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The Privileged Poor

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The Privileged Poor

HOW ELITE COLLEGES ARE FAILING DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Anthony Abraham Jack

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To Marilyn Butler Jack,

for teaching me from whence I come

To Gregory Glenn Jr.,

for showing me how far I can go

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I am what time, circumstance, history,
have made of me, certainly, but I am,
also, much more than that. So are we all.

JAMES BALDWIN, *Notes of a Native Son*

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Abbreviations

Social Classification

DD	Doubly Disadvantaged
PP	Privileged Poor
UI	Upper Income

Racial / Ethnic Classification

A	Asian American
B	Black
L	Latino
W	White

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Introduction

CAN POOR STUDENTS BE PRIVILEGED?

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

—DOROTHY, *The Wizard of Oz*

"Where are the *other* poor black kids?" This is the first question I remember asking myself, a chubby freshman with my hair in cornrows, while walking across the Amherst College campus. I was in the center of the main quad, standing outside Johnson Chapel. The lawn was freshly mowed. It looked pristine, a shimmering deep green. The evening, slightly chilly for a Miami transplant such as myself, was filled with excitement as the incoming freshmen meandered around, nervously greeting one another. Conversations bubbled all around me. Wasting little time, my new peers enlisted me in a rite of passage that, fifteen years later, I now call "convocation conversations"—those quick, casual introductory chats that happen en route to meals and classes, where students conveniently work in verbal versions of their resumes and narrate their summer itineraries for any and all to hear.

These strangers—my new classmates—swapped stories of summer fun. Multiweek trips abroad. Fancy parties at summer homes. Courtside

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seats at professional basketball games. Invitations to private premieres of movies that, as far as I knew, had not yet hit theaters. Many of these kids were white, but the black students were chiming in too, going tit-for-tat recounting the elaborate stories behind their passport stamps. One black classmate casually mentioned that she had flown on a private jet. I thought back to my first time on a plane, which had been just a few months ago: me struggling to chew five pieces of Wrigley's Doublemint gum, because everyone had made me afraid that my ears would pop, as I boarded a Delta Airlines flight from Fort Lauderdale to Hartford, Connecticut, for my Amherst football recruiting trip. I tried to think of a story that I could add. The only family vacations I had known were drives up I-95 from Miami to a cousin's house in Georgia. These rich kids had their own version of summer. In my family, summer was just a season, a hundred days of heat, humidity, and hurricanes. And mosquitoes.

I was surrounded by affluence; some of my Amherst classmates were flat-out rich. The Amherst brochure boasted that roughly 40 percent of students received financial aid, but I knew what that really meant: more than half of my classmates came from families that made too much money to qualify for any financial aid. I was not surprised by the wealth. After all, I already knew what it meant to go to school with rich people. I had just finished my senior year at Gulliver Preparatory, a wealthy private high school in Miami. Although I was only there for a year, it gave me a taste of what was to come, both socially and academically. My best friend at Gulliver, whose father convinced me to start eating burgers medium instead of well done, which was the rule in my house, received a car his senior year, and an all-expenses-paid backpacking trip through Europe as a graduation gift. The first time I heard the word "hostel" was while sitting in the larger of the two family rooms in their sprawling, Spanish-style home.

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But there was a difference between what I had experienced at Gulliver and what I found at Amherst. While I was not shocked by the wealth, I was surprised by its color. The rich kids at Gulliver, those who drove Range Rovers and boasted of extravagant vacations, were not black. But at Amherst, many of my new wealthy classmates were.

What I discovered that afternoon was the same thing I would read about years later, as a sociology graduate student, in William Bowen and Derek Bok's groundbreaking study of American higher education, *The Shape of the River.* Bowen and Bok found that the majority of black students at the twenty-eight elite colleges and universities they studied (from Ivy League institutions, like Columbia University, to flagship public universities, like the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor) came from upper-income families. My Amherst classmates were no exception. Some were the sons of Bain Capital and McKinsey & Company. Others were the daughters of the Mayo Clinic and Massachusetts General Hospital. I was not. I was a Head Start kid from Coconut Grove, a distressed community that, in 2013, the *Miami Herald* called a "neighborhood that time forgot." My mother patrolled the hallways of Ponce de Leon Middle School for over thirty years, wearing a green polo shirt with SECURITY in white block letters emblazoned across its back. By day, my older brother, his pale blue uniform peppered with bleach spots, cleaned the classrooms of my old elementary school; by night, he cleaned the emergency rooms at South Miami Hospital.[1]

Before I transferred to Gulliver, the closest I got to rich was through the stories my grandmother told me. For her entire adult life she cleaned the homes of wealthy white families, mainly doctors and lawyers. When my cousin was arrested for possession of a controlled substance, one of my grandmother's employers, a lawyer, represented him as a

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favor for her twenty-plus years of service. She did not gossip about what went on inside her employers' homes. Now and then, however, she would let slip a detail about an expensive purchase or a lavish family trip. The father of one of the families, a commercial pilot, invited my grandmother to travel on one of his flights so that she could hear his voice come across the intercom greeting passengers as they took their seats. (She never did go.) But second-hand accounts and unanswered invitations were the extent of my exposure—wealth was always just a story to me. Hearing my classmates at Amherst recount their adventures, just as distant as those my grandmother shared when we sat at her knee, I resigned myself to be, yet again, one of the few poor black people in a rich (mostly) white place, just as I had been at Gulliver.

My hasty conclusion that afternoon was reasonable. Higher education in America is highly unequal and disturbingly stratified. Youth from poor families of all races, but especially those from black and Latino families, are less likely to go to college than their wealthy peers. When they do go to college, they rarely attend schools like Amherst. Although half of all undergraduates in the United States are the first in their family to go to college—with most of those coming from poor backgrounds—first-generation college students are disproportionately relegated to community colleges, for-profit colleges, and less-selective four-year colleges. Those institutions share some troubling traits: resources are few, aid for students is scarce, and retention is low.[2]

That same disproportion, of course, works in reverse. The more selective the college, the fewer the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of both class and race. In their examination of college demographics between 1982 and 2006, Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce clearly documented this phenomenon. At the most competitive tier of colleges—think Columbia, Princeton, Stanford—

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just 14 percent of undergraduates came from the bottom half of the country's income distribution. At the second-most competitive tier—the likes of Dickinson, Furman, and Skidmore—just 16 percent did. This paucity of lower-income students at the most selective colleges and universities, which comprised 193 institutions at the time of their study, stands in stark contrast to the fact that in these same two tiers, 63 and 70 percent of students, respectively, came from the top quartile of the income distribution. Put another way, children from well-to-do families, as measured in terms of earnings, took up two-thirds of the seats at the best schools.[3]

New data provide a more detailed, and even more discouraging, snapshot of where Americans from families of different income levels go to college. In 2017, the economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues found that students from families in the top 1 percent—those with incomes of more than $630,000 a year—are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League college than are students from families that make $30,000 or less a year. The study showed that a startling number of elite colleges—38, by their count, including places like Colby College and Bucknell University—have more students from families in the top 1 percent than from families in the bottom 60 percent (the growing group of families that make less than $65,000). At Colorado College, the ratio is greater than 2 to 1. At Washington University in St. Louis, it is just over 3.5 to 1.[4]

Another comparison, this time looking at the college destinations of the super-rich, puts this inequality into even sharper perspective. Chetty's report showed that the percentage of students from families in the top 0.1 percent who attended elite universities (40 percent) was the same as the percentage of students from poor families who attended any college at all, either two-year or four-year.

We might have better data now, but the situation itself is not new. Indeed, for more than two decades, colleges have faced significant

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pressure to do more to combat inequality, and in particular, to use their considerable wealth to address the affordability problem of higher education. In 2008, just before the financial crisis, the Senate Finance Committee admonished colleges for not spending more of their growing endowments on financial aid and access. The public has chimed in as well, lamenting the rising tuition costs that have priced out a growing segment of the American population. Colleges were (and still are) missing out on students from humble means who have a powerful drive to succeed. To address this inequality in access, which was keeping poor youth from reaping the benefits of an elite education—as well as to respond to public outcries against skyrocketing costs—a few colleges introduced no-loan financial aid policies in the late 1990s. Rather than the usual combination of scholarships and loans, which was still prohibitively expensive for many poor families, schools began to create financial aid packages that replaced loans with grants and other forms of aid intended to help recruit and then support academically gifted applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.[5]

Princeton University began this movement in 1998. Then president Harold T. Shapiro noted of the policy, "Our aim is to do as much as we can to be sure that no student decides not to apply to Princeton solely for financial reasons." A number of colleges followed Princeton's lead. Amherst did so in 1999, which helped pave the way for my admission a few years later. By 2008, all the Ivies were on board. Stanford University, MIT, and Duke University adopted similar policies. Although enacted mostly by private colleges, no-loan financial aid was taken up by some flagship public universities as well. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was the first public university to do so, in 2003. The University of Virginia and the University of Michigan followed suit soon thereafter. Donald Saleh, former dean of admissions and financial aid at Cornell University, expressed the general sentiment about

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this new approach to aid: "There's an importance in having socio-economic diversity, so that campuses reflect the country in general rather than a campus that is upper income."[6]

These revolutionary policies increased access to many universities, especially elite ones. The effects were felt right away: student bodies began to look different. Vassar College, which in 2015 won the inaugural Cooke Prize for Equity in Educational Excellence, nearly doubled the percentage of Pell Grant–eligible students—students from families in the bottom quarter of the income distribution—from 12 percent in 2008 to 23 percent in 2015. The University of North Carolina and Amherst reported that at least 20 percent of the students who enrolled between 2012 and 2014 were from lower-income families.[7]

Elite colleges may be few in number, but their influence—on the lives of individual students and on American society as a whole—is outsize. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, attending an elite college or university serves as a mobility springboard. Graduating from any college provides benefits, especially to students belonging to groups that are the recipients of policy initiatives aimed to diversify universities along class and racial lines. But this difference is even more pronounced for elite colleges, where graduation rates are higher. The nation's most selective colleges boast graduation rates of 90 percent or more, while the average for community colleges is 57 percent. While some of this gap is due to differences in the preparation of the students who attend each type of institution, there is no doubt that more resources and support are available at elite colleges and universities. The economic payoff of attendance is also larger. A 1999 study found that graduates of elite private schools had incomes 39 percent higher than those of their peers who attended low-ranked public universities. Whether looking at Supreme Court justices or leaders of different

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industries, alumni from elite colleges and universities are the norm rather than the exception. The sociologist Lauren Rivera has shown that students from elite institutions have an advantage when trying to enter lucrative fields like management consulting, law, and investment banking; as a result, alumni of elite colleges dominate the ranks in those companies.[8]

The shift in the makeup of the undergraduate population at elite schools is remarkable. More and more colleges are enacting policies to promote the social mobility of those from humble means. They are being celebrated and rewarded for their efforts to diversify their campuses, and by extension, to expand the ranks of the future leaders of America. The doors to elite colleges are increasingly open to lower-income students. But just how wide open are they? Let us not forget that Princeton, despite introducing this change in financial aid policy, remains one of the thirty-eight universities that have more students from the top 1 percent than the bottom 60 percent. Lower-income students may be entering elite colleges in greater numbers now than they were fifty years ago, but these campuses are still bastions of wealth, built on the customs, traditions, and policies that reflect the tastes and habits of the rich.

I believe we should congratulate these colleges and universities on their willingness to innovate. Yet we cannot stop there. We must inquire further. Who are the students admitted to college under these new financial aid regimes? And what happens to them when they arrive on campus? Now that they have gained access to an elite institution, how do they make a home in its hallowed halls?

That afternoon on the Amherst quad, after milling around and making small talk, I marched along with my classmates into Valentine dining

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hall. Imagine my surprise when I learned that the young black woman sitting next to me, who had just graduated from a snooty day school and had studied abroad in Spain the previous year, also came from a single-parent home and was the first in her family to attend college. After discovering our common past, we felt the flush of comfort that comes with shared impoverishment but also shared freedoms. We immediately started telling stories of life before Amherst. We both grew up in segregated neighborhoods where just about everybody was black. The white people we did see fell into three easily identifiable categories: police officers, crackheads, and people who had lost their way. Her family, too, struggled to make ends meet from time to time. Both of us had done homework by candlelight, not for atmosphere, but because the power was out.

She and I laughed and commiserated over that desperate search for end-of-the-month money. Soon, a few other students at our table joined in. We were not the only ones, it turned out, who had experienced poverty in our youth but had been exposed to a different world when we went to a prep school. The vacation homes I heard about from some of my new friends during those convocation conversations, I discovered, were not always their own. They often belonged to the families of their wealthy high school classmates, the ones that we all made nice with for a few glimpses at the good life. I was not alone. I was not the only poor black kid on campus. And I was not the only one who had already been granted access to experiences and places beyond what my family could afford or even knew about. My classmate and I were not as different as I had thought. We were both poor. And privileged.

College "viewbooks"—magazine-style recruiting tools that colleges put together to advertise themselves—contain glossy snapshots of campus

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life. These days, such snapshots almost always highlight diversity: the black and brown faces are placed front and center, as are the statistics documenting the cosmopolitan nature of the student body. But appearances, as we know, can be deceiving. And statistics can lie or, at least, hide deeper truths. While it is doubtless true that colleges are more diverse now than they were a generation ago, this does not mean that these institutions reflect the full variety of American society.

Essentially, colleges hedge their admissions bets: they diversify their student bodies by drawing from old sources. We know that poor youth make up only a small fraction of the students who attend private high schools in the United States; we also know that poor black students are only a fraction of that small population. But it is this tiny slice of a slice, I discovered, who are primarily admitted to selective colleges. Over 50 percent of the lower-income black undergraduates who attend elite colleges get there from boarding, day, and preparatory high schools—well-endowed, highly selective schools that pride themselves on fostering independent thought and extending learning beyond the classroom through close contact with faculty. Chances are, at least half of the poor black kids I met that first day at Amherst had graduated from elite private high schools, like Phillips Academy Andover in Massachusetts and St. Paul's School in New Hampshire.

When you envision a wealthy private high school—with its top-flight facilities and abundant resources—that image likely has a color attached to it: white. Thus, when most people see poor black students at an elite college, they simply don't think that those students might have come from an exclusive high school. These prep schools are full of students from affluent families—mostly white but not exclusively so—and offer academic and social opportunities usually reserved for the rich, from study abroad opportunities to language immersion

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programs to contact with faculty who have advanced degrees. Lower-income graduates from these high schools enter college already accustomed to navigating elite academic arenas, already familiar with the ways and customs of the rich. True, they are poor, but they have the privilege of an early introduction to the world they will enter in college. I call this group of students the *Privileged Poor.*[9]

Then there is the other half of lower-income black students at elite colleges. This group of students enters college from exactly where most people would expect: local, neighborhood schools that are often distressed, overcrowded, and under-resourced. The teachers are likely to be younger and have less experience in the profession (and less support) than their counterparts in more affluent communities. Maintaining order often takes precedence over teaching, as neighborhood problems penetrate school boundaries. These schools are also likely to be segregated, both racially and socioeconomically. Undergraduates who enter college from these schools traverse troubled hallways and endure disordered classrooms before college. When they first set foot on an elite college campus, it looks, feels, and functions like nothing they have experienced before. I call these students, who are both poor and unfamiliar with this new world, the *Doubly Disadvantaged*.[10]

This situation of two distinct tracks to college is not limited to black students. Many lower-income white and Asian American students also travel an alternative route through private high schools, albeit at lower rates. Latinos, too. One-third of lower-income Latino students at elite colleges and universities hail from private high schools like the Brearley School in New York and the Thacher School in California. The other two-thirds stayed close to home for high school.[11]

Before I arrived at Amherst all those years ago, like most eighteen-year-olds, I was blissfully ignorant of the complexity all around me.

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I knew that I had studied hard, and now I got to go to a great school and do something that no one in my family had ever done. But I had no idea that my detour through Gulliver was a well-established on-ramp that a great many students across the country traveled en route to college. Until I learned the stories of some of my classmates at Amherst, I thought I was the only one. It was only years later that I started to fully grasp these truths. It was also years later, as a graduate student in sociology, that I realized that I was far from the only one who was ignorant here. The very social scientists I was now eagerly reading, analyzing, and learning from had also ignored this distinction within disadvantaged youth, its origins, and how it manifests itself in college.

So I set out to add a missing—overlooked but nevertheless crucial—piece of the puzzle. For two years I lived and made observations at a prestigious undergraduate institution that I call Renowned University. (For a full discussion of my data and methods, including my use of pseudonyms, see the Appendix.) Some readers may wonder why, if I hoped to learn about inequality, I chose to examine life at an elite university. But studying inequality cannot, and should not, always be about studying poor people in poor places. Doing so assumes that the inequality that stifles the development and undercuts the well-being of the poor only occurs in the places where they live. The reality is that while our neighborhoods may be segregated, our fates are intertwined. And what happens at colleges and universities like Renowned has a significance beyond their small number. So it is crucial that we understand the experiences of lower-income students and investigate whether these institutions are ready for the increasingly diverse students bodies they are now trying to recruit.[12]

During my first weeks at Renowned, when I was just beginning my research, I met two students, Patrice and Alice, who were both Latina and from New York City. We talked. We got to know one another.

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When they told me their stories, I learned that they shared similar beginnings but had traveled along divergent paths to college. Both had grown up poor, but one went to a prep school and the other didn't.

Driven and determined, Patrice and Alice made their academic dreams come true when they earned admission to college. They were both short, both curly haired, both golden brown—as if they'd just been kissed by the sun. But the similarities went far deeper than appearance. Patrice and Alice were social twins, too. They saw and experienced many of the same things at home, in their neighborhoods, and in school. They traversed the same streets. They shopped at the same bodegas. From time to time, they even worshipped in the same parish. "We went to the same church. Patrice's mom lives around where my grandma lives," Alice said eagerly, while sitting in my office. The path to college was not easy for either of them. Both of their mothers had immigrated to New York in search of a better life, but immigrant dreams quickly became American nightmares. Limited by language barriers and lack of support from Patrice's and Alice's fathers, their mothers each worked two jobs until health problems from strenuous work and long hours forced them to quit.

Patrice and Alice grew up on government assistance, but evictions and the constant strain of moving made uncertainty a constant reality. Moreover, their moves were not always to better neighborhoods. "It's not really projects 'cause we do pay for electricity, but it's subsidized. Everyone there is poor," Alice said about her current neighborhood. Although they both cringed when outsiders called their communities "ghetto" or "sketchy," they knew that a rose by any other name still has its characteristic thorns. They saw beauty in the struggle they faced, even though neither felt safe walking around the neighborhood, even during the day. Patrice was particularly torn; her anxiety about how to talk about home was palpable as she fidgeted with the cuff of her

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sleeve. "There's so much Hispanic culture; I love that. People know each other. It's kind of chill," she began. In the same breath, however, she noted, "I don't like the violence; that's a big thing. There's a lot of violence. A lot of shootouts. I witnessed one this summer." Seeing so many of her friends fall victim to the street, Alice questioned why she made it to college and her neighborhood friends did not. "John was so smart; he used to do so well. Now he's in and out of jail," she said. Slapping her leg sharply with an open palm, she asked, "What happened? Why did I get out? How did this happen to me but not everyone else? It's sad."

Elementary and middle school provided no refuge from neighborhood woes. Alice, becoming stony faced the longer she spoke, revealed that a fellow student who lived three blocks away had brought a gun to school and accidently shot her younger brother's grade-school crush. The student's rationale for bringing the weapon to school was simple, she explained: he wanted to feel safe. Patrice, looking downcast, discussed how constant fighting left students bloodied, teachers scared, and the school on high alert.

Patrice's and Alice's paths diverged after middle school. Both applied to Prep for Prep, a New York–based program that places lower-income, minority youth in boarding, day, and preparatory high schools. The program's intent is explicit: to transform the nation's leadership pool. Patrice was accepted. Alice was waitlisted.

Alice was not offered a spot, so she ended up attending her local public high school, where the people and problems from middle school followed her. Ninety-five percent of the students were black and Latino; equal numbers were poor. Roughly 40 percent of the students dropped out. Her high school was underfunded, under-resourced, understaffed, and underperforming. Disrespecting the teacher was part of the daily routine. Antagonistic rather than cooperative relationships

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developed between students and teachers, prompting Alice to keep her distance from all but one or two of them. It took years of seeing those same teachers day in and day out before enough trust was built to enlist them as mentors. Threats to person and property were frequent. "Teachers didn't know how to control their classrooms. There would be fights, people setting garbage cans on fire, people smoked weed in school, cut school," she said somberly. "All these things became more commonplace as the years went by." Alice was not innocent, she admitted. She, too, skipped class with her friends. She, too, was not always respectful to her teachers. Still, gifted and naturally inquisitive, with an uncommon ease in expressing herself through writing, she maintained high marks even as she played hooky.

Toward the end of her sophomore year, Alice decided to invest her energies into making sure she graduated and went to college. With its lack of resources and unpredictable funding, the school did not always make it easy to do so. Alice loathed having to travel to other schools for science labs because her school didn't have the appropriate equipment. She applied to Renowned on something of a whim. When she received her acceptance letter, she was a ball of emotions: happy, surprised, terrified. People from her school often did not graduate, let alone go to college; and if college was in their plans, they did not attend places like Renowned.[13]

Patrice, by contrast, was accepted to Prep for Prep. She went through the grueling fourteen-month academic boot camp, a prerequisite to prepare urban middle schoolers for the expectations of private high schools. She eventually left New York City and the ten-block radius in which she had spent most of her life for a boarding school three states away. The school buildings sat on three hundred sprawling acres of manicured lawns and fields peppered with red brick buildings. "My

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mom never had to pay for tuition: I got full financial aid, it paid for books and trips," Patrice explained. Someone else's dime paid her $50,000 tuition and fees, which covered not only snow tubing adventures and European exchange programs, but also health insurance and winter clothes. Her boarding school, rich and mostly white, boasted a $200 million endowment. Nearly three-quarters of the faculty had advanced degrees, and the student-to-teacher ratio was six to one. With a jovial look spreading across her face, Patrice noted, "My school was smaller than some of my lectures now" at Renowned, allowing her to get "very close to the teachers; there was a lot of overlap with who was your coach, who was in your club, who was in your organizations, and then who was in your classes and dorms."

In fact, one of Patrice's fondest memories of boarding school was that she was given the resources to pursue her own independent study project. She chose to investigate the social meaning of hair for women of color. It is true, she said with a wry smile, that the research project was spawned by ignorant—or perhaps racist—questions by some of her white classmates about the cleanliness of "black hair." Nevertheless, she laughed the comment off and emphasized her appreciation of her teachers' encouragement to explore a project that sparked her nascent interest in identity and culture. The school also helped her family at home when unexpected trouble hit. "We've always had to struggle; we got a lot of help from the school," she said. "When my grandfather passed away, the school sent a check to help with funeral expenses."

As senior year approached, Patrice benefited from two additional perks that her boarding school provided. Along with the college counselor supplied by Prep for Prep, she worked closely with a school counselor, who had a caseload of fewer than fifteen students, to coach her through all her college applications. (In 2014, the national average caseload for guidance counselors was five hundred students, and at schools

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