

Changing Class: Are Colleges Helping Americans Move Up?

APM Reports Transcript

Ruth Durrell: I walked onto campus and everything was green and the flowers were blooming and everyone was outside playing frisbee or just reading and spending time with each other and I thought, “Wow, this is what I want.”

Stephen Smith: For Americans from poor families, college still offers the best shot to achieve the American Dream.

Patrick Hughes: No matter what we’re going to graduate and we’re going to get some really good jobs and we’re going to change our communities but if you’re only letting a few of us in, that change is going to happen very slow.

The gap between rich and poor is growing in America. What role do colleges play?

Charles Clotfelter: Nobody set out to do this. Nobody said, “Let’s make colleges more unequal.”

Samuel Stanley: Part of our fundamental ethos as a country is to provide this kind of opportunity and I think when we don’t have it, our democracy is really at risk.

Coming up, an APM Reports documentary: Changing Class: Are Colleges Helping Americans Move Up? from American Public Media. First, this news.

Part 1

Stephen Smith: From APM Reports, this is Changing Class: Are Colleges Helping Americans Move Up? I'm Stephen Smith.

Adam Carlesco grew up in Roanoke, Virginia. His dad worked in a hardware store, delivered pizza, sold cell phones.

Adam Carlesco: I look back on it and I think that I wasn't hungry, that I wasn't poor. But then I talked to my mom and she was like, "Oh, you know, there were a couple of times the lights got shut off," and stuff like that.

They shopped for their clothes at thrift stores. His parents hadn't gone to college. They told him he had to.

Carlesco: There were I think one or two times that I joked – I was like, well, maybe I just won't go to college and they were like, 'Don't you even joke about that.'

So Adam did what most young Americans do now when they graduate from high school. He went to college.

[Montage of college ads]

It's not just colleges that sell the message that higher education is the way to move up. So do guidance counselors, politicians, economists – and parents. Adam Carlesco hoped a degree would mean financial security.

Carlesco: I just kind of wanted a basic sort of life where if a simple, you know, fee or something like that came up, I wasn't freaking out. I could easily cover it. I'd like to just have the regular road bumps smoothed out a bit.

In other words, he wanted to do better than his parents. It's the classic definition of the American Dream. But, kids doing better than their parents – does that really happen in America?

John Friedman: Look at the probability that a child grows up to earn more than his or her parents earned.

This is John Friedman. He's an economist at Brown University.

Friedman: For kids born in the 1940s, they were almost guaranteed to achieve this level of success. About 90 percent of them grew up to earn more than their parents did.

But social mobility has been going down in America.

Friedman: By the time you get to when I was born in 1980, it's just a coin flip. Only 50 percent of kids earn more than their parents do.

Today, it's hard to break out of the class that you're born into. Children of well-off families are likely to stay that way. Children of poor families are very likely to stay poor. A lot of people hope college will help them move up. But are colleges really helping people do better?

[Music]

We know from all kinds of data that, on average, college is a good bet if you want to improve your economic circumstances. People with bachelor's degrees earn 84 percent more over a lifetime than people with just high school diplomas. And if you don't have a degree, you're about twice as likely to be unemployed and more than three times as likely to live in poverty. And it's not all about money. People with college degrees tend to be healthier, they're more likely to vote and to volunteer, and their kids are more likely to go to college too.

[Music]

But not everyone who goes to college gets all these benefits.. Whether going to college will give people like Adam Carlesco the boost they're looking for depends a lot on where they go to college.

We know this from the work of John Friedman Along with a couple of economists at Harvard, he started something called the Equality of Opportunity Project. They looked at federal data from the IRS and the Department of Education for all college students from 1999-2013. That's about 30 million people.

Friedman: And what we do with those students is we look to see what their circumstances were before enrolling in college – where they were living and how much their parents were earning. And then we track them through to what happens after they leave college – whether they graduate or not – and they enter the labor force measuring their earnings either individually or in their household in their mid 30s.

Then the economists calculated a mobility rate for every college in America. They defined the mobility rate as the percentage of all students who are bottom to top success stories. Now this is obviously a very stark contrast – going from the lowest income to the highest income. In their data, that means going from a family income of less than \$20,000 a year to a family income of at least \$110,000 a year. We wouldn't expect college to do that for everyone, and not everyone's goal is to make it to the top 20 percent.

But John Friedman and his colleagues wanted to know: which colleges are producing the most bottom to top success stories? And which ones are not helping many people move up?

Over the coming hour, we're going to visit two campuses that help illustrate what the economists learned. We're going to ask why some colleges do so much better than others at pulling people out of poverty. And we're going to come back to Adam Carlesco's story, too.

We begin at a college that isn't doing much to promote social mobility. We're going to see how that happened and what they're trying to do about it. Our correspondent Sasha Aslanian begins on a campus tour:

Tobie Soumehk: "So we're now entering Brookings Quadrangle. Brookings Quadrangle is where every Wash U student starts and ends their Wash U experience."

Sasha Aslanian: Tobie Soumehk is a student tour guide at Washington University in St. Louis. Wash U is a private university with about 7,500 undergraduates. Tobie's wearing white sandals and white jeans ripped at the knees. Her long dark hair whips in the wind as she walks backward leading a handful of prospective students and their parents through a grassy quad criss-crossed by red brick paths. An archway between the red collegiate gothic buildings frames downtown St. Louis in the distance.

Wash U is one of the hardest schools in the country to get into. It only admits 15% of students who apply. Tobie describes the welcome procession that awaits those lucky few.

Soumehk: Your parents line the campus with green glow sticks and you walk through your parents in a ceremonial way as they send you off into the next journey of your life and you end here in Brookings quad with with Ted Drewes Ice Cream and live music, and it's just really a great tradition and fun celebration to start your time at Wash U.

Those entering students are very likely to march back through this quad in caps and gowns on commencement day. Wash U boasts a graduation rate of 94 percent. That's typical of elite private colleges like this one.

It's easy to read the signals of a wealthy clientele here. On the tour, Tobie highlights Wash U's award-winning food, free yoga and pilates classes and ample opportunities to study abroad:

Soumehk: "I personally studied abroad in Florence this past summer, which was a really great experience to be engaged in studio coursework while being surrounded by the birth of the Renaissance and all of that beautiful architecture. Currently, this semester, a lot of my friends are abroad since it's Junior spring, and I have friends in Dublin, Copenhagen, Hong Kong, Australia, Cape Town – they're all over. I was able to visit my friends in Hong Kong for Spring Break, which was really fun..."

Most of the students here come from high-income families. In fact, the economists from the Equality of Opportunity project we told you about – they found that Wash U had the highest median family income of any elite university in the country. \$272,000 a year.

After the tour, Tobie joins me on a bench to chat more about her experiences at Wash U. Her family can afford to pay the \$70,000 it costs for tuition, room, board and fees – and her older sister graduated from Wash U a few years ago. I ask her if there are many students from other kinds of backgrounds here.

Soumehk: To be honest, that's definitely been an issue that's been deliberated here on campus and has been maybe something controversial because our tuition can be a little high and spiky that I think Wash U definitely does attract students from maybe higher socioeconomic classes. I mean, I think any private institution attracts maybe more from that demographic.

Tobie's right about this. At highly selective private colleges like Wash U, there are almost no students from poor families. Two, three, four percent – that's it. And in the Equality of Opportunity Project data, Wash U ranked dead last among elite colleges for its percentage of poor students. Only one percent came from the bottom 20% of households.

Ruth Durrell comes from one of these families. She's grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She still still remembers her first visit to Wash U, and catching sight of a world she wanted to join:

Ruth Durrell: I walked onto campus and everything was green and the flowers were blooming and everyone was outside playing frisbee and spending time with each other or just reading and I thought, “Wow, this is what I want.”

She won one of Wash U’s most prestigious scholarships. And she loves it here. But sometimes she feels out of place. She says it helps that she gets together every week with a group of other students from families like hers. One day when I was there, she told that group about an uncomfortable exchange she’d had with another student. They were chatting, and when she mentioned her family’s modest income, he looked astonished.

Durrell: “Jaw dropped and said, ‘Wow! I’ve never met someone from below the poverty line before. He said, ‘You dress so well and you speak so well.’”

Other low-income students I talked to say they sometimes feel invisible. Mashoud Kaba is one of them. She’s a sophomore from Columbus, Ohio.

Mashoud Kaba: “I heard my suitemates talking in the bathroom. And they were like, “Oh my God, are there actually any poor students in this school?” Like, “I never knew!” Like, they’re like, “I never talked to anyone,” you know. They’re like, “I can’t even tell.” I was just sitting there and I’m like, “You guys basically live with me.” And, like, they just were not aware.”

[Music]

Mashoud was such an impressive student she won a Gates Foundation scholarship that covers ten years of higher education. But when there are almost no students like Mashoud at a college, that college is doing a terrible job promoting social mobility. You can't produce a lot of bottom to top success stories if you have almost no one from the bottom to begin with.

And here's the thing: Students from poor families who get a chance to go to an elite college like Wash U end up doing really well. Here's John Friedman:

Friedman: So what we find in the data is that the students from poorer backgrounds who attend elite schools do essentially as well as students that attend those same schools from much, much richer backgrounds. That is despite the very strong dependency in this country of kids' outcomes to parents' incomes in general. That almost entirely disappears once you look at students at an individual college.

In other words, a school like Wash U could be doing a lot to promote social mobility in this country if it took in more students from poor families. More than half of the students from poor families who go to Wash U end up in the top 20 percent.

That's a powerful potential counterforce to America's stalled social mobility. And that's why the Equality of Opportunity Project researchers make a big deal out of elite schools. They have the power to propel students from poor families way up the earnings ladder. But students have to get the chance. Several reports and studies show there are lots of highly-qualified students from low-income families – maybe tens of thousands of these students – who could succeed at highly selective colleges but are not ending up at them.

[Music]

So why is Wash U a school for mostly rich kids? It didn't start out this way. When it first opened its doors in 1854, it offered free night classes to mostly immigrant men.

Candace O'Connor: At the beginning, Washington University was kind of a school that was kind of hanging on by its fingernails.

Candace O'Connor wrote a history of Washington University. She says the University grew into a place that educated the children of local elites so they didn't have to go east for college, but it also welcomed talented students of lesser means.

One of her favorite stories is about a scholarship request that was so original the Admissions office hung it on the wall for years. In the late '40s, a young man from a hardscrabble farm in the Missouri Ozarks wrote to say he had four cows and proposed selling one each year to cover his

expenses. But, he would still need a scholarship to close the gap. The University agreed. The alum went on to a career with IBM and later as an investment banker. He's given millions to Wash U.

In the first hundred years of Wash U's existence it mostly drew students from the midwest. So how did it get to be one of the most prestigious schools in the country? Partly, it was on purpose: Wash U was ambitious. But partly, Wash U was caught up in larger changes that were happening in America.

Charles Clotfelter: Nobody set out to do this. Nobody said, "let's make colleges more unequal." But in fact, that's exactly what happened.

Charles Clotfelter is an economist at Duke University and the author of "Unequal Colleges in the Age of Disparity." Clotfelter says around 1980, income inequality began to rise in the United States. Wages for most Americans stagnated, while the rich got richer. Colleges mirrored that divide.

The elite colleges favored by the wealthy saw their fortunes soar. Rich families could pay more tuition. Their alumni made big donations. Their endowments rode the bull market. The less selective schools fell further behind. And there was another new force at work in the 1980s that would magnify the divide: College rankings.

[Music]

In 1983, U.S. News and World Report began publishing its annual best colleges in america issue. Clotfelter says the rankings were an overnight success. They were a shortcut for parents trying to make sense of the college market. And colleges wanted to stand out:

Clotfelter: Colleges were looking around at their competitors and saying, “how do we get better students and better faculty than our competitors? Well, one way is to improve our ranking in U.S. News.” And it’s clear to anybody who wants to look at the footnotes in the U.S. News publication, how you do it. And so the way you do it is to decrease the acceptance rate, increase your yield rate.

Your yield rate is how many students accept your offer to attend

Clotfelter: Increase the amount of money you spend per student, increase the amount of money you spend on faculty.

It was all spelled out for a school that wanted to rise. And a lot of it depended on money. For example, to boost rankings you want incoming classes with high scores on their SATs or ACTs. But test scores are highly correlated with family income.

Colleges have a big incentive to woo these wealthy students. Affluent families can pay tuition that helps pay for new buildings, better faculty, spiffier programs, and better food to attract more applicants, which helps them move up in the rankings. So rich kids help rankings. And rankings slice colleges into haves and have nots.

Wash U was a contender in all this. In 1988, Wash U debuted at number 23 in the U.S. News college rankings. By 1995, it had moved up to 20th place, and the university was looking for a new chancellor. The leading candidate was Mark Wrighton, a brilliant chemist at MIT who'd risen to provost. Wrighton saw great potential for Wash U:

Mark Wrighton: I discovered that Washington University was a lot better than, than people knew and I thought if I could win the job, it would be relatively easy because I felt that it would be a great place for very talented people.

Wrighton was hired, and set out to accelerate the ascent Wash U was on.

Leah Merrifield worked at Wash U in the '80s, then returned in the '90s after Wrighton was on board. When she came back...

Leah Merrifield: I almost didn't recognize the institution. Physically in terms of new buildings and new construction...the profile of students who were coming here, it was like, "Whoa, this place has really changed in 10 years."

Wash U's tuition was ticking up by a few percent a year – like tuition at other private colleges. Merrifield noticed more license plates from California, New York, Massachusetts and Florida in the student parking lot and they were on fancier cars:

Merrifield: You see Range Rovers and you think, “I don’t drive a Range Rover.” “That’s a Mercedes. Huh. That’s interesting.”

By 2003, Wash U cracked the top ten in *U.S. News and World Report*. The New York Times wrote a glowing piece about Wash U, marveling at the school’s rapid climb in the rankings and noting the school’s fundraising prowess. The article noted how effectively Wash U used merit aid to woo a better class of students.

[Music]

Merit aid. That’s basically incentive money to get kids who can pay most of the tuition to come to a school like Wash U. The college gives them a bit of financial aid in the hopes a discount will entice them to enroll when they could go somewhere else. Critics of merit aid say it bids down prices for the wealthy and would be better spent on students who need aid to afford college at all.

But using merit aid helped Wash U compete with its peers for top students and bring in more money, and become an even more desirable place to go to college. The university was on a

winning streak. But, it flew too close to the sun. A decade after that glowing 2003 article, the New York Times wrote another piece. This one was not so flattering.

[Music]

“Elite Colleges Differ on How They Aid Poor,” read the headline in the 2013 front page article. The Times pointed to Washington University’s paltry number of low-income students. The Times used the percentage of students on federal Pell grants as a proxy for low-income. At that time, most students who got Pell grants were from families who made less than \$30,000 a year. Only seven percent of Wash U’s students got Pell grants. Some of Wash U’s peer institutions like Vassar, Amherst and Emory University had triple that percentage.

Merrifield, the associate vice chancellor who noticed the fancy cars on campus in the ‘90s, remembers the fallout from the bad press:

Merrifield: Your phone was ringing, your email was blowing up. Text messages from colleagues all over the country saying, “Did you read–?” You are like the 100th person. Yes, you know I read it.

The criticism wasn’t just from the outside. People inside the school were upset too. 142 faculty members signed a letter calling for greater socioeconomic diversity in the student body.

Students protested. A group called “Washington University for Undergraduate Socioeconomic Diversity” ran a photo campaign on social media.

“I’d trade all our tulips for socioeconomic diversity at Wash U,” one student wrote on a whiteboard she held up for the camera. Others wrote they’d give up catered meals at the business school, the Tempur-Pedic mattresses in the dorms, Smart boards in every classroom, and petting zoos during finals week.

Merrifield says, to its credit, Wash U didn’t try to bury the problem.

Merrifield: It was uncomfortable but from my perspective, that’s the consequence. You know, institutionally we made decisions that resulted in a certain outcome and if you accept the praise, you gotta accept the criticism. And a lot of it was valid. To me the important piece was the response. Instead of saying, either denial – ”Oh, no, you misread the statistics, it wasn’t really like that” – instead of going that route, we owned up to it. We said, “You’re right, you know. That’s what we did. Thank you for giving us that feedback, and, institutionally, we’re going to start doing things differently.”

Wash U Provost Holden Thorp was new on the job when the firestorm hit.

Holden Thorp: My first reaction was “Well, if we’re going to work on this, I guess I came to the right place.”

He’d previously been the chancellor at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill and he’d worked on trying to get more low-income kids in to the state’s flagship university. Wash U announced a goal to double the number of its students who were poor enough to qualify for federal Pell grants – from seven percent to at least 13 percent.

Thorp: It was always in the plans of Washington University to build our financial aid endowment and that accelerated it.

At top colleges, there’s a debate over how to be the most fair with students from poor families. Some really wealthy colleges – like the Ivies and a few others – read applications without looking at whether the student is also applying for financial aid. This is called need-blind admissions. These schools pick the best students regardless of their ability to pay, and then they cover what the student can’t afford. Only a few schools do this and they tend to be some of the richest schools, with huge endowments.

Wash U has a large endowment, but it’s what’s known as “need aware,” which means when staff read applications, they do look to see who’s asking for financial aid. There’s a pot of money for financial aid and once it’s gone, it’s gone. Thorp says if an applicant needs aid and Wash U can’t provide it, the university doesn’t accept that student.

Thorp: We have only admitted students historically if we could meet all of their financial need and we're just expanding the number of students that we're doing that for.

[Music]

Even though it is not need-blind, for the past three years, Wash U has met its goal of admitting 13-percent Pell-eligible students, so it's now closer to the middle of the pack among selective schools.

Thorp says Wash U is spending millions more on financial aid each year, and it's also invested in more campus support for low-income and first-generation students. Two years ago, the University launched a new program called Deneb Stars, named for one of the farthest stars that can be seen with the naked eye. Students in the program have their own space in an elegant building with windows opening out onto central campus. They gather here to study, get tutoring, eat snacks and hang out.

Gabby Pantoja is a sophomore from Chicago who's in Deneb Stars. She's now working as peer mentor to younger students.

Pantoja: "There are going to be a lot times when you need support from people who are just like you. You have problems at home maybe that other people aren't going to

understand just because they don't have that similar background as you. And I think it all goes back to really just finding comfort in finding people that are similar to you.”

Helping low-income students feel comfortable at an elite school is one thing. Getting them to apply in the first place is another. Research shows there are a lot of low-income students who could qualify for selective schools, but most high achieving students from poor families don't apply to any selective colleges. None. When she was in high school in Chicago, Gabby was part of program that helped black and Latino youth prepare for college. It gave her the chance to visit Wash U in the summer after 10th grade.

Pantoja: It was that cliché, kind of, “I know this is the one.”

Wash U has expanded its partnerships with these kinds of recruiting programs, and it's also doing more outreach to low-income students in the St. Louis area.

The administrator who got all those emails when the New York Times story came out, Leah Merrifield, founded a program called “College Prep.” Fifty high school students from low-income families spend summers after 9th, 10th and 11th grades taking courses on the Wash U campus – for free. They also attend workshops and events on campus during the school year. The idea is to help them get ready for college, whether they go to Wash U or somewhere else. This spring, a second crop of high school students completed the program. Merrifield welcomed their families to a celebration on campus.

Merrifield: “Wow. Everybody, everybody looks fabulous!”

One of the student speakers, Delton Utsey, admitted he wasn’t happy when his mom first signed him up for summer classes. But he told the crowd the Wash U campus now feels like home:

Utsey: “After three years of learning things like African dances, ACT skills and tactics and the creation and fall of Motown, I started to become very fond of Wash U. As a result, I’m now a member of the class of 2022 at Washington University in St. Louis!”

A third of the students in this group will be starting college at Wash U this fall. The rest are heading to a range of other colleges.

Provost Holden Thorp has done a lot of thinking about the power colleges have to promote social mobility. He’s just co-authored a book called “Our Higher Calling: Rebuilding the Partnership Between America and its Colleges and Universities.” Thorp says there’s new scrutiny on universities and what they are delivering for the country:

Thorp: It’s logical to say, “We expect these permanent institutions that have all these resources to be part of shaping the future of the country,” and making sure that low-income students can come here is an important part of it. And so now it’s become the case, that succeeding at this is not something that’s antithetical to our progress, it is part

of our progress. And to me, that's a good thing. And I give a lot of credit to the top institutions, who in 2008 dramatically changed their aid policies. That's when Harvard, Princeton, and Yale started putting these really aggressive no-loan programs out there, that's when, they, Harvard said below a certain income, nobody will pay more than 10 percent of their family income to go to Harvard. And for those of us who are just below that, you know eventually that was going to come to us, something we would have to do if we were going to take our place among the great institutions.

Those moves by the Ivy League colleges a decade ago did get a lot of buzz, but the needle on social mobility has moved very little. In the past decade, there has been almost no overall growth in the percentage of low-income students at the nation's elite colleges. Very few students from poor families get those golden tickets.

Ruth Durrell did. She's the Wash U student from Milwaukee whose classmate told her he'd never met anyone who grew up below the poverty line. Which, by the way, Durrell says is not a comment that's been typical during her time here. Durrell wants more students from backgrounds like hers to experience an education like this:

Durrell: But when I go home I look at a lot of, you know, peers and even friends that were juniors when I was a senior and they're like, "I'm going to go to Madison." Or, "I'm going to go Marquette," or – and those are fantastic schools, but I try to tell them, there's more. I've irritated a lot of people, cause it's like, "Have you looked at

Swarthmore? Have you looked at Oberlin, oh, have you looked at University of Richmond and Pomona and all these great places?” They’re like, “yeah, no, I’m just going to stay here.” Part of that is the responsibility of communities in making sure their children and their youth know, “You are worthwhile. You are valuable. You have value.” But it also takes schools saying, “Yeah. That’s true, and we want you.”

[Music]

Elite colleges do want these students. It appeals to their meritocratic values. But they’re also in an arms race to bring in money to support their programs and facilities and faculty, and alumni want their children admitted. For every poor student these schools enroll, they forego revenue, and need to raise scholarships to cover the difference. But Wash U demonstrates that elite schools can crack the door open wider.

Stephen Smith: That was correspondent Sasha Aslanian, and I’m Stephen Smith. You’re listening to *Changing Class: Are Colleges Helping Americans Move Up?*

So, the nation’s top colleges aren’t producing much social mobility. Who is? Coming up next, we find out what make a college a “mobility maker,” and we visit one, and meet students there.

Patrick Hughes: Not probably, but I am going to be making more than the combined income in my house, right. It’s kind of weird to fathom like that actually happening.

If you want to look up a college's mobility rate, you can find a link on our website, APMreports.org. Support for APM reports comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. More in a moment. This is APM, American Public Media.

PART 2

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary, Changing Class: Are colleges helping Americans move up? I'm Stephen Smith.

We're going to return for a moment to Adam Carlesco's story. When Adam was thinking about where to go to college, he didn't even consider a private school like Wash U. In fact, he never looked at any schools outside of his home state.

Carlesco: Because my parents had always told me you need to go to a state school, you need to go to a Virginia state school so that you can get instate tuition because it's just not worth it to go out of state or to go private because that's going to blow a ton of cash.

Adam's dad had firsthand experience with student debt. He started college when Adam was eight. Went to a community college first. And then...

Carlesco: He did his last two years at a private school and he died still paying off his student loans, ten years after he graduated.

Adam was determined not to end up in that kind of debt, so he went to state schools. He started at Virginia Commonwealth University, then he transferred to Virginia Tech. It's one of the top public universities in the state. But even though Virginia Tech was a public school, Adam says there were plenty of rich kids there.

Carlesco: I remember hanging out with a guy who lived in my dorm and he got drunk one night and then ordered a thousand dollars worth of raving gear on Amazon.

Raving gear?

Carlesco: Oh like going to raves. Glow sticks, light up torches, the light – just dropped like a full thousand dollars on this and then told the story about it the next day and it blew my mind how anyone could possibly have the resources and poor judgment to make a decision like that.

According to all that data analyzed by the economists at the Equality of Opportunity Project, there are indeed a lot of rich students at Virginia Tech. Students there have the second highest family income among highly selective public colleges in the United States. The University of

Michigan is number one.

[Music]

These public colleges aren't doing much better than a private school like Wash U when it comes to promoting social mobility. Students from poor families like Adam Carlesco are an exception at many of the nation's top public universities. So what colleges are doing a good job? Who are the "mobility makers" in America? Our correspondent Sasha Aslanian takes us to Long Island, New York to show us what a mobility maker looks like.

Sasha Aslanian: The campus of Stony Brook University is much plainer than the Wash U campus. It started as a teacher's college in 1957. It has a lot of blocky brick buildings from the '70s and some newer ones with more glass:

Derek Peterson: Like this wasn't here when I was here. We used to walk this way to go to the lecture hall.

Derek Peterson graduated from Stony Brook 1988. He grew up on Long Island. Stony Brook was a half hour from home and a place where he could work with big computers.

Peterson: Back then, the goal was just very simply: can I go to school and get a job? My parents didn't – we weren't necessarily destitute but we didn't have a lot. And so, how do

I get out and do something on my own and then make my parents and my community proud of what I've done?

Derek was admitted to Stony Brook as part of a special program for low-income students who show potential but aren't fully prepared for college. Their high school grades and test scores are lower than what Stony Brook typically looks for.

Peterson: Let's just be honest, there were a lot of people who said you're not going to be able to do it. The school is really tough.

But, with a lot of support, he did do it. Derek graduated with a degree in computer science and applied mathematics. Now he's a wealthy tech entrepreneur. He's setting up a scholarship to honor his father who never finished college.

Peterson: "What I've gained is to be able to help a lot of people."

[Music]

Stony Brook has been making bets on people like Derek Peterson for decades. The school produces a remarkable number of bottom to top success stories. The Equality of Opportunity Project found half the students from poor families who attend Stony Brook go on to become top

earners. That's an Ivy League success rate. But Stony Brook takes in lots more low-income students than an Ivy League school does.

Turns out, Stony Brook is the third best college in America when it comes to promoting social mobility. The top two are Cal State LA and Pace University in New York. John Friedman of the Equality of Opportunity Project refers to these schools as America's "engines of mobility."

These are not fancy schools.

Friedman: So if you look at the schools with the very highest mobility rates, there are primarily schools that are in the middle of the American public higher education system.

And what exactly are these schools doing? Friedman's not quite sure.

Friedman: I like to say that colleges with a very high mobility rate, they must be doing something right. They are either providing a great education and a great kind of boost to students that are on campus or they're doing a great job finding talented low-income students in the first place.

Friedman thinks it's probably both. It's not entirely clear what the secret sauce is at Stony Brook.

But administrators say these are some of the ingredients:

The school is a short train ride away from a ton of talented, low-income kids growing up on Long Island and in New York City. These students are hungry to succeed, and Stony Brook sees helping them do that as part of its mission. It recruits them, it gives them a chance even if they may not be quite ready for college, and it supports them along the way.

Remember how most high-achieving low income kids don't apply to any selective colleges? Stony Brook tries to go find them. Some of the outreach the school does is to pretty young kids. These Long Island 6th graders are on a day-long field trip to an engineering lab at Stony Brook. They're learning how to build little motion detectors out of circuit boards.

Girl: We're stuck on the first part

Teacher: Stuck on the first part, okay, let me show you how to do it.

Emma and Samantha get some help with their soldering irons from David Westerfeld who usually teaches college students about semiconductor lasers.

Teacher: "There, we got it."

Girls: Yay!

Teacher: Excellent, team soldering

Stony Brook has a grant from the National Science Foundation to get kids from underrepresented groups excited about careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math – known as STEM

fields. Stony Brook has cooked up math camps and opportunities for high schoolers to shadow doctors in its teaching hospital to learn about careers in health care. Stony Brook specifically targets children from low-income school districts. These programs get kids on to campus and may spark the idea: I could come here.

The woman who's picked a lot of those students who became bottom to top success stories is Judith Berhannan, the Dean of Admissions. She's worked in admissions at Stony Brook for 34 years – more than half the school's history. She knows how many more students want the chance to be here.

Judith Berhannan: I work with applications, I see family income levels so I see the level of need and in my opinion it's grown over the years. It's very in your face that there's still this very strong need for more.

32 percent of Stony Brook undergraduates receive Pell grants. Remember, Wash U was trying to get up to 13 percent. And because of federal, state and institutional financial aid, 44 percent of Stony Brook students pay no tuition. But it can still be a stretch to afford things like housing and books. Berhannan says there's a culture at Stony Brook of trying to make college possible for these students.

Berhannan: I can remember picking up the phone and talking to our associate director for campus residences and saying on many occasions, "This student does not have money

for the housing deposit. Can we waive it?” No problem. Waive the deposit. “This student doesn’t have the housing deposit and, furthermore, they don’t have a place to stay for the last two weeks of the summer.” No problem. We’ll give them a job on campus, we’ll let them stay in the building and then we’ll figure it out.

Social mobility doesn’t just happen because a school takes in lot of students from poor families. Plenty of schools are willing to take their money, but many of those schools don’t catapult their students to higher incomes. For example, for-profit schools take a lot of low-income students and have some of the worst rates of social mobility. There’s something that Stony Brook’s doing for its low-income students that’s really working.

Patrick Hughes: I got a spot for us in Central.

Elvis Perez: Okay.

Here’s one of the things Stonybrook is doing: having students from low-income backgrounds mentor each other. Patrick Hughes is a senior from Queens New York. Patrick has a huge smile with dimples, close cropped hair and the slender build of the soccer player he is.

Hughes: How’s your week been?

Perez: It’s all right. So far so good.

Hughes: Pretty good.

Patrick's mentee, Elvis Perez is from the Bronx. Elvis is a math major, but a calculus test didn't go so well.

Hughes: Did you try going to the math learning center?

Perez: Um, no, not really.

Patrick advises Elvis there's a 90% chance those problems will show up on the final exam, so it's worth getting help. Then he asks about Elvis's new job in the student center. Patrick put him in touch with his boss there and Elvis got hired. They spend the rest of the session editing Elvis's resume.

Hughes: So they see that you're an active participant and as job-seekers, they want those kinds of people.

Patrick and Elvis are both part of Stony Brook's Educational Opportunity Program, or EOP.

That's the same program Derek Peterson was in, the Stony Brook grad who's now a wealthy tech entrepreneur.

Patrick's the son of Jamaican immigrants. He says, ever since he can remember, his mom has been insisting that he was going to go to college.

Hughes: “I am the first child of four and first to go to college out of my mom’s family, my dad’s family as well. But having it instilled in me that education is the path to break the cycle that my parents were fighting so hard to break.

Three thousand people apply for these coveted spots in the EOP Program at Stony Brook every year, and about 200 get them. It’s a state-funded program, so there’s only so much money.

First year students arrive five weeks early for an intensive summer school session and they’re matched with counselors who work with them from the beginning to the end of their college careers. Patrick takes me to visit his counselor

Counselor: Yeah, I was looking at your plan, making sure all’s good. You’re graduating. I’m checking occasionally.

Hughes: Oh, okay, okay. I’m good, right?

Counselor: Yes, you’re good.

Hughes: Alright, cool.

Throughout the school year, EOP students get academic and social support from counselors and peer mentors. The support seems to be paying off. The graduation rates of EOP students are even a little higher than the regular student body. Remember, these were students whose academic profiles put them a little below the mark when they were admitted. And at Stony Brook, they’re more likely to graduate.

Just to give you a sense of how remarkable that is, nationally, Pell students have a graduation rate that is 18% lower than students who don't get Pell grants. But graduation isn't the ultimate goal. Social mobility doesn't happen without that next step: getting a job.

When more affluent kids need a job, they might have a connection through a relative or a neighbor who can offer an informational interview or an internship. Stony Brook is calling in this favor from alumni.

Woman: I love the energy. This is awesome

On this spring evening, Stony Brook has invited 100 alumni to join students at a networking mixer. Students crowd around alums who work in IT, healthcare and business. These tend to be fields that pay well and Stony Brook's strength in these areas probably helps explain some of those bottom to top success stories. Students who look dressed for job interviews gather up free hors d'oeuvres and work the room.

Marianna Savoca: S'cuse us everybody, you look great!

The force behind these efforts is Marianna Savoca who directs the Career Center. I follow her to a quieter room and she lays out how crucial these connections are, especially to first generation college students.

Savoca: These students don't have exposure to professionals in the way that continuing generation students have. I think, for myself, I didn't know anybody with a college degree growing up.

After graduation, a lot of Stony Brook grads pour into the New York City job market. Savoca says, they're up against candidates whose alumni networks are much more extensive.

Savoca: We're working on it. We're building it right now. And we're starting when they're students. But if we don't tell them, right? When you think about social capital, they don't know the expectations, right? So in a very practical way, not in a snooty way, we say, "OK, we're going to help you. We're bringing these alumni to help you. They want to help you. And when you're in a position, you're going to help too."

She tells the story of an alum in banking whose company recruited 100 new college grads. 41 of them were from Stony Brook. It wasn't loyalty to his alma mater, he told Savoca. It was a good business decision. Stony Brook grads were hungry.

[Music]

Patrick Hughes is hungry for a career in the tech field. He says ever since he was 12, taking apart his mom's computer and putting it back together, this is what he wanted to do.

I'm talking with Patrick and a group of EOP students in the Career Center, asking them about their plans after graduation. Patrick says he's still deciding. Kimberly Dixon, who's the Assistant Director of Employer Relations & Diversity chides him for being too modest.

Dixon: Patrick is being extremely modest. I mean way too modest. He does – he has four to five job offers already, and over the last two years, every year, has had several internship offers so he could choose from. So, but we're very excited about his four to five offers. Can't wait to see what he accepts.

Aslanian: You'd kind of forgot to mention you had four or five job offers.

Hughes: Yeah, um... [laughs]

It's a big decision for Patrick. His whole family is counting on his success. He recently visited relatives in Jamaica, and before he left, his grandfather told him he was broke. Patrick gave his grandfather everything he had in his wallet. Patrick knows how much others will be relying on him.

Hughes: Some people can afford the luxury to say like, "Oh, got a 70K job, I can put my feet up, all this is mine," right? But I know that I have about like 10 mouths you know, ready to kind of like divvy up and that sort of thing."

Patrick used a white board in his dorm room to calculate how fast he could pay off his student loans and start building wealth for his family. Investing in real estate, living below his means. He points to his backpack, with a Google logo on it, leaning against his chair.

Hughes: “My other book bag ripped and I bought a book bag, it was like \$80, ‘cause I’m like, “Hey,” you know, “I’m graduating so I’ll probably need another book bag to put all my stuff in, I’m starting a new job anyways.” You know. But then I thought about it, I was like, “Hey, this is a pretty good book bag that I had in my closet.” I’m like sort of a packrat. So I got this at a Google event that my mentor invited me to.”

Patrick returned the \$80 bag and used his free Google swag around campus. It was also kind of a good luck charm. He had applied for a job at Google and, even though he had all those job offers, he was holding out for the tech giant that gets more than a million applicants a year.

[Music]

This spring, he accepted a job offer from Google.

The Jamaican kid from Queens going off to Google is a champion story of bottom-to-top mobility. But, it’s a story that’s growing more scarce at colleges across the country, and even at Stony Brook.

The Equality of Opportunity Project focused on an eleven year period from 2000 to 2011. And researchers detected a shift. Even at a mobility maker like Stony Brook, the share of students from the top 20% of households grew from 33% to 40%, while the share of students from the poorest 20% of households shrank from 17% to 11%.

Part of the problem is that state funding declined when the recession hit, and it hasn't come back. That's made Stony Brook more reliant on tuition dollars to meet its budget. Since it can't raise tuition without legislative approval, Stony Brook has turned to international and out-of-state students who pay tuition that's four times higher than what New Yorkers pay.

The recession also brought more applicants from middle- and upper-middle class families who recognized Stony Brook was a good value and who might have gone private before. Stony Brook has increased enrollment to bring in more revenue, but Stony Brook President Samuel Stanley says he's not sure how long Stony Brook can sustain that balancing act.

Samuel Stanley: We want to remain committed to the social mobility we're doing, but we're really getting squeezed. You know, the incentives that have been created for us are to accept more students who pay full tuition, and pay full out of state or international tuition.

A fifth of Stony Brook students now come from out of state, and this fall, because it's at capacity, there'll be fewer slots for entering students in that EOP program we told you about.

Stanley says before he took the job at Stony Brook, he read about the EOP program, and he was drawn to the idea of working for a public university that saw part of its core mission as giving lots of people the opportunity to rise out of poverty. It's hard for him to understand why the state isn't investing more in EOP.

Stanley: We struggle every year. It's remarkable to me for a program that's so successful that every year there's an attempt to reduce its budget at the state level. Usually some of that money gets restored, but it keeps the program capped. And rather than having to fight about restoring money to it, I would rather have a fight about adding money to it every year, but every year we seem to be stuck in this cycle.

This fall, 150 new students will enter Stony Brook's EOP program. Remember, 3,000 people applied. Patrick Hughes, the student from Queens who got the job at Google, wonders about the ripple effect of what could be accomplished if more people got a chance like he did:

Hughes: We need to open up the admissions to maybe 200, 300 students. Because, no matter what, we're going to graduate and we're going to get some really good jobs and we're going to change our communities but if you're only letting a few of us in, that change is going to happen very slow.

[Music]

Stony Brook is dealing with a financial squeeze that's affecting a lot of other public institutions, too. A report by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association found more than half of all states now rely more on tuition than on state and local government funding to finance higher education. In 44 states, funding fell after the Great Recession hit, and it hasn't come back. And it's these state schools that tend to be the engines of social mobility in our country. When they get more expensive, it's harder for Americans from poor families to move up.

Stephen Smith: That was correspondent Sasha Aslanian. I'm Stephen Smith.

What the Equality of Opportunity Project suggests is that opportunity for students from poor families to move up through higher education is shrinking in America. And, we know that Americans are borrowing more than ever to fund their educations, too.

Adam Carlesco, the guy who grew up in Virginia, was determined to avoid debt. He saw his own dad never get out from under his student loans. But Adam couldn't find a job with his psychology degree from Virginia Tech. He graduated right into the teeth of the recession. He decided to go to law school. There, debt was unavoidable.

Luckily for him, he was able to get into an income-based loan repayment program where he pays ten percent of his income toward his loans each month.

Carlesco: If I were paying what I actually owe, it would be ten times that. So like my entire income would go to student debt.

Adam and his wife together make pretty close to that \$110,000 it takes to be in the upper fifth of the income distribution. He's one of those bottom-to-top success stories the economists went looking for in all that data. But in the DC area where they live, 110k doesn't buy much.

Carlesco: \$110,000 here will get you a one-bedroom apartment and an hour commute.

Adam is doing better than his parents. But he might not be if he didn't have that income-based repayment program. He's bitter about it. He sees no reason higher education should cost so much.

Carlesco: It's a cash grab. It's a cash grab on people wanting to rise above the level that they were born in.

[Music]

So, are colleges helping Americans move up? Some are and some aren't.

Colleges do have the power to propel people up the earnings ladder have to want to do that, and make it part of their mission. And they may need taxpayer support to do it. Like much of America, colleges are largely segregated by income. Schools at the top are rewarded when they serve an ever-wealthier slice of the population. Schools in the middle scramble as public support falls away. And schools at the bottom, the open-enrollment and for profit colleges, don't always propel students very far.

For students like Adam Carlesco, who start at the bottom and incur large debt, moving up has gotten more expensive. And while colleges do boost many people up the income ladder, college may not be enough to counterbalance the powerful forces creating income inequality in our society. That problem may be too big for colleges to solve.

Smith: You've been listening to *Changing Class: Are Colleges Helping Americans Move Up?* a documentary from APM Reports. It was produced by Emily Hanford and Sasha Aslanian, with help from Emerald O'Brien and Alex Baumhardt. The editor is Catherine Winter. Fact checker, Betsy Towner Levine. Web editors Dave Mann and Andy Kruse. Mixing by Craig Thorson. Music help from Liz Lyon. Our theme music is composed by Gary Meister. The editor-in-chief of APM Reports is Chris Worthington, and I'm Stephen Smith.

To learn more about colleges and social mobility, and read stories about people's experiences changing social class, visit our website – APMReports.org. This is one of four programs in our

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Promo 1

Stephen Smith: On the next APM Reports documentary, for americans from poor families, college still offers the best shot to achieve the American dream.

Patrick Hughes: No matter what, we're going to graduate and we're going to get some really good jobs and we're going to change our communities, but if you're only letting a few of us in, that change is going to happen very slow.

Listen for Changing Class: Are Colleges Helping Americans Move Up? from APM.

Promo 2

Stephen Smith: On the next APM Reports documentary: the American dream has stalled.

What's college got to do with it?

Charles Clotfelter: Nobody set out to do this. Nobody said, "Let's make colleges more unequal."

Samuel Stanley: The incentives that have been created for us are to accept more students who pay full tuition.

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