



# Why Are All the Rich Kids Sitting Together on Campus?

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Jourdan Shepard, a student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, created a lively blogosphere debate with his online post decrying elitism and “classism” at his historically black and male college. His insights speak volumes about the changing nature of student divisions on college campuses, from racial divides to income divides—though of course it isn’t as tidy a division since we’re speaking, after all, about American college campuses.

“Every August, a new freshman class walks through the gates of the school and into the campus gymnasium only to have their older brothers try to transform them into Black elitists,” Shepard wrote late in 2011 as the Morehouse correspondent for [newsone.com](#), an online aggregator of news targeted at black Americans. “Yes, Morehouse does tell their freshmen what is expected, but the bravado has seemed to overshadow the greater good. This is a problem.”

What drew Shepard’s ire is the sense of elitism and entitlement among a certain group of students strutting across his campus green. According to a growing body of scholarly literature, class stratification on college campuses may well be an immutable barrier that increasingly divides affluent students from their less well-off classmates, threatening the long-cherished ideal that a college education is the great equalizer of society.

Even as college campuses herald their efforts to lower racial barriers—especially at the most elite, predominantly white colleges—some observers note that economic disparities among college students is creating a situation where affluent students have one experience and poor students have an entirely different one. As Shepard noted, income disparities among students undermine the purpose of a college degree, which he defines as a tool “to develop the individual and help the community, rather than embracing a superficial identity that degrades one another.”

Several academics have looked at what Shepard called “a problem,” and their findings are far from definitive. The early scholarship—from academics such as University of Michigan economists Martha Bailey and Susan Dynarski and education policy experts such as Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute—suggests, however, that class distinction on college campuses deserves greater attention if institutions of higher learning want to improve the educational experience for poorer students.

As Rothstein makes clear, there are subtle differences in household wealth that are likely to be important markers of achievement. “But these are usually overlooked because most analysts focus only on annual family income to indicated disadvantage,” he wrote in a 2006 article for the

National Association of Independent Schools. “This makes it hard to understand why black students, on average, score lower than whites whose family incomes are the same. ... but children can have similar family incomes but be of different economic classes,” he stressed. “For low income families, blacks are likely to have been poor for longer than whites with similar income in any year.”

To be sure, hardly anyone seriously quarrels with the abundant facts demonstrating that students from poor and economically disadvantaged homes perform worse on average in school than classmates from affluent communities. Notably the highly regarded 1966 "Equality of Educational Opportunity Study"—also known as the Coleman Report after the study's lead investigator, James Coleman—made clear that student background and socioeconomic status are more important in determining educational outcomes than measurable differences in school funding.

More recently, research by Stanford University Associate Professor Sean F. Reardon traces the student achievement gap between wealthy and poor children over the past half-century, finding that the gap is greater than between black and white schoolchildren. Of course, if those gaps aren't narrowing, then it's reasonable to assume that economic disparities—and the gulf of academic outcomes—are evident on the college campus. Indeed this is the case, with troubling outcomes.

Princeton University sociology Professor Thomas J. Espenshade studied the effect of economic disparities on the college experiences of more than 9,000 students who applied to, enrolled in, and graduated from 10 selective colleges between the early-1980s and late-1990s. His findings—co-authored with Alexandria Walton Radford, associate director of postsecondary education at MPR Associates, Inc., in Washington, D.C., and published in the aptly titled book *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite Colleges*—suggested that students from different racial and class backgrounds “do not mix as much as one might expect.”

The lack of the social interactions isn't the "problem," but rather a symptom and reflection of the divergent experiences students are likely to have on campus. As Espenshade explained to me in an interview, less-affluent students often walk on campus feeling out of place, harboring attitudes that hamper their early ease and adjustment to college life. Such feelings aren't shared by their wealthier classmates, he said.

What's more, often the poorer students are made to feel unwelcome or reminded of their “outsider status” with comments about their need to work or dependence on financial aid. “Financial aid is where the class distinctions become apparent,” Espenshade said. “The top schools are trying to make financial aid available and to make it more practical for [less wealthy] students to attend. But that aid has to be invisible to ensure that it's not the dividing line once the student arrives for class.”

In recent decades (and as the backlash to affirmative action programs' displaced race-based efforts to attract nontraditional students to campus) college administrators and admissions officers have shifted focus toward redefining what a diverse student body looks like.

Increasingly, class-based diversity is the more coveted form of campus diversity, and race-based admissions is passé.

“I think [admissions officers] are motivated by the same concerns regarding social class diversity as they were with racial diversity,” Espenshade said. “They see themselves as creating opportunity for groups outside the mainstream.”

Indeed, one of the unintended and unforeseen consequences of the brief era of affirmative-action programs was that an ever-expanding group of well-prepared and often academically gifted middle-class black students were admitted to elite college campuses. Once on campus, however, these students found themselves viewed as separate and unequal to their even-better-prepared and decidedly more affluent white classmates.

Espenshade said race, class, and gender distinctions have long been a part of the DNA on college campuses. The civil rights movement of the late-1950s and early-1960s pushed some schools to make aggressive efforts to bring black students on campus, but it didn’t change the way they chose to interact once they arrived. The same seems to be true with class-based differences, he said.

Yet considering a student’s class upbringing doesn’t touch the same chords that considering race once did. “I think there’s awareness [among college admissions officers] that these are two different things,” Espenshade said. “One [class] is not just a proxy or coded language for the other [race].”

For the most part, few people—on campus or across the wider land—want to acknowledge that class matters or is determinative to future success. Denial that class truly existed separated the Founding Fathers’ lofty ideals from the Everyman (and Everywoman) in the society. For the New World’s experiment in representative democracy to take root, let alone succeed, every citizen had to believe that his or her opportunity in life was equal to a neighbor’s, not granted by a monarch or ordained by clergy.

That’s where education entered the picture, enshrined as the great leveler of our society. In order to be self-governing, a population had to be educated well enough to keep tabs on its government, to track how it spent taxes, and to hold accountable anyone who would corrupt the system. Knowledge was the key—greater quantities of education opened more rooms to those who might have been locked out.

Or so goes the theory. But in practice something else is true. The class divide continues to yawn across America, and despite legal attacks and changed social norms, education inequality continues to help maintain a class-based status quo. In a voluminous examination of class in America in 2005, *The New York Times* noted that many Americans prefer to imagine that class distinctions in the land “have blurred” or “some say they have disappeared.” *The Times’* findings, however, pointed to the contrary:

But class is still a powerful force in American life. Over the past three decades, it has come to play a greater, not lesser, role in important ways. At a time when education matters more than

ever, success in school remains linked tightly to class. At a time when the country is increasingly integrated racially, the rich are isolating themselves more and more.

This seems especially true on our nation's college campuses, which are the petri dishes of America. Whatever conversations occur in the wider, public discourse are surely more concentrated and intense among the young, sensitive, and idealistic students.

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