

Monkey Cage

## Why are working class kids less likely to get elite jobs? They study too hard at college.

By **Henry Farrell** September 23

Lauren Rivera is an associate professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of management. Her recent book, "[Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs](#)," examines how inequality is produced by subtle social patterns of education and informal skills as well as big political and economic forces. I asked her four questions about the book.

**When social scientists think about economic inequality and the ways in which elites are able to hand down advantages to their kids, they usually argue that it's driven by obvious material differences, such as access to good schools. Your book argues that elite privilege can involve subtle benefits that help some students – and not others – get jobs at top ranked law firms, banks and management consultancies. What are these benefits?**

LR – Whether intentionally or not, elite parents expose their children to different experiences and styles of interacting that are useful for getting ahead in society. Many of these are taken for granted in upper and upper-middle class circles, such as how to prepare a college application (and having cultivated the right types of accomplishments to impress admissions officers), how to network in a business setting in a way that seems natural, and how to develop rapport with teachers, interviewers, and other gatekeepers to get things you want from those in power. Basically, if we think of economic inequality as a sporting competition, elite parents give their kids a leg up, not only by being able to afford the equipment necessary to play but also by teaching them the rules of the game and giving them insider tips on how to win.

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**One of your most counter-intuitive arguments is that students from working class and lower-middle class backgrounds are less likely to get elite jobs, because they concentrate on studying rather than their social life at college. That's the opposite of what the conventional wisdom would suggest. How does these students' devotion to academic seriousness hurt their job prospects?**

LR – Working and lower-middle-class children are less likely to participate in structured extracurricular activities than their more privileged peers while growing up (and when they do, they tend to participate in fewer of them). This hurts their job prospects in two ways. First, it affects the types of schools students attend. Elite universities weigh extracurricular activities heavily in admissions decisions. Given that these employers—which offer some of the highest-paying entry-level jobs in the country—recruit almost exclusively at top schools, many students who focus purely on their studies will be out of the game long before they ever apply to firms. Second, employers also use extracurricular activities, especially those that are driven by “passion” rather than academic or professional interest and require large investments of time and money over many years, to screen résumés. But participation in these activities while in college or graduate school is not a luxury that all can afford, especially if someone needs to work long hours to pay the bills or take care of family members. Essentially, extracurriculars end up being a double filter on social class that disadvantages job applicants from more modest means both in entering the recruiting pipeline and succeeding within it.

**Your book finds an enormous difference in how many recruiters at elite firms treat graduates from a tiny number of prestigious colleges, and how they treat everyone else. Candidates who “chose” to go to a lower ranked school are seen by some recruiters as having demonstrated moral failure. What drives this culture of selectivity and perpetuates it?**

LR – Quite simply, we like people who are similar to ourselves. Ask anyone what constitutes a good driver, leader, or parent, and chances are they will describe someone like themselves. The same is true for how people think of merit in the working world. Most employees in these firms are graduates of highly elite undergraduate or graduate programs and believe that's where talent really resides. In addition, given how segregated our society has become socioeconomically, people who grow up in upper-middle or upper-class communities where college attendance is the norm may not realize structural factors that influence educational pathways and erroneously view university prestige as a reflection of ability alone. Finally, national rankings matter. Rankings provide an easily quantifiable, presumably “scientific” way of making sense of the myriad of educational institutions out there. They both reinforce beliefs that school prestige equals student quality (even though things having nothing to do with students' abilities factor into a university's rank) and serve as a convenient justification for limiting recruitment to a small number of

elite schools with strong alumni ties to firms.

**One of the ways in which your book has been received is as a way for people to figure out how to improve their chances of getting a job at an elite firm. One [prominent review](#) treated your book as more or less a “how to” guide for joining the 1 percent. This, presumably, wasn’t your motivation for writing the book. What’s your reaction to readers who are reading the book in ways that may potentially reinforce the problematic system that it is describing?**

LR – The purpose of the book was to reveal how taken-for-granted ideas about what merit is and how best to measure it contribute to class inequalities at the top of the U.S. economic ladder. I certainly did not intend for the book to be interpreted as a how-to manual. However, given rising levels of anxiety about class position among the relatively advantaged and the high stakes of getting jobs in these firms, I’m not entirely surprised that some people are using it as a tool to try to game the system. I have mixed feelings about this. On one hand, it can help groups currently disadvantaged in the hiring process, such as working class students and racial minorities, break into these jobs. On the other hand, it can benefit the already advantaged and reinforce the types of inequalities documented in the book. My hope, however, is that the research will open employees’ eyes about inequities and inefficiencies in the way hiring is currently done in these firms and motivate change in a positive direction.

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