

THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST

HOW COLLEGE MAKES OR BREAKS US



author of

How Children Succeed

PAUL TOUGH

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Taryn Roeder, Director of Publicity
617.351.3818 taryn.roeder@hnhco.com

“In this **fascinating study**, education journalist Tough (*How Children Succeed*) argues persuasively that access to an elite college education, which in the U.S. is popularly believed to be a meritocratically distributed social equalizer, is in fact distributed in ways that reinforce existing economic divisions... **His analyses of data are sound, his portraits of students and teachers sympathetic, his argument neatly structured, and his topic one with wide appeal. This well-written and persuasive book is likely to make a splash.**” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Tough’s work offers an indictment of American society and political structures and persuasively argues that universities must fulfill the American commitment to equality of opportunity.”
—**STARRED** review, *Library Journal*

“Tough clearly shows that college placement remains mostly about wealth at the expense of a collective educational environment. A good choice for aspiring college students and their parents.”
—*Kirkus Review*

THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST

How College Makes or Breaks Us

BY PAUL TOUGH

The *New York Times* best-selling author of *How Children Succeed* returns with a powerful, mind-changing inquiry into higher education in the United States

Does college still work? Is the system designed just to protect the privileged and leave everyone else behind? Or can a college education today provide real opportunity to young Americans?

New York Times bestselling author **Paul Tough**’s new book **THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, September 10, 2019) delivers fresh, fascinating insight on how the American system of colleges and universities helps and hinders young people, especially low-income and first-generation students.

Tough tells the stories of students trying to find their way, with hope, joy, and frustration, through the application process and into college. Drawing on new research, and on dozens of in-depth visits to college campuses across the country, the book reveals how the landscape of higher education has shifted in recent decades and exposes the hidden truths of how the system works

THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST: How College Makes or Breaks Us * By Paul Tough

*Publication Date: September 10, 2019 * \$28.00 hardcover * ISBN 978-0-544-94448-0*

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and for whom. And it introduces the people who really make higher education go: admissions directors trying to balance the class and balance the budget, College Board officials scrambling to defend the SAT in the face of mounting evidence that it favors the wealthy, researchers working to unlock the mysteries of the college-student brain, and educators trying to transform potential dropouts into successful graduates.

Tough's intimate and insightful reporting:

- Reveals how in recent years the country's most selective colleges and universities have been steadily admitting more and more very wealthy students and fewer and fewer poor and working-class ones – all while trying to convince the public that the opposite is happening.
- Goes behind the scenes in college admissions offices to show how competition for tuition dollars leads colleges to admit affluent students they would rather turn down – and then to offer them increasingly large discounts and aid packages in order to land them.
- Shows how low-income students, in the rare cases when they are admitted to elite colleges, often feel overwhelmed and beaten down on campus – not by the academic demands, but by the culture shock of being surrounded by so much concentrated wealth and privilege.
- Describes groundbreaking efforts taking place across the country to guide students conscientiously through the admissions process and into college, and then keep them on track for success once they arrive.
- Explores the many shapes that college in America takes today, from Ivy League seminar rooms to community college welding shops; from giant public flagships to tiny experiments in urban storefronts.

THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST inspires and surprises on every page. It will change the way readers think —not just about higher education, but about the nation itself.

Paul Tough is the author of three previous books, including **HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED: *Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character***, which has been translated into 27 languages and spent more than a year on the *New York Times* hardcover and paperback best-seller lists. Paul is a contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine*, where he has written extensively about education, parenting, poverty, and politics. His journalism has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *GQ*, and *Esquire*; on the public-radio program *The American Life*; and on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. He lives with his wife and two sons in Austin, Texas, and Montauk, New York.

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A CONVERSATION WITH PAUL TOUGH

What is *THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST* about?

It's about higher education and social mobility, and the way those two forces intersect in the United States today. For a long time, that relationship was pretty straightforward: Going to college was the single best way for young Americans to improve their station in life; higher education was the most powerful engine of American social mobility. But there are plenty of signs now that that engine is breaking down. The questions at the heart of the book are: Why doesn't higher education work the way it used to? What can we do to get that mobility engine up and running again? And what does it feel like to be a young person caught in the middle of that process?

Where did you go to find answers?

I spent six years working on this book, and my reporting took me to twenty-one states. I went all over: to giant flagship state universities and tiny storefront colleges; to 4-H club meetings in rural Louisiana, community-college math classes in Chicago, and philosophy seminars at Princeton. And everywhere I went, I talked to young people. I interviewed more than a hundred students during my travels, including a half dozen whom I followed closely over the course of many years – visiting their homes and their high schools and their colleges, trying to dig deeply into the details of their lives. What I was trying to understand in all those conversations was what it's like today to be a young American trying to make your way through the process of applying to and attending college – especially if you come from a family without a lot of money.



And what is the experience like for those students?

It's hard! We have created immense challenges at every stage of the college process for students from working-class and low-income families. They face obstacles in applying to college. They face obstacles in paying for college. If they do make it to highly selective institutions, they often experience an intense culture shock when they arrive on campus and find themselves surrounded by wealth and privilege. But most low-income college students attend community colleges or regional public universities, which in general have much lower success rates and in many cases have been hurt by years of budget cuts.

What about students who come from well-off families? How does the system work for them?

In some ways, the system works great for those students. If you come from money, it's much easier to gain admission to highly selective colleges. At many Ivy League universities, about three-quarters of the students come from families in the top income quintile – and only 2 or 3 percent come from families in the



bottom income quintile. But on a deeper level, I'm not sure the system is serving those affluent students all that well, either. I spent a lot of time reporting with a much-in-demand SAT tutor in Washington, D.C. named Ned Johnson, observing Ned at work and talking to the kids he was tutoring, most of whom came from wealthy homes. A lot of them seemed consumed by anxiety about school and the SAT and their applications and their parents' expectations. That's a hard way to spend your adolescence – even if you do make it to a gold-plated college in the end.

Did your reporting give you any insights into the big college admissions scandal earlier this year?

Oddly enough, I think it helped me understand the thinking of the super-wealthy parents who were arrested. What they are accused of doing to get their kids into college was certainly wrong, and it was certainly crazy. But the admissions process seems to make every affluent parent a little crazy. I can imagine that crossing the line into illegality, to those parents, just felt like they were trying to get one more advantage for their kids in a system they already knew was tilted in their favor.

What about students who aren't aiming for those super-elite colleges?

Their situation is even more challenging than that of the super-achievers. Some of the most interesting reporting I did was among students who didn't particularly like high school and weren't all that excited about college. But after graduating from high school, many of them quickly discovered that without some kind of post-secondary credential, they were getting stuck in low-paying, insecure jobs with no clear path for advancement. So these students would try to improvise a solution in a higher education system that did not seem designed to help them succeed.

In chapter seven, I profiled three of those students – Orry, who was studying welding in North Carolina; Alicia, who was working in fast food in Texas and taking business classes on the side; and Taslim, who was training to be a corporate I.T. support person in New York City. On a personal level, their individual stories were what drew me in – but their experiences also seemed significant on a broader national level. I talked to labor economists and sociologists and other experts who have done research on post-high school options for students like Orry and Alicia and Taslim, and the overall picture is pretty grim. Those students are well aware that they need credentials beyond a high school degree – but the system does a terrible job helping them understand how to get those credentials and providing a realistic path for them to do so.

What about you? What was your college experience like?

It was pretty choppy, to tell you the truth. When I was a teenager, back in the 1980s, I dropped out of two colleges – first Columbia, and then McGill – and I never went back to complete my B.A. In some ways, reporting this book was the ideal penance for me as a two-time dropout: Almost three decades after deciding I couldn't stand college, I voluntarily spent six years immersed in campus life. It sometimes felt a little odd, to be re-living the collegiate life I never quite had. But college was definitely a lot more fun and rewarding this time around.

What was the biggest surprise for you in your reporting?

The incredible power of the SAT and the ACT in shaping our post-secondary landscape. Over the last few years the College Board, which oversees the SAT, has put a lot of effort into portraying the SAT as a tool for greater equity in higher education. But what I found in my reporting was more or less the opposite. The students who benefit most from an admissions approach that puts disproportionate weight on SAT and ACT scores tend to be affluent white and Asian students. And that's precisely the admissions strategy of most American colleges.



Isn't the SAT a good predictor of how well students will do in college?

Sometimes. When students have both a low SAT score and a low GPA, that's a clear sign that they'll probably struggle at an academically demanding college. But many of the low-income students I followed in my reporting had excellent high school GPAs and mediocre SAT scores. When colleges take a chance on admitting those students and then support them through the transition to college, they tend to catch up quickly and excel. But not enough colleges are taking that chance.

What was the most interesting experience you had while you reported this book?

This may be a little hard to believe, but it was the semester I spent in a freshman calculus class. I had heard about this one math professor at the University of Texas, a guy in his early seventies named Uri Treisman. He has spent decades trying to change the way college calculus is taught, and he has figured out a system in which first-generation students and low-income students and students of color – the kind of students who most often fail freshman calculus, according to national statistics – are actually succeeding in big numbers.

I spent the whole semester in Treisman's calculus course, going to the lectures and discussion sections and office hours, watching him teach and interact with his students. I wound up following one freshman, a young woman named Ivonne who as a child had immigrated with her family from Mexico to San Antonio. She was one of those students I mentioned above, a first-rate student from a big public high school who had great grades but relatively low SAT scores. At most universities, students with Ivonne's background wouldn't be encouraged even to take freshman calculus – and if they did take the class, they'd likely fail. Watching Ivonne and Treisman and his team work together to try to change that equation was a remarkable experience. It taught me a lot about how higher education actually works – and how it might work if we did things differently.

What *should* we do differently?

Well, I should make clear that this isn't a policy book – it's really a book of stories and ideas. But still, my reporting did push me toward some conclusions about what needs to change. At highly selective colleges, the big problems are in the admissions office. Those colleges talk a good game about how hard they work to recruit low-income and first-generation and black and Latino students, but in fact all of those groups are still highly underrepresented at elite universities. The student bodies at those institutions are dominated by wealthy students. That has something to do with the undue weight they put on SAT scores in their approach to admissions, but it also has to do with the favoritism they show to legacy students and to prep-school athletes and to the children of donors. Those institutions can and should do much more to level the playing field.

But those colleges are still just a small sliver of the higher-education landscape. The most urgent need for change is at the other end of the selectivity spectrum – among the institutions that serve students like Orry and Alicia and Taslim. In almost every state, governments have over the last decade cut their budgets for community colleges and public universities, sometimes drastically. This is precisely the moment when we need to be doing the opposite – providing more and better options for the millions of students who need a reliable pathway from high school to a decent middle class life. At other moments of change in American history, we've managed to pull together and create and fund education systems that respond to the needs of our young people. This time around, we're failing. We need to do better – and our history should remind us that we can.





MEET PAUL TOUGH For THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST

on the tour that matters most

New York

Monday, September 9
Barnes & Noble Upper East Side
In Conversation with Ira Glass

Tuesday, September 10
Greenlight Bookstore (Fort Greene)
In Conversation with Max Linsky

Washington, DC

Wednesday, September 11
Politics & Prose

Philadelphia, PA

Thursday, September 12
Free Library of Philadelphia

Boston, MA

Friday, September 13
WBUR's CitySpace
In Conversation with Michael Pollan

Chicago, IL

Monday, September 16
Family Action Network:
New Trier High School

Tuesday, September 17
Family Action Network:
Latin School of Chicago

Wednesday, September 18
Chicago Public Library

Monday, October 21
Loyola University/Arrupe College

Madison, CT

Thursday, September 19
RJ Julia Booksellers
In Conversation with Emily Bazelon

Portland, ME

Friday, September 20
TBD

Maplewood, NJ

Saturday, September 21
Words Bookstore
In Conversation with Ilana Silverman

Denver, CO

Wednesday, September 25
Tattered Cover Book Store

Austin, TX

Friday, September 27
Texas Tribune Festival

Sunday, September 29
BookPeople

Saturday, October 26- Sunday, October 27
Texas Book Festival

Tuesday, October 29
University of Texas at Austin

San Francisco, CA

Wednesday, October 2
Book Passage (Corte Madera)

Thursday, October 3
Common Ground Speaker Series
In Conversation with Denise Pope

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Seattle, WA

Friday, October 4
Town Hall Seattle

Minneapolis, MN

Monday, October 14
Magers & Quinn Booksellers

Atlanta, GA

Monday, October 7
Atlanta Rotary Club

Milwaukee, WI

Tuesday, October 15
University School of Milwaukee/Boswell
Books Company

Athens, GA

Monday, October 7
University of Georgia

Billings, MT

Thursday, October 17
Private Talk

Oxford, MS

Wednesday, October 9
Square Books

Cincinnati, OH

Wednesday, October 23
Joseph-Beth Booksellers

Nashville, TN

Friday, October 11- Saturday, October 13
Southern Festival of Books

Traverse City, MI

Friday, November 1
Private Talk

Praise For

THE YEARS THAT MATTER MOST

“Paul Tough is a thinker to cherish: formidably clear-eyed, incandescently learned, and unshakably hopeful. Diving deep into the rewards, challenges, and perils of the American university system, *The Years That Matter Most* reveals the heavy price a society pays when it no longer pulls together to give its young people the education they need. An extraordinary, indispensable book.”

—**Junot Diaz**, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

“Gorgeously reported. Vividly written. Utterly lucid. Paul Tough jumps skillfully between deeply engaging personal narratives and the bigger truths of higher education. The way he tells the stories of these students, it’s impossible not to care about them and get angry on their behalf.”

—**Ira Glass**, host, *This American Life*

“Paul Tough’s daring *The Years That Matter Most* forces us to unfold the suffering built into the creases of American higher education. It refuses to let us forget about the bodies and lives of real students. It should be necessary reading for every student, professor, administrator, and trustee in this country interested in what radical revision looks like.”

—**Kiese Laymon**, author of *Heavy: An American Memoir*

“Paul Tough is a beautiful reporter and writer and a deeply moral guide to understanding the situation of children in our heartless meritocracy. *The Years That Matter Most* is a great book that should start a necessary conversation about the high cost of the race to the top.”

—**George Packer**, author of *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* and *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*