

The Disadvantages Facing Low Income College Students

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Abstract

Studies have been done to understand the college experience as it relates to varying demographics and their outcomes. Additional surveys question students to understand classism in the university setting and its impact. Research shows that low income students are less admitted to colleges compared to high income students. Low income students face challenges that cause them to drop out at higher rates as well. Findings suggest that higher income students have more resources to apply to, get scholarships for, and succeed in college. College degrees are found to increase wages and thus benefit those who graduate and help students out of poverty.

Keywords: inequity, socioeconomic status, income, employment, poverty, food and housing insecurity.

The Disadvantages Facing Low Income College Students

College is for the rich. Universities may flaunt their financial aid packages and student resources but behind all that is the inequity low-income students face. A Harvard University study found that of 38 colleges in America, including five in the Ivy League, more students came from the top 1 percent of the income scale than from the entire bottom 60 percent (Aisch et al., 2017). Colleges are not providing the resources that students need to get a good education. Otherwise, there would be a much closer enrollment rate between the upper and lower income classes. In addition to academics, students are faced with costs that prevent them from succeeding in social settings. On top of all of that, expenses for food and housing. This lack of equity negatively impacts students' ability to succeed socially, physically, and academically.

College is an opportunity to branch out, engage socially, and make connections. That is, if the student can afford it. Connections at college stem from joining clubs, sports, or participating in events and activities. Extracurriculars are for the rich. Joining just one sport can rack up costs of equipment, uniforms, travel, and more. Going out with friends is also expensive, a share of the dinner bill, and the uber ride. Even joining a weekly club can be too much when a job is the priority. Because of costs, low income students are often excluded from the social aspect of the college experience. In a study of 12,000 students from 200 plus colleges, results showed that students from low income backgrounds were less involved in extracurriculars than their higher class peers (Walpole, 2003). In a separate study of first generation college students, questions were asked to learn about personal experiences of classism. Students reporting less access to financial resources experienced more incidents of exclusion (Allan et al, 2016). Playing a sport or going out with friends may not be a graduation requirement. However, social inclusion is vital in a student's success in college and thereafter. In the end, this study found that

institutionalized exclusion has an effect on college students' well-being (Allan et al, 2016). In a 2011 study done by JAMA psychiatry, doctors studied the relationship between household income and mental health. Results proved that lower levels of household income are associated with several lifetime mental disorders (Sareen et al, 2011). Not being able to participate socially has a negative impact on students' overall enjoyment of college. How can a student succeed in the college setting without social inclusion?

Socioeconomic class not only affects students' mental health but physical well being as well. Low income students struggle to have basic necessities like food and housing. Low income students find themselves skipping meals or reducing food intake altogether to save money. Some college kids rely on staying at school over breaks. It may be too expensive to go back home, or there may be no home to go back to. In a *TedTalk*, Harvard professor Anthony Jack (2019) expresses the impact shutting down for spring break has on those who depend on their college. Dining halls close and heat in dorms is turned down. Colleges may provide students housing over break but fail to realize the other challenges. There is no shortage of students impacted by these issues. The American Psychological Association reports that over a third of college students in the United States suffer from food and housing insecurity (Reppond, 2019). This means they struggle to get enough to eat and a place to live year round. Having access to healthy food is something many take for granted. For those in poverty, finding foods with a longer shelf life is a necessity to save money. Fresh fruit goes bad in days whereas frozen dinners can last months. Healthy, organic meals may be an option but automatically have a higher price tag attached. Foods with a longer shelf life are not as healthy and have consequences on one's physical well being. Such effects include diabetes, heart disease, and everyday difficulties like fatigue. Overall, these food and housing insecurities are found to have negative repercussions on

grades, test scores, and graduation rates (Reppond, 2019). What a student eats can quite literally determine their path to success in college.

Even if the social and physical disadvantages were somehow diminished, low income students would still suffer from academic barriers. For some students, college is a way out of the cyclical issue of poverty. Degrees promise higher pay and better employment rates. The U.S Department of Education (2021) reports that as degree levels rise, so do annual incomes. On average, those earning master's degrees make 26% more than those with a bachelors, and those with bachelors earn 59% more than those with just a high school degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Poor kids want to go to college. They want to make a life for themselves greater than the one they grew up in. Students from low income backgrounds are enrolling in college at higher rates every year (Allan et al, 2016). In the *PBS* documentary *Poor Kids*, children tell their experiences of growing up in poverty. They all express their stresses, and fears of becoming homeless. A boy comes home from school, proud of a test score and ready to show his parents. "Grades are my only way out of here," he explains "if my grades aren't good, I know I can't go to school." (*Poor Kids*, 2017). Good grades are considered a way out of poverty. Since parents cannot contribute, the kids must find a way from a young age to be able to succeed. This means working tirelessly to get good grades for merit scholarship money. Getting in is only half the battle though. Low income students must study hard to maintain grades to keep scholarships. It doesn't end there; they still need a job for other expenses such as bills, class materials, and technology. These costs will result in students working more, studying less. When bills pile up, picking up extra hours is the only option for lower income students. Hours spent at a job will take away from focusing on academics and can result in extra years to finish college, which piles on more loans and bills itself.

Some may say colleges provide equal opportunity to all. There are resources for all students, financial aid, scholarships. Anyone can apply regardless of income and universities do not discriminate based on social class. Some say colleges provide equal opportunity, and that would be right. Equality, though, is not equity. Advertising that students from lower socioeconomic status get a lower tuition rate is misinformation. There is more to it than that. Rich students actually have an advantage over lower class peers in the way they are informed about and are awarded scholarships. The College Board reports that an estimated \$16.1 billion in college scholarships are available annually by private sources such as golf associations, rotary clubs, businesses and more (Marcus, 2015). This is nearly double the amount given out in grants by all colleges in the United States annually (Marcus, 2015). These resources are designated for the rich. A golf association's members are not in poverty. Low income students are less likely to have parents who went to college than high income students. This means that high income students will have access to resources through their parents that others do not. Even though the poor students need these scholarships the most, they are less likely to get them than their higher-income peers (Marcus, 2015). Easier to access, and easier to obtain, the students who come from money are awarded more of it. This just continues the cyclical issue of poverty.

Low income students start disadvantaged to their higher class peers and those disadvantages continue throughout the education system. Without opportunities that level the playing field, how will the cyclical issue of poverty be stopped? Step one is to consider this an issue worth helping. There is no lack of resources, just lack of wanting to help. Counselors should have an understanding of students' experiences with classism. This way they are better equipped to assist students. Yet, classism has continued to be overlooked in the education system (Liu et al., 2004; Smith, 2008 in Allan, 2016). For example, "in a study of multicultural course

syllabi used in counseling psychology training programs, researchers found that classism was addressed in only 15% of courses surveyed” (Pieterse et al., 2008, in Allan 2016). Step two of fighting inequity is to aid low income students in their path to success. How about providing credits for knowledge learned outside the classroom? Real world experience is more valuable than most courses. This can decrease the time it takes to get a degree, saving money and time. How about embracing online learning? With the technology to post assignments and have online meetings, students are allowed a more flexible schedule for outside jobs. College may be designed for the rich, but there's no reason that design cannot be changed.

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