

# Does College Still Work?

Author Paul Tough's new book argues that the system just isn't as fair as it should be



Katie Couric [Follow](#)

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Paul Tough's new book 'The Years That Matter Most' takes a hard look at college.

**E**very parent hopes to give their kids the best opportunities possible — and for many, that might mean higher education. A college degree is commonly regarded as one of the most reliable ways to level the playing field and ensure that those with talent and drive get the opportunity to succeed, no matter what

resources they may have. However, Paul Tough's new book *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us* makes the powerful case that the system just isn't as fair as it should be. Read our conversation below to find out what he learned in his six years of reporting for the book ...

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**Katie Couric: What questions were you hoping to answer when you started the book?**

**Paul Tough:** I was trying to answer two questions. First, I wanted to understand why higher education, which for so long was the great engine of social mobility in America, has now stopped playing that role for so many of our young people. And second, I wanted to understand what it's like to be a young person today in the middle of that process: applying to and entering college, filled with hopes and dreams and ambitions, and trying to make a college education work the way it once did.

**Your reporting reveals the pretty dramatic way that higher education has shifted over the years to become a lot less meritocratic...what's the reason?**

It's complicated! I was hoping I could find one dastardly villain that I could pin all the blame on. But it's much more complex than that. I think it really has to do with the larger changes that have taken place in this country in the last few decades: the way we've become more competitive and less cooperative, more about winner-take-all and less about collective progress. When a country stops believing that fully educating our young people benefits us all, it's hard to have a true meritocracy.

**You interviewed more than a hundred students during your six years of reporting...do you think their expectations of what college can provide them have shifted as well?**

For some of them, the answer is certainly yes. I heard a lot of frustration with how the system functions and how it had sometimes let them down. But what struck me was how many of the young people I spoke to were still true believers. They had such high hopes that real opportunities would be open to them if they worked hard and studied hard and invested in their future. I hope we're able to create a higher education system for them that is worthy of that faith.

**I thought it was really interesting that you came to realize that even *affluent* students aren't being served very well by the system...why is that?**

There are all kinds of ways that affluent students benefit from the current system. On a practical level, well-off kids today have lots of advantages when it comes to college admissions. But on an emotional level, I'm not sure. I spent a lot of time reporting on an amazing SAT tutor in suburban Washington, D.C., who had a lot of super-ambitious, affluent students. They felt enormous pressure to improve their SAT scores and to get into an elite college. For most of them, it worked! They went to this tutor and pumped up their scores, and they got in where they wanted. So on paper, it was a good deal for them. But when I saw their crammed schedules and heard them describe their all-consuming anxiety, I have to say it seemed like a pretty difficult way to spend your adolescence.

**I love that you spent a semester taking a freshman calculus class! What did you learn from that experience (aside from some pretty complex math knowledge of course!)?**

Sadly, I didn't learn much calculus. For the first week or so, I thought I might be able to keep up with the class — but then I quickly had to admit that I wasn't anywhere near as good at math as any of the 18-year-olds in the class! Still, once I swallowed my pride, I was able to learn some amazing and important truths about opportunity and math and college. The class was at the University of Texas, and it was taught by an amazing professor named Uri Treisman. He showed me that attentive and supportive teaching could be transformative for young people who were feeling out of place or confused in their freshman year of college. I was able to watch as he helped one student after another turn themselves into A students and math and science majors, despite their fears and anxieties coming into the class.

**You've said you were really surprised by the “incredible power of the SAT.” How so?**

The SAT has a lot of flaws, but admissions departments at most American colleges still put an enormous amount of weight on the test when they're making their decisions about whom to admit and whom to reject. I met a lot of young people — often kids from low-income or working-class families — who had great grades in high school and enormous ambition and potential to succeed, but because of their mediocre test scores, they weren't admitted to the kind of schools where they could have thrived.

**With all your reporting about the way the system works, what insight did it give you into the recent college admissions scandal?**

Surprisingly enough, my reporting actually made me more sympathetic to the parents who were caught up in that scandal. I mean, it seems pretty clear that they broke the law, and they should certainly suffer the consequences if they did. But I spent a lot of time reading through the transcripts of the FBI wiretaps of the conversations those parents were having. And what struck me was how they sounded just like every other stressed-out affluent parent. Like, *OK, what hoops do we have to jump through now?* I think the system of elite college applications makes every affluent parent act a little crazy. The parents who got caught up in the scandal just went a little crazier than most.

**What do you think would make the most significant difference in leveling the playing field for students of all backgrounds?**

I actually think there's a pretty simple answer to that question: We need to invest way more in public higher education. Certainly, the elite private institutions could do more to admit more balanced freshman classes, and they should! But if we want to change things in a big way, we need a robust and well-funded public system, from community colleges to flagship state universities, that can provide an excellent, low-cost college education to millions of students, whether that education ends in a welding degree or a philosophy degree. Other countries are able to do this. In other eras, the United States has done it, too.

All the signs from the labor market indicate that our young people need more higher education than they are getting. But instead, we've been going in the opposite direction. Since 2001, states have cut their higher education budgets by 16 percent per student, on average. That's crazy. But it's a mistake we can correct. What it would take, I think, is a shift in our mindset. We've been trained to think of higher education as a cutthroat competition, where we are just supposed to look out for our own kids and elbow everyone else's aside. We need to remember that in fact, our collective public higher education benefits us all. If we can remind ourselves of that simple truth, I think the answers to our current problems will become much clearer.

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*This interview originally appeared in the September 12, 2019 edition of Katie Couric's Wake-UP Call newsletter. [Subscribe here.](#)*

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