

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

CONTENTS



THE PRIVILEGED POOR

How Elite Colleges Are Failing
Disadvantaged Students

ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK

03

Using this Teaching
Guide

04

Anthony Jack

05

One-Week Lesson Plan

6 - 8

Two-Week Lesson Plan

9 - 10

Reader's Theater

11

Using Philosophy in
Education

12

About The Center for
Ethics & Education

USING THIS TEACHING GUIDE

The Center for Ethics & 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, activities, and assignments. Print the student materials handout on our website, <http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/>

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.

USING THIS TEACHING GUIDE

This study guide is intended for use in undergraduate and graduate education classes. The curriculum offers two plans: a [one-week plan](#) and a [two-week plan](#), each with suggested guiding questions, activities, and assignments.

Student materials are available to download and print on our website.

LISTEN

<http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/curriculum.html>

ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK



Bio: 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.htm>

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. Retrieved from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/anthonyjack/files/jack_no_harm_so_e_forthcoming.pdf

Jack, A. A. (2014). Culture shock revisited. The social and cultural contingencies to class marginality. *Sociological Forum*, 29(2), 453-5. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15737861>

ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN

Syllabus

Topic: Navigating Non-Ideal Institutions

Learning Objectives: Students will be able to articulate the ethical tradeoffs associated with navigating the non-ideal contexts of higher education institutions.

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

Harvard University Press.

- Introduction (pp. 1-24)
- Chapter 2: "Can you sign your book for me?" (pp. 79-131)
- Chapter 3: "I, too, am hungry" (pp. 132-180)

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

GUIDING QUESTIONS

USE THESE QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION, READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENTS, OR OTHER ACTIVITIES

1. What are the distinctions between the Privileged Poor and the Doubly Disadvantaged? How are these useful analytical categories? Would other categories be more useful?
2. The Doubly Disadvantaged and the Privileged Poor are both, despite their social origins, being groomed for privileged positions in a highly unequal social hierarchy. Does this make either, or both, groups beneficiaries of social injustice?
3. Where does injustice begin?
4. What institutional reforms would you recommend that either do not cost money or that you can pay for by removing other things from the budget?
5. Assuming there's no reform, what should professors do differently? What should more advantaged students do differently?
6. What are the responsibilities of the university to promote student integration within student academic and social life on campus?
7. In light of Morton's paper, what ethical tradeoffs do professors and administrators face when working with the Privileged Poor and the Doubly Disadvantaged at Renowned?
8. What are the duties of the professor for promoting student integration within students' academic and social life on campus?

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

Online platform: Before class, students write a discussion post in the online learning platform (e.g., Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard).

Reading response: Write a 400-700-word response to a guiding question (above).

ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN (CONT.)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES & ASSIGNMENTS

I. Online platform: Before class, students write a discussion post in the online learning platform (e.g., Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard).

II. Reading Response: Write a 400-700-word response to a guiding question (above).

TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

Syllabus

Topic: Navigating Non-Ideal Institutions

Learning Objectives: Students will be able to articulate the ethical tradeoffs associated with navigating the non-ideal contexts of higher education institutions.

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

- Introduction (pp. 1-24)
- Chapter 1: "Come with me to Italy!" (pp. 25-78)
- Chapter 2: "Can you sign your book for me?" (pp. 79-131)

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

Listen to audio story: *Uncovering a huge mystery of college: Office hours*. NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/02/766568824/uncovering-a-huge-mystery-of-college-office-hours>

Week Two:

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

Finish reading the rest of *The Privileged Poor*.

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

GUIDING QUESTIONS

USE THESE QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION, READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENTS, OR OTHER ACTIVITIES

1. What are the distinctions between the Privileged Poor and the Doubly Disadvantaged? Are these useful analytical categories? Would other categories be more useful?
2. The Doubly Disadvantaged and the Privileged Poor are both, despite their social origins, being groomed for privileged positions in a highly unequal social hierarchy. Does this make either, or both, groups beneficiaries of social injustice?
3. Where does injustice begin?
4. What institutional reforms would you recommend that either do not cost money or that you can pay for by removing other things from the budget?
5. Assuming there's no reform, what should professors do differently? What should more advantaged students do differently?
6. What are the responsibilities of the university to promote student integration within student academic and social life on campus?
7. What are the duties of the professor for promoting student integration within student's academic and social life on campus?
8. In light of Morton's paper, what ethical tradeoffs do professors and administrators face when working with the Privileged Poor and the Doubly Disadvantaged at Renowned?
9. How is evidence of the kind provided in *The Privileged Poor* and *Parenting to a Degree* relevant to thinking about what a just higher education system would be like?

TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

The Second Week

In-Class Activity: Reader's Theater

Download and print the “student materials” and distribute to students.

I. Read the case “MLAC’s Serious Problem” aloud reader’s theater-style by assigning each student role in groups of four.

Roles:

- 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)

II. In small groups, discuss:

1. What is the dilemma in this case? For whom is it a dilemma?
2. Why is this a dilemma?
3. What values or principles are at stake? Do people disagree about which values matter, which should take precedence, or how they should be addressed in this case?
4. What practical and/or policy considerations are at stake? Do people disagree about which considerations are relevant, which should take precedence, or how they should be addressed in this case?
5. What do you think should be done in this case, and by whom? Why?
6. What have you learned from talking about this case that might apply to other ethical dilemmas in education? What principles or values are you thinking about for the first time, or thinking about in a new way? What policies or practices are you thinking about for the first time in a new way?
7. What value is there, if any, to talking through a case like this with others? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others? What did you learn about your institution, organization, or broader context? What did you learn about the process itself?
8. Is there anything else you want to bring up or discuss?

Questions from Justice in Schools Discussion Protocol: <https://www.justiceinschools.org/protocols>

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

Online platform: Before the class, students write a discussion post in the online learning platform.
Reading response: Write a 400-700-word response to a guiding question (above).

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."

READER'S THEATER: MLAC'S SERIOUS PROBLEM (CONT.)

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: because 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.

THE CENTER FOR ETHICS & EDUCATION

We at the Center are committed to encouraging philosophical reflection on contemporary issues in education. This curriculum was developed for use in undergraduate and graduate education, philosophy, and sociology classes. It is available for free.

The Center for Ethics & Education is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) 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.

How did it go using this teaching guide with your class?
We'd love to hear from you!

Website: <http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org>

Podcast: <https://anchor.fm/ethicsandeducation>

Twitter: [@ethicsanded](https://twitter.com/ethicsanded)

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The creation of this curriculum was supported by a grant from the
Spencer Foundation.

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