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Introduction

UNPRECEDENTED CLASSES IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

"WE ARE NOT who we once were." That is what elite colleges across the United States want you to believe about them. It's true. They aren't. Universities are touting unprecedented diversity numbers with respect to race and class. According to Princeton University, the class of 2021 was its most diverse "in the modern era," including more first-generation college students than ever before. Many other colleges are also making similar headlines—particularly notable are the rapidly growing number of schools that have admitted their first majority-minority classes, meaning there are more students of color than White students. In 2017, Cornell University recorded its third consecutive year in which prospective students set a new record for the number of applicants who self-identify as an underrepresented racial minority. The glee is palpable: according to the university, these remarkable numbers signal that Cornell is "well on our way toward our goals to broaden and diversify the incoming class."[1]

Harvard University is no different. In 2017, after 380 years of existence, Harvard admitted its first majority-minority class with respect to race: 50.8 percent of admits were not White. Economic diversity is another issue; that same class remains mostly rich and wealthy. Still, as one spokesperson for the university noted, the class of 2021 testifies to the fact that "Harvard remains committed to enrolling diverse classes of students."

Keeping its well-publicized word, the university delivered parallel performances in the years that followed.[2]

Like proud parents sharing pictures of their newborn baby, colleges broadcast these “wins” everywhere they can: purported testament to the fact that they value diversity. From staged pictures in glossy viewbooks handed out at high school open houses to (slightly) more organic “Student Takeover” days on Instagram, universities don’t let you miss the fact that they look different. These carefully curated displays of color serve as blatant marketing, and as a shield from criticism—both from prospective students critical of long-standing patterns of exclusion and from critics who say universities are raising tuition and hoarding resources. Everywhere you look, you are sure to find a smiling Black or Brown face, along with a White student with a “First Gen” shirt, highlighted for all to see—what sociologists Karly Ford and Megan Holland call “cosmetic diversity.”[3]

These achievements, to be clear, are no small feat. They are a profound shift in campus demographics, in just a few decades. And they are certainly not cheap. Universities are investing millions of dollars in financial aid to support such initiatives. Amherst College, which in 1999 replaced loans with scholarships and grants for students who come from lower-income families, announced that it would dedicate $71 million to financial aid annually starting in 2021. In 2022 Smith College became the most recent college to go “no loan,” in what has become something of an arms race among elite colleges to pledge that all lower-income students—and increasingly even middle-class students—will graduate without debt. Stanford University has the most robust no-loan policy and expanded it even further in 2023: the university now offers full tuition for families that make less than $150,000, up from $125,000. Princeton and Harvard doubled down on their no-loan policies and increased the income cutoff to $100,000 and $85,000, respectively. What’s more, Harvard and Princeton extend their no-loan policy to all students, regardless of immigration status, bringing the number of colleges in the country that do so to six.[4]

Changing admissions’ priorities and expanding financial aid don’t just make college more affordable for individual students; they also pave a smoother path toward upward mobility. To be clear, elite colleges are not the biggest drivers of social mobility for marginalized students. Economist Raj Chetty and his collaborators point out that certain mid-tier public universities, such as the City University of New York and California's web of state colleges, are actually the most effective at bottom-to-top quintile mobility, meaning moving people from the lowest 20 percent of the country's income distribution to the top 20 percent. Yet Chetty offers a sobering fact about mobility in America: for those same students it is elite universities, both private and public (like Amherst and Harvard, and the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley), that offer the surest shot at "making it."[5]

The more selective the college, the higher the odds of graduation. And this is especially true for students from underrepresented groups. But that's just the start. Attending an elite college increases a student's chances for entering elite occupations upon graduation, regardless of background (and often without the oppressive weight of loans). Sociologist Lauren Rivera documents how alumni of elite colleges are overrepresented in high-status positions—consulting, investment banking, venture capital, and other particularly lucrative sectors of the economy. From established Fortune 500 companies to new venture capital firms to the Supreme Court, students at elite colleges are far more likely than anyone else to secure elite jobs.[6]

Yet so much happens in the interim, between matriculation and graduation, between the thrill of getting in and the slog of getting out. There is a lot of life lived in those intervening years. And for so many students it is not easy living. I have found, again and again, that colleges are not paying enough attention to the everyday realities of those they let in. While elite colleges are content with recruiting "the most diverse class," patting themselves on the back for a job well done, it is not enough just to get students to campus. It is not just about financial aid. Colleges remain woefully unprepared to support the students who make it in.[7]

In an almost twisted act of fate, the students admitted in 2017 who make up these unprecedented classes at elite colleges are also those who were on campus in March 2020, when COVID-19 entered our world and shut so much of it down. Like many colleges across the country, members of Harvard's first record-breaking class were juniors, settling into their spring semesters and progressing toward graduation. They were gearing up for the all-important junior summer, when so many companies extend offers for employment after grueling yet revelatory summer internships. The next crop of students, now sophomores, and similarly record-breaking, had just declared their concentrations (Harvard-speak for academic majors), a big day on campus. Another group was gearing up for housing day, the annual celebration when first-years get sorted into their houses, the dorms they will live in for the next three years. The seniors, of course, were mere weeks away from graduation. Each of these groups of students were marching toward milestones and taking part in age-old traditions, almost as one. Then campus closed. The closure of campus revealed just how different the paths of these students through college had already been and foreshadowed how much more divergent they would become. And will continue to be. What happened when campus closed begs a crucial question: Do colleges know how to support a diverse class of students, or do they just know how to foot the bill for one?[8]

Buzz. Ding. Buzz. Ding. The morning of March 10 was a cacophony of vibrations and beeps across campus, as the phone of every student brought life-altering news. "Students are asked not to return to campus after Spring Recess and to meet academic requirements remotely until further notice." This message first came from Harvard's then-president Lawrence Bacow. Different deans repeated various versions of the same message throughout the day, as if the whole university were playing a harrowing game of telephone. The news dropped at 8:27 A.M. I read it as soon as it hit my inbox. I was on the faculty at the time. It was a Tuesday. Much of campus was still asleep. That quickly changed. The first burst of notifications spread across campus, followed by a second and third round, as students texted each other with their own screenshots and snippets of the original email. Just over seven thousand students emerged into a new reality. COVID-19 closures had begun.

But as I read the email that morning, and again months later, it reminded me of a very different message I got about spring break a decade and a half prior, during my first year in college. I was a nineteen-year-old freshman at Amherst, a member of a very different kind of cohort—we were celebrated for being unlike anything the college had seen. There was a group of us—we were Black, Latino, and the first in our families to go to college. Amherst was thrilled to have us—it took pride in how unusual we were. We weren't quite paraded around like a traveling circus. But we were definitely asked to smile for the camera more than our White peers. We were highlighted at the first and only assembly that our class would gather for until senior spring. Yet for all the attention on the front end, getting us to campus and sharing the news that we accepted the offer of admission, I realized that the college had no idea what to do with us once we arrived.[9]

The notice that Valentine Dining Hall, our sole cafeteria, would close came just before spring break of my freshman year. Universities just assume that students will leave campus for spring break because, well, nearly all of them do. I was from Miami, and plane tickets to return to the Sunshine State were already too expensive, even when it wasn't vacation time. Then, as more and more college students, both at Amherst and around the country, booked flights for fun in the Miami sun, tickets grew even farther out of reach. I decided to stay on campus. It wouldn't be all bad: I could work at the check-in desk at Alumni Gym and make some extra money. I didn't then realize how lucky I was to be able to pick up those extra hours. Each hour would become a lifeline. Money for me to eat. And also money for my mom, who would ask me to send "anything I could" to help pay the bills. What my nineteen-year-old self hadn't yet reckoned with was that while Amherst had opened its doors to welcome poor students like me, they forgot to keep the doors open for those of us who couldn't afford to leave.

Valentine would be closed for the entirety of break. I was shocked. And then I was angry. Angry at myself for assuming there would be food. Angry at Amherst for making a fool out of me. I remember walking past Valentine Dining Hall en route to town to try and find something to eat. I knew whatever I would find would not be cheap. Nothing is truly cheap when you're broke, not even greasy pizza in a college town. And definitely not when you unexpectedly have to provide for yourself three times a day for ten days. The irony of my route stung for the whole week: before I could even make it across College Street to venture into town, I first walked by the entrance to the dining hall. The lights were out. Only the emergency exit signs blazed red in the darkness. Peering through the large bay window, I could see the chairs stacked on top of the tables as if someone were just vacuuming but had moved out of sight. The towering stack of food trays stood waiting, just behind the gates that now barred me from entry.

Campus truly felt empty. Valley Transporter, the van service to Bradley International Airport, was packed to the gills heading down I-91. So many of my classmates left campus long before Valentine served its last meal for the week. It didn't hurt so much to see them go. What hurt was the college's ignorance of how those of us who remained were faring.

A decade and a half later, I confronted this reality anew as a scholar. In my first book, *The Privileged Poor,* I met students at an elite college who found themselves in the same situation I was in all those years ago. Their college, like Amherst, also closed eateries during break. And they, like me, learned to chart hungry days on their calendars. The students I spoke with stayed on campus because of what they didn't have. For some of them, it was money. For others, it was security. For a fair few, it was safety. Little did I know that exactly a year after *The Privileged Poor* was published, a global pandemic would make all of these issues even more urgent. The blind spots and fault lines of well-meaning college campuses would be exposed like never before, in ways both devastating and very illuminating.[10]

I read and reread President Bacow's email. I fixated on that one line. *Students are asked not to return to campus after Spring Recess.* In my heart of hearts, I knew the president was right. Closing campus was the only safe option. COVID-19 was a killer, and we didn't even know yet how deadly it would be. But each time I read the president's words, a different set of questions surfaced. What about the students who weren't going to leave for break? What are we doing for students who *can't* leave? What are we sending students home to? There wasn't clear messaging, no clear plan forward for those who "need to remain." I discovered over and over, in the days and weeks to come, that students seeking support were met with blank stares, mixed messages, and bureaucratic hurdles. Some students were even chastised for not having an exit strategy at the ready.

Jerome, a bespectacled, soft-spoken junior with South Asian roots, had to reckon with the full gamut of these difficulties. I met him on Zoom as he sat in his dorm room almost a year to the day since campus closed. His blue plaid shirt, buttoned to the very top, complemented his brown-butter complexion. He sat next to an open window in his room, soaking in the early spring sun. Although in his third year at Harvard, he had not made any "real connections" on campus with peers or professors. He felt disconnected from folks at Harvard from the beginning, a feeling that persisted. He tried to involve himself in different ways on campus, but the more he tried, the more "it dawns on me that I am alone in my situation."

Jerome struggled with what to do a year prior, when he read the president's email. He felt unseen and unheard. "Reading that email, from the president of the university, followed by the dean, it had the assumption that students have a place to go back to. . . . That is how I interpreted that email. I was uncertain. People are telling me, 'Oh, that means everyone needs to go.'" Jerome paused for a second, collecting himself. He began again, voice softer yet sharper, "For me, I didn't have plans to go back home for spring break, on the count that I don't have a home to go back to. 2020 has just been a crazy time for my family. My mother and I, it's just the two of us, we lost our place in the beginning of 2020, in January."

For many lower-income students like Jerome, going to college—let alone Harvard—was more than the exhilarating achievement of a lifelong academic dream. Harvard was an escape. The pandemic-related hardships that millions felt in 2020 weren't anything new for Jerome; those global disruptions were a different flavor of the same kinds he had been enduring for years. For half his life, Jerome and his mother bounced around the country, never staying anywhere for long. He characterized his disjointed housing history with a terrible bluntness: "I've lived where I cannot afford." Evictions were all too familiar. During his three years at Harvard, his mother found herself living "in her car, or right now, in a motel" as she "looked for employment opportunities." Jerome helped out whenever he could, picking up odd jobs when his class schedule permitted. His goals were as specific as they were dire: "trying to earn sufficient funds to get a place to stay for my mother that's more stable than a motel and her car." Things were beginning to look up. For the first time in a long while, even his mother was hopeful; she had just applied for her first batch of jobs after years of unemployment. She even made it past the first round of interviews for one of them.

When times were most dire, they sometimes stayed on the couches and floors of family members. But that arrangement never ended well. Jerome's uncles dismissed his mother for having a child while unmarried and rebuked her for struggling to get, let alone keep, a job. But it went deeper than verbal admonitions: "My uncle almost killed my mother." A fist-sized hole in the wall of their old home, Jerome explains, remains as evidence of a deed long done. His mother wasn't his family's only target. They detested Jerome for his effeminate demeanor, forgiving neither the sin nor the son. "Their hate of my mother is also targeted at me," Jerome explained. "I'm the abnormal one. I'm a bastard."

After President Bacow's email, Jerome made the long, anxiety-inducing trek from campus to his uncle's house on the West Coast. Remote learning was a distant thought. He had hoped the previous summer was the last time he would ever step through his uncle's front door. But then campus closed, and his mom was staying with her brother yet again. So Jerome didn't really have a choice. And then, soon after he arrived, he was reminded all over again why he never wanted to come back. One day after running an errand, he entered the front door of his uncle's house, and waiting for him was the barrel of a gun. Holding the grip was someone, his own flesh and blood, who made it clear how much Jerome was despised. "My cousin was aiming a pellet BB gun at me. It looks like a real gun, but it's not. I was screaming; I was really terrified." Jerome didn't know it was a BB gun at the time. But that fact didn't matter. His cousin took simple pleasure in watching Jerome cower in fear. His aunt mocked him. Instead of reprimanding her son for drawing a weapon on him, Jerome's aunt, watching on from the living room, chastised Jerome for screaming "like a girl. Why are you screaming and yelling? Are you gay?" Jerome's constant refrain was how living with his uncle "was a scary, scary time."

Feeling safe—let alone rested—always eluded Jerome when he was away from campus. COVID-19 wasn't his first time dealing with campus closures. Thanksgiving, winter, and spring breaks never gave what they promised to give: a respite. Breaks were the opposite for Jerome: "very much trauma-inducing; still something that gets me sick." Making Jerome and his mother feel unsafe was a family affair. Campus closures, like every break in the calendar, meant not just loss of room and board, as disruptive as that always was, it meant a loss of security. After all, coming to Harvard, even with all of his misgivings, had been a great gift: it was the first time "I have that stability of having a place, like a room with four walls and a roof."[11]

* * *

There are costs to being a member of an unprecedentedly diverse class. One of those costs is living in the university's blind spots. Colleges make many, many assumptions: not just about the books that students have already read, and the academic jargon they are already familiar with, but about what students know about living on a campus, about what students can afford, and about the resources—both financial and relational—that students take for granted. No surprise, then, for an institution that for nearly all of its history has served a painfully homogenous group of people—nearly all White and wealthy—we are only just becoming aware of the gaps in the services that a campus offers. Administrators, deans, and therapists I have worked with are consistently dedicated to their work but also largely ignorant of what it means to be a poor student on a rich campus, and ill-equipped to handle the many issues that emerge.[12]

The hurdles that made college so different, and so much more difficult, for students like Jerome existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to exist now. But the campus closures that started in March 2020 placed these often-invisible inequalities front and center. Our necessary response to COVID-19 exposed the university's ongoing ignorance—about the entrenched problems that haunt our students, and the fact that many of us don't know how we can, or should, support those students. COVID-19 was a stress test on higher education. It challenged all of us, in many different ways. So many universities failed that test.

To be clear, this failure is not just about money, or the lack thereof. Race matters, often amplifying class differences in distinctive ways. As time passed, the daunting weight of the pandemic exposed how having money, and in some instances even a modicum of wealth, was an imperfect shield for students of color. It wasn't just about getting off campus and gearing up for "Zoom school," although this was an ordeal. The uneven toll the pandemic exacted from disenfranchised communities, already marred by segregation, joblessness, and concentrated poverty, rippled through the student body. After all, students from the most recent historically diverse classes call these neighborhoods home. These communities were already grappling with the generations-long struggles that accompanied students to college—the distracting worries, the distressed calls, and all the other debilitating burdens of poverty that make focusing on schoolwork nearly impossible. As campuses closed and the virus spread, Asian, Black, Latino, and Native communities were hit the hardest, both in terms of COVID-19 cases and fatalities. In these communities, the sharp spikes in COVID-19 deaths were accompanied by the persistently high rates of other deaths—due to police brutality, vigilantism, domestic terrorism, and also the many systemic inequalities that define American life. Each of these manifestations of hate and inequity deepened how we all were being burdened, and also showed how this pain was unevenly dispensed. What's more, the ways that members of the university community—especially White peers and administrators—responded to these moments often did more harm than good, adding salt to ever-fresh wounds.[13]

Even after he was able to return to campus months later, Jerome found himself yet again in a no-man's land. This time he grew increasingly fearful just moving about the world. He obsessively tracked the rise in animosity toward communities of color, and especially Asian Americans. As assaults on Asian Americans rose across the nation, he felt himself split in two. Jerome was not Chinese, but he knew that assailants bent on doing harm did not know the difference between Mandarin and Korean, Nepali, or Tagalog. As much as he wanted to not think about the very people who made his life hell, he couldn't help it. "Every time that I see a headline, 'Asian man gets, whatever, beaten or attacked in these communities,' it always increases my heart rate. I want to read the headline. I want to see—is it my relatives who got attacked?" Each news item that crossed his desk or phone sharpened his loneliness and isolation. When he tried to reach out to classmates and other people at Harvard, he so often met silence. "They just don't want to speak or listen to me . . . people don't bother spending the time to hear me out in that."

* * *

There is a dire need to understand how students actually make it—or don't—from convocation to commencement, and especially how what happens outside the college gates—in their families, in their communities, and in the nation—permeates the campus. As ever more diverse classes are recruited, admitted, and enrolled, this need grows greater. Even during the height of the pandemic, colleges of all ranks and sizes reported new demographic milestones. In 2021, as Yale admitted its class of 2025, the university bragged that it was not only the largest class in its history but also one that "sets records for diversity."[14] The University of Arizona welcomed its largest, most diverse class in 2022. The University of Minnesota and Virginia Tech celebrated similar milestones. As the demographic makeup of campuses becomes more complex, so too does the slate of issues that students bring with them to college, especially since these students are coming to college in the wake of a global pandemic that deepened already deep-rooted inequalities. Colleges need to think less about the photo shoots and the press releases, and more about the even harder work that comes with making these students actual members of the community.[15]

My goal in these pages is to illuminate what living in poverty's long shadow means for students and, in turn, for colleges and universities. Unless we get a handle on how these durable inequalities—from poverty to joblessness to segregation—affect the transition to college, and the experience of college—and adulthood for that matter—universities will fail the students who they spend millions to recruit. This is not a book about the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a book that uses the disruptions of the pandemic to reveal underexamined inequalities that plague our most vulnerable students. COVID-19 closures and the months after present a time to reflect upon the past as we attempt to build a better future. And there is no better guide in our reflecting than the stories of students themselves. As we'll see, they are our blueprint; their disparate experiences deepen our understanding of the reproduction of inequality in college. It is not just about how savvy one is about navigating exams or office hours. The calls from home—whether asking for money to pay bills or offering news of untimely deaths due to neighborhood woes—fundamentally shape how students move toward graduation. There are new responsibilities attached to having students from every walk of life. Admission is but the first step along this mobility journey.[16]

* * *

To understand the upended world of college students, I went straight to the source. I spent more than a year speaking with undergraduates to understand the ways in which the pandemic and resulting closures exacerbated the inequalities in their lives. Between January 2021 and March 2022, my team and I interviewed 125 undergraduates at Harvard University, either via Zoom or in person. They were Asian and Black, Native and White, and Latino and Mixed (students who identify with two or more racial/ethnic groups). They came from families across the economic spectrum. They all lived in the United States. In the pages that follow, I use race and socioeconomic identifiers in parentheses to help situate students. (See the appendix for a detailed discussion of how I carried out this research and the abbreviations for an explanation of what the identifiers mean.)

Social class can either create a buffer to the world's problems or bring us closer to those problems. In order to elucidate the tremendous impact of class, I spoke with both lower-income as well as middle- and upper-middle-class students. Of the students I spoke with, sixty-eight were upper-income and sixty-seven were lower-income students. We still shy away from talking about social class, especially the privileges more affluent students have at their fingertips compared to those of their lower-income peers. If anything, the pandemic underscored the ease of privilege. And the obliviousness of the privileged. It also placed private choices—where to go, what to buy—into the public view. From Instagram to Snapchat to Zoom, all of our online platforms provided glimpses into these disparate worlds. At the same time, it gave new insights into just how hard it is to be poor, and especially poor at an institution that caters to the privileged.[17]

Similarly, talking openly about race remains taboo. So often universities keep conversations general and superficial. Sometimes this move is done so as not to offend. Other times it is so as not to reveal one's true thoughts. And yet, universities would be better equipped to help students if frank conversations about the college culture and climate could be had, a finger on the true pulse of the university community.

So much of social science research still focuses on Black/White inequities, in schooling, in pay, and in a host of other outcomes related to mobility. Yet this story would be incomplete without the experiences of Latino undergraduates as well as Asian and Native students. Latinos face historic rises in discrimination, family separations, and anti-immigration sentiment and legislation captured in vows to "Build a Wall." Our country also bore witness to increased racial hostility toward Asian Americans during the pandemic amid claims of the "China virus" coming to hurt the United States by then-president Donald Trump and other conservative pundits. But there were also those who faced targeted attacks before the pandemic and increased hostility since, as well as debilitating rates of death due to COVID-19 who received next to no coverage in the news: Native and Indigenous people. Including the voices of Asian, Latino, and Native students, alongside Black and White students, deepens our understanding of how the pandemic exacerbated inequalities in students' lives as well as shines light on those suffering in silence.[18]

My focus on race and class does not negate the importance of gender and sexuality—quite the opposite. I discuss times when students' gender or sexuality played a particular role in how they navigated closures, as in the case of Jerome. But social class and race serve as the primary focuses of this project.

Some may say Harvard is abnormal, an oddity on the higher education landscape. What can we learn from students' experiences there? A lot. Harvard is not the only school playing the diversity game, amping up outreach to recruit more students of color and those who are first in their families to go to college. What these pages hold is as much an examination of Harvard as it is a look at just how unequal America is. Harvard is not divorced from the world; it sits squarely within it. It plays an outsized role in society, from economic to political affairs. It recruits students from all over the nation and around the globe. Yet, like many elite colleges—from Washington University in St. Louis to University of Southern California—Harvard is a barbell campus demographically: most students are either wealthy or low-income, with very few people in between. This inequality is growing on campuses just as it is growing in society. Students enter the gates from neighborhoods marked by concentrated affluence or concentrated poverty, and both profoundly shaped how students moved through campus long before March 2020 and how they experienced the pandemic. Yet, even at the wealthiest university in the world, there was, at times, little to no shielding from the dangers of the pandemic.[19]

Moreover, being a student of color, regardless of class background, at a predominately White university brings with it a host of challenges, challenges that only got harder with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Delaina Ashley Yaun, and the many missing Indigenous people at the hands of police and vigilantes in 2020 and the months that followed. At times, there were additional burdens placed upon students of color because of just how ill-prepared Harvard—like so many schools that aggressively tout diversity—was to help students process and work through the trauma of witnessing such disregard for human life.

There is power in telling your own story. Yet so many students felt silenced. Some were still at home, and some were back on campus. Yet all, in one way or another, were distanced from the community they had built, and so many were in need of someone to talk to. I had the great fortune to sit with students as they shared their stories, open and honest from the moment we began. There were as many smiles and jokes as there were tears and weighty silences. The words that filled the hours-long interviews gave insight into how poverty and inequality influenced the ways each student moves through college. But their words also gave insights into how to address the many entrenched inequities, on our campuses and beyond.

The longer I sat with these students, the more their words forced me to wear two hats, one of the forever first-generation college student and the other of the academic committed to investigating social ills. There is a responsibility that comes with collecting these stories, one that goes beyond sociology's near directive to just be the objective observer who documents the problem and then moves on. I don't have it in me to sit on the sidelines. I want to be part of the solution, not just one who points a finger at what is going wrong. Throughout, I ask a simple question: Now that we know what we know, what are we going do about it? In line with sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois's vision of engaged scholarship and Monica Prasad's call for "problem-solving sociology," I use students' stories to build out actionable steps that can help ameliorate the long-standing inequalities that COVID-19 exposed.[20]

Part I focuses on students' families. Chapter 1 examines students' relationships with the people they share a bloodline with or who invited them into their family trees. In doing so, we see differences not only in resources but in acceptance and support. Chapter 2 focuses on the family students inherit: their community. Some communities protect students from harm. Others seem to invite dangers into their lives. Chapter 3 offers insights to help colleges understand and prepare for when the problems of home, tucked in next to XL twin sheets, come to college too.

Part II turns to finances, specifically how work and labor shape undergraduate life. Chapter 4 focuses on paid labor and chapter 5, unpaid. In chapter 4, I show how campus closures revealed an unacknowledged class-segregated labor market on campus. Lower-income students stopped working and lost pay, while more privileged students, at least those who worked, kept going with the support of faculty, even getting more hours. In chapter 5, I show how privileged students took on unpaid internships during the pandemic, while lower-income students took on additional unpaid paid labor on behalf of their families. Yet for many lower-income students, I show how the work they did often required more work and higher-order skills than their privileged peers, but they discounted it as just helping their families. Chapter 6 puts forth solutions on how to make campus employment work better for students.

Part III focuses on the racial fault lines on campus and across the United States, respectively. Chapter 7 examines how racist acts before campus closures colored students' reception of wellness checks from White friends and solidarity statements by the university as social unrest gripped the nation. Chapter 8 leaves campus to understand the myriad ways, overt and subtle, that racism impacted students' lives when campus closed and how the heartache of those experiences lingers. Chapter 9 pushes universities to adeptly navigate and close the gaps in recognition—of students as full members of the community and not just props for pamphlets—that students uncomfortably find themselves in and come to resent the university for.

It is paramount for colleges to come to terms with entrenched social inequalities, particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court's dismantling of affirmative action. Due to the ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard,* handed down in June 2023, universities are now barred from explicitly using the race of an applicant as a key factor in admissions. In response, universities are doubling down on their recruitment of youth from lower-income families, and especially first-generation college students. While first-generation status captures an individual's history, it does so without the larger context of the United States. Yes, there are common experiences among those who are first in their families to go to college, but we cannot paint all first-generation college-goers with one brushstroke. An uncritical use of first-generation college student status as any kind of proxy, without understanding the many and varied predicaments of these students, is a recipe for betrayal and for pain.[21]

In the *Price of the Ticket,* the ever-prescient essayist James Baldwin notes, "It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less." I agree. To admit a diverse class mandates that colleges support a diverse class. But without understanding the inequities that shape every facet of college life, we will never be able to live up to that directive, not in good times, and definitely not in bad. Diversity devoid of understanding is worse than a broken promise; it is one that was never intended to be kept. Students need us to be better and do better, to work harder to keep that promise. The testimonies of these students serve as both an invitation and a challenge: to learn from missed opportunities, to do less damage.[22]

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