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ADMINISTRATION

Poor Kids, Limited Horizons

The support they need to overcome barriers to aspirational careers comes too little, too late

By Scott Carlson | JANUARY 17, 2016



John Burcham for The Chronicle

Darrius Sloan (right)

Darrius Sloan, 17, talks about his dreams — about himself — in the past tense. He hoped to go to the University of Arizona. "I wanted to be a civil engineer," he says. "I really loved math, I really did. I really *do*, I mean."

Raised on Navajo land in Tuba City, Ariz., in a trailer with 13 other family members, Mr. Sloan got good grades and earned a spot in a boardinghouse for Native Americans to attend high school in Flagstaff, about 80 miles

from the broken schools of home. He blossomed there — the kid who carried around a journal full of quotations from famous thinkers, who knocked out a year's worth of credits at the local community college, who toured the University of Arizona as a sophomore and bought a gray jacket emblazoned with its name.

But his grandparents and siblings, back on the reservation with no electricity or hot water, subsisting on little more than potatoes, tugged at his heart until he made a weighty decision late last year.

"I realized what my point is in life: It's to take care of the people who took care of me," he says. A job in civil engineering might pay six figures years from now, he figures, but in the military, he could earn money right out of boot camp and start sending some home. He plans to join the Marines next month.

"Doing school," he says, "is no longer for me."

People who advise low-income students or study their paths to careers may see a familiar pattern here: students with limited horizons who can't bridge the gap

between their aspirations and reality. In that gap lie financial insecurity, family pressure, bad schools, a fear of debt, a lack of social or cultural capital, discrimination. Those factors often push poor students to aim low, to go for what seems like a sure thing rather than take risks pursuing an eminent occupation.

Some might regard that pattern with a shrug. After all, few people work in dream jobs, and many muddle through, college or not, to jobs that simply pay the bills. But the fact is that affluent, generally white people are more likely to reach aspirational careers than are low-income, often minority people, despite their talents, intelligence, or ambitions. And so the positions that set policy, influence public opinion, and guide the business world continue to be held by those who have money, connections, or both.

Does Higher Education Perpetuate Inequality?



Colleges are seen broadly as engines of opportunity, as economic equalizers. Is that reputation deserved?

This is part of an occasional series exploring that question. Read stories from the series:

- Engine of Inequality
- Poor Kids, Limited Horizons

'A lot of things can happen in four years. That ain't gonna do it. They need money now.'

"I find that there are two Americas: people who are working for survival and people who work for self-determination," says David L. Blustein, who studies careers as a professor of psychology at Boston College. Those

with "career-choice privilege" often draw on family wealth, social connections, or cultural capital to ascend to plum jobs. Meanwhile, students from poor families look for steady, familiar work that seems attainable. Researching a book on employment in an age of uncertainty, Mr. Blustein has found that in poor families, hit hardest by the recession, children were traumatized watching parents lose jobs and scramble for money. "The situation," he says, "is actually getting worse."

The trends disproportionately affect blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, whose poverty rates are two to three times that of whites. Consider a study of the representation of women and minorities in a range of careers, based on five decades of census data, through 2010. While white women and Asians made significant gains in well-paying white-collar jobs — as doctors, lawyers, scientists, engineers, economists — the share of African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in those jobs hardly budged. Certainly, the college pathways and outcomes for minority students are different: Even when their grades and test scores match those of their white peers, they are more likely to attend less-selective colleges and to

drop out before earning a credential, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. The difference in college graduation rate between the top and bottom income quartiles is 37 percentage points, according to the most recent federal data.

The trends don't stem from a lack of desire. Research indicates that members of racial and ethnic minorities start off with the same aspirations as their white peers, but that over time they see barriers, and their perceptions of what's possible for their careers begin to change.

Colleges claim to care about this. Their mission statements and public images celebrate the notion of pulling people up the socioeconomic ladder. Some institutions follow race- and class-conscious admissions policies, accept students without considering their financial need, and offer scholarships and support programs. Increasingly colleges are judged on whether students land viable jobs. And yet, for kids trying to clamber out of poverty, college may stand as yet another barrier.

Many institutions, in the race for prestige, have become less accessible to disadvantaged students. College representatives visit their schools less often, if at all. And institutions often promote to low-income populations professional programs — accounting, nursing, hospitality management — more than they do squishier liberal-arts degrees, which may be more of a pipeline to graduate school and influential careers.

A number of nonprofit groups, like Say Yes to Education, the College Advising Corps, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation, try to advance the prospects for low-income students. They point to some progress, but most of the energy in higher education goes toward getting kids to and through college. What happens after that — do they wind up working in high-end consulting or in retail sales, burdened with debt? — gets less attention.

For a low-income kid from rural Arizona or from Chicago, the hurdles come early, formed by the examples, expectations, and crises around them. That influence is deeply rooted and difficult to change.

As a junior in high school, Mr. Sloan saw his college plans evaporate. His grandfather, the family's main breadwinner, was in the hospital with blocked arteries. The teenager sat by his bed thinking about what would happen if the old man died. His parents, he says, were unreliable.

Mr. Sloan's grandfather was a military veteran, and like many Navajos, he was a welder who worked in construction, among the few steady jobs the boy saw growing up. One way out of that is to do well enough in school to go to college, but the reservation schools make that hard. "Everybody knows that they are not equipped to teach anybody," Mr. Sloan says. He was lucky to get to Flagstaff High School, the last kid admitted to the boardinghouse the year before. A teacher there persuaded him to enroll at the local community college, and encouraged him to go on to a four-year university. Go back to the reservation with a degree, she told him, and help your family.

As Mr. Sloan considered his options, the bit about helping his family stuck. But even if he got scholarships, he figured, he might still rack up debt, and he wouldn't be able to send money home for as long as he was in college. "A lot of things can happen in four years," he says. "That ain't gonna do it. They need money now."

When he told the school's guidance counselor, Katherine Pastor, that he was going to join the Marines, she was floored. "There was a disconnect," she says. "Here is a kid who is engaged, who is going to community college part of the day, but who feels that enlisting in a branch of the military would be a better option for him."

She tried to tell him that he would get substantial financial aid for college, that he might be able to work while he was enrolled and still send money home. But Mr. Sloan had made up his mind. He plans to enlist next month, when he turns 18, and graduate from high school this spring. He gave his University of Arizona jacket to his little sister.

His story is not unusual. "I see it all the time," Ms. Pastor says. Teachers, counselors, or family members can sometimes guide a student past the limits they see for themselves, but often not. "We should be talking to students when they are young — as fourth and fifth graders," she says. But there are scant resources for that. She has a caseload of 500 students, roughly the national average. In Arizona the average counselor-to-student ratio is 800 to 1.

As a counselor at Brighton High School outside Boston, Mandy Savitz-Romer would watch her former students drop out of college after a year or two. Frustrated, she quit to study the profession and try to understand what derails students in poor, urban districts. Now she trains school counselors as a senior lecturer at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. Talking with students right before they're supposed to apply to college, she argues, is too little, too late.

"We can't just work with seniors," she says. "We also have to realize that there are groups of students that are ruling out college, ruling out careers, well before someone shows up to help them fill out an application."

Career aspirations, she says, are all about students' immediate influences. As another expert puts it, You have to see it to be it. Mr. Sloan wanted to be a civil engineer in part because that's what an uncle, one of the only people in his extended family to go to college, had become. Otherwise he saw what many low-income kids do: adults working low-level service or blue-collar jobs, if they're employed at all.

Self-esteem and optimism also play important roles. Affluent kids can aspire to be lawyers, doctors, professors, and politicians because they see that's been possible for their parents and other adults around them. Poor kids don't often know people in such jobs. And because of bad schools, the pernicious effects of discrimination, and financial constraints, they may think they aren't smart or wealthy enough to strive for those things.

'The only scientist I knew,' growing up in San Diego, 'was Bill Nye the Science Guy.'

"If students don't see that as a possibility for themselves," says Ms. Savitz-Romer, "they might have the highest GPA, test scores, and promise, and they won't choose a major that will get them there."

Low-income students tend to grapple with decisions about majors before deciding to go to college, says Karen Arnold, an associate professor of higher education at Boston College who studies the transition from college to career. The choice of a certain major can be a justification for applying or enrolling. That's because many low-income students believe there's a direct line between a major and a career, she says, "to the point that they might not even be going to college if they don't know what they want to do."

She has also found that many low-income students and their families are skeptical of general-education requirements, which they see as part of a college "scam" to charge more for a degree. "It's hard enough for upper-class students to see how comparative literature is going to work into a career," Ms. Arnold says. "It's virtually impossible for people who don't know a whole bunch of people — or even anyone — who has gone to college."

That's where guidance and career counselors are supposed to come in, to help students imagine possibilities, chart a course. But many schools put their limited resources toward raising test scores and managing students' special needs.

"There is almost no career development going on in schools, particularly at schools that serve low-income communities," Ms. Savitz-Romer says. "Schools don't see this as part of their mission. And even if counselors want to do it, they are not given the time or space."

When financially poor students are prompted to consider dream careers, the message may not resonate. "On more than one occasion," Ms. Arnold recalls, "I have heard students say, 'All this find-your-passion stuff is great, but I can't do that. I need to get my mom out of the Bronx.'"

But a pitch for college in purely financial terms isn't necessarily helpful either, says Ms. Savitz-Romer. Counselors should emphasize to students not just earnings, but influence, she says. "We don't sell them enough on the ways that they can be part of a change in their community and their world."



Sandy Huffaker for The Chronicle

Anai Novoa

Anai Novoa met scientists for the first time in ninth grade, when a nonprofit group took students to Baja California, in Mexico, to study marine ecosystems. Before that, science in her San Diego high school consisted of watching movies like *Jurassic Park*.

"The only scientist I knew," she says, "was Bill Nye the Science Guy."

She spent five weeks studying interactions between gulf nutrients and islands. And she decided then and there that she would become a marine biologist.

There were few precedents for that kind of ambition in her community. Most of the kids at school, if they graduated, went straight to work. Her parents, immigrants from Mexico, didn't get past second grade. When Ms. Novoa was 3, her father was killed in a car accident. Her mother, who worked as a seamstress and in a factory, was later crippled in another car accident. Not speaking English, she couldn't do much else for work.

Ms. Novoa's two oldest sisters had pursued careers in photography and psychology, but when the family needed money, each one quit college to work. A third sister wanted to be a chemist, but a counselor told her that it might be too hard. Instead she studied criminal justice at San Diego State University and now works at Kaiser Permanente, enrolling people in health-insurance programs.

Buoyed by her dream of marine biology, Ms. Novoa got into the University of California at Santa Barbara. She struggled at first, not having taken rigorous science courses in high school. "It's really fast-paced, and if you don't have the foundation, it's already too late," she says. She watched many low-income and minority classmates drop out, one by one.

She was doing fine in the research courses in her biology major but struggled in the "weed out" courses, like organic chemistry. Because some of her grades were weak, a counselor at the university suggested that she switch majors and give her spot in the research program to a student doing better.

"I was devastated," she says.

'There are groups of students that are ruling out college, ruling out careers, well before someone shows up to help them fill out an application.'

Those are the kind of roadblocks that make low-income students believe they don't have as many choices of career, says Ryan D. Duffy, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Florida. He studies "work volition," people's sense of control in making career decisions.

People from lower-income backgrounds tend to have lower volition, he says. Like Ms. Novoa, they may feel underprepared. They face discrimination, or fear they will, in part because they don't encounter mentors with similar backgrounds. In college Ms. Novoa had only one minority female instructor: a physics professor from India.

For low-income and minority students, success "is all about having a role model," Mr. Duffy says. White students can find them in abundance. Minority students, notably on campuses like the University of Missouri at Columbia, are asking for more. "They want to have someone who is like them," he says, "to help them go through the process."

A mentor can also help a student manage family doubts. Ms. Novoa says her mother was proud that she was in college but never fully grasped the significance. For example, if Ms. Novoa was up late studying for a test, her mother would demand that she go to bed. Her mother would beg her to come home on weekends, despite the seven-hour bus ride.

After meeting with that counselor, Ms. Novoa did not give up. She switched to the university's College of Creative Studies, where she found a mentor in a prominent parasitologist. He helped her create her own biology major, focusing on ecology, which meant she wouldn't have to take some of the most intimidating science courses.

Her grades improved, and the nonprofit group that had taken her on that ninth-grade trip sent her to Washington to accept a science-education award from President Obama on its behalf. She graduated from Santa Barbara, earned a master's degree at the University of San Diego, and is now applying to marine-biology Ph.D. programs throughout California, planning to study the effects of climate change on marine habitats.

The sister who'd been discouraged from pursuing chemistry inspired her to keep going. "She listened to their advice, and she regrets that," Ms. Novoa says. "I really wanted to continue on this path, so that I could be a mentor for students who faced the same obstacles I did."



Lexey Swall for The Chronicle

Rhiana Gunn-Wright

Rhiana Gunn-Wright has gone about as far professionally as any 26-year-old could hope for, and yet her struggle is hardly over.

She grew up on the South Side of Chicago, money a constant pressure, even though her mother had a college education and ran a nonprofit organization. "Scholarship," her mother would whisper to her, starting when she was 7. "Baby needs a scholarship."

The girl responded. She studied all the time and tested into gifted programs; her mother got her into the best schools she could find. As a teenager, Ms. Gunn-Wright won a scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which supports high-achieving, low-income students. Her mother wanted her to be a doctor, but when she headed off to Yale University, she thought she might become a lawyer. Feeling no connection to English and political science, however, she switched to a double major in African-American studies and women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

When she went home and told her mother, it led to the biggest fight of their lives, an all-night blowout. "We didn't raise you to go into these subjects that don't seem like real subjects," she recalls her mother saying. "You want to pay your bills one day, don't you?"

But Ms. Gunn-Wright's new majors energized her. Her senior thesis, on welfare reform, won awards, and she became a Rhodes Scholar. After studying at the University of Oxford, she interned at a Washington think tank, focusing on women's policy issues, and recently she went to work for a research arm of the Education Credit Management Corporation, a guaranty agency for student loans.

By many measures, Ms. Gunn-Wright has

How to Help Low-Income Students Strive

Colleges and nonprofit groups offer advice to colleagues as well as students:

More advising, sooner: Talking with high-school seniors for the first time about what they want to do next is far too late. Counselors should start earlier, but their offices are often understaffed. The College Advising Corps has placed recent college graduates at 531 high schools in 14 states to meet with students as early as ninth grade. That provides a "longer runway" for conversations about college and career, says Nicole Hurd, the group's founder and chief executive. The counselors come from more than 20 college partners, which help provide salaries and training.

Setting an example: Low-income students can benefit from early contact with people in aspirational careers, beyond those they see in their families and communities. The Ocean Discovery Institute, for example, introduces low-income youth in San Diego to topics in science and conservation. Nearly all of the students who participate in the program go to college, and 70 percent wind up majoring in science. The nonprofit group, which is considering how to replicate its model in other coastal cities, has won support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to start a program in Norfolk, Va.

Support starting out: Internships have become all but essential, but they often pay little, if at all. To get all students in the game, Colgate University raised \$1.1 million last year to provide as much as \$6,500 per student for a summer internship or community-service project. For its first-generation students, Hamilton College offers support for networking, résumé and cover-letter writing, and interviewing.

made it. And yet, sitting in a board room at her office, she says the specter of poverty still haunts her. "Once you have that fear of not having money, it never leaves you."

It's sometimes in subtle ways that her low-income background still limits her, she says. When her Washington colleagues talk about the hottest new restaurant or bar, she feels out of place. She has avoided going out for \$10 drinks when she could be saving for a house, wedding, or unforeseen emergency. She worked two jobs in college, against her mother's wishes, because she didn't want to ask for money. She's certainly not going to now.

But her peers get plenty of help, their parents covering rent, occasional bills, or car insurance. For many affluent twenty-somethings who were encouraged to figure things out in college, a safety net remains in place well after graduation. Building an impressive career, especially in cities like New York and Washington, usually requires extensive cultural and financial scaffolding.

Ms. Gunn-Wright can live without having tried the latest artisanal spirits. "I don't think I will ever have a taste for hipster nonsense," she says. But by not socializing with colleagues, she knows she has missed out on valuable networking opportunities. "If everyone is

talking about going to a particular restaurant, and you've never been, what do you say? It's definitely a barrier. There is feeling that you don't belong here."

That pattern often begins in college, says Ms. Arnold, of Boston College, and can become a significant barrier to low-income students' pursuit of aspirational careers. Immersive, enriching experiences like internships, study-abroad programs, and social outings broaden students' connections with peers and provide practical experience for the workplace. But low-income students tend to participate in such activities at lower rates — because of the costs, because they don't live on campus, or because they're busy working.

Elissa Chin Lu, a former student of Ms. Arnold's who now works in institutional research at Wellesley College, has found that low-income students, worried about accumulating debt, choose to work during college, often in retail positions. Wealthier students fret less about debt and spend more time making connections with people and potential jobs in high-status professions. As a result, they are better positioned after graduation.

"The pathways from college to career are increasingly nonstandardized, and need to be negotiated with a good deal of social and cultural capital," Ms. Arnold says. "If you are outside an elite institution, or inside it but not of it, you are not getting those connections in friendships and extracurriculars that lead to these high-profile jobs."

Where administrators have realized this, colleges have introduced programs to support lower-income students' career development. Some provide stipends to subsidize internships, connections to alumni, and lessons in professional etiquette. A fund at Boston College gives low-income students tickets to football games or money for a night out.

And yet "career funneling," the socialization process that pulls affluent students into prominent, high-paying careers, remains strong.

Many elite-college graduates wrestle with the choice between pursuing wealth or a meaningful vocation. But for Ms. Gunn-Wright, that decision is a special conundrum. Lately she's been thinking a lot about Laquan McDonald, a black teenager who was shot 16 times by a Chicago police officer not far from where she grew up. Maybe she'll get a law degree after all, or go to graduate school for sociology or public health and work on gun-violence policy.

Or should she join a top-flight law or consulting firm? "Is it more of a political act to make money so that my children never need anything," she wonders, "or more of a political act to work in government?" She constantly considers her wage trajectory and the "psychic cost" of worrying about money or being around people she can't identify with.

"You have these gifts, and you know that if you don't use them, people in leadership positions won't look like you, and they might not care about the people that you care about," she says. "At the same time, you have real responsibilities to everyone else."

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