

The New York Times Magazine

At that moment, however, I thought less of home and more about the gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. I walked past Valentine Hall, the cafeteria, its large windows ghostly in the moonlight. Only the emergency exit signs blazed red in the darkness. There was just enough light to see the chairs stacked on top of the tables and the trays

out of reach through the gates that barred me from entry. Amherst

afford to leave campus. After my first year, I knew when these

on my calendar.

provided no meals during holidays and breaks, but not all of us could

disruptions were coming and planned for hungry days, charting them

Back home in Miami, we knew what to do when money was tight and

the family needed to be fed. At the time, in the late '90s, McDonald's ran a special: 29-cent hamburgers on Wednesdays and 39-cent cheeseburgers on Sundays. Without that special, I am not sure what we would have done when the week outlasted our reserves before payday. But up at Amherst, there was no McDonald's special, no quick fix. I worked extra shifts as a gym monitor to help cover the unavoidable costs of staying on campus during breaks. At the gym, the vending machines were stocked with Cheetos and Yoo-hoos, welcome

complements to the ham-and-cheese and peanut-butter-and-jelly

sandwiches I got from CVS; there are no corner stores or bodegas in

Amherst. Not so welcome was the air conditioning on full force in the

gym, despite lingering mounds of snow outside. I would check in 20 or

so people during my 10-hour shifts, mostly faculty and staff who lived in

the area. I recognized them, but they didn't pay me much mind. Friends would not return until the Friday and Saturday before classes began again. Many came back tan. But what I noticed more was how so many of them returned rested — how different our holidays had been. We like to think that landing a coveted college spot is a golden ticket for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We think less critically about what happens next. I lived this gap as a first-generation college student. And I returned to it as a first-generation graduate student, spending two years observing campus life and interviewing more than 100 undergraduates at an elite university. Many students from lowincome families described having to learn and decode a whole new set of cues and terms like professors' "office hours" (many didn't know what they were or how to use them), and foreign rituals like being

invited to get coffee with an instructor (and not knowing whether they

were expected to pay) — all those moments between convocation and

'My financial-aid officer didn't understand why I worked so many jobs

Now, as a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I

which we examine how poverty shapes the ways in which many

teach a course I've titled C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around

students make it to and through college. Admission alone, as it turns

out, is not the great equalizer. Just walking through the campus gates

unavoidably heightens these students' awareness and experience of

I've spent half my life in Miami and the other half in Massachusetts.

One 20-minute phone call with an Amherst football coach when I was a

high school senior, and a college brochure that arrived two days later,

brought this dual citizenship into existence. I can still hear my brother

asking, "What is an Amherst?" We didn't have internet at home, so we

had to wait to get to the school computer lab before we could look up

Me) — borrowing the title of that still-relevant Wu-Tang Clan track —in

commencement where college life is actually lived.

or why I picked up even more hours at times.'

the deep inequalities around them.

the unfamiliar name. We learned that the "H" was as silent as my brother was when he found out a United States president— Calvin Coolidge — was an alumnus, and so was the eminent black physician Dr. Charles Drew. Now maybe his baby brother could be one, too. The path from Miami to Massachusetts was not one that everyone around me could see. I attended George Washington Carver Middle School, which had an International Baccalaureate program, in my neighborhood, Coconut Grove. But the summer before I started at Carver, I took some summer school electives at Ponce de Leon Middle School, our zoned school, where my mom worked as a security guard and which she helped to desegregate in the '60s. Before the starting bell one day, an assistant principal from Carver saw me goofing around with some friends from around the way. She strode over and said to me, "You don't have the potential to be a Carverite."

That assistant principal saw black, boisterous boys and deemed us, and

me, less than. She didn't see my drive to succeed. My family didn't have

much, but since my days in Head Start, I was always a top performer in

every subject. During one rough patch, I stayed home from school for a

few days when we couldn't afford all the supplies needed to carry out

developed my hypotheses and outlined my proposed methods without

summer morning when the assistant principal admonished me, anger

played into her preconceived notion of who — or rather, what— I was. I

welled up inside me, but I couldn't let it show. That would have just

the materials and had everything ready to go when we were able to

afford the supplies. I missed the ribbon but got the A. So on that

had to prove her wrong. I had to prove myself right.

my science-fair experiment on bulb voltage and battery life. I

But even as I write these words, I'm aware that this is exactly the kind of story that poor, black and Latinx students are conditioned to write for college application essays. In everyday life, as the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote, we "wear the mask that grins and lies" that "hides our cheeks and shades our eyes," but when we write these allimportant essays we are pushed — by teachers, counselors and anyone who gives advice — to tug the heartstrings of upper-middle-class white admissions officers. "Make them cry," we hear. And so we pimp out our trauma for a shot at a future we want but can't fully imagine. At Coral Gables Senior High, I was the safe friend in the eyes of my friends' mothers. The nerdy, chubby kid who geeked out to novels and

cartoons did not pose as much of a threat as his less bookish football

teammates. But being the safe friend couldn't protect me any more

I'm still haunted by the memory of one night when a group of us

decided to go to the CocoWalk AMC theater for a movie. We ran into

stopped to joke and roast one another. Then, up ahead at the corner, we

heard raised voices. We could make out three men starting to fight. As

we watched, frozen, one picked up a cinder block and heaved it down

on the head of another man on the ground. An angry voice rang out in

our direction: "Who dat is down there?!" Terrified, we sprinted away

behind the nearby houses. After seconds that felt like forever, doors

slammed and a car sped off. We came out only after the roar of dual

exhaust pipes faded away and raced home in the opposite direction,

Once I was at Amherst, the phone would ring with news of similar

some folks from school near the corner of Frow and Elizabeth and

than anyone else from the dangers all around us.

knowing better than to stay and invite questions.

nights. I would be reading a novel for class or reviewing my chemistry notes for a test when my mother's ring tone, "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," by the Tokens, would break the silence. Something in her "Hey, Tony, you busy?" let me know I was about to share in the emotional burden that bad news brings. My family didn't understand how disruptive those calls could be. Neither did I, really. No one had ever left. We normally went through these events together. But I was no longer able to help figure out when the coast was clear, to investigate the flashing police lights. I always wondered, unnerved, just how close my family was to whatever prompted such a call. I was away. They were still there. Neighborhoods are more than a collection of homes and shops, more than uneven sidewalks or winding roads. Some communities protect us from hurt, harm and danger. Others provide no respite at all. This process is not random but the consequence of historical patterns of exclusion and racism. Life in privileged communities means that children traverse safer streets, have access to good schools and

interact with neighbors who can supply more than the proverbial cup

of sugar. Life in distressed communities can mean learning to

These starkly different environments have a profound impact on

children's cognitive functioning, social development and physical

clear that inequality depresses the mobility prospects of even the

brightest kids, with poor black youth disproportionately exposed to

neighborhood violence. In his 2010 study of Chicago youth from

adolescence to young adulthood, the sociologist Patrick Sharkey, then

at New York University and now at Princeton, shows how such violence

disrupts learning in ways equivalent to missing two years of schooling.

Even if they make it to dorms on leafy-green campuses, disadvantaged

about those back home just as much as those back home worry about

between lunch and lab, announcing that someone needed something:

\$75 for diabetes medicine or \$100 to turn the lights back on. One day a

call announced that a \$675 mortgage payment needed to be paid. It

wasn't the first time. I was annoyed. I was mad that I was annoyed.

Was I not the future they had invested in all these years? Did I have

enough to spare? Were they expecting the whole thing? How much

time did I have? This was before apps like Venmo that allow you to

spare cash home by MoneyGram. That ride on the B43 bus was as

By my junior year, I had secured four jobs in addition to monitoring

worked so many jobs or why I picked up even more hours at times.

to tell me that they would be reaching out to my bosses to let them

That fall, right after Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, I was called in to

the financial-aid office. They wanted to discuss my work schedule and

know I needed to cut back hours. I was working too much; that's what

I pleaded with them not to. I needed the money. More truthfully, my

sending remittances back, a reality that many of us who are the first to

venture away from home know all too well. I assured the officials I was

family and I did. One responsibility of being the one who leaves is

handling all my work. In truth, I was really just pushing through; I

became a robot, hyperscheduled and mechanical in my interactions.

worked less, I would not be able to help my family recover from the

storms, let alone get through all their everyday emergencies. But if I

My grades were good, and so I thought I was good. I worried that if I

and cleaning the gym. My financial-aid officer didn't understand why I

send money to anyone instantly, so it would take almost three hours,

start to finish, to get to the nearest Walmart, on Route 9, to send a bit of

them. At Amherst, I would get messages, in the few moments I had

students still live in poverty's long shadow. They worry

And yet we equate performance on tests with potential, as if learning

health. Research on concentrated disadvantage makes it abundantly

distinguish between firecrackers and gunshots.

happens in a vacuum. It doesn't.

lonely as it was long.

the work-study rules said.

was their safety net, I had none. I was surprised this spring when I learned about the College Board's new Environmental Context Dashboard, rename <u>d</u> Landscape, a set of measures for colleges to use in admissions that takes into consideration students' neighborhood and high school environments, the constellation of influences — individual and institutional — that shape students' chances at upward mobility. Critics saw this "adversity index," as it came to be known, as just another attempt by the College Board to maintain its dominance over college admissions or elide the harm that the SAT has inflicted upon generations of youth from disadvantaged communities. (After pressure, the College Board announced it would not combine the neighborhood and school scores into one individual score.) I hated the SAT. It stole Saturdays from transferred to the private high school where I spent my senior year on a scholarship. And not because I went to tutoring sessions or met with private coaches but because my more privileged peers did, while I

passed the hours at home by myself. (I wasn't doing practice tests

either. I couldn't afford the book.) Those lonely afternoons served as

reminders of my poverty and also my precarious future. But now, as a

sociologist of education who spent two years interning in the Amherst

admissions office, I see the College Board's new index as a step — and

just one step — in the right direction to demonstrate the impact of

well-being to admissions committees, those gatekeepers of higher

education. And at a time when affirmative action is under renewed

attack, the index permits an alternative to explicit considerations of

that are intimately tied to race. The supplemental scores Landscape

provides can't level the playing field, but they offer some context for

Colleges have made racial and class diversity into virtues with which

they welcome students during orientation and entice alumni to make

backgrounds often bear the brunt of the tension that exists between

proclamation and practice of this social experiment. Schools cannot

brochures and students wearing shirts blaring "First Gen and Proud"

from home that a more diverse class may bring with them to campus.

Does this entail going beyond providing tuition, room and board? Yes.

in curated videos and then abdicate responsibility for the problems

It requires colleges and universities to question what they take for

This means ensuring that campus services meet the needs of all

students. College can be a difficult time for everyone. Divorces of

parents and deaths of grandparents are not uncommon. Counselors

and advisers are more or less prepared for these universal types of

challenges. But whom do students turn to when they get those 2 a.m.

calls bringing news of street violence, eviction or arrests? Hiring more

diverse staff and administrators, as well as those who are familiar with

these issues, is important in this effort — but this work can't just be

consigned to the diversity dean, who is often the only person of color

College administrations must make a sustained effort to understand

granted, about their students and about the institutions themselves.

And to do this, they'll need more than an algorithm. What's needed is a

donations. But students of color and those from lower-income

simply showcase smiling black and brown faces in their glossy

just how unequal it is.

deeply human touch.

in the office.

race in college admissions by taking into account the ecological factors

instability that contributes to differences in performance and social

the stress and isolation that can define everyday college life for these more vulnerable students. This necessitates more than forming ad hoc committees to produce reports that all too often sit on a dean's desk collecting dust. Climate or exit surveys can take the pulse of the community and reveal blind spots among administrators, faculty and staff. Officials can hold training sessions to help them face their own racial and class biases. They should also form sustained partnerships with student groups and keep those lines of communication open throughout the school year and across incoming and outgoing classes. When I was learning to chart the hungry days on my calendar, I was one of the nearly 40 percent_of undergraduates who struggle with food insecurity. Before all else, colleges must meet students' basic needs it is hard to focus and function when you're hungry. There are practical and immediate steps that can be tailored to the campus and student body, whether by expanding meal plans, as Connecticut-College and Smith College did around recesses in the academic calendar; allowing meal-share programs on campus, like Swipe Out Hunger, which permits students to donate unused dining credits for other students to use; or opening food pantries and food banks, as at Bunker Hill Community College, Appalachian State University and Columbia University.

the nearly 3.3 million students who were eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), less than half applied. Students in need must navigate not only the bureaucratic red tape to apply but also the double bind of the 20-hour workweek requirement — the minimum to receive SNAP benefits, but also the federal workstudy maximum — all while staying in good academic standing. I knew how to ask for help in college. I understood that it was how you got what you needed. I eventually lobbied Tony Marx, then the president of Amherst, to provide support during spring break, which he agreed to in my junior year. Amherst provided funds for lowerincome students to eat in Schwemm's, the campus coffee shop, and expanded support during other breaks in subsequent years. But the full weight of my responsibilities, even the most quotidian ones, was often as invisible to me as it was to my adviser and financial-aid officer. And sometimes students like me continue to carry

the weight of home long after we graduate and in ways we still aren't

aware of. I got a text from home days before my 32nd birthday — after

I'd gone to college, earned my doctorate and secured my position as a

professor — asking me to "call DirectTV and take your name off the

bill." I had to ask: "My name on the bill? Since when?" The response:

The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that in 2016, of



"Since we been living here."

It had been almost two decades.

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