Access to selective US universities reserved for the wealthy

Michael Anders
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The think tank New America recently released a detailed report on access to higher education in the United States, titled "Moving On Up?" The report is based on data from new research, contained in the paper, "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of College in Intergenerational Mobility". One of the researchers was Emmanuel Saez, whose work on inequality has been cited by the *World Socialist Web Site* on many occasions.

The report provides shocking statistics on the declining access to selective universities for low income students. The report finds that "colleges heavily covet students from wealthy families, and help them excel further than their low-income peers."

Notably, the study also revealed that while these students are systematically rejected from selective universities, students from low-income families are just as likely to succeed in higher education, and eventually attain a similar income level to their counterparts from high-income families.

The table above, taken from the report, shows the access and success rates, expressed as percentages of total enrollment. Access rates are the percentage of students whose families are in the bottom quintile, while success rates are the percentage of students with families in the bottom quintile who eventually enter the top quintile.

Ivy Plus schools—Ivy League plus other elite institutions—tend to have 3.70 percent enrollment of students with families with incomes in the bottom quintile. Highly selective and selective public universities have an enrollment of 6.10 percent and 10.90 percent, respectively. Working class students are mostly relegated to nonselective public and private universities, with enrollments of 15.60 percent and 11.70 percent, respectively. The colleges with the highest access rates are four- and two-year for-profit institutions.

These statistics also demonstrates that, while access rates increase for less prestigious universities, success rates are decreasing. Nonselective public and private schools have a success rate, which is explained above, of 14.20 percent and 18.60 percent, respectively. Four- and two-year for-profit institutions, which have the highest access rates, have the lowest success rates. Unsurprisingly, the universities with the lowest access rates and highest success rates for students from low-income families are Ivy League universities.

The researchers discovered that students with families that are in the top 1 percent "are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League university" than their counterparts from families in the bottom quintile. In spite of this, Barrett also notes that "over half [of students from the bottom quintile who attend these schools] enter the top quintile" by the time they are 32 years old.

These numbers, when considered together, shatter the idea that access to higher education in the United States is meritocratic. It also destroys the illusion maintained by the bourgeoisie that people have freedom to move from one class to another by virtue of hard work. Students do not get into universities based on academic merit and ability, but rather their enrollment is decided to a large degree by their economic class. As more and more high-paying positions require a college degree from a noteworthy institution, the working class is denied the tools necessary to attain these degrees. In other words, someone born into the working class is forced to remain there.

New America analyst Stephen Burd notes that the move to deny access to selective universities for low-income students has been part of a long process dating back over two decades. He explains that two thirds of

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the 32 public flagship universities considered in the study have seen steady increases in the percentage of students from wealthy backgrounds since the late 1990s.

This process was achieved by shifting from a need-based disbursement of institutional financial aid, to a non-need-based disbursement policy. The starkest example of this is the University of Alabama, "which spent over $100 million" on "so-called merit aid" in 2014-15. This was met by an increase of 13 percentage points of students being from the top quintile.

Universities have become tools of the ruling elite. They are beginning more and more to fulfill the bourgeois counterrevolutionary task of concentrating wealth in an increasingly minuscule minority, by more and more excluding the working class from even the possibility of gaining wealth. In the United States, this minority is already tiny. Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett collectively own more wealth than the bottom 160 million people. Worldwide, an Oxfam 2017 report suggests that the global number is 8—i.e., 8 people own more wealth than the bottom 3.5 billion.

It must be noted that the "Mobility Report Cards" data was collected from 1999-2013. The policies which have led to the decline in access to higher education for students from low income families was a bipartisan effort, presided over not only by the Bush administration, but also the Obama administration.

The rising tuition that can be seen since 2013 in the US will only put higher education further out of the reach of the working class. The graph above is derived by the College Board, showing the rise in tuition costs from the 1987-88 academic year to 2017-18. The dollar values here are shown in 2017 dollars. Despite a few twists and turns, the general direction of these lines is obvious—tuition is rising steadily as time goes on. This trend has continued, regardless of the President in office.

However, "Moving On Up?" notes that the data found in the "Mobility Report Cards" could not have been collected by the Department of Education. In section 2 of Chapter 2, Clare McCann notes that the Department of Education is forbidden by Congress to access and compile data on a student level, thus restricting the comprehensiveness of any data they can release. In other words, the privileged layers at the top level of universities have the perfect cover to do whatever they want, while the Democrats and Republicans in Congress need not bother themselves with the resulting inequality.

This attack on education, consciously waged at all levels, is evidence of what Trotsky called the "thoroughly thought-out counterrevolutionary strategy of the bourgeoisie," recorded in Volume 2 of *The First Five Years of the Communist International*.

The bourgeoisie has the task of ensuring the concentration of wealth, and the sharp class divisions of society on which it is based. Counterposed to this, Trotsky adds, the working class must have "its own revolutionary strategy, likewise thought out to the end."

Access to education—like the right to a job, quality health care and housing—is an inalienable social right, not a privilege for the very wealthy, which must be fought for by the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

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