality, for many young Americans, it functions as something closer to the opposite: an obstacle to mobility, an instrument that reinforces a rigid social hierarchy and prevents them from moving beyond the circumstances of their birth."

"And a system of economic mobility based on luck – whether it's the luck of which family and which neighborhood you're born into, or the luck of what a particular college-admissions officer happens to see in your application on a particular day – is a system that is hard to invest or believe in."

"The basic premise underlying Ned's tutoring strategy is that the kind of kids who are likely to make it into his office – surrounded by wealth, attending excellent schools, born to parents with multiple degrees – already possess the knowledge and academic skill they need to do well on the SAT or ACT. The obstacles holding them back from achieving top scores, Ned believes, are generally not intellectual in nature; they are at least as often emotional or psychological. Standardized college-admissions tests make kids anxious – it's almost as if they were designed that way – and one of Ned's chief tasks, as he sees it, is to reduce that anxiety."

"When students take their own stress seriously, their stress levels usually go down and their scores usually go up."

"So Ned makes the opposite argument from the one made by the College Board and ACT Inc. The SAT and the ACT are completely ridiculous, he tells students. Every reference he makes to the tests is dismissive – they're "stupid" or "silly" or "a bunch of malarkey." The tests are not in fact designed to measure how smart you are, he says. They are designed to assess how well you have mastered the tricks of taking standardized tests. Ned says this not only because he believes it – when you observe over and over, as Ned has, that tutoring can vastly improve kids' scores, it's hard to maintain the view that the tests are authentic measures of a student's academic ability – but also because dismissing the test, laughing at it, takes away the psychological power that it holds over many students."

“Ned tells students to imagine that the questions were written by lawyers, not poets: if there’s an answer that feels mostly right, look for tiny traps that might make it wrong. When there’s a diagram in a geometry question, see if you can figure out the answer by just eyeballing the diagram, rather than doing the math. Whichever answer looks right usually is.”

“Once you experience for yourself the fact that these dumb tricks actually work, the test becomes much less intimidating. It loses its magical power.”

“Schools with a 1400 median incoming SAT score (like the University of Maryland) spend about \$100,000 educating each student each year, and schools with a 1500 SAT score (like Washington University) spend about \$150,000 – far more than they charge in tuition.”

“Hoxby points out that the decision by highly selective colleges to underwrite their students’ education is rooted not in charity but in strategy. These high-prestige institutions are playing the long game – employing what Hoxby calls the “dynasty” model – betting that overspending today on their students will pay dividends in the future when those students become wealthy donors.”

“As Caroline Hoxby pored through her data on college applications, she noticed something curious. The very predictable decision algorithm that she had discovered among high-scoring students (Always go to the most selective school that will admit you) actually only held true, reliably, for one particular group of high-scoring students: affluent ones.”

“Hoxby’s dictum – Seek out the most selective school that will admit you, and go there – was part of the daily catechism. It was in the water you drank.”

“If your academic achievements qualify you to attend one of the country’s most prestigious universities, you simply must do so. To choose otherwise is, as Coleman often put it, a betrayal.”

Annual revenues at the College Board are more than a billion dollars, most of which comes from student fees for the SAT and for AP exams.

“The SAT was created and cultivated, in the 1920s and 1930s, in the confines of the Ivy League, championed by the president of Harvard and administered by a team at Princeton.”

“In 1959 E. F. Lindquist, an education professor with populist leanings who worked at the University of Iowa, established his own testing organization, called American College Testing, or ACT.”

“As a more egalitarian image of the country began to take hold in the 1960s and 1970s, the social and racial imbalances apparent in SAT scores became a growing public relations problem for the College Board. What had been intended as a tool to disrupt the reigning American class hierarchy was increasingly perceived as an instrument that perpetuated it.”

“The first step was removing the word “aptitude” from its title. In 1990 the College Board declared that “SAT” no longer stood for Scholastic Aptitude Test; it now stood for Scholastic Assessment Test. (A few years later, “assessment” was abandoned, too, and now, officially, SAT stands for nothing at all.)”

“1946, in fact, when a recent graduate of New York’s City College named Stanley Kaplan, the son of a Brooklyn plumber, began offering SAT-prep classes in the basement of his parents’ home in Flatbush . . . Kaplan built his basement SAT classes into a \$50 million company.”

“Katzman’s success – and the improved test scores that his rich students started boasting about – reinforced the growing public perception that a student’s performance on the SAT was primarily a reflection not of his aptitude or his achievement, but of his parents’ financial resources.”

“Beginning in 2001, ACT’s sales reps began trekking from Iowa City to various state capitals, far from the coasts – Springfield, Illinois; Frankfort, Kentucky; Lansing, Michigan; Cheyenne, Wyoming – and making a bold pitch to state education officials: sign a contract with us to make the ACT your official statewide high school exit exam. Instead of having students in your state pay us one by one to take the ACT on weekends, just pay us a lump sum, and we’ll administer the test to every single high school junior in your state, during the school day.”

“It wasn’t hard for ACT’s sales reps in these meetings in Frankfort and Lansing (and Bismarck and Baton Rouge) to persuade state officials that a company based in Iowa City might understand their students better than one in an office tower in Manhattan.”

“In 2012, for the first time, more high school students took the ACT than the SAT. Iowa City had overtaken New York City at last.”

“Expensive test prep hadn’t produced actual inequality and injustice in America, just the perception of it – but that was bad enough. Or so the argument went.”

“Khan, then in his early forties, was raised in Metairie, Louisiana, just outside New Orleans, by a single mother who had emigrated from the West Bengal region of India. He attended a working-class public high school in Metairie, and the prodigious math ability he displayed there won him admission to MIT, where he studied math, electrical engineering, and computer science. He went on to get an MBA from Harvard and then settled down in Boston to work as a financial analyst for a hedge fund. Teaching, at that point, was the furthest thing from his mind.”

“The videos were intended for Nadia’s eyes only, but their audience soon grew – first to Nadia’s siblings and other young relatives in Louisiana, then to their friends, then to thousands of people around the world who needed math help and found Khan’s simple, low-tech videos especially clear and useful.”

“Being thanked and praised for contributing to society was an unusual experience for a financial analyst, and in 2009 Khan decided that his destiny was not to work at a hedge fund after all. He quit his job, withdrew his life savings, and moved with his wife and infant son to California to establish Khan Academy as a nonprofit organization.”

“A week later, he was summoned to Seattle for an audience with Gates, and a few days after that, the Gates Foundation invested \$1.5 million in Khan Academy. Google soon donated another \$2 million, and Khan was able to move his operations out of the converted closet he was using as an office. Khan Academy now occupies the second floor of a Spanish colonial revival building less than two miles from Google’s headquarters. The office has all the distinguishing marks of a Silicon Valley startup: an open-plan work space, wall-size dry-erase boards, exposed ceiling beams, brushed concrete floors, and dozens of young employees typing away at their standing desks.”

“A great many students were practicing for the SAT on Khan Academy. Forty percent of all students who took the SAT said they had prepared using Khan Academy.”

“How much, exactly, were students from different racial and income groups studying, and how much were they gaining? But the College Board wasn’t saying much publicly beyond its one broad claim: that students from every group were gaining the same amount. When one or two reporters asked for more

details, the College Board replied that it would not be publicly releasing score gains among specific demographic groups.”

“The good news – which was later released to the media – was that an hour of practice on Khan Academy seemed to increase students’ test scores by a roughly equal amount no matter who you were. Twenty hours of practice raised wealthy students’ scores by an average of 109 points; twenty hours of practice raised low-income students’ scores by an average of 113 points.”

“This was the pattern with the College Board during the early years of David Coleman’s presidency: one grand, well-publicized attempt after another to make the SAT more equitable and more fair, ending either in quiet, unpublicized failure or in a noisy claim of success that fell apart under more careful scrutiny.”

“The gaps between the scores of affluent students and poor ones seemed to have grown even wider. For the thousands of low-income students who did well in their high school classes but struggled to earn high scores on the SAT, the test remained what it had always been for students like them: not an invitation to opportunity, but a barrier to it.”

“Ned’s tutoring also carried with it his underlying, and somewhat subversive, psychological message: that the SAT is not designed to measure your math ability. It is designed to measure your ability to take the SAT.”

“The recent history of American higher education is in part a story of stratification.”