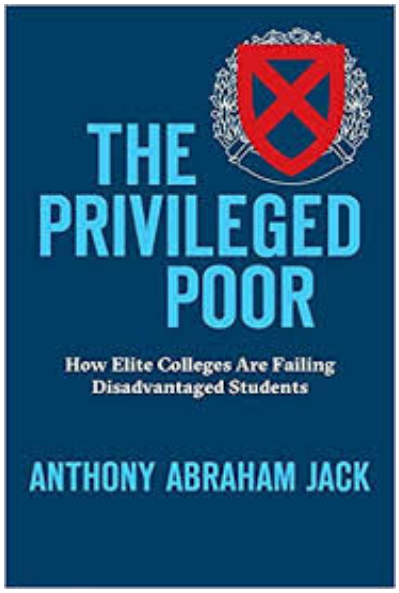
Navigating Non-Ideal Institutions: The Case of *The Privileged Poor*



Study Guide
Student Materials

Using This Study Guide

The Center for Ethics and Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. Specifically, we connected Jack's book to philosophical works about the distinction between non-ideal and ideal theory and to the ethical costs students face in institutions of higher education. This curriculum plan connects value-laden content with Jack's empirical work to challenge students to scrutinize the ethical duties of faculty and policymakers, and to consider the student experience of navigating non-ideal institutions.

This curriculum is intended for use in undergraduate and graduate education classes. The study guide offers two plans: a one-week plan and a two-week plan, each with suggested guiding questions for discussions and assignments. Print the student materials handout on our website, http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/

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Audio

In April 2019, we interviewed Anthony Abraham Jack about his book, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Jack describes the power of "mesearch," his experience as a first-generation college student in an elite preparatory high school and at Amherst College, the pains and triumphs of doing qualitative research in graduate school, and writing academic literature accessibly. We created this audio piece to give listeners a compelling companion to the current qualitative literature on non-ideal higher education policies and practices.

Listen:
http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/curriculum.html

Anthony Abraham Jack

Anthony Abraham Jack is a first-generation college student who received his B.A. from Amherst College in women's and gender studies and religion, and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in sociology. He is a junior fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows, assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Shutzer Assistant Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Jack's work examines the often-overlooked diversity of low-income college students. In 2019, Jack published his first book, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students.*

Website: https://anthonyabrahamjack.com/

Selected Publications

Books and Book Chapters

Jack, A. A. (2019). *The Privileged Poor: How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jack, A. A. (2015). Crisscrossing boundaries: Variation in experiences with class marginality among lower-income, Black undergraduates at an elite college (pp. 83-101). In *College students' experiences of power and marginality: Sharing spaces and negotiating differences* (E. Lee & C. LaDousa, Ed.). New York: Routledge.

Public Scholarship

Jack, A. A. (2019, September 10). I was a low-income college student. Classes weren't the hard part. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/10/magazine/college-inequality.html

Jack, A. A. (2019, June 13). On diversity: Access ain't inclusion [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7w2Gv7ueOc

Jack, A. A. (2018, March 17). It's hard to be hungry on spring break. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/opinion/sunday/spring-break-colleges-poor-students.html

Jack, A. A. (2015, September 13). What the Privileged Poor can teach us. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/opinion/sunday/what-the-privileged-poor-can-teach-us.html

Sociology Journals

Jack, A. A. (2016). (No) harm in asking: Class, acquired cultural capital, and academic engagement at an elite university. *Sociology of Education*, 89(1), 1-19.

Jack, A. A. (2014). Culture shock revisited: The social and cultural contingencies to class marginality. *Sociological Forum*, *29*(2), 453-75.

Reader's Theater: MLAC's Serious Problem

Introduction

After becoming President of the University of Pennsylvania, Amy Gutmann commissioned an analysis of the students at Penn, which showed that among highly qualified applicants, middle-income students were underrepresented. Low-income students receive generous financial support from the university, and high-income students receive generous financial support from their families; the revenues produced by the latter can be used to fund the former. Middle-income students are less well supported by the university and by their parents. Like Harvard, Penn has a generous endowment, and can admit many very highly qualified applicants. But most colleges have more limited resources, and a smaller, less highly qualified, applicant pool.

Case: MLAC's Serious Problem

Cast:

- Jane Cabrera (VP of Student Affairs)
- Sam Collins (Chief Financial Officer)
- Lily Withers (Vice Provost of Enrollment Management)
- John Jackson (Faculty Rep. and Physics Professor)

Metropolitan Liberal Arts College (MLAC) is a school of 2,000 students. MLAC has a serious problem. About 22% of its students are Pell Grant recipients, and the 6-year graduation rate for them is much lower (60%) than for the more affluent students who constitute the majority of its student body (55% of students come from the top 20% of the income distribution, and their 6-year graduation rate is 84%). The Provost has scheduled a meeting with the senior leadership team to address this problem.

Jane Cabrera, VP of Student Affairs, went first. "Look, the problem is not that complicated. We have a great policy on tuition: most of our first generation students and students of color get grants and scholarships so that tuition is almost free: certainly much lower than it would be at the local state university. But living in Metropolitan is expensive. They work, on average, 30 hours a week, to make rents and avoid debt, but 30 hours a week of paid work is not compatible with succeeding in four or five challenging courses a semester. We just need to provide more generous grants for them."

Sam Collins, the Chief Financial Officer, grimaced. "I take Jane's point, and you know I'm a strong advocate of generous aid. But where is the money going to come from? Our endowment yields about $1000 per undergraduate, and student aid already eats most of that up. I'm not criticizing the Foundation for that: they work hard at fundraising, but our students don't, typically, become engineers or tech innovators: we have a long proud record of producing teachers, nurses, social workers, and social entrepreneurs. People like that don't donate much, because they don't earn much."

Cabrera responded: "Why can't we use more of the tuition revenues from the affluent students to support aid for the lower income students?"

Collins had a ready answer: "We're already doing that. We're basically at our limit. We could reduce faculty salaries, but we're already in the bottom 50% of our peer institutions and if we go down much further we'll just start losing people."

Lilly Withers, the Vice Provost of Enrollment Management chimed in.

"Look," she says, "I do have a way out of this. We could expand the number of full-pay students. We'd have to lower admissions requirements for those students, but my team thinks that if we reduced the threshold ACT score by 2 points we could enroll an additional 100 full-pay students, which would enable us to create annual scholarships of $10k for each Pell-recipient, and still expand the teaching staff so that the faculty: student ratio wouldn't change."

The team stared at her.

Cabrera was the first to respond.

"I don't like it. I would be on board if we were at a large state school, but since we're at a smaller school, our students will be more affected by that policy. We already have a major problem with the cleavage between lower- and higher-income students. First generation and students of color feel marginalized and isolated on this campus. Reducing their proportions, even if we don't reduce the absolute numbers, will just make things worse."

Faculty Rep and Physics Professor John Jackson was also unhappy:

"And I can tell you, the faculty won't like it at all. They already feel that they are dealing with too many students who are underprepared for the kind of rigor that they want their courses to exhibit. This will make things worse." Withers wasn't impressed. "John, you know that I think the mission is to find the students who can benefit the most from what we have to offer, not to find the students who make the least demands on the faculty. And I take Jane's point. But I don't agree that it'll make things worse. Sure, there's segregation on the campus. But that's partly because our needier students have so little time to themselves. Relieve them of the need to work, and they'll be less marginalized."

What values, principles, and practices should the senior leadership team prioritize in their decision-making around funding low-income students at MLAC?

And what should they actually do?

Adapted from Justice in Schools: https://www.justiceinschools.org/

Using Philosophy in Education

Ideal vs. Non-Ideal

Philosophers sometimes distinguish between 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' theorizing.

Ideal theorizing is thinking about what principles should guide the design of fully just institutions – institutions which mediate our interactions so that no one is treated unjustly, and in which everyone complies with the rules they are given.

Non-ideal theorizing is thinking about what principles should guide institutions and those who act within them in all other circumstances; that is, whenever the institution or the social ecology within which it is embedded are in any way unjust.

Sometimes non-ideal theorizing is about how agents in non-ideal conditions should act to achieve justice. But in many cases, agents have no prospect of achieving full justice, whether individually or in concert with others.

Think about Renowned. When asking what values should guide professors, or Renowned administrators, in response to Jack's observations, we are primarily drawn to thinking about how the Doubly Disadvantaged and the Privileged Poor should be treated within the institution. But the institution itself is embedded within a highly unequal society, which it plays an important role in reproducing. Someone thinking about ideal justice would not be much moved by the plight of either the Privileged Poor or the Doubly Disadvantaged. The natural thought would be that Renowned as we know it would be unlikely to persist in such a society.

Jack is asking us to engage in non-ideal theorizing of a particular kind: thinking about what principles should guide us, and what we should do, in a circumstance where all that can be done is the reduction and mitigation of particular injustices and harms to specific people within a highly circumscribed situation. His book alerts us to various features of the institution which perpetrate harms and injustices on specific groups within it, and which might have implications for other groups beyond it. It also alerts us to institutional constraints, which we should take into account when deciding what to do, and even perhaps what principles to act on. There's further work to be done: the book doesn't offer a comprehensive analysis of Renowned's structure, let alone of its place in the broader social structure, yet both of these must be taken into account when making all-things-considered choices about how to change behavior.

Annotated Bibliography

Jack, A. A. (2019). *The privileged poor: How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

In *The Privileged Poor*, Anthony Jack sheds light on the diversity among low-income college students by drawing attention to the disparate experiences of two groups of disadvantaged students: 1) The Doubly Disadvantaged, who enter college from under-resourced public high schools and 2) The Privileged Poor, who enter college from preparatory, day, and boarding high schools. Jack demonstrates the distinct experiences of these two groups of students attending elite institutions and offers potential steps these institutions can take to support the less well-off Privileged Poor. This piece offers rich empirical evidence illustrating the non-ideal context of higher education. While Jack does not address ethical tradeoffs directly, his book provides ample ground for considering the ethical tradeoffs made in institutions of higher education.

Morton, J. (2019). Mitigating ethical costs in the classroom. *Dædalus*, *148*(4), 179-194.

While the costs of higher education are often spelled out in monetary terms (e.g., student loan debt), Jennifer Morton points to the ethical costs of higher education. For many low-income and first-generation college students, or "Strivers," attending college means making difficult sacrifices that affect parts of their lives that make life meaningful, including community, family, and friendship. Morton argues that institutions of higher education bear responsibility for mitigating these ethical costs, and that there is work that can be done in the college classroom to do so. In this lesson plan, we employ Morton's article to provide background on the concept of ethical costs, which we use to interrogate the ethical tradeoffs made by various stakeholders in Tony Jack's *The Privileged Poor*. Further, Morton's suggestions for classroom-level solutions to mitigating the ethical costs of higher education offer potential implications for institutional arrangements and policy decisions.

Hamilton, L. (2016). Bystanders. In *Parenting to a degree* (pp. 98-118). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

In *Parenting to a Degree*, Laura Hamilton demonstrates the distinct parenting styles of parents of college-age women. Hamilton shows how these parenting styles often map onto class—middle-class parents tend to be more involved in ensuring that their daughters receive the professional development and social ties necessary to achieve a desired future, while lower-income parents tend to trust that colleges will provide the requisite support to ensure their daughters' success. Hamilton argues that many institutions rely too heavily on parental involvement and suggests institutional solutions that have the potential to help lower-income students successfully navigate college. For the purposes of our lesson plan, Hamilton's chapter on "bystanders" adds empirical evidence about the role of cultural capital in perpetuating inequality in institutions of higher education, contributing to the complexity of ethical tradeoffs made in these non-ideal institutions.

Schouten, G. & Brighouse, H. (2014). The relationship between philosophy and evidence in education. *Theory & Research in Education*, *13*(1), 5-22.

In this piece, Gina Schouten and Harry Brighouse offer a blueprint for understanding the relationship between normative philosophy and empirical evidence. Schouten and Brighouse argue that normative philosophers ought to consult empirical evidence in order to identify values, assess institutional arrangements, and guide policy decisions. On the flip side, they contend that empirical researchers ought to attend to the contributions of philosophy in setting empirical research agendas. This piece provides a useful overview of the type of work with which we ask teachers and students to engage, as they toggle between empirical evidence about real-world non-ideal institutions and normative philosophy.

The Center for Ethics and Education

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The Center for Ethics and Education is a research center in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER), housed in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

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