

Book Notes

CLASS DISMISSED: WHEN COLLEGES IGNORE INEQUALITY AND STUDENTS PAY THE PRICE

by Anthony Abraham Jack

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In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, colleges and universities across the United States began shutting their doors, often with little warning to students, faculty, and staff. Colleges canceled in-person instruction, pivoted to virtual settings, and instructed students to go home. What began as a necessary health and safety measure quickly became a crisis for thousands of students who suddenly found themselves with nowhere to go. News outlets shared the stories of low-income and marginalized college students facing food and housing insecurity and the loss of critical supports, such as access to a campus job, transportation, a stable internet connection, or even a laptop (Calhoun, 2020; Goins, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020; Redden, 2020). These accounts underscored the resourcefulness and persistence with which students navigated this unprecedented moment, skills they had long been forced to rely on since systemic disparities in institutional supports between low-income and marginalized students and their more privileged peers existed well before the pandemic.

Indeed, the upheaval laid bare the racial and class dynamics that institutions—in particular, highly selective colleges—had long overlooked. Highly selective colleges tend to be better-resourced and have higher persistence and graduation rates than less selective or open access institutions, but low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color tend to be underrepresented at these schools, often enrolling instead at less-resourced institutions, such as community colleges and other open-access schools. While selective colleges had made progress in diversifying their student bodies in terms of both socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds (Pew Research Center, 2019), the pandemic drew attention to a stark reality: despite these gains, many institutions were unprepared to support their most vulnerable students in a time of crisis. *Class Dismissed: When Colleges Ignore Inequality and Students Pay the Price*, by Anthony Abraham Jack, paints a vivid picture of this reality, shedding light on the ways colleges and universities have failed to account for the full range of their students' lived realities

and challenging institutions to rethink what genuine, comprehensive support for minoritized and marginalized students entails.

Class Dismissed builds on the foundation Jack (2019) laid in his first book, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. This earlier work examines how class dynamics shape the experiences of low-income, first-generation students at elite colleges, highlighting how precollege educational experiences, such as attending boarding schools instead of public schools, influence their sense of belonging and ability to navigate the hidden curriculum of campus life. In *Class Dismissed* Jack extends this conversation by exploring how these class dynamics showed up during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Class Dismissed showcases insights gained from interviews that Jack and his research team conducted with 125 undergraduate students at Harvard University between January 2021 and March 2022. The interviews capture a range of student voices, including Asian, Black, Native, White, Latino, and mixed-race students, along with those from upper- and lower-income families. Interviews lasted, on average, two and a half hours and, in some cases, took place across multiple sittings. This comprehensive approach gave Jack a nuanced understanding of the intersecting challenges students faced, from navigating class and racial dynamics to grappling with the unique pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on such a wide sample, Jack not only uncovers systemic inequities but also highlights the different ways these inequities manifest in students' lives.

The book is organized thematically, focusing on three elements that shape how students navigate higher education: families, finances, and fault lines along race, or the systemic inequities, cultural biases, and institutional challenges that uniquely impact students of color. By grounding his analysis in these themes, Jack illustrates how students' backgrounds and lived experiences shape their college trajectories. Part 1 focuses on families, including those students acquired by birth, choice, or circumstance. For some students, family meant biological relatives; for others it included chosen families or those who stepped in during times of need. These varied dynamics played a significant role in how students engaged with their college education during the pandemic, as discussed in chapter 1. While many upper-income students spent the pandemic sheltering-in-place in spacious Airbnbs, many low-income students were confined to cramped living quarters and lacked access to a separate space where they could study. Chapter 2 explores the vastly different experiences of students within the families they inherited—their neighborhoods and communities. Wealthier students often returned to areas with spread-out housing and access to large, open public spaces, making social distancing more manageable. In contrast, lower-income students frequently returned to more densely populated areas that not only faced higher risks of COVID-19 exposure but also contended with additional challenges, such as violence. In chapter 3 Jack underscores how, even in times of relative “normalcy,” low-income students

face academic disruptions due to family and community challenges at higher rates than their upper-income peers. The pandemic magnified these inequities, revealing colleges' burdensome requirements regarding leaves of absence, such as securing full-time employment or submitting letters of recommendation, which disproportionately affect low-income students. Jack encourages institutions to rethink these punitive policies and instead provide more wrap-around supports for students.

Part 2 of the book examines students' finances, highlighting the paid and unpaid labor college students take on and how that looks vastly different for upper- and lower-income students. Chapter 4 focuses on paid labor and shows how low-income students were more likely than their higher-income peers to have held campus jobs that were disrupted by the pandemic. Students working at a coffee shop or doing janitorial work lost their sources of income as this work did not shift to online employment. By contrast, wealthier students, who were more likely to hold research assistantships or teaching jobs, were better positioned to keep their jobs during the pandemic. Chapter 5 explores the unpaid labor students took on during the pandemic. While wealthier students had more capacity and flexibility to take on unpaid internships to boost their resumes, low-income students often took on unpaid labor at home, where they were expected to help support their families, and then did not add these experiences to their resumes and instead wrote them off as "just work they do to help their family." In chapter 6 Jack explores the ways institutions might be able to make campus work more equitable for all students, such as rethinking how available campus jobs are advertised or how they handle unpaid work. For example, he encourages college leaders to support those low-income students who dedicate significant time to unpaid work helping their families by recognizing this work as a source of valuable skills and thus creating opportunities for students to incorporate it into their resume building.

Part 3 focuses on fault lines along race, both on and off campus. In chapter 7 Jack examines the covert and overt racism students of color faced on campus before the pandemic and how those experiences informed how the students made meaning of the solidarity statements colleges put out and the check-in text messages their White friends sent following the murder of George Floyd. Chapter 8 looks at how students of color navigated the social unrest and racist attacks in 2020, with many students left feeling unseen, unsupported, and alone. In chapter 9 Jack reminds us that even though many of the incidents fueling social unrest often happen off campus, universities have an obligation to meet students' needs. This can look like providing robust, culturally responsive mental health services and prioritizing administrative and financial support for affinity groups on campus.

In the concluding section, Jack demystifies the idea of a "campus bubble" that protects students from the influence of the outside world. As he points out, when colleges admit students as part of their effort to diversify the student

body, they are “inviting more than students to campus. They are inviting families . . . , communities . . . , [and the] long, tangled history of exclusion that shapes so much of students’ every day lives, both en route to college and each day after that” (226). In this way, *Class Dismissed* serves as a wakeup call for college leaders who have failed to grapple with how their institutions’ policies and practices do not account for all the ways students show up on campus.

The prominence of student voices is one of the book’s greatest strengths. By sharing students’ experiences in a relatable and engaging way, embedding extensive student quotes throughout the narrative, Jack not only broadens the book’s reach but also makes the issues he explores in it feel tangible and urgent. This urgency is further amplified by his decision to use the COVID-19 pandemic as the backdrop. Although the book is situated within the context of the pandemic, Jack makes it clear that “this is not a book about the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a book that uses the disruptions of the pandemic to reveal underexamined inequalities that plague our most vulnerable students” (12). He skillfully uses the examples of students’ experiences during the pandemic to demonstrate that the inequities undergirding these experiences were not new but, rather, are deeply entrenched in the structures and policies of higher education, and a crisis like COVID-19 only exacerbates issues that institutions have failed to address for decades.

While policy-oriented readers may be left wishing the book provided more detailed, step-by-step recommendations outlining what campuses should do to account for these dynamics, Jack’s aim is not to provide a prescriptive roadmap. Instead, he sets out to illuminate the complexity and diversity of the lived experiences of marginalized and minoritized students and to urge college leaders to really grapple with how their current practices are, or not, well-poised to meaningfully support these students. Admitting more diverse classes and providing them with generous financial aid packages is not enough. Jack calls on college leaders to rethink how they can create environments that foster a true sense of belonging for students from historically marginalized and minoritized communities.

Class Dismissed provides a compelling examination of the inequities that exist in higher education. Written in a narrative style, the book is highly accessible without sacrificing the depth or nuance that emerged from the research. Jack’s powerful storytelling makes these nuanced issues accessible, and the book a valuable resource for a wide audience. In blending vivid narratives with critical analysis, the book resonates with readers across disciplines and perspectives. *Class Dismissed* is an important read for those wishing to learn more about the deep inequities at play in higher education, particularly at selective colleges, and for those wishing to reform its policies and practices to create a more just system.

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