I Was a Low-Income College Student. Classes Weren't the Hard Part.

Schools must learn that when you come from poverty, you need more than financial aid to succeed.

By ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK SEPT. 10, 2019

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Night came early in the chill of March. It was my freshman year at Amherst College, a small school of some 1,600 undergraduates in the hills of western Massachusetts, and I was a kid on scholarship from Miami. I had just survived my first winter, but spring seemed just as frigid. Amherst felt a little colder — or perhaps just lonelier — without the money to return home for spring break like so many of my peers.

At that moment, however, I thought less of home and more about the gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. I walked past Valentine Hall, the cafeteria, its large windows ghostly in the moonlight. Only the emergency exit signs blazed red in the darkness. There was just enough light to see the chairs stacked on top of the tables and the trays out of reach through the gates that barred me from entry. Amherst provided no meals during holidays and breaks, but not all of us could afford to leave campus. After my first year, I knew when these disruptions were coming and planned for hungry days, charting them on my calendar.

Back home in Miami, we knew what to do when money was tight and the family needed to be fed. At the time, in the late '90s, McDonald's ran a special: 29-cent hamburgers on Wednesdays and 39-cent cheeseburgers on Sundays. Without that special, I am not sure what we would have done when the week outlasted our reserves before payday. But up at Amherst, there was no McDonald's special, no quick fix.

I worked extra shifts as a gym monitor to help cover the unavoidable costs of staying on campus during breaks. At the gym, the vending machines were stocked with Cheetos and Yoo-hoos, welcome complements to the ham-and-cheese and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches I got from CVS; there are no corner stores or bodegas in Amherst. Not so welcome was the air conditioning on full force in the gym, despite lingering mounds of snow outside. I would check in 20 or so people during my 10-hour shifts, mostly faculty and staff who lived in the area. I recognized them, but they didn't pay me much mind. Friends would not return until the Friday and Saturday before classes began again. Many came back tan. But what I noticed more was how so many of them returned rested — how different our holidays had been.

We like to think that landing a coveted college spot is a golden ticket for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We think less critically about what happens next. I lived this gap as a first-generation college student. And I returned to it as a first-generation graduate student, spending two years observing campus life and interviewing more than 100 undergraduates at an elite university. Many students from low-income families described having to learn and decode a whole new set of cues and terms like professors' "office hours" (many didn't know what they were or how to use them), and foreign rituals like being invited to get coffee with an instructor (and not knowing whether they were expected to pay) — all those moments between convocation and commencement where college life is actually lived.

'My financial-aid officer didn't understand why I worked so many jobs or why I picked up even more hours at times.'

Now, as a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I teach a course I've titled C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me) — borrowing the title of that still-relevant Wu-Tang Clan track — in which we examine how poverty shapes the ways in which many students make it to and through college. Admission alone, as it turns out, is not the great equalizer. Just walking through the campus gates unavoidably heightens these students' awareness and experience of the deep inequalities around them.

I've spent half my life in Miami and the other half in Massachusetts. One 20-minute phone call with an Amherst football coach when I was a high school senior, and a college brochure that arrived two days later, brought this dual citizenship into existence. I can still hear my brother asking, "What is an Amherst?" We didn't have internet at home, so we had to wait to get to the school computer lab before we could look up the unfamiliar name. We learned that the "H" was as silent as my brother was when he found out a United States president — Calvin Coolidge — was an alumnus, and so was the eminent black physician Dr. Charles Drew. Now maybe his baby brother could be one, too.

The path from Miami to Massachusetts was not one that everyone around me could see. I attended George Washington Carver Middle School, which had an International Baccalaureate program, in my neighborhood, Coconut Grove. But the summer before I started at Carver, I took some summer school electives at Ponce de Leon Middle School, our zoned school, where my mom worked as a security guard and which she helped to desegregate in the '60s. Before the starting bell one day, an assistant principal from Carver saw me goofing around with some friends from around the way. She strode over and said to me, "You don't have the potential to be a Carverite."

That assistant principal saw black, boisterous boys and deemed us, and me, *less than*. She didn't see my drive to succeed. My family didn't have much, but since my days in Head Start, I was always a top performer in every subject. During one rough patch, I stayed home from school for a few days when we couldn't afford all the supplies needed to carry out my science-fair experiment on bulb voltage and battery life. I developed my hypotheses and outlined my proposed methods without the materials and had everything ready to go when we were able to afford the supplies. I missed the ribbon but got the A. So on that summer morning when the assistant principal admonished me, anger welled up inside me, but I couldn't let it show. That would have just played into her preconceived notion of who — or rather, what — I was. I had to prove her wrong. I had to prove myself right.

But even as I write these words, I'm aware that this is exactly the kind of story that poor, black and Latinx students are conditioned to write for college application essays. In everyday life, as the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote, we "wear the mask that grins and lies" that "hides our cheeks and shades our eyes," but when we write these all-important essays we are pushed — by teachers, counselors and anyone who gives advice — to tug the heartstrings of upper-middle-class white admissions officers. "Make them cry," we hear. And so we pimp out our trauma for a shot at a future we want but can't fully imagine.

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At Coral Gables Senior High, I was the safe friend in the eyes of my friends' mothers. The nerdy, chubby kid who geeked out to novels and cartoons did not pose as much of a threat as his less bookish football teammates. But being the safe friend couldn't protect me any more than anyone else from the dangers all around us.

I'm still haunted by the memory of one night when a group of us decided to go to the CocoWalk AMC theater for a movie. We ran into some folks from school near the corner of Frow and Elizabeth and stopped to joke and roast one another. Then, up ahead at the corner, we heard raised voices. We could make out three men starting to fight. As we watched, frozen, one picked up a cinder block and heaved it down on the head of another man on the ground. An angry voice rang out in our direction: "Who dat is down there?!" Terrified, we sprinted away behind the nearby houses. After seconds that felt like forever, doors slammed and a car sped off. We came out only after the roar of dual exhaust pipes faded away and raced home in the opposite direction, knowing better than to stay and invite questions.

Once I was at Amherst, the phone would ring with news of similar nights. I would be reading a novel for class or reviewing my chemistry notes for a test when my mother's ring tone, "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," by the Tokens, would break the silence. Something in her "Hey, Tony, you busy?" let me know I was about to share in the emotional burden that bad news brings. My family didn't understand how disruptive those calls could be. Neither did I, really. No one had ever left. We normally went through these events together. But I was no longer able to help figure out when the coast was clear, to investigate the flashing police lights. I always wondered, unnerved, just how close my family was to whatever prompted such a call. I was away. They were still there.

Neighborhoods are more than a collection of homes and shops, more than uneven sidewalks or winding roads. Some communities protect us from hurt, harm and danger. Others provide no respite at all. This process is not random but the consequence of historical patterns of exclusion and racism. Life in privileged communities means that children traverse safer streets, have access to good schools and interact with neighbors who can supply more than the proverbial cup of sugar. Life in distressed communities can mean learning to distinguish between firecrackers and gunshots.

These starkly different environments have a profound impact on children's cognitive functioning, social development and physical health. Research on concentrated disadvantage makes it abundantly clear that inequality depresses the mobility prospects of even the brightest kids, with poor black youth disproportionately exposed to neighborhood violence. In his 2010 study of Chicago youth from adolescence to young adulthood, the sociologist Patrick Sharkey, then at New York University and now at Princeton, shows how such violence disrupts learning in ways equivalent to missing two years of schooling. And yet we equate performance on tests with potential, as if learning happens in a vacuum. It doesn't.

Even if they make it to dorms on leafy-green campuses, disadvantaged students still live in poverty's long shadow. They worry about those back home just as much as those back home worry about them. At Amherst, I would get messages, in the few moments I had between lunch and lab, announcing that someone needed something: $75 for diabetes medicine or $100 to turn the lights back on. One day a call announced that a $675 mortgage payment needed to be paid. It wasn't the first time. I was annoyed. I was mad that I was annoyed. Was I not the future they had invested in all these years? Did I have enough to spare? Were they expecting the whole thing? How much time did I have? This was before apps like Venmo that allow you to send money to anyone instantly, so it would take almost three hours, start to finish, to get to the nearest Walmart, on Route 9, to send a bit of spare cash home by MoneyGram. That ride on the B43 bus was as lonely as it was long.

By my junior year, I had secured four jobs in addition to monitoring and cleaning the gym. My financial-aid officer didn't understand why I worked so many jobs or why I picked up even more hours at times. That fall, right after Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, I was called in to the financial-aid office. They wanted to discuss my work schedule and to tell me that they would be reaching out to my bosses to let them know I needed to cut back hours. I was working too much; that's what the work-study rules said.

I pleaded with them not to. I needed the money. More truthfully, my family and I did. One responsibility of being the one who leaves is sending remittances back, a reality that many of us who are the first to venture away from home know all too well. I assured the officials I was handling all my work. In truth, I was really just pushing through; I became a robot, hyperscheduled and mechanical in my interactions. My grades were good, and so I thought *I* was good. I worried that if I worked less, I would not be able to help my family recover from the storms, let alone get through all their everyday emergencies. But if I was their safety net, I had none.

[What college admissions offices really want.]

I was surprised this spring when I learned about the College Board's new Environmental Context Dashboard, renamed Landscape, a set of measures for colleges to use in admissions that takes into consideration students' neighborhood and high school environments, the constellation of influences — individual and institutional — that shape students' chances at upward mobility. Critics saw this "adversity index," as it came to be known, as just another attempt by the College Board to maintain its dominance over college admissions

or elide the harm that the SAT has inflicted upon generations of youth from disadvantaged communities. (After pressure, the College Board announced it would not combine the neighborhood and school scores into one individual score.)

I hated the SAT. It stole Saturdays from me, especially when I transferred to the private high school where I spent my senior year on a scholarship. And not because I went to tutoring sessions or met with private coaches but because my more privileged peers did, while I passed the hours at home by myself. (I wasn't doing practice tests either. I couldn't afford the book.) Those lonely afternoons served as reminders of my poverty and also my precarious future. But now, as a sociologist of education who spent two years interning in the Amherst admissions office, I see the College Board's new index as a step — and just one step — in the right direction to demonstrate the impact of instability that contributes to differences in performance and social well-being to admissions committees, those gatekeepers of higher education. And at a time when affirmative action is under renewed attack, the index permits an alternative to explicit considerations of race in college admissions by taking into account the ecological factors that are intimately tied to race. The supplemental scores Landscape provides can't level the playing field, but they offer some context for just how unequal it is.

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Colleges have made racial and class diversity into virtues with which they welcome students during orientation and entice alumni to make donations. But students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds often bear the brunt of the tension that exists between proclamation and practice of this social experiment. Schools cannot simply showcase smiling black and brown faces in their glossy brochures and students wearing shirts blaring "First Gen and Proud" in curated videos and then abdicate responsibility for the problems from home that a more diverse class may bring with them to campus. Does this entail going beyond providing tuition, room and board? Yes. It requires colleges and universities to question what they take for granted, about their students and about the institutions themselves. And to do this, they'll need more than an algorithm. What's needed is a deeply human touch.

This means ensuring that campus services meet the needs of all students. College can be a difficult time for everyone. Divorces of parents and deaths of grandparents are not uncommon. Counselors and advisers are more or less prepared for these universal types of challenges. But whom do students turn to when they get those 2 a.m. calls bringing news of street violence, eviction or arrests? Hiring more diverse staff and administrators, as well as those who are familiar with these issues, is important in this effort — but this work can't just be consigned to the diversity dean, who is often the only person of color in the office.

College administrations must make a sustained effort to understand the stress and isolation that can define everyday college life for these more vulnerable students. This necessitates more than forming ad hoc committees to produce reports that all too often sit on a dean's desk collecting dust. Climate or exit surveys can take the pulse of the community and reveal blind spots among administrators, faculty and staff. Officials can hold training sessions to help them face their own racial and class biases. They should also form sustained partnerships with student groups and keep those lines of communication open throughout the school year and across incoming and outgoing classes.

When I was learning to chart the hungry days on my calendar, I was one of the nearly 40 percent of undergraduates who struggle with food insecurity. Before all else, colleges must meet students' basic needs — it is hard to focus and function when you're hungry. There are practical and immediate steps that can be tailored to the campus and student body, whether by expanding meal plans, as Connecticut College and Smith College did around recesses in the academic calendar; allowing meal-share programs on campus, like Swipe Out Hunger, which permits students to donate unused dining credits for other students to use; or opening food pantries and food banks, as at Bunker Hill Community College, Appalachian State University and Columbia University.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that in 2016, of the nearly 3.3 million students who were eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), less than half applied. Students in need must navigate not only the bureaucratic red tape to apply but also the double bind of the 20-hour workweek requirement — the minimum to receive SNAP benefits, but also the federal work-study maximum — all while staying in good academic standing.

I knew how to ask for help in college. I understood that it was how you got what you needed. I eventually lobbied Tony Marx, then the president of Amherst, to provide support during spring break, which he agreed to in my junior year. Amherst provided funds for lower-income students to eat in Schwemm's, the campus coffee shop, and expanded support during other breaks in subsequent years.

But the full weight of my responsibilities, even the most quotidian ones, was often as invisible to me as it was to my adviser and financial-aid officer. And sometimes students like me continue to carry the weight of home long after we graduate and in ways we still aren't aware of. I got a text from home days before my 32nd birthday — after I'd gone to college, earned my doctorate and secured my position as a professor — asking me to "call DirectTV and take your name off the bill." I had to ask: "My name on the bill? Since when?" The response: "Since we been living here."

It had been almost two decades.

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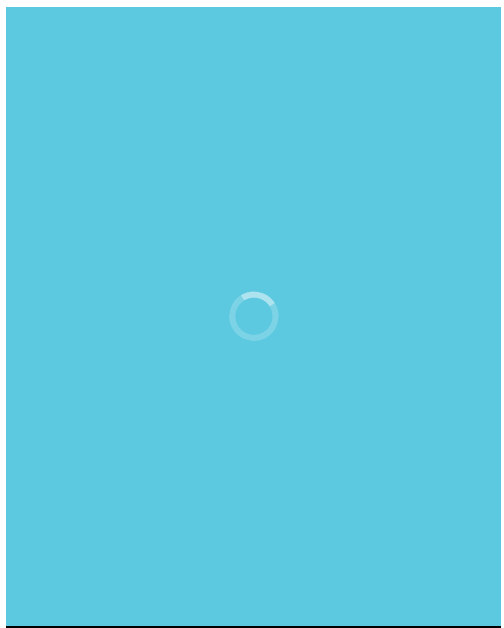

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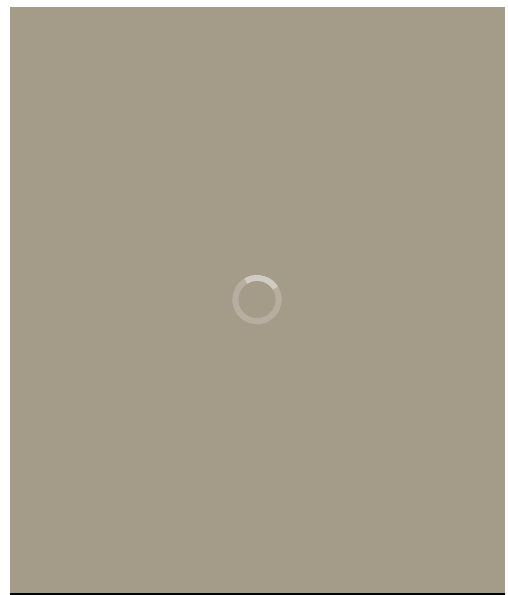

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