The Failure of the Great Equalizer

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Abstract

Of all the liberal education systems in the world, the American and Japanese systems are two of the most infamous and diametrically opposite. So how do they both perpetuate social immobility? Despite their differences, both education systems have mechanisms of differentiation that require initial economic capital. This presents a burden to those lower on the socioeconomic ladder, which further perpetuates the society's extant socioeconomic composition. Building on existing secondary scholarship on inequality in schools, and drawing upon interviews, articles, and datasets, this paper demonstrates the invalidity of common arguments surrounding the role of education on social immobility. The paper presents the mechanism for social mobility in Japan and the United States and the conditions under which students succeed or fail in attaining said mobility as a 'game.' Specifically, students compete to signal their competencies better than their peers at crucial stages in their education. Those with more resources to begin with have a competitive advantage over those with less, ensuring the game continues to favor the more well-endowed, thereby creating a cycle of social immobility within the education system.

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Historical Background

Japan and the United States have two of the most notorious liberal education systems in the world, completely opposite to one another in nearly every way. Japan's modern education system is deeply centralized with the Ministry of Education in Tokyo as the preeminent educational authority.[1] Contrast this to the United States' fragmented public education system where individual locales are responsible for selecting textbooks, creating curriculums, maintaining school facilities, and hiring teachers.[2] However, in the 1990s and early 2000s, both the United States and Japan tried to overhaul their education systems through large-scale reforms. The Japanese government's 1997 Program for Education Reform allowed for school choice for the first time and through the 2004 Trinity Reform, billions of dollars in education funding were decentralized from the national to the prefectural level. The United States, between 1994 and 2002, mandated national education policy over the states, required curriculum standards for all public-school students, as well as testing and accountability measures for schools.[3] More recently, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (first adopted by Kentucky in February 2010) encouraged states to "adopt common standards" in core subject areas.[4]

Despite these two diametrically opposed education systems adopting reforms that more closely resemble the approach of the other country, social mobility has not improved between 2000 and 2022 in either the United States or Japan. Not to be confused with income inequality, which measures how unevenly income is distributed in a population, social mobility refers to the movement of one's socioeconomic situation in relation to their parents (intergenerational

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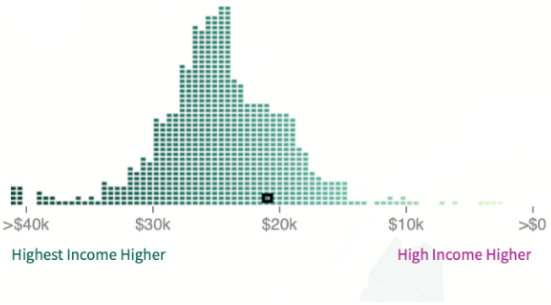
[1] Keith A. Nitta, *The Politics of Structural Education Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 16.
[2] Ibid, 19.
[3] Ibid, 2.
[4] "Common Core State Standards FAQ," National Conference of State Legislatures, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/common-core-state-standards-faq.aspx.

mobility) or throughout their lifetime (intragenerational mobility), either becoming richer, poorer, or remaining in the same social strata.[5] However, there is a strong linear relationship between income inequality and social mobility known as "The Great Gatsby Curve" to where a country's GINI coefficient, used to measure income inequality, can be used to assess the country's social mobility.[6] Higher GINI coefficients indicate more inequality, while lower coefficients signal less inequality. Income inequality in the United States has grown by all measures since 1980, with the highest GINI coefficient of any G7 country.[7] Japan's GINI coefficient, while not as elevated as the United States', has remained steady, even slightly increasing in the years after 2000.[8] More detailed data exists for the United States that shows the lack of social mobility even more clearly. Figure 1 shows four comparisons of household income at age 35 within neighborhoods in the United States between those born into five income levels: highest income (100th percentile or income of $1,500,000/year), high income (75th percentile or income of $94,000/year), middle income (50th percentile or income of $55,000/year), low income (25th percentile or $27,000/year), and lowest income (0th percentile or $2,200/year). Considering all races and genders, in every case, children from higher income brackets consistently continue to make more in later adulthood than those of lower socioeconomic status in their neighborhood. Just how much more people of higher socioeconomic status make than their immediate poorer counterparts depends on the specific locale. However, on average, a low-income individual can expect to make just over $10,000 more than a person in the lowest income

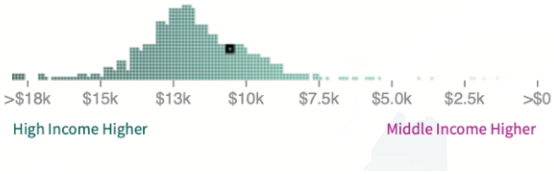
[5] "Understanding Social Mobility," Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/stories/social-mobility/.
[6] "Global Social Mobility Index 2020: why economies benefit from fixing inequality," World Economic Forum, January 19, 2020, 10.
[7] Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority," *Pew Research Center* (January 9, 2020), 21.
[8] Jun Saito, "How does inequality in Japan compare with others?" *Japan Center for Economic Research*, April 18, 2022.

bracket in the same neighborhood at age 35; an individual born into the highest income bracket can expect to make nearly $25,000 more than their high-income counterpart.

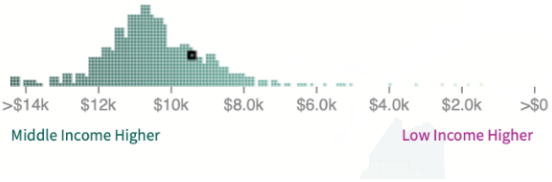
Figure 1: Comparison of Household Income at Age 35



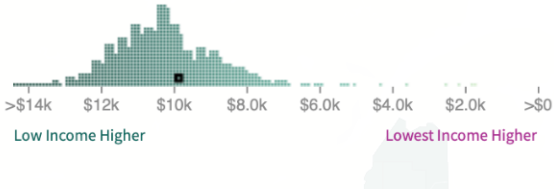
Highest-income vs high-income individuals



High-income vs middle-income individuals



Middle-income vs low-income individuals



Low-income vs lowest-income individuals

Source: "Opportunity Atlas," Harvard University, https://www.opportunityatlas.org.

Research Question and Argument

That neither education system provides substantial means for inter-generational mobility in the 21st century in spite of reforms is counterintuitive. As public education reformer John Dewey observed during the early 1900s, education reform is a product of society and an effort to meet society's needs.[9] However, the lack of social mobility throws into question the foundational ideals of the Japanese and American education systems. The unfortunate reality of

[9] John Dewey, *The School and Society*; and, *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

socioeconomically disadvantaged students who are unable to climb up the socioeconomic ladder challenges the notion of equality of opportunity that has underscored Japanese education for the past century.[10] Same goes for the United States' education system historically idealized as being, "…the great equalizer of the conditions of men," in the words of Horace Mann, the father of American public education.[11]

But how exactly do the public education systems in Japan and the United States perpetuate social immobility? Mann criticized the 'revolutionary' thinking of contemporary political reformers of his time for claiming that "some people are poor *because* others are rich."[12] This paper presents an explanation that gives credence to Mann's opponents. The observed disparity between the ideals of liberal education and the realities of these two public education systems is reconciled by conceptualizing both education systems as 'games.' Initial economic capital is required in order to differentiate oneself from their peers and signal academic competency within various mechanisms and stages (i.e., SATs, entrance exams, cram schools). The success or failure to signal competency relative to one's peers results in differing socioeconomic outcomes. A better socioeconomic outcome than one's parents can be understood as successful attainment of social mobility or winning the game, while a similar or lower income than one's parents reflects social immobility or losing the game. By looking at Japan's nationally uniform education game as a theory-building case study and comparing it to two education games within the United States' fragmented system to test this theory, this paper demonstrates how initial capital is key in explaining the role of Japanese and American public education in perpetuating social immobility.

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[10] Akito Okada, *Education Policy and Equal Opportunity in Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 2.
[11] "Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education, together with the Twelfth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board (1848)," (Commonwealth of Massachusetts: Board of Education, 1849), 59.
[12] Ibid, 60.

Literature Review

It is already well-documented that post-secondary education, specifically elite post-secondary education, is the key to social mobility in both the United States and Japan. In Japan, the need for a university degree, specifically an elite university degree, in future job prospects is so pronounced that the term 学歴社会 (*gakureki shakai*, called 'degreeocracy' by Okada and 'diploma society' by Kariya) exists in Japanese sociological literature. Okada provides a helpful, comprehensive description of degreeocracy from Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung:

> It [degreeocracy] is essentially an ascriptive system in the sense that once one is allocated to a group it is very difficult to change one's social class. It is like being born into a class, only that in a degreeocracy social birth takes place later than biological birth. More precisely, it takes place at the time of the various entrance examinations, and like all births it has pains…Biological birth is dramatic and the social birth of fully conscious individuals even more so…[T]he entrance examination is to be born again, and once it has happened one's future life is as predetermined as in any Model I society [conservative society in which one's social status is determined by birth, as in a caste system]—only more effectively so because the society is more rational, more technically adequate.[13]

Fierce competition in the education system, especially around exams (examination hell), ensues as academic qualifications are ever more significant to getting jobs that determine income, social status, and political power. Parents in this society push their students to attain the highest level of education possible because of the understanding that education is key in securing employment.[14] However, the highest level of education able to be obtained depends on the resources one is endowed with. Wealthy families can afford to supplement their children's education with outside

[13] Okada, *Education and Equal Opportunity in Japan*, 141; Kariya Takehiko, *Education Reform and Social Class in Japan*, trans. Michael Burtscher. (University of Tokyo: Routledge, 2012), 98.
[14] Okada, *Education and Equal Opportunity in Japan*, 143.

help, creating an education system that, "…reproduce[s] the class profile of the Japanese people."[15] As the importance of these entrance exams into elite universities increases, wealthier families invest in their children's education outside of the normal education system. But in some cases, these expected costs exceed one's salary. Okada finds that a 2005 Ministry of Internal Affairs survey discovered that the average Japanese household made 5.68 million yen annually (a decreasing figure in the years leading up to the survey). Compare this to the 21 million yen necessary to send a child to private kindergarten, middle school, high school, and university.[16] Poorer families cannot keep up.

The role of higher education is equally vital in the United States for one's career. Completing post-secondary education is correlated with higher salaries. According to Ishiki, in the 1970s, bachelor's degree recipients in the United States made one and a half times as much as their counterparts who only received a high school diploma. Bachelor's degrees continued to have a substantial positive impact on the degree-holder's career, even decades after graduation. His research suggests that higher education seems to be the key to socioeconomic advancement in American society.[17] The influence of higher education on earnings hold true to this day as men with bachelor's degrees earn nearly $900,000 more in median earnings over their life than those with only a high school degree. Women with bachelor's degrees earn $630,000 more than their less educated counterparts.[18] Domina, Penner, and Penner also emphasize the role higher education institutions have as gatekeepers to high-status employment. During the admissions process, high-ranking universities have an incentive to introduce extremely selective admissions

[15] Ibid, 145.
[16] Ibid, 146.
[17] Hiroshi Ishida, *Social Mobility in Contemporary Japan: Educational Credentials, Class and the Labour Market in Cross National Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 121, 128.
[18] "Education and Lifetime Earnings," Social Security Administration, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/research-summaries/education-earnings.html.

criteria as they are largely evaluated on their exclusivity rather than absolute educational effectiveness. Seeking that exclusivity means admissions committees often systematically marginalize those from disadvantaged backgrounds who cannot demonstrate a benefit to the university in terms of the talent they would bring. Elite universities then funnel students to elite firms, whereas schools of lower status channel students into lower status firms, recreating inequalities that existed in the college admissions process.[19]

While post-secondary education is well-understood to be the key to upward mobility on the socioeconomic ladder, it is also well-known that the path to post-secondary education is riddled with inequalities that complicate the path to college. Breen and Goldthorpe explain how differences in socioeconomic class create differences in educational ability levels as soon as students begin their education. In their rational action model, students have the option to stay in school or leave for the labor force when the time comes to advance to the next educational level. Choosing to stay can lead to success or failure, which is understood to be passing or failing a critical examination. Deciding factors for students and parents when choosing to stay or leave are cost of education (both costs that must be paid and potential unrealized earnings), the likelihood of success, and the perceived utility of staying in the education system and succeeding, staying and failing, or leaving. It is assumed that students rationally seek to improve their social outcome, or at least minimize the risk of falling below their initial social class, of which there are three. Listed in descending order of rank they are the service class (professionals, managers), the working class, and the underclass. When differences in initial resources (in other words, differences in socioeconomic status) are considered, educational attainment is split along socioeconomic lines. According to their rational action model, the outcome is that students of

[19] Thurston Domina, Andrew Penner, and Emily Penner, "Categorical Inequality: Schools As Sorting Machines," *Annual Review of Sociology* 43, no. 1 (2017): 316, 321.

higher socioeconomic class will attain more schooling than those from lower socioeconomic classes as there is more utility in staying in school, more expectation for success, and less cost burden the higher one goes up the socioeconomic ladder. Breen and Goldthorpe interestingly point out that although the absolute number of students has gone up from each social class as costs of education have come down, the rates at which students continue their education remain stratified as the odds of success for remaining in education stays constant. Thus, they conclude, that in order for students continue in the education system, those students from lower socioeconomic classes must have a higher expectation of success at that level than those from higher socioeconomic classes.[20]

Schools also act as sorting machines that reproduce social inequalities throughout the education system, including inequalities due to economic class. For Domina, Penner, and Penner, their idea of categorical inequality explains how schools construct internal categories, as well as adopt external categories in delineating students along distinct differences and criteria. Within schools, the construction of grades, classrooms, and instructional groups is dependent upon student age and ability levels. Students play a more active role in the construction and selection of these groups as they compete for limited space on teams and institutions, join social networks, and decide to remain in school or drop out of the system altogether. Outside of schools, categories based on race and gender, as well as class, are adopted and developed upon within the educational environment. Groups for special education, gifted and talented groups, International Baccalaureate, and extracurricular activities within schools support extant racial and socioeconomic distinctions outside of the school walls. Once these groups in schools are formed and their role established, the expectations associated with each group leads them down different

[20] Richard Breen and John H. Goldthorpe, "Explaining Educational Differentials: Towards A Formal Rational Action Theory," *Rationality and Society* 9, no. 3 (1997): 279-281, 285-287, 298.

and unequal instructional paths. Those placed in more advanced educational tracks are exposed to more challenging content and often proceed at a faster pace than those in remedial tracks. Resources are often allocated so that advanced students receive the best teachers and instructional materials.[21] Domina, Penner, and Penner additionally note that the more socially advantaged groups are usually disinclined to get rid of differentiated educational tracks, preferring instead to hoard resources within the advantaged instructional pathways, maintaining existing social inequality even in contexts where educational opportunities are universal.[22] These different educational tracks then influence and shape student motivation and incentives. Those in more advanced tracks see greater benefit and reward to their education, while less-advanced students have fewer incentives to expend energy and invest significant effort into their education with the composition of the tracks largely determined by socioeconomic class.[23]

This observed gap in motivation correlated with social class is observed in Japan, as well. In Japanese sociological literature, the term 'incentive divide' exists to explain this gap stemming from the reforms of the 1990s. As Kariya points out, one of the targets of the Japanese educational reforms in the 1990s were excessive examinations and the 'educational aristocrats' it created. These educational aristocrats were those born into the middle class who had mastered entrance exams for elite schools in Japan's post-war society. These educational aristocrats were guaranteed their social status not based on any ability or skills of their own but simply by virtue of their education, which is encapsulated in the University of Tokyo's commencement speech by then-president Ōkōchi Kazuo: "As the elites in your professional lives, you will be riding the so-called fast track. And this regardless of your actual skills and on-the-job performance." Notably,

[21] Thurson, Penner, and Penner, "Categorical Inequality," 312, 314-320.
[22] Ibid, 320.
[23] Domina, Penner, and Penner, "Categorical Inequalities," 320.

this statement was met with raucous laughter of approval.[24] In an effort to dismantle this educational elite and out of concern that, "…excessive examination competition was distorting educational practice."[25] The reforms in the 1990s changed the nature of high school and college entrance exams to test subjects and materials "neutral in terms of class nature."[26] However, as external study incentives fell away, they revealed a gap in study motivation that particularly affected the middle and lower classes; a decrease in motivation was not as pronounced in the higher social classes.[27] While Kariya's data cannot point to a specific explanation for this gap, he posits that there is a continued incentive for wealthier students to study, as evidenced by a movement of the wealthy to private schools and cram schools, and the ease wealthier students have in cultivating their interests without external pressure.[28]

Contrast the ease of continuing education for the wealthy with the detrimental effects of poverty on education and future economic prospects. A large body of existing scholarship in the United States already recognizes poverty as being particularly impactful on the future socioeconomic status of both individuals (childhood poverty is the best predictor of adult poverty) and families (intergenerational poverty). Corcoran finds that parental poverty has significant impacts on children's outcomes. Those children raised in poverty are more likely to be poor as early adults and earn less than their peers who did not come from impoverished backgrounds. Poverty is also associated with fewer years of schooling and lower rates of high school graduation and college attendance.[29] Corcoran even highlights a structural argument for intergenerational poverty present in Gary Becker's *A Treatise on the Family* that revolves around

[24] Kariya, *Education Reform and Social Class in Japan*, 99, 101.
[25] Ibid, 173.
[26] Ibid, 104.
[27] Ibid, 171.
[28] Ibid, 174.
[29] M. Corcoran, "Rags to Rags: Poverty and Mobility in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 21, no. 1 (1995): 247-248.

the lack of material resources. According to the argument, parents must allocate between present consumption and their children's schooling, and poor parents have few resources to allocate to their children's future social capital.[30] However, Corcoran rules out schooling as the mechanism through which poverty affected children's future economic outcomes, stating that, "…both past and recent studies that control for schooling demonstrate that most of the effect of parental poverty on children's economic outcomes is independent of schooling."[31] For Corcoran, parental resources clearly impact future economic outcomes, yet concludes that the mechanism through which poverty is transmitted from one generation to the next remains elusive.[32] This paper demonstrates that the mechanism that Corcoran finds so elusive is in fact the argument he rejects: the lack of material resources in education.

Alternative Explanations

Other arguments for the prevalence of intergenerational poverty, such as family structure, intelligence differences, and welfare culture that Corcoran judges to be unconvincing in explaining intergenerational poverty are also inadequate in regard to education's role in perpetuating social immobility. One could argue that in a broken family, children do not have adequate resources or stability to pursue their education through to the post-secondary level. However, this would place the broken family argument under the socioeconomic umbrella, making it alone an insufficient and incomplete explanation for social immobility through the education system. Arguments focused on the influence of welfare culture, private schools, family expectations of success, and student attitude are also part and parcel of socioeconomic background's influence in the education system on rates of social mobility.

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[30] Ibid, 242.
[31] Ibid, 250.
[32] Ibid, 261-264.

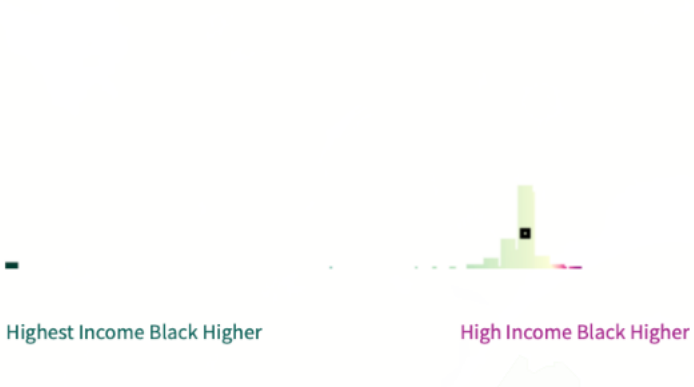
The structure of the education system can also be dismissed as an alternative argument for producing social inequality. It is already shown that the decentralization reforms in Japan and centralization reforms in the United States of the 1990s and 2000s did not provide for more social mobility.

One of the strongest alternative arguments is the role of racial discrimination in the education system that could lead to social immobility. Race has already been proven to account for much of the socioeconomic disparity seen in American society.[33] Corcoran's own research addresses the tremendous effect race has on future socioeconomic class; being born into a Black family significantly reduced economic prospects when compared to white families.[34] However, race cannot explain social immobility in Japan's homogenous population, much less education's role in perpetuating said immobility. Additionally, within the American context, socioeconomic differences between the elite and the poor are re-created and perpetuated within racial groups. In Corcoran's research, Black children who grew up in poverty were two and a half times more likely to experience poverty as adults than their wealthier Black peers. Impoverished white children were seven and a half times more likely to remain poor than their non-poor, white counterparts.[35] Poverty, thus, has the same effect of disenfranchising poor Black and white students relative to their wealthier peers. More strikingly, within the Black, Hispanic, Asian, indigenous, and white populations, individuals born into higher income brackets continue to have higher household incomes at age 35 than those from lower income brackets, mirroring the general trend of social immobility when accounting for all races and genders in Figure 1 (see

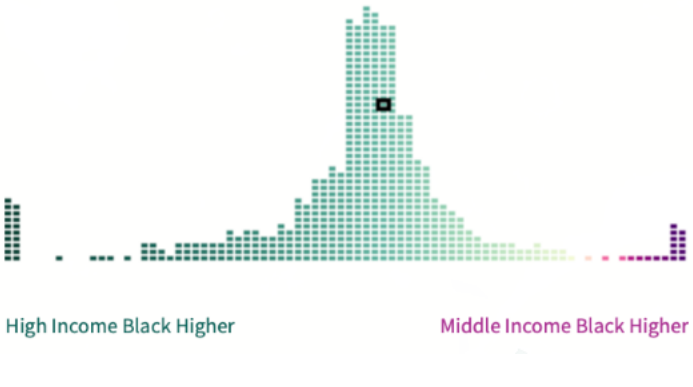
[33] Emily Badger, Claire Cain Miller, Adam Pearce, and Kevin Quealy, "Extensive Data Shows Punishing Reach of Racism for Black Boys," *The New York Times*, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/19/upshot/race-class-white-and-black-men.html
[34] Corcoran, "Rags to Rags," 262.
[35] Ibid, 247.

Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). Black elites also use post-secondary education as a vehicle for continuing a legacy of wealth. Figures 7, 8, and 9 show the economic background and post-secondary outcomes of students who attend three different post-secondary institutions: Howard University, Hampton University, and Morehouse College. Howard, Hampton, and Morehouse have historically been a part of the 'Black Ivy League', a group of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) with strong reputations of being some of the best HBCUs. The average median family income at all three of these institutions exceeds that of the average Black household ($48,297 as of 2021), making their students some of the most affluent of their group with their wealth continuing after graduation.[36]

Figure 2: Comparison of Black Household Income at Age 35

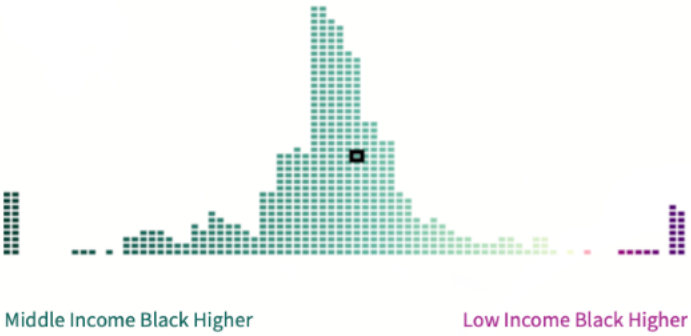


Highest-income vs high-income individuals



High-income vs middle-income individuals

[36] "Income in the United States: 2021-Current Population Reports," United States Census Bureau, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2022/demo/p60-276.html.

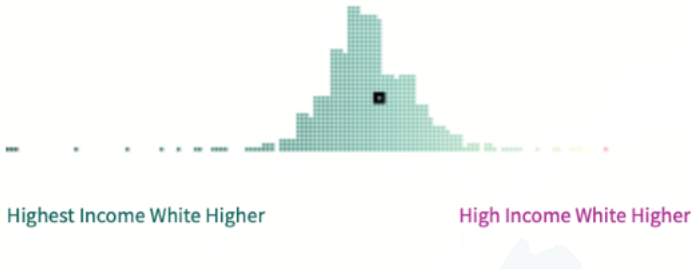


Middle-income vs low-income individuals

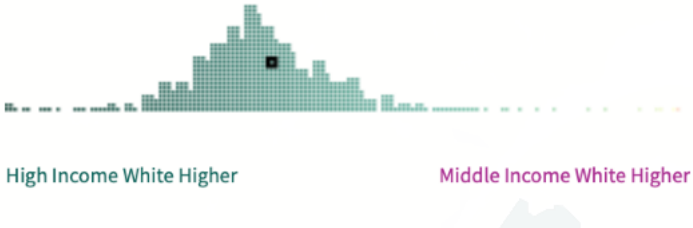
Low-income vs lowest-income individuals

Source: "Opportunity Atlas," Harvard University, https://www.opportunityatlas.org.

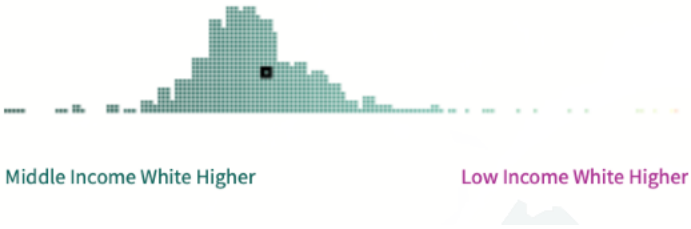
Figure 3: Comparison of White Household Income at Age 35



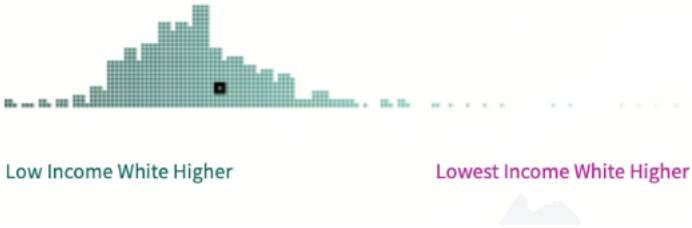
Highest-income vs high-income individuals



High-income vs middle-income individuals

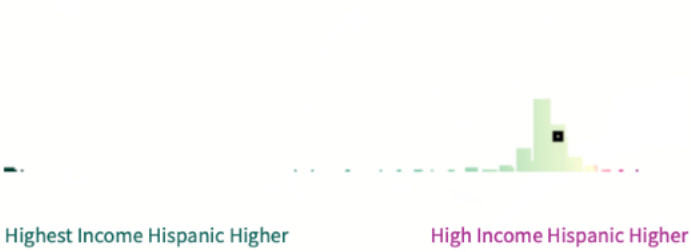


Middle-income vs low-income individuals

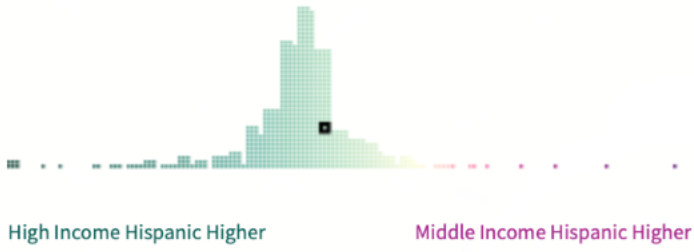


Low-income vs lowest-income individuals

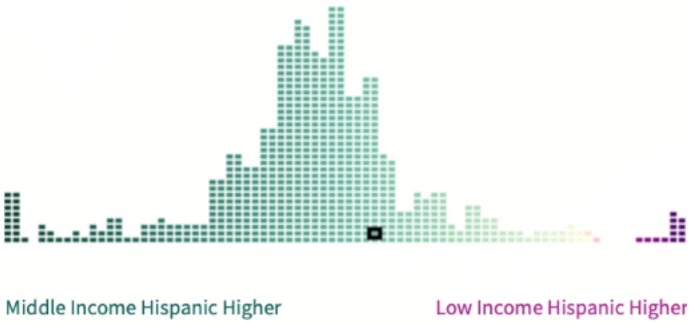
Figure 4: Comparison of Hispanic Household Income at Age 35



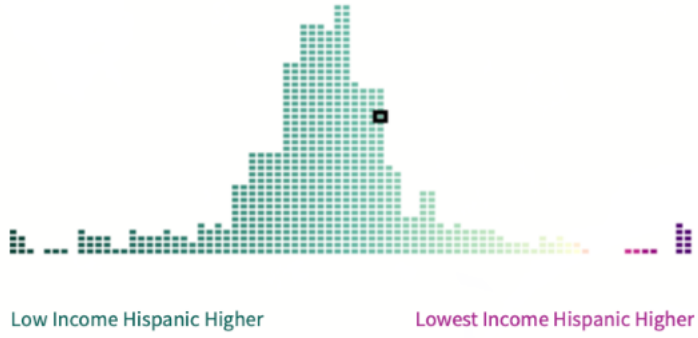
Highest-income vs high-income individuals



High-income vs middle-income individuals



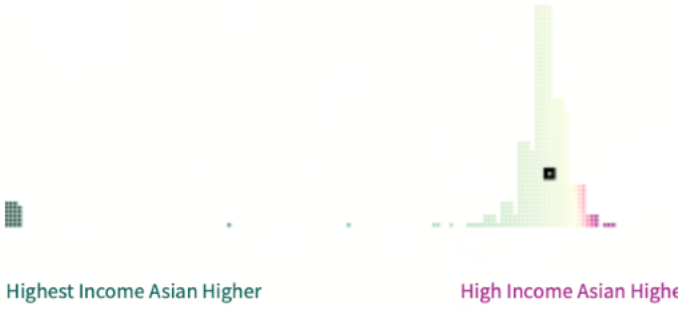
Middle-income vs low-income individuals



Low-income vs lowest-income individuals

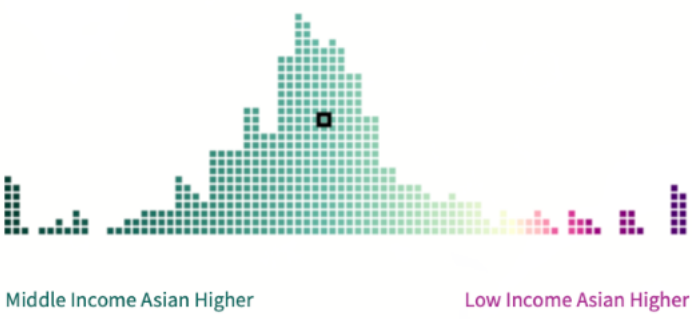
Source: "Opportunity Atlas," Harvard University, https://www.opportunityatlas.org.

Figure 5: Comparison of Asian Household Income at Age 35



Highest-income vs high-income individuals

High-income vs middle-income individuals



Middle-income vs low-income individuals

Low-income vs lowest-income individuals

Source: "Opportunity Atlas," Harvard University, https://www.opportunityatlas.org.

Figure 6: Comparison of Indigenous Household Income at Age 35

Highest-income vs high-income individuals

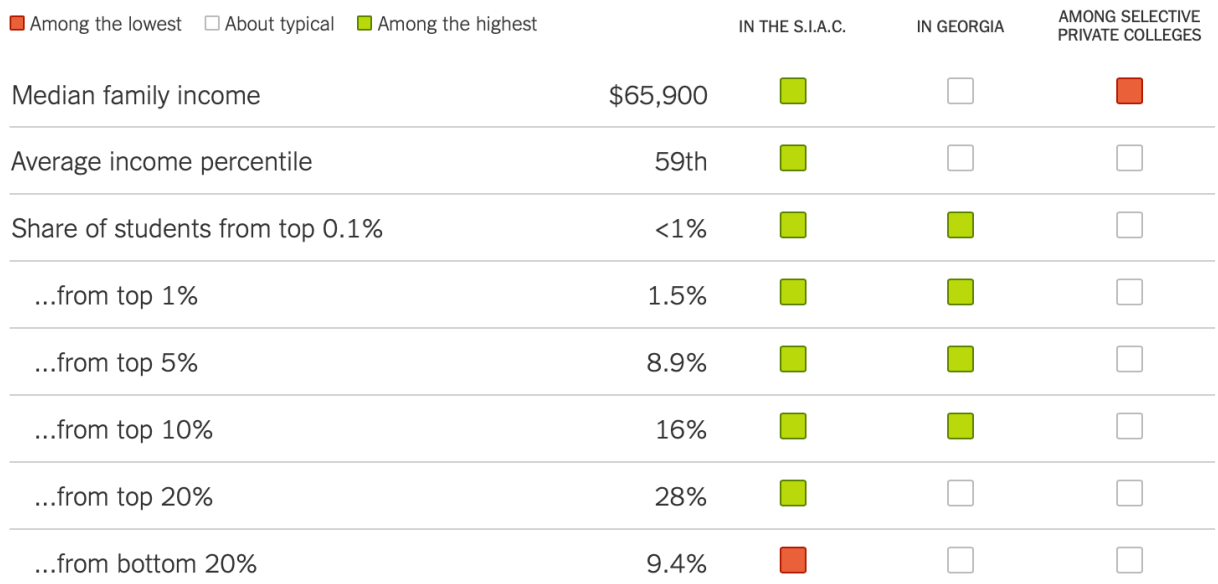
High-income vs middle-income individuals

Middle-income vs low-income individuals

Low-income vs lowest-income individuals

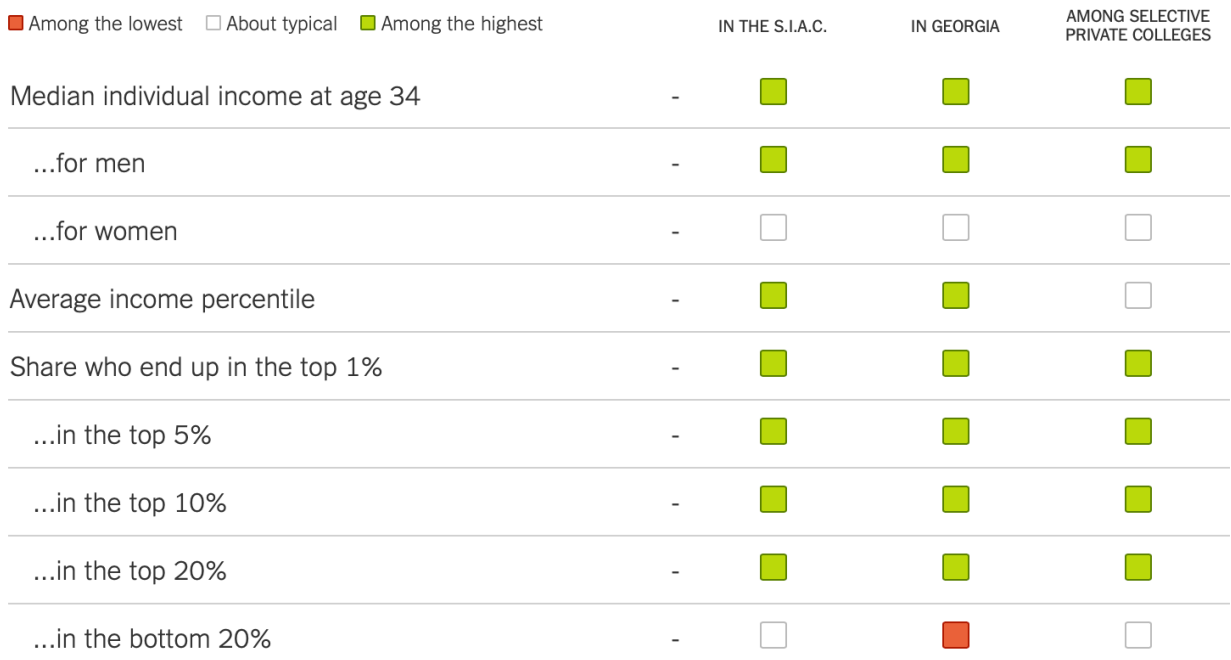
Source: "Opportunity Atlas," Harvard University, https://www.opportunityatlas.org.

Figure 7A: What Kind of Students Attend Morehouse College



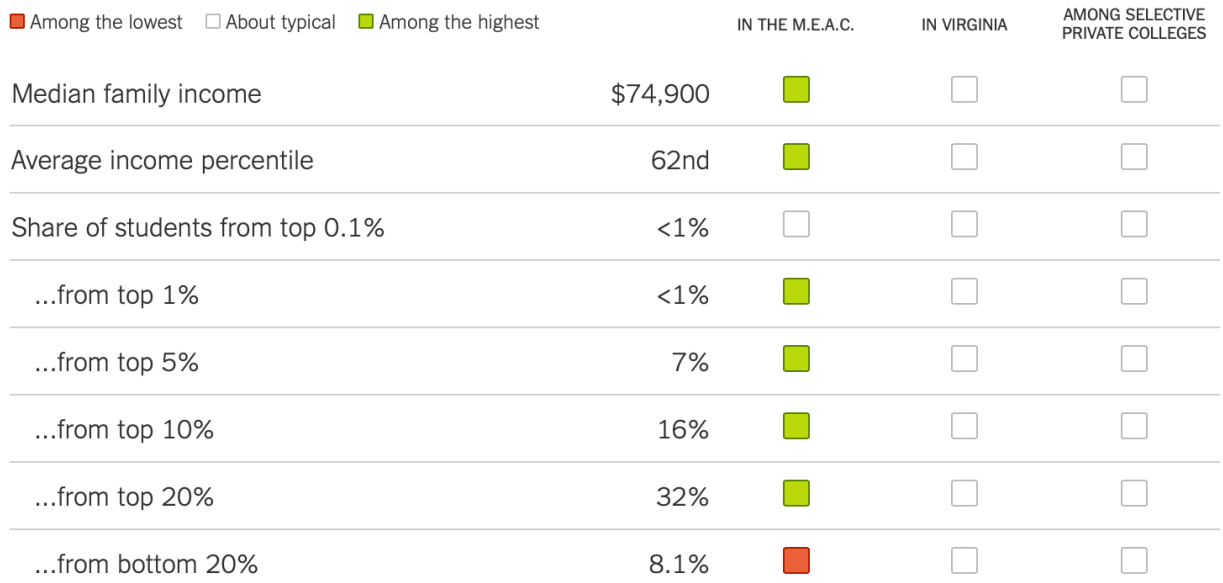
Source: "Economic diversity and student outcomes at Morehouse College," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/morehouse-college.

Figure 7B: How Morehouse College Students Fare Later in Life



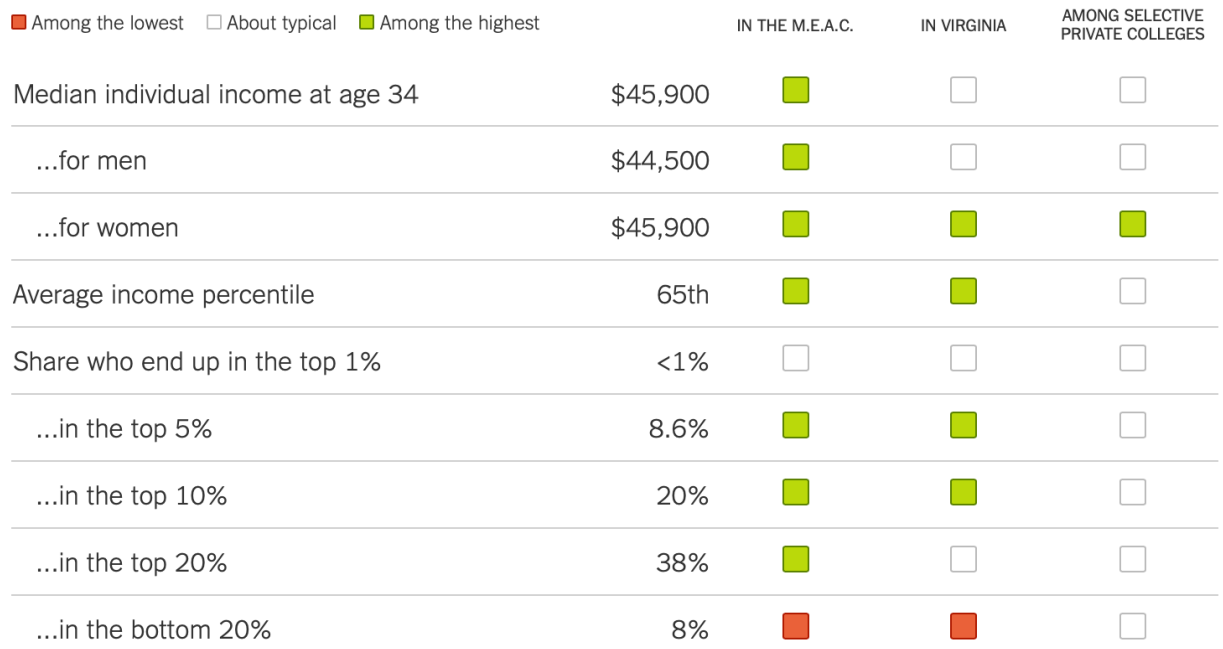
Source: "Economic diversity and student outcomes at Morehouse College," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/morehouse-college.

Figure 8A: What Kind of Students Attend Hampton University



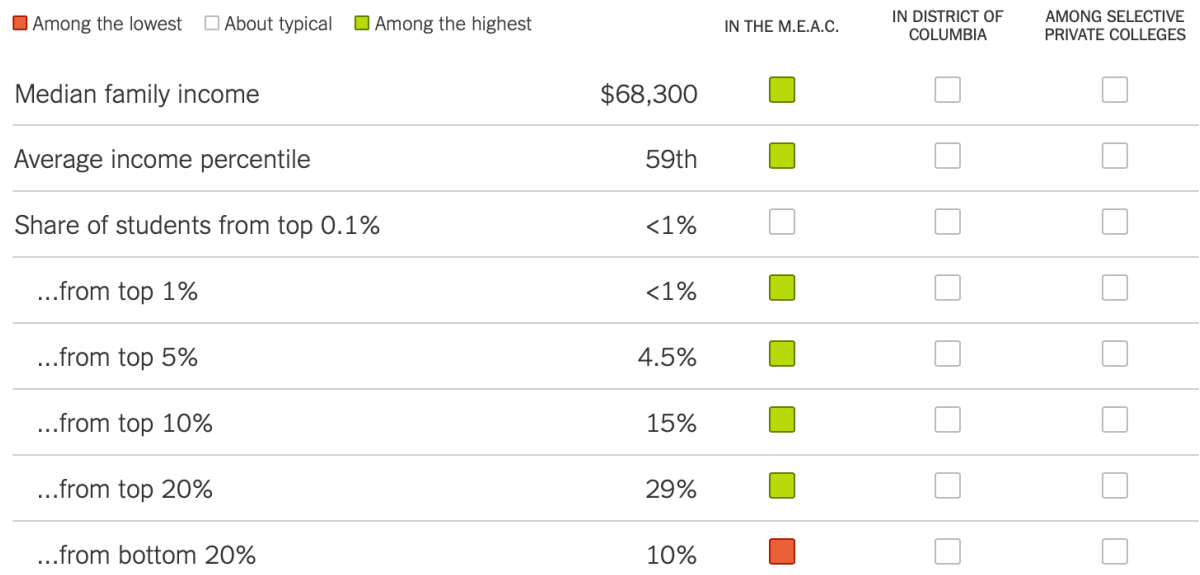
Source: "Economic diversity and student outcomes at Hampton University," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/hampton-university.

Figure 8B: How Hampton University Students Fare Later in Life



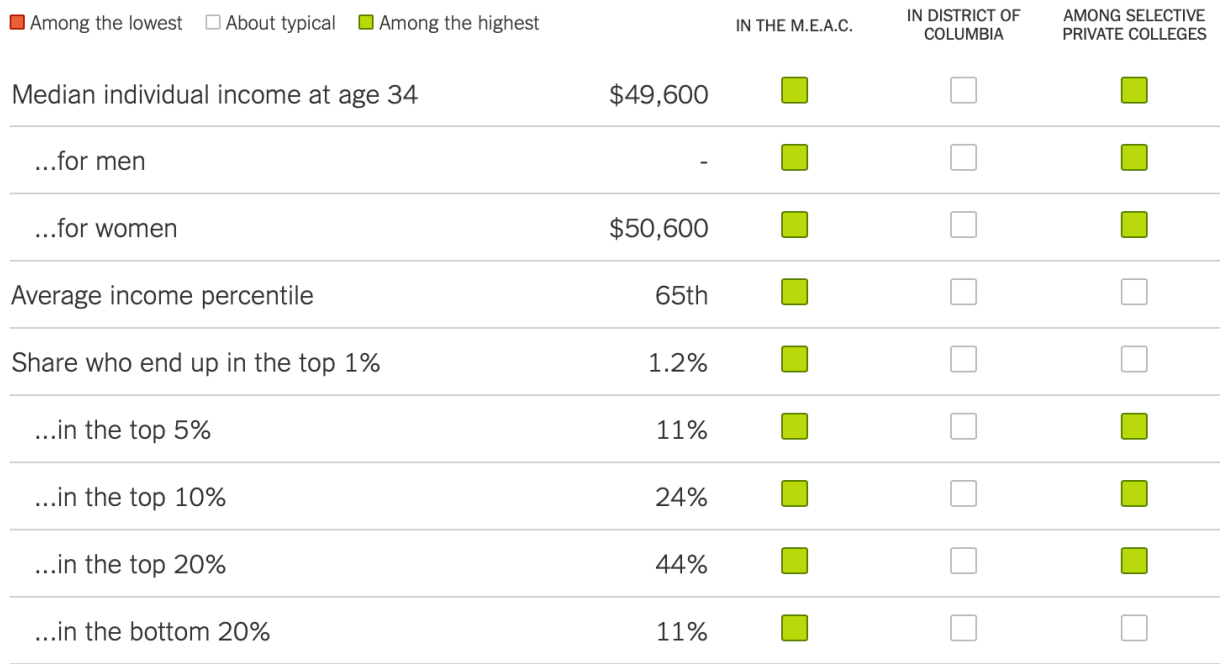
Source: "Economic diversity and student outcomes at Hampton University," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/hampton-university.

Figure 9A: What Kind of Students Attend Howard University



Source: "Economic diversity and student outcomes at Howard University," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/howard-university.

Figure 9B: How Howard University Students Fare Later in Life



Source: "Economic diversity and student outcomes at Howard University," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/howard-university.

Gender discrimination is another strong alternative argument to explain education's role in continuing social immobility. However, similar to the case of race, women born into higher-income households in the United States have successfully continued a legacy of wealth through education. Women's colleges have provided education to young women in America for generations, but the type of woman who attends these colleges continues to come from a background of affluence. The median family income of a student at Wellesley College, one of the first women's colleges in America, is $141,000 with 59% coming from the top 20th percentile and 51% ending up in the top 20th percentile; students at Barnard College are even more affluent with a median family income of $190,100, 65% coming from the top 20th percentile, and 51% ending up in the top 20th percentile.[37]

The socioeconomic dynamics between the elite and non-elite, therefore, can be earnestly applied to race, gender, or any other societal distinctions to explain the perpetuation of inequality that exists between the haves and the have-nots without diminishing the influence that other societal divisions have in contributing to economic inequality themselves.

Detailed Argument

The foundation is set to conceptualize the education game. The American and Japanese education systems can be classified as 'leagues,' taking place over many years in multiple stages containing smaller tournaments. In this league, students (players), supported by their parents (sponsors), are differentiated into academic tracks. This categorization is based on past performance on examinations (tournaments) with teachers acting as referees during the exam and

[37] "Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at Wellesley College," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/wellesley-college; "Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at Barnard College," *The New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/barnard-college.

coaches outside of the exam. At the end of the game, rewards come in the form of income that is a function of rank; a higher rank promises more income with increasingly less income as one moves down the ranking. Naturally, students seek to move up in the rankings. Students have limited resources at their disposal, namely monetary capital, to compete against their peers during these examinations for the highest ranking possible. Students can use their capital in various mechanisms for exam preparation, such as cram schools or preparatory classes. Students can even remove themselves from the public education system entirely, using their capital to enter into the private school system, similar to purchasing and unlocking the full version of the free game and benefitting from the subsequent bonuses unavailable to those participating in the free version.

But with no single win condition in this game, success and failure are individualized notions depending on one's initial position relative to others. For students who enter the education system with few resources, the win condition is to reach a higher income level than their parents (social mobility). Attaining a similar or lower income than their parents would be considered a loss (social immobility). For those entering the education system with considerable resources, achieving a similar income level to that of one's parents can be regarded as continuing a legacy of wealth, which is itself a sufficient win condition, in addition to that of reaching a higher income level. However, falling down the socioeconomic ladder for these students is a more serious failure than for someone from a lower class. Those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder have more to lose than those closer to the bottom, which translates into increased motivation for those with the means to use their resources to the farthest extent possible. As students do not enter the game with equal resources, the system cannot be said to be meritocratic and individual win conditions are not met based on ability alone. Rather, those with more initial

capital have an inherent competitive advantage over those with less initial capital in this system with established mechanisms requiring capital that solidly ensure success on examinations, few regulations on the usage of capital to acquire advantages in the education system, and no effective mechanisms to stop the perpetuation of existing inequality. As initial capital determines future outcomes, this education game results in more well-to-do students successfully and consistently signaling better academic competency and talent than those less well-off, thereby crowding out those who are less materially advantaged from the coveted, limited spaces at post-secondary institutions that would allow economically disadvantaged students to improve their socioeconomic status.

The Japanese Education Game

Japan's education system is extremely uniform across the entire nation. Strict laws, regulations, and regulatory bodies govern its education system, allowing for consistency in education regardless of locale. The foundation of Japanese education starts with the supreme law of the land. The Japanese Constitution establishes the right to an equal, compulsory, and free education for all in Article 26. The Basic Act on Education, passed in March 1947, expands upon the mandate that the constitution establishes, laying out the guiding principles of education, including that of equal opportunity. Other laws regulate the minutiae of Japanese education: the School Education Law oversees the organization and management of the school system; activities of social education are regulated by the Social Education Law; local boards of education are governed by the Law Concerning Organization and Functions of Local Educational Administration. Set standards for establishing schools and curriculum are issued from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MEXT). Education is compulsory until the end of grade 9, where students can choose to continue to high school or drop out of the education

system altogether. Students can choose between three high school tracks that cater to students with different interests and ambitions. The general course track provides a generalized curriculum that suits those seeking future college admissions or looking at non-specific vocational careers. Specialized courses provide vocational courses for students who have already decided on a career path, ranging from agriculture, to science-mathematics, to art. Finally, integrated courses offer a wide array of subjects covering topics in both the general and specialized tracks.[38] Because university admissions are only eligible to those who have completed twelve years of education (or otherwise passed the Upper Secondary School Equivalency Examination), attending the additional three years of high school beyond the mandated nine years is essential and focusing on a track that provides sufficient preparation for college is essential. Admission into universities is determined in large part by the Common Test for University Admissions administered each January throughout Japan. Universities also have their own individual criteria for admissions that take specialized exams and interviews into consideration.[39] In this education game, there are many opportunities for capital to be spent advantageously by the wealthy.

The various exams that exist throughout the Japanese education system are prominent examples of the tournaments within the education game. Because high school is non-compulsory, students must take entrance examinations to attend.[40] However, students can bypass the high school entrance exams and be relatively assured to attend post-secondary education by testing into university-affiliated private schools. Prestigious universities, such as Waseda

[38] "Principles Guide Japan's Educational System," Ministry of Eduation, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/overview/index.htm.
[39] "Admission to Higher Education Institution," National Information Center for Academic Recognition Japan, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.nicjp.niad.ac.jp/en/japanese-system/admission.html.
[40] "Principles Guide Japan's Educational System."

University or Keio University, have established private schools that offer entrance exams at the beginning of middle school. Students, once accepted, attend private middle school, are guaranteed admissions into the affiliated high school, and are nearly guaranteed to attend the affiliated university.[41] Due to the high cost burdens of these private schools as presented in the literature review of this paper, this option of a 'fast-track' to post-secondary education is not readily available to those of lower socioeconomic classes whose best option to attend college is to pass both the high school and college entrance examinations.

However, because limited spots at these prestigious universities are already taken up by those in the university-affiliated private schools, those in the public school system compete over a smaller number of already limited spaces. Those with sufficient capital who remain in the public school system can afford to attend cram school to make up for this disadvantage. These cram schools are necessary to attend as the public school system curriculum does not teach all that is on college entrance exams, making them necessary mechanisms that reliably ensure success on examinations. Students begin attending cram school as early as elementary school; however, the types of children attending cram schools are largely constrained to those from higher socioeconomic classes. Classes last from the end of the public-school day well into the night, often past 10PM, requiring a significant expenditure of money and time that socioeconomically disadvantaged students cannot afford to expend. However, not attending cram school largely decreases the chances of signaling academic competency on the college entrance examination.[42] Thus, the Japanese education game restricts those lower on the socioeconomic ladder from attending the universities necessary for socioeconomically disadvantaged students to

[41] Nozomi Asamura, personal communication, September 6, 2022.
[42] Nazuna Nagai, personal communication, September 8, 2022; Kariya, *Education Reform and Social Class in Japan*, 112.

obtain social mobility in necessitating that capital be spent on cram schools for success during examinations and allowing wealthier students to use their capital to attain an educational fast-track to post-secondary education.

While the Japanese government provides scholarships and financial aid initiatives in an attempt to counteract the effects of economic inequality within the education system, they are insufficient in relieving the total financial burden for the financially disadvantaged. In a 2018 survey conducted by MEXT on education costs, annual costs for private middle school minus cram school expenses equaled 1,071,438 yen (equivalent to $7,837).[43] MEXT offers a maximum tuition support of 297,000 yen/year to attend private school for certain households, or just 28% of total costs of one year of private middle school.[44] Students living in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area can apply for scholarships from the Metropolitan Foundation for Private Schools but can only receive a maximum monthly stipend of 35,000 yen if attending a general course high school and 53,000 yen if attending a vocational high school, neither of which makes up the difference left after government tuition support.[45]

The American Education Game(s)

While the Japanese education game is fairly straightforward, the United States does not have the same uniformity in its education system as seen in Japan. This provides an opportune test for the education game to be considered at individual locales with their idiosyncrasies. Two

[43] "Cost of Private Education Through High School Climbs to ¥18.3 Million," Nippon Communications Foundation, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00626/cost-of-private-education-through-high-school-climbs-to-¥18-3-million.html.
[44] "Tuition Support for High School Students," Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/elsec/title02/detail02/1373867.htm.
[45] "(Tōkyōto ikuei shikin kashitsuke jigyō) Kashitsuke wo kibō sareru hō（東京都育英資金貸付事業）貸付を希望される方," Metropolitan Foundation for Private Schools, accessed December 17, 2022, https://www.shigaku-tokyo.or.jp/pa_ikuei/pa_ikuei1.html

locales located on the complete opposite sides of the United States exemplify two different versions of the American education system that still exhibit the same dynamics of initial capital being essential for social mobility. Information on Knox County, Maine relies on an interview with local resident Rebecca Cox (see Appendix A); information on Irvine, California relies on the experiences of Howard Xuan and Ariana Satari (see Appendix B, C).

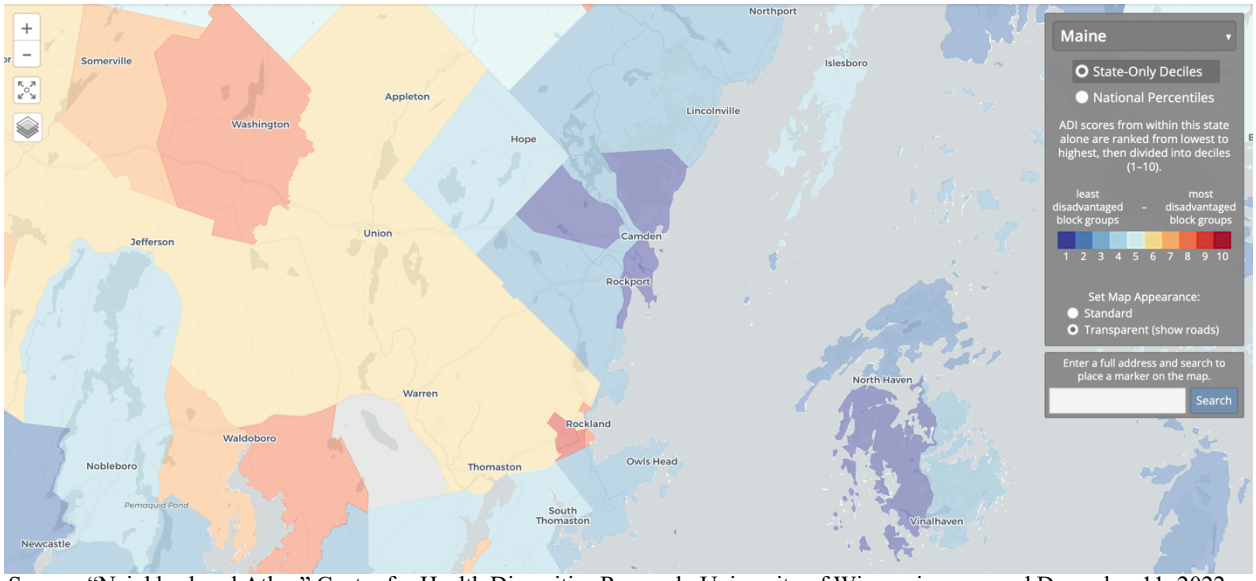
A. Knox County, Maine

Located on the Atlantic coast, Knox County features prominent socioeconomic divisions that are promulgated in the area's two education systems (see Figure 10). Students from Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville attend different elementary and middle schools than students from Camden and Rockport, but all go to the same well-funded high school.

> The Hope elementary and middle schools aren't as good; Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville aren't as good, so the kids are a little bit less prepared once they get to high school, I would say. I was in very advanced classes already because I had been in the 'better' public school.
>
> But, like, the Five Towns High School, to me at least, looks exquisite in terms of its facilities. It's a public school but I believe it's the tax revenue from Camden and Rockport that are allowing the facilities to be, like, track field, running trail, windmill—we had a windmill—we had an auditorium, like, a gorgeous stage, you know, nice gymnasium. It looks like it could be—in Spain, it looks like their private school. I realized that in Spain.

Already, students are differentiated into different academic paths due to their educational background and past performance, a product of their socioeconomic situation. By contrast, the wealthier students from Camden and Rockport successfully translated their capital into an advantage during the college admissions stage, shutting out their more socioeconomically disadvantaged peers:

Figure 10: Map of Area Deprivation Index (ADI) of Knox County, ME



Source: "Neighborhood Atlas," Center for Health Disparities Research, University of Wisconsin, accessed December 11, 2022, https://www.neighborhoodatlas.medicine.wisc.edu/mapping.

> …there was a girl a couple classes above me who went to Harvard, a couple kids in my class who I was like, "Really?", went to places like Dartmouth. I don't know how. Well, I do, they were smart kids but, like, the school is much more of a feeder school. They're like the small-town Maine school that looks good to the Ivy League because it's like "Oh, look it's small-town Maine" but their parents are probably also millionaires.
>
> …because that school I went to was not academically rigorous whatsoever.
>
> …they have more access to resources than someone from two towns over. And the people from two towns over…a lot of people don't go to college. My high school, they would be pictures and they would show everyone going to college.

'Everyone' is not all-encompassing of the students from Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville whose outcomes are sharply distinct from those living in Camden and Rockport:

> You'd see people come from the outskirt towns, some of them wouldn't go or they would have other plans. They would become a hairdresser, or they would say, like, "I'm sticking around here." Or, like, Maine Maritime Academy, where my dad went to school, or, like, UMaine. You'd see that, but the wealthier Camden-Rockport kids, you'd see, like, the private schools. You'd see they were headed to a private school.

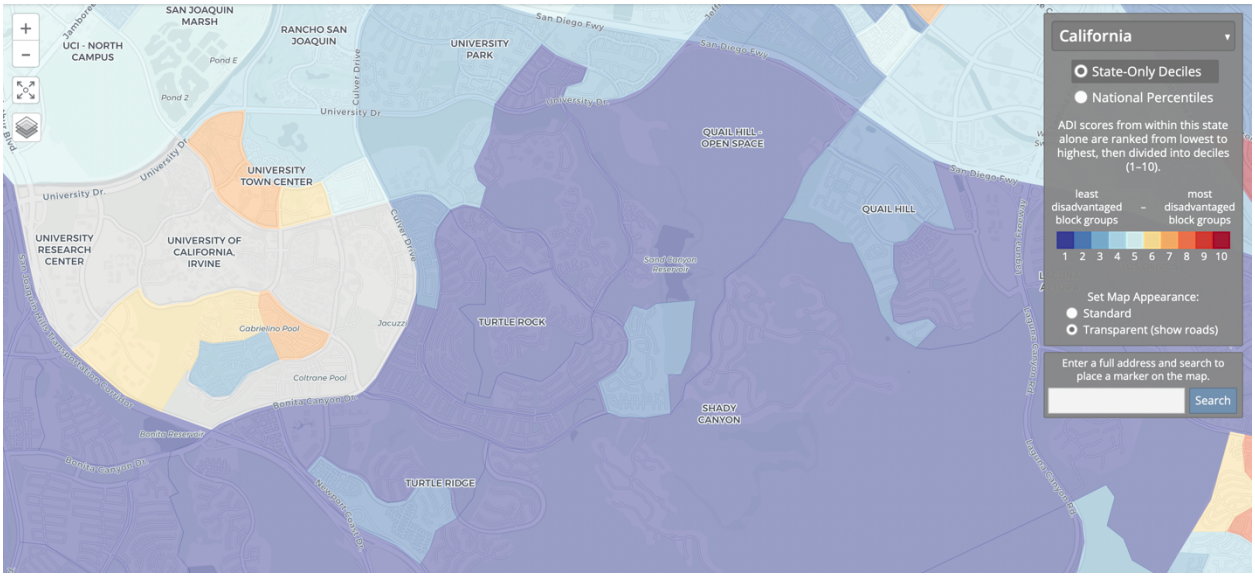
As well-funded an academic environment that the Five Towns High School is, it is not a sufficient mechanism to counteract the effects of previous inequality:

> I feel like the low-key people, the ones who were just good students, good kids, the low-key ones, like middle class kids, they would probably go to University of Maine and study anything and maybe go to the honors college and do well. And then there are kids who are farther down socioeconomically and watch where some of them end up. Some of them do go to the military or they go to Maine Maritime—I'm not saying they don't do well, but it's not like a kid who grew up with that background from Appleton and comes to my high school, that doesn't mean they're going to get the same—they don't have the same outcomes as the kids who grow up in Camden and were prepped to apply to Harvard when they were ten.

As student outcome follows in the footsteps of their parent's socioeconomic income, winners in the Five Towns High School are constrained to the affluent class, while those of lower socioeconomic status lose out on opportunities for social mobility.

B. Irvine, California

On America's West Coast, Irvine is one of the most affluent and socially advantaged areas in the United States (see Figure 11). Active participation in categorization and differentiation begins as early as elementary school for some, like Ariana Satari who attended



two

Figure 11: Map of Area Deprivation Index (ADI) of Irvine, CA

Source: "Neighborhood Atlas," Center for Health Disparities Research, University of Wisconsin, accessed December 11, 2022, https://www.neighborhoodatlas.medicine.wisc.edu/mapping.

elementary schools in the Irvine area: Bonita Canyon Elementary School and Turtle Rock Elementary School.

> Turtle Rock also had the AAPAS program, which is for students who were supposed to be 'gifted'—so they have two kinds of programs, they have the GATE one and then APAAS—my sister was in APAAS, I was in the GATE program.
>
> I don't know what your topic is, but toward the point of there being inequalities, my mom had to talk to a bunch of the other parents in order for me to know to even take the test to get into the GATE program. The same thing for my sister to get into APAAS. The reason why I wasn't in APAAS was because my mom didn't find out early enough.

This early differentiation had major consequences once students reached middle school and high school:

> Basically, once you hit middle school, you're forced to go to the school that's within your district. I had an exception, but the GATE and APAAS program was one of the ways that you could show you were more academically advanced. Parents who wanted their children to be more academically advanced earlier on and have the advantage of that to apply to better programs in middle school and high school, they started getting into those programs as elementary school kids.
>
> …so, like, being in APAAS and GATE would set you up so that, like—for me, 6th grade, you have to take an exam to get into the higher math levels. I got into Algebra I after 6th grade, whereas if you didn't pass the class, you got into Pre-Algebra. If you didn't pass *that* exam, it was the intro to Pre-Algebra. So, basically, you repeated 6th grade math depending on two exams you took in 6th grade. And that determined your class for middle school.

Preparation for exams, similar to Japan, revolves around preparatory courses outside of the established public school system:

> …there's a big afterschool preparatory ecosystem in Irvine. You go to public school, you go home, you go to this afterschool class, you learn about the SATs, English, math, whatever. Stuff that gets you ahead. Parents who emphasize education a lot, they put their children in those classes and then they come back to school, and they perform really well. So maybe on the record, these high schools are very competitive and doing a good job at educating these kids, but maybe they're not doing the heavy lifting.

However, there are those with even more affluence in Irvine who use their capital to remove themselves from the public school system entirely and enter private school, such as Sage Hill:

> Yea, there's still a lot of people who have a lot of money at public schools, but I don't think they show it was much as Sage did.
>
> [Howard interjects] There's people with 'fuck you' money at Sage. [End of interjection]
>
> Those people just walk around with Gucci and Louis Vuitton on campus, no problem, do not care. I have friends who I have never seen them wear the same outfit twice at Sage. They have a lot. I've been to friend's houses, $11 million houses, they have like bowling alleys in their house, a tennis court, stuff like that. It's insane.

The advantage acquired from entering the private school system is the relative comfort of the private school environment that helps in developing attributes attractive to college admissions. With much of Irvine's population in high socioeconomic brackets, the motivation to not fall below one's initial economic situation is heightened, pushing families to seek out and take advantage of as many opportunities as their capital can accumulate. Howard Xuan describes his brother's hypercompetitive experience at the local public high school and his parents subsequently enrolling Howard into Sage Hill:

> One thing is that we didn't know that Sage Hill was, like, an option, so it speaks to, I think, by default people went to public high schools, right? And it was a good enough of a choice to be a default choice. Later on, I think my parents found out about Sage and then, like, they got a sense that University High from my brother's experience, they found that it was very much, like, the type of school environment they felt existed in China.
>
> [It was] hypercompetitive, right? That was one of the reasons, maybe part of their calculations that "We moved to the United States, we expect more space for kids to grow outside of academics and do things that are more like 'personal growth', 'interest development', stuff like that." They felt that was not being achieved in University High's…So they started looking at Sage Hill as another option.

In some instances, the motivation to overcome competition turns physical:

> There was one example I remember; I was in a math competition—I forget what it was called—but there was one of the girls from the APAAS program. She ended up punching a kid to take a test, like the practice exam by herself. You're supposed to take it as a group, and she actually punched somebody. I think we were in 6th grade, so it was a really intense competition.

Or even illegal:

> …we were one of the schools that got hit with the college scandal. We had, how many was it, was it, like, two or three people on the board that were like parents involved in that scandal. Some of their kids knew, some of them didn't. There were other students who got caught cheating, so they were asked to leave the school. Other ones didn't because they had enough money that they could get out of it.

But students who attend Sage Hill can reliably expect to attend a post-secondary institution, and an elite institution, at that. In addition to students being placed in small classrooms with individualized attention and office hours being built into the school day, the school encourages students to apply to elite universities:

> Because there's a lot of affluence and everything, then they really strongly want to show statistics that their students went to a college. So, if you go to a community college, which it happened that year, I was one of three students, we popped up as like one of the top schools that people went to ended up being a community college. The school doesn't want to show that, so they really discourage it.

The combination of the affluent using their wealth to take advantage of beneficial mechanisms outside of the public school system, such as tutoring, and movement of the even more affluent to private schools leaves little in the hands of the public school, with the wealthy actively working around the public-school system to preserve their socioeconomic status. But for less economically fortunate students, even at Sage Hill, there is no reliable mechanism to address the inequalities that arise due to their disadvantageous economic circumstances. These inequalities manifest in being left behind in the competitive public school system:

> There's a lot of horror stories of—I guess, I don't know how to word this nicely. There's rumors of teachers who have participated in harassment of various sorts

> as well as drug dealing. There's also a lot of reports of suicide. So, it's a very intense school and not a lot of good things associated with it. And that's the public school that I would have been told to go to. I didn't really have a choice. Middle school I kind of had a choice, so that one, I think I dodged a bullet. But, if I went to Uni, I don't know how it would have turned out.

For those economically disadvantaged who do attend private school, like Ariana, their economic disadvantage distinguishes their experience from that of other more affluent students:

> My family dynamic is very different than a lot of people's there. In terms of financial stability, I also was not super great at the time, so there's definitely—Howard probably mentioned it—there were people writing articles about how the people who were on scholarship programs try to hang out with people who do have the financial means to attend the school, but they're sort of like—there's a lot of fancy restaurants in the area that are just more expensive because people can afford it in their area. So then, people who can't afford that see that, and it kind of messes with your head a little bit.
>
> You kind of see things differently than they do because you're kind of looking at it as, "Oh, I can't spend money on this thing" and they're, like, "Oh, the cafeteria has all this food. Why don't I buy everything?"

However, even for those socioeconomically disadvantaged students who end up with a privileged private school education, they still often are unable to fully separate from the disparities created by their economic disadvantage and are defined by the constraints of their socioeconomic class. In Ariana's case, she first attended community college after graduating from Sage Hill due to financial reasons, even though she was accepted into more prestigious institutions.

Conclusion

The popular conception of education as a reliable investment in a child's future can no longer continue in good faith. Where people expect to get gains out of education, investing capital in education does not bring about expected gains for all. But this has been understood to be the case for a long time; it has only been unclear how. However, the mechanisms for how

education has been unequal have now been identified. Not only is education in Japan and the United States unsuccessful in providing a means for social mobility, its nature of being a game skewed in the favor of existing economic advantages perpetuates existing socioeconomic differences, making education a vehicle for social immobility. Advantageous mechanisms that necessitate capital, the wide possibilities that capital can be used to acquire advantages, and the lack of effective counter mechanisms that could stop the perpetuation of inequalities in schools must be addressed in order to remake education into the great equalizer it was meant to be.

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Appendix A

Interview with Rebecca Cox, November 19, 2022

You were talking about those two towns in Maine about one that had tourist revenue and what that didn't have tourist revenue and had different educational outcomes.

Yea, and this is just my anecdotal experience. It's very pronounced where I live. I grew up in Rockport, and Camden and Rockport are very scenic towns. There's a ton of tourism there, it's right on the ocean. Very wealthy areas as well in terms of second homes and stuff like that. Locals aren't necessarily wealthy, but for example, I grew up on this hill in the runt of the litter kind of house that my parents fixed up over the years. But then when you walk down the hill you have this row of hedges, where those houses are so expensive, they bought the view. We would've been able to see the ocean if it weren't for them. They're really just summer homes. The whole street is like hedges hedges hedges.

Did they move in recently?

No, it's always been like this. And they're like perfectly trimmed hedges, whereas Maine is like this wild wilderness of a place. They exist in part for their privacy, I'm sure, but at the same time you obviously want the view all to yourself. You get on the water or swimming, and you look at these houses and you're like, "What is this thing?" They're just like mansions with their own little rock beaches and their own little boats.

So, you live in Rockport…

I lived, yea.

You lived in Rockport, and you lived on the hill…

So, my house would be here, but you're here sailing on the water in a rowboat, you see like my house here and all these woods and stuff. Like open public woods with like rocks, and it's beautiful. And then you see like mansion mansion mansion, beach beach beach, boat boat boat.

Was that only in Rockport? Or was that also in…

Camden? Uh, it's in Camden as well, the thing is you don't see it on the harbor because it's more public. It's right near the library. The downtown is the little tourist hub, whereas downtown Rockport, there are no stores. There's film and art galleries and two very fancy tourist restaurants but they always shut down because, I don't know.

Camden is the tourist town?

Camden is more touristy. It has the gift stores, bagel places, public spaces to picnic.

And Rockport doesn't have that?

Yea, Rockport isn't the same. There's no, like, little store. There's no like candy store, or…

Did you go to either public school?

So, this is the thing. For elementary and middle school, there's one public school for Camden and Rockport kids. I grew up going to public school in Camden, both elementary and middle school. But at the high school level, they bring in three other nearby towns. So, it's called the 'Five Towns High School'.

There was a huge cultural difference between the kids from Camden and Rockport, and then the kids from Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville, which were the three outlying towns.

Was it like, "You guys are the hicks?"

A little bit, but especially a lot of the Hope kids, some of them are very redneck-y, but a lot of them are just very down-to-earth, kind people because they didn't grow up in this strange, uber-wealthy—because some kids in Camden grew up uber-wealthy, and some kids grew up like normal people. But there's this different, clique-y class thing going on that's in Camden and Rockport that doesn't exist in Hope, Appleton, or Lincolnville.

But it expresses itself in the high school?

Yea, so you see the Hope kids stick to themselves and they're very down-to-earth, good kids. Like I know a lot of Camden kids who decided to go hang out with, like, the Hope kids once they got to high school because the Camden clique is so bad.

The Hope elementary and middle schools aren't as good; Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville aren't as good, so the kids are a little bit less prepared once they get to high school, I would say. I was in very advanced classes already because I had been in the 'better' public school.

But, like, the Five Towns High School, to me at least, looks exquisite in terms of its facilities. It's a public school but I believe it's the tax revenue from Camden and Rockport that are allowing the facilities to be, like, track field, running trail, windmill—we had a windmill—we had an auditorium, like, a gorgeous stage, you know, nice gymnasium. It looks like it could be—in Spain, it looks like their private school. I realized that in Spain.

But then you go a couple towns over to ones that aren't in the Five Town range, like Warren. So, you've got Camden Rockport. Then, like, Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville on the outskirts, and then you get a little bit farther, you get Warren, you get like Thomaston, Rockland. And those places have a lot more poverty, a lot more drugs.

How far are they from Camden and Rockport?

15, 20 minutes on like Maine roads.

Um, those high schools are so different. The culture is a little meaner, it's very vulgar. You go into the facilities and it's so much less funded. It's very visible, the difference.

In terms of educational outcomes?

Very different. A couple from my public school, there was a girl a couple classes above me who went to Harvard, a couple kids in my class who I was like, "Really?", went to places like Dartmouth. I don't know how. Well, I do, they were smart kids but, like, the school is much more of a feeder school. They're like the small-town Maine school that looks good to the Ivy League because it's like "Oh, look it's small-town Maine" but their parents are probably also millionaires.

So, you think it's the combination of them coming from Maine and the fact that they're…

Yea, because that school I went to was not academically rigorous whatsoever.

It's more the fact that they're wealthy?

Yea, I would assume so. There's more—they have more access to resources than someone from two towns over. And the people from two towns over, there's a lot of teen pregnancy, a lot of people don't go to college. My high school, they would be pictures and they would show everyone going to college.

You'd see people come from the outskirt towns, some of them wouldn't go or they would have other plans. They would become a hairdresser, or they would say, like, "I'm sticking around here." Or, like, Maine Maritime Academy, where my dad went to school, or, like, UMaine. You'd see that, but the wealthier Camden-Rockport kids, you'd see, like, the private schools. You'd see they were headed to a private school.

So even though these people from these five towns go to the same high school, it's the personal background that affects their educational background.

Yea, and a lot of the people from the more outskirt towns, I feel like the low-key people, the ones who were just good students, good kids, the low-key ones, like middle class kids, they would probably go to University of Maine and study anything and maybe go to the honors college and do well. And then there are kids who are farther down socioeconomically and watch where some of them end up. Some of them do go to the military or they go to Maine Maritime—I'm not saying they don't do well, but it's not like a kid who grew up with that background from Appleton and comes to my high school, that doesn't mean they're going to get the same—they don't have the same outcomes as the kids who grow up in Camden and were prepped to apply to Harvard when they were ten.

So, I think it's a lot more family, a lot more class background that predicts those outcomes.

And what were the names of the other three towns?

Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville. And now I live in Hope. So now I'm straddling that world a bit.

And I live on the boundary with Warren. And so, Warren is kind of like a—like my brother's boyfriend is from Warren and it's just like a totally different world.

Like are they taught different things?

Like, people just struggle a lot financially, there's a lot of drug issues. There's an opioid crisis in Maine. People are really affected by that, like, a lot of people can't make rent. Families really struggle. Not that they don't struggle in their own way in, like, richer homes, but a very different type of struggle. People do struggle with addiction all the time, you know what I mean? It's just, like, a palatable socioeconomic difference.

It's really striking out these three towns on the outskirts, they're only fifteen minutes away, but this disparity is so visible apparently.

Yea, like, from Hope to Camden is, like, ten minutes. From Hope to Warren is, like, five minutes. But the difference from Warren to Hope, and Hope to Camden is just huge; people dress differently, people talk differently. Like, my brother speaks with a little bit more of an accent because of the people he's hung out with, they're from those outer towns. He speaks with more of a Maine accent, whereas I don't speak with a Maine accent.

I don't even know what a Maine accent would sound like.

It's, like, "Yuh, I tol—" no, I can't do it either. It's, like, uh, "Ion't know"—no, wait. You have to listen to Jake speak. Ugh, yea. I can't do it. My dad has bits, but not much.

Do you think the people from Hope, Appleton, and Lincolnville do better by going to the Five Towns High School?

Like, in what way?

Like, do you think they achieve higher academics?

Oh, ok. That's interesting. This is all my conjecture, of course. First of all, I think saying 'doing better' is hard because I don't personally think that the elite education—it's like a mass and I don't like it, and I don't think I want my kids to go to a school like Georgetown, to be perfectly honest.

I mean I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had, but I think the mindset is so limiting.

It's so toxic.

It's toxic and it's limiting. It makes you see your possibilities as fixed and looks down on people who are really happy living a much smaller life, and they're fine, like, you know what I mean?

So, I think talking about 'better' in that way doesn't work, but at the same time, I think my theory is that people are prepped by the socioeconomic and educational background of their parents and like the expectations of their parents and the community around them, but not the places they live. The friends of the parents, like, the kids that they grew up being friends with, the churches they go to. Just that social circle is what preps them for their outcomes, I believe.

Do you think the social circle is determined by socioeconomic status, or is it determined by, like, other demographics?

I would say people tend to clump together more or less with people who have similarities to them and people who can afford to live in certain places based on their income, based on their background, based on their family. I would say like Hope kids as a monolith probably do better on average than Warren kids, but then Hope is also slightly more expensive than Warren. They're slightly closer to Camden than Warren. There's a vibe of a different kind of culture in Hope, that's closer to a Rockport Camden vibe, so like can you say those kids from Hope do better because they come into Camden or would they do just as well if they went to Warren but it's just, they have those different home expectations, that home life, so they would still end up…

So, what if we define 'better' as in making more money?

But you could also define it as, like, the ranking of the school that you went to, that you end up going to versus not, that's the whole—because money, money's complicated because people can see themselves as high class but not have very little money and see themselves as lower class, like, they can be lobstermen but making a fortune. So, money isn't really class. Like, a lot of the kids who do go into college, they're probably going to make as much money as I certainly will.

Like, a lot of them are going to go into the trades, and they're going to support a family of, like, three kids, you know, and they're going to live in Maine and they're going to be fine. So, they could be making fifty, sixty thousand dollars a year doing *that* work, starting their own business that sort of thing, which is like what a Georgetown educated government job worker, NGO worker, they might have a different career trajectory, but especially if they join like the Peace Corps or decide to start a family and one of them stays home, economically the differently might not be huge. It's more, like, the social expectations of "what does the good life look like?"

I think it's, like, post-graduate outcomes is a good way to measure it because it's not saying it's better to go to Harvard than it is to become a lobsterman. It's just saying that are the choices predictable by where you grew up, or what school you went to, or who your parents were, you know what I mean?

[Portion redacted at the request of interviewee]

How much do you not want me to put?

I guess, like, the stuff about my dad's girlfriend. You could use that anecdote with, like, other data but just, like, I don't want, like, her name or the details that sort of thing.

So, I would just say, I think it's not clear what predicts the outcomes the best, I would say it's a combination, but I think the highest predictor is probably family and immediate social circle. Like, in my case, I can analyze it that way. I don't want to get into consulting or anything like that. I could pat myself on the back and be like, "I'm so morally righteous and don't care about money." But it's like, my family wouldn't be as proud of me if I went into consulting because their moral compass is much more, like, they don't care how much money they make, but they do want to know I'm doing *big* things, but just like *helping,* kind of, like, NGO stuff, educational stuff. They want it to be intellectual and academic. Had I decided I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom or like a missionary, they'd be, like, not impressed.

Even in my case, if I had just grown up in the social circle of my dad, I probably would've just gone to UMaine.

What drove you to Georgetown?

My mom's side of the family. They're all, like, more private school educated. And I don't know what my mom would have said, but she went to Amherst. So that was always kind of, like, the expectation, if you are capable, of getting into, then go. And the money wasn't a question. It was, like, the money's worth it.

Appendix B

Interview with Howard Xuan, December 2, 2022

So, you went to private school?

Yes.

What private school?

It was a school called Sage Hill in Newport. Basically, in the neighboring city.

From Irvine?

Yes. Some of my classmates were in my situation where they attended public middle school in Irvine and then went to Sage Hill private school. But some of my other peers had other situations, like private Catholic school, all sorts of stuff like that.

So Sage Hill was just high school?

Just high school.

And where did you go before?

I went to a public high school in Irvine called Rancho San Joaquin Middle School.

Is it a normal thing for people where you live for people to go to private schools, or is it more of a selective choice?

It was a selective choice. Most of my friends in middle school, they went on to just go to University High School, which is just the high school that was closest to me and where a lot of my friends in Rancho went. The rarer choice was to go to private school.

What kind of high school would you describe your friends' high school as?

That's a good question. I think one thing about public high schools in Irvine is that they're very competitive. I don't think that's a controversial thing to say. A lot of students, you know, several grades above where they should be in math, etc. A lot of AP classes, things like that. That's the general vibe I get, pretty fierce competition. That might be one of the reasons why my family thought I might have better room to develop myself in a private high school where there's room to do things that aren't for the sake of academic competition.

That's interesting that the public high school would be more competitive than the private school.

I think it's interesting too. It's hard to say why that is. It might just have to do with the local communities that surround the public high schools.

What kind of communities?

Um, well, being Chinese myself, I think the community that was most visible to myself were other Chinese Americans, both like Chinese immigrants, as well as children of Chinese immigrants. I feel like it's a general, kind of—when you think of a stereotypical middle class, upper-middle class Asian American family, that's the kind of community that I saw a lot of. I'm not saying that's the majority of the families, I'm just saying that's what I personally saw, and you know, from that there might be a cultural emphasis on education. So, you see a lot of emphasis on going to good universities and you have all the academic and extracurricular preparation that went into that.

It's like the culture of the families that these students came from you think influenced their competitiveness most?

Perhaps, though, I don't want to make culture the deciding factor here. It could just as well be socioeconomic factors, you know, it's hard to tell. I don't want to essentialize anything. All I'm saying is that it seemed, like—at least the families that were visible to me and that I saw around me—a lot of times, parents would go to these workshops talking about how to get their kids into good universities, etc. So that's the vibe I got.

The public high school, it was just Irvine that was served? Or were there other towns that it served by the same high school.

I think it was just Irvine. I'm not so familiar with how the public school district worked. I think people generally just went to whatever high school was closer to them, so University High School was the school that my brother went to. Some of my friends who lived in different parts of the city went to different high schools. Some of them, off the top of my head: Irvine High School, there's this high school called Woodridge. These are two other high schools that a lot of people I knew went to.

Your friends went to the…

My friends from Rancho generally went to University High School, so I guess there is a geographic component to that.

And the other high schools, would you say they're similar to University High or are they different in their own ways?

I think they were relatively similar. I heard some parents say that Woodridge was a more, like, is a different vibe, but that might just be from the mouths of Asian parents who have their own prejudiced biases.

What do they mean by different vibe?

I guess just, like, "Oh, that's where some of the bad kids go," or that it's a high school that has more, like, troublemakers. That seems to be the vibe that they perceived. But of course, all that is within Irvine, which is a pretty affluent town, so I don't know how much credit to give to them.

So those other high schools served Irvine, but Irvine itself, as a monolith, is affluent, would you say?

Yea, quite.

Why did your brother decide to go to University High?

One thing is that we didn't know that Sage Hill was, like, an option, so it speaks to, I think, by default people went to public high schools, right? And it was a good enough of a choice to be a default choice. Later on, I think my parents found out about Sage and then, like, they got a sense that University High from my brother's experience, they found that it was very much, like, the type of school environment they felt existed in China.

What's that supposed to mean?

Again, like, hypercompetitive, right? That was one of the reasons, maybe part of their calculations that "We moved to the United States, we expect more space for kids to grow outside of academics and do things that are more like 'personal growth', 'interest development', stuff like that." They felt that was not being achieved in University High's…So they started looking at Sage Hill as another option.

I'm not sure how they heard about that private school, but I guess there were some other Asian parents, and you just hear through the grapevine.

I will say, after my year, though, the succeeding years, I started seeing more Asian and Chinese American students.

At Sage Hill?

At Sage Hill.

So, Sage Hill before was…what? Mostly catered towards who?

Catered, I'm not sure, but I saw mostly white students. Yea, I think that's fair to say majority white.

And then after you, you saw more Asian students enter?

More Asian students, yes.

Of course, I saw other students of other ethnic backgrounds and stuff. If I had a yearbook in front of me, I could just point to them and maybe we can make a distribution, but I don't have that in front of me right now.

But your brother, you'd say, he got a pretty decent education from University High or no?

I'd say so. I mean, I think 'decent education' has as much to do with the person receiving the education as much as the institution, right? I mean, my brother had some trouble with education, just in high school, I don't know if University High was the cause of that or part of the cause of that. Um, I guess the competition definitely caused some stress.

One other observation I can make is when I was in Rancho, I had some peers who I thought were in those advanced placement classes. Most people in 8th grade are taking algebra. Some classes are taking geometry, stuff like that. I remember one of my friends in that class—he ended up going to University High—I heard from my mom who heard from his mom—again, Chinese American grapevine—I heard that he had performed very poorly on one of his exams. 'Poorly' being a C, which isn't that bad, but it was pretty devastating to him, so I guess the idea that someone in middle school who seemed very high achieving and a competitive academic student could go to University High School and go through that, I think that says something about the academic environment there.

Would you say your parents would have chosen a different school for your brother if they had other options?

That's a good question, I'm not sure. I don't know if they would have, um…I should ask them. I don't know. I can't say one way or the other.

Would you say that the people at University High and maybe the other high schools in Irvine had the same ambitions that people at your high school did?

I would say that—I'm pretty confident in saying that there's more socioeconomic diversity in the public high schools. Because of that, what people wanted out of life, what they were expecting, might have been different. I think that students who—the kids who went to Sage, a lot of times they would have all sorts of advantages coming in already. Those just get magnified and expanded upon at Sage.

I mean, all those types of resources, like, for example, we had this sort of internship placement program where a lot of that is built off of the connections that affluent people were able to have. That was a program and opportunity that students in a public school might not have had access to. So that's what I mean, it's sort of like a reinforcement of existing privileges.

But the public high schools, they had more socioeconomic diversity than your private high school.

I would say so, and the Asian American community that I referenced, I would say that within the larger population of public school-attending families and kids, the people that I interacted with are, like, towards the higher end of the socioeconomic distribution of like public high schools.

There was still socioeconomic diversity in Sage Hill?

I would say some. There were definitely scholarship students, scholarship students were there with some degree of financial aid, but most of the students are quite well off, I would say.

Do you think that the environment at Sage Hill impacted those scholarship students?

That's a good question, that's something that like most students at Sage Hill have discussed: privilege and all sorts of conversation topics like that. I mean, that's one of the good things about Sage. Of course, when you get a bunch of rich kids in a room talking about privilege, sometimes they don't take it seriously, sometimes their talking points…

What do they say?

I mean, students take it seriously and try to discuss it well, but one caveat to that is coming from rich backgrounds, they kind of have the influence from, like, upper-middle class, conservative ideas, right? Or there might be…I can't think of any good examples right now, but you can kind of imagine, if your parents are from upper-middle class or upper-class backgrounds and you're a kid, even if you're hearing these things about privileges and stuff like that, it's hard for you to talk about it in a more nuanced way.

And then you kind of have the teenage boys—mostly boys, I would say—but teenage boys who were very kind of 'edge-lord' mentality, you know, the type of people who might not take those kinds of conversations seriously.

One anecdote I can think of is, there was one student that wrote for the school newspaper who I think was on scholarship or was in some capacity…her dad was a teacher at the school. She wrote an article talking about the annoyances that can arise from having friends who come from well-off families. You know, when we're going shopping together, your friends, the places they go to, the things they buy, even if they don't mean to, it might kind of exclude you if you don't have the same kind of economic resources.

So, those kinds of conversations happen. I don't know if everybody sympathizes with those points, but that's something.

What do you think motivated them to go to Sage Hill?

Well, I can't speak for everybody, especially because I don't know what type of high schools were in other cities where, you know, it might be very different, right? Irvine is an example where, like, the public high schools are quite competitive, at the same time, like, the quality is pretty decent. Not every city nearby is like that, so it's hard to say what motivates people to go to private high school.

Maybe there's this idea of, like, being in the 'right crowd'. I would say my parents were more focused on, like, having me explore other things outside of academics, not to be hyper stressed about it. Maybe other cities where the public schools aren't that good, then it's a matter of finding a private school nearby where your kid can have a good education.

I really do wonder what motivates people to go to private high schools if the public high schools seem so good.

That's a good question.

Sure, it might be competitive, but it seems like it's good academically, like it would academically prepare students for what's to come after, which I assume is university.

That's a good point. One thing to complicate it more, and in conversations with Ari, who was also in the same high school, but she maybe experienced the public school system in Irvine from a different perspective than me. From her perspective, something she noted was that the public-school systems aren't necessarily 'good' in the sense that they had good infrastructure, good personnel, whatever. It's more just there's a bunch of hypercompetitive kids from families who highly value education, and it's driven by the attendees of these schools that these schools became competitive.

And what that means is, I think, there's a big afterschool preparatory ecosystem in Irvine. You go to public school, you go home, you go to this afterschool class, you learn about the SATs, English, math, whatever. Stuff that gets you ahead. Parents who emphasize education a lot, they put their children in those classes and then they come back to school, and they perform really well. So maybe on the record, these high schools are very competitive and doing a good job at educating these kids, but maybe they're not doing the heavy lifting. I think, unfortunately I don't know enough about kids whose families might have had these kinds of resources or whose families might have other priorities and how they felt they were being serviced by these high schools. I don't know what they situation is like for them.

It sounds a lot like Japanese cram schools, is that a fair characterization?

I would say so.

I went to several of them myself, so I think, ultimately, my view of Irvine and its school system is inevitably molded by the community I grew up in. It was a community that was very gung-ho about applying to college, getting good grades, and packaging yourself for educational advancement. So, like, I'm very confident that there are other experiences that are not like I described. Like, some people who were failed by the public high schools because they didn't provide good enough teachers to help the kids or have the same resources or whatever.

Would you say the people who did have the resources put their kids in prep schools?

I would say so, yea.

Would that be the majority of the people that went to public high school?

I can't say majority. Yea, I really can't say. I think it's enough of a proportion where people talk about it and are familiar with it.

Appendix C

Interview with Ariana Satari, December 2, 2022

Can you describe what kind of educational experience you had growing up?

Mine was a little complicated. I feel, like, I was a little bit on the privileged side of things since I grew up in Ohio, so the education system is very bad over there, so I was homeschooled. Kindergarten and first grade, homeschooled, then moved over to Irvine, CA. There, I went to Bonita Canyon Elementary School, which is in one of the more privileged areas, and then Turtle Rock Elementary School. Still in the same privileged area, but they found more kids that are—they expanded the region—more kids who don't have families that are higher socioeconomic status.

Education was different for each one. Bonita Canyon was more artsy. Turtle Rock is known more as a math-science school. I swapped over for that reason. Turtle Rock also had the AAPAS program, which is for students who were supposed to be 'gifted'—so they have two kinds of programs, they have the GATE one and then APAAS—my sister was in APAAS, I was in the GATE program.

I don't know what your topic is, but toward the point of there being inequalities, my mom had to talk to a bunch of the other parents in order for me to know to even take the test to get into the GATE program. The same thing for my sister to get into APAAS. The reason why I wasn't in APAAS was because my mom didn't find out early enough.

You think she would have put you into APAAS?

For sure.

Why is that?

She wanted me to do well in education or to have better opportunities down the road.

So, it was for the sake of her getting a good education, I want her to be in this certain track?

Yea.

What was the culture at the different schools?

From what I can remember—I don't remember the home school at all. That one, you did kind of interact with the other students, but I was too young to remember most of it. At Bonita Canyon, the more artsy school, that one, everyone was a lot more friendly and easy-going. It wasn't as high stress. Moving over to Turtle Rock, very high stress, even though we were in, like, 5th, 6th grade. Like, *insanely* competitive.

There was one example I remember; I was in a math competition—I forget what it was called—but there was one of the girls from the APAAS program. She ended up punching a kid to take a test, like the practice exam by herself. You're supposed to take it as a group, and she actually punched somebody. I think we were in 6th grade, so it was a really intense competition. Probably not what you were looking for.

What was the point of APAAS and the track that you were on, that other people were on in middle school?

Basically, once you hit middle school, you're forced to go to the school that's within your district. I had an exception, but the GATE and APAAS program was one of the ways that you could show you were more academically advanced. Parents who wanted their children to be more academically advanced earlier on and have the advantage of that to apply to better programs in middle school and high school, they started getting into those programs as elementary school kids.

As elementary school kids?

Yea, so, like, being in APAAS and GATE would set you up so that, like—for me, 6th grade, you have to take an exam to get into the higher math levels. I got into Algebra I after 6th grade, whereas if you didn't pass the class, you got into Pre-Algebra. If you didn't pass *that* exam, it was the intro to Pre-Algebra. So, basically, you repeated 6th grade math depending on two exams you took in 6th grade. And that determined your class for middle school.

How did people prepare for these exams?

Mostly by studying. There's a lot of people in the Irvine area that use tutors, so like 'Kumon' is a huge thing. Other than that, the GATE program was kind of like—I don't know if it was geared towards the test, it was just more you get more practice with more challenging math problems. So, that definitely prepared you. But yea, mostly, it started in elementary school, and it leads up all the way to high school. You need to be started really early on the math-and-science-heavy tracks.

What were the kinds of people who took these tracks? Was there a similarity between these people?

I think it's going to be a little bit of a stereotype, but there's a lot of, like—there's a pretty high percentage, above 90% of people in Irvine who are Asian, so a lot of those families will push their children very hard in order to get into those programs. So that's the dominant demographic. Otherwise, there's a lot of professors because UC Irvine is right next door. The person who punched someone, her parents are professors at UC Irvine. There's a few other kids who also had professors as parents, and those kids were also on those tracks.

I'm trying to think…I don't remember other than that if there was any general trend, but everyone around there has a higher socioeconomic status, which got them into those schools in

the first place. From my understanding, Irvine does have one of the best education systems, so it's a privilege just being at those schools in the first place.

I was just talking to Howard about his private high school. I said that the public high school seemed like already really academically rigorous, and people are very academically well-prepared for what's to come afterward. What's the draw to go to a private school then?

At least for me, it was the…what was it called? Common Core? They started Common Core when I was in 7th grade, I would say. So, they were just starting to implement it, and my sister had one of the first Common Core math classes; absolutely dreadful, did not want to do that. They kind of implemented it in my math class in 8th grade, but it wasn't as intense. But, even earlier on, my mom had been fighting to try and stop them from trying to use Common Core in our elementary schools, so we knew we wanted to get out of that. And one of the ways was to go to private school.

How were you able to get into private school.

Lots of applications until one of them took me. It was a lot of interviews. It depends on if it's an East Coast school, then sometimes you had to do Skype interviews. Probably now, they changed it to Zoom. I forget how many essays it was, but it was probably three to four essays per school, and they had a bunch of short answer questions. It's very similar to doing college applications.

That sounds really time-consuming.

Yea, I spent all of winter break for three years doing that.

For three years!

I think 8th grade, 9th grade, 10th grade-ish. I was debating which school to go to, so I was still working on applications.

You just went to the one that accepted you?

I was accepted to two, I think, and I chose the one that was close to my home because I didn't want to board. I wasn't ready for that yet. I was accepted to a boarding school, and I chose not to go there.

Did you have a similar experience to friends who continued in the public education system?

I didn't really keep in touch with my friends who were in the public education system, so I'm not really sure. I know once I got to college, there was a writing course that I had to take. There, you could see a drastic difference. I had done a lot of reports already on, I guess, book analysis, whereas they had just focused on research. What was taught was different, and what was taught was more geared towards going to college.

In the private school?

Yea.

And the private school that you went to was the same as Howard's?
Yes.

How would you describe the high school?

That's a tough one, because I feel, like, everyone's experience is really different. I really liked going to Sage, but there were a lot of people who wanted more freedom, they wanted to do other things, which is kind of surprising knowing that Sage is probably the least strict school you could go to.

There's a lot of opportunities that comes with being around people who have more finances. It's definitely a very nice campus and it's nice to have the small community because everyone knows everyone. Teacher will look out for you, for sure. You're not hidden in the back of the classroom. Most of the time, you have twelve students in your class, so it's a pretty small class size. You can get individualized time when you need it, and they set aside time to make sure that you can go to teachers. They already have office hours already built into the high school curriculum. So, they already planned out within the day.

That's sounds a lot like college.

Yea, so it's definitely a college-prep school.

And that's pretty much what everybody aspires to?

Most people do go to college from there. We have a much higher college acceptance rate, from my understanding, and the majority of students will go to colleges. My experience is slightly different. I got accepted to some colleges and then ended up going to community college instead because of financial reasons, which was really looked down upon.

Why was it looked down upon?

Because there's a lot of affluence and everything, then they really strongly want to show statistics that their students went to a college. So, if you go to a community college, which it happened that year, I was one of three students, we popped up as like one of the top schools that people went to ended up being a community college. The school doesn't want to show that, so they really discourage it.

Would you say you had a different experience than the normal student who went to Sage?

Probably.

How so?

My family dynamic is very different than a lot of people's there. In terms of financial stability, I also was not super great at the time, so there's definitely—Howard probably mentioned it—there were people writing articles about how the people who were on scholarship programs try to hang out with people who do have the financial means to attend the school, but they're sort of like—there's a lot of fancy restaurants in the area that are just more expensive because people can afford it in their area. So then, people who can't afford that see that, and it kind of messes with your head a little bit. Or like, there are people that I know who were on my volleyball team and stuff and they were in the most expensive neighborhood probably in the United States. One of my best friends lived in that neighborhood—or she did until a few months ago.

I guess, I don't know where I'm going with this. You kind of see things differently than they do because you're kind of looking at it as, "Oh, I can't spend money on this thing" and they're, like, "Oh, the cafeteria has all this food. Why don't I buy everything?" So, it depends on what everyone's financial situation is, but the students who have more financial stability were the ones who always wanted to leave campus. I didn't really have that option because I have a single mom and I would be stuck on campus until 8PM, so a lot of students, it hits 1:30PM or 3PM, they're gone. They have their own cars; they can leave whenever. For me, I was stuck super late because we had one car for our family and my sister would be in volleyball practice or something and I would be stuck waiting in one of the classrooms or outside depending on when they locked up. I didn't have the freedom to just leave campus. I was kind of stuck there. I guess, for me, that was one of the reasons why I enjoyed Sage more though, is I had a group of friends who would stay afterschool. Not until 8, until like 5PM, so I had some friends who I would hang out with consistently.

I feel like I should bring up the fact that there was a drug problem. There was a lot of vaping that happened on campus. There were always the stories of people going out and getting drunk at parties and stuff like that. Any of the people in the more affluent groups, they tended to have that experience where they would leave campus early, and then I don't really know when they finished their homework, but they would go out and party and have fun. That was not my experience.

They weren't the most academically serious students?

Some of them were, it really depends.

Did everybody end up getting the aspired dream that they wanted?

I think most people did. There were some people that, like, they kind of screwed up, so they had some issues. I don't know if Howard mentioned, we were one of the schools that got hit with the college scandal. We had, how many was it, was it, like, two or three people on the board that were like parents involved in that scandal. Some of their kids knew, some of them didn't. There were other students who got caught cheating, so they were asked to leave the school. Other ones didn't because they had enough money that they could get out of it. I don't remember anything else off the top of my head.

You mentioned some of the scholarship kids would hang out with the more affluent kids. Do you think that influenced them any way besides feeling left out?

I know there were other students who felt left out. I did not. I had a pretty strong friend group. There were still, of course, some instances where I'm, like, "I can't afford to do this, but you guys want to go, go ahead without me." Because I had a good friend group, they would sometimes be like "It's fine, we won't do that, we'll just find something else that's better to do." So, I think I had a pretty good friend group in that aspect.

Do you think you would be where you are known if you didn't go to Sage?

I think it would've been harder to get to where I'm at because Sage really prepared me academically on what to do. Also, Uni is very hard. There's a lot of horror stories of—I guess, I don't know how to word this nicely. There's rumors of teachers who have participated in harassment of various sorts as well as drug dealing. There's also a lot of reports of suicide. So, it's a very intense school and not a lot of good things associated with it. And that's the public school that I would have been told to go to. I didn't really have a choice. Middle school I kind of had a choice, so that one, I think I dodged a bullet. But, if I went to Uni, I don't know how it would have turned out.

And you went to community college first?

Right after high school, yea.

Did you feel the composition of Sage was different than the public school you would have gone to?

Yea, there's still a lot of people who have a lot of money at public schools, but I don't think they show it was much as Sage did.

[Howard interjects] There's people with 'fuck you' money at Sage. [End of interjection]

Those people just walk around with Gucci and Louis Vuitton on campus, no problem, do not care. I have friends who I have never seen them wear the same outfit twice at Sage. They have a lot. I've been to friend's houses, $11 million houses, they have like bowling alleys in their house, a tennis court, stuff like that. It's insane. I did not have friends like that in public school, but also, I don't think those students were the most, I guess—they were pursuing academics in public schools, at Sage more of the higher socioeconomic people were high-achieving in academics as well. So, it's a different type of demographic.

So, is it that everyone's affluent in Irvine, but the even more affluent people would go to the private schools?

Yea, they would send their kids to private schools. They're also private schools for elementary and middle school. So, a lot of the time, those students would already not be in your public-school experience. They already had a place to go that wasn't, I guess, challenged as much.

But some people would still start out in public school and then transfer later to private school?

Yea, I had friends who did that.

Do you know why they might have made that transition?

I think for the same reasons. They wanted better education, they wanted to be more academically advanced, and their parents could afford it.

One other thing I remembered. There was the SHIP program, which is like an internship program that's only available to Sage students. So, they'll contact the parents throughout the school and ask them if they would take interns from the high school students. By the time I had graduated, I had worked job at one of the startups that was available. And I think I had already done four internships by the end of my senior year summer. There's a lot more opportunities in that realm. At the same time, because it's a more affluent area, one of the people I had interned with—I'm still in contact with him right now, and he reached out to a bunch of his other friends who are all entrepreneurs and I got to shadow each of their companies. I don't think that would be available if you were in a public school. He just took his entire friend base who's in entrepreneurship since I'm in entrepreneurship and he was, like, "Let's visit all of them. You like engineering specifically. We'll find you some engineering-specific entrepreneurs." So, I got to shadow a bunch of companies that I keep in contact with all those people.

[Howard interjects] I didn't do this whole thing. [End of interjection]

No but that's the thing though, his kid is also a Sage student who's in the grade level below mine. And he kept making the comment multiple times that any of the students that are more affluent don't actually take that opportunity. It's the students that are less affluent that will take the SHIP program and they'll use it to their advantage.

[Howard interjects] As one of those more affluent students, I can't speak for others, maybe they felt the stuff would just be handed to them anyways. Personally, it's almost like a situation where your parents might have reserved the best opportunities for you without putting them into this open pool.

I know the main thing I pursued in high school that I put a lot on my applications are more like stuff within the Asian American community that my mom directly just came to me about. That's kind of a different thing than this experience. [End of interjection]

By message to Howard shortly after interview: I forgot to mention JTMS and how we stole all the good teachers in the district lol. Also idk if it's helpful to him but getting into Scioly was only the kids who came out of elementary school as the top students and they had to get in with a test. Those kids had the opportunity to mess around with more tech and had more resources than the rest of the school since we got extra time on the computer labs and there was a budget for us to

buy parts and books for the competition which in turn helped me get into private schools since it showed academic achievement in a way students who didn't pass the exam to get in couldn't.