Adjacent but Unequal

Earlier this decade, Anthony Abraham Jack posed a stern challenge to selective colleges that had begun to focus on attracting more students from lower-income families and communities. Within that cohort, he documented separate groups: the “privileged poor,” who had gained access to day, boarding, or prep schools that introduced them to the social norms and academic culture of elite higher education (for example, making use of office hours); and the “doubly disadvantaged,” whose path led from under-resourced public schools into an often bewildering environment on campus. For the latter group, that transition risked making the very students the colleges had recruited feel vulnerable and alienated, and thus more exposed to academic failure. (This magazine reported on his findings in “Aiding the Doubly Disadvantaged,” September-October 2016, page 11).

Now Jack, an assistant professor of education and Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows, has expanded upon his work in The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students (published March 1 by Harvard University Press). Giving voice to the students he interviewed and observed at “Renowned University” deepens the emotional power of his research. But it also raises broader, disquieting questions about the pervasiveness and scale of inequality.

The students’ voices. For a student who came to Renowned from a home life characterized by serial evictions, “[Y]ou know that being here is not a right,” as one of them put it. “It’s a privilege. Being in a place like this can easily be taken away. Everything you do here is at someone else’s mercy. You’re allowed to be here, allowed to take classes here because someone else is allowing that versus someone who can afford this…If they can’t go here, they’ll go somewhere else.”

Beyond the weight of this existential fear, there are the indignities that come from institutional thoughtlessness:

- closing dining halls, except for athletes, during spring break—leaving hungry low-income students, who can’t afford to travel home, to resort to food banks—and even encouraging young women to risk pursuing dates in the hope of getting a meal (“treating Tinder as if it were Open Table”);
- having to pick up college-subsidized tickets to campus events in a separate line; or
- working on a dorm crew cleaning peers’ bathrooms, because the job pays better than research assistantships—but missing out on the networking opportunities with faculty members those positions enable, and hearing from a fellow student, “I don’t want to get you in trouble or anything, but you missed a spot. Next time can you scrub under the toilet?”

Those experiences often coincide with the prevailing campus climate of “peers in the dorm [who] swap tales of excursions to Bali and extravagant purchases” of luxury clothing that are utterly outside the lives of

“The current system has many things going for it that don’t just have to do with…inertia.”

Reflecting on what the committee has heard and options like these, Nickel said, “has shown me that the current system has many things going for it that don’t just have to do with institutional inertia.” Sorting them out is “very difficult work,” and it is “hard to anticipate what the changes will be that come up with a new registration system.” His committee will report to the faculty this spring, prompting further debate if not prescribing precise legislation.

This is suitable work, it would seem, for a philosopher.

Thereafter, if a new system is adopted, the nitty-gritty of building it could well take at least a couple of academic years. The committee’s timeline suggests implementation for the fall term of 2022—three years into the new Gen Ed curriculum, and two years after the engineers and applied scientists set up shop across the Charles River, on Western Avenue.

—John S. Rosenberg
Undergraduate Education Agendas

I. Gen Ed in the Offing

When she became dean of undergraduate education last July 1, Amanda Claybaugh, Zemurray Stone Radcliffe professor of English, immediately inherited the Faculty of Arts and Sciences’ (FAS) longest-running, most pressing curricular challenge: launching the College’s reformed, required General Education courses successfully, effective this coming fall semester. During a December conversation at her office in University Hall, she put that in context of her office’s larger mission: devising “a new story about what a liberal-arts education is in the twenty-first century,” amid such pressures as students’ strong shift toward concentrating in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math), and the need to bridge students’ varying preparations before they matriculate to assure that all can “have access to the same set of possibilities at Harvard” no matter where they began. But first, Gen Ed, which Claybaugh said had dominated her first six months.

Briefly: in 2016, the faculty concluded a review of the curriculum as it was reconsidered under former president Lawrence H. Summers, legislated under interim president Derek C. Bok, and implemented amid the financial crisis during Drew Gilpin Faust’s administration—and found it a mess (see “Unfinished Business,” July-August 2018, page 3). The new Gen Ed, about to debut, says it “lies at the heart of the intellectually transformative mission of Harvard College and seeks to prepare students for meaning-ful lives of civic and ethical engagement in an ever changing world.” The means are one half-course each, purpose-built, from the four categories of Aesthetics & Culture; Ethics & Civics; Histories, Societies, Individuals; and Science & Technology in Society. In addition, the young scholars must take a departmental course from each of the three FAS divisions (arts and humanities; science and engineering; and social sciences); and a course in the new empirical and mathematical reasoning field.

The purpose-built offerings (and the new empirical reasoning one) are Claybaugh’s principal concern, as they have been her predecessors’. They depend on professors’ willingness to step outside their disciplinary teaching (tied into their research and graduate-student mentoring), which in turn depends on having time and resources to propose, devise, and have vetted new courses and pedagogies. And to satisfy student demand, there need to be plenty of courses among which to choose (and a compelling appeal, since undergraduates can cling to their concentrations).

Claybaugh said she has found that everyone involved in building the new Gen Ed agrees that the courses have to feel distinctive to students, who have to be able to understand why that is so. The common element, she said, is pedagogy. Once the substantive idea for a course is approved, it is assigned to a team within the Bok Center for Teaching and Learning who work with faculty members on course development, and to teaching specialists and resource people in the Division of Continuing Education, the Academic Technology Group, and the libraries and museums (whose collections may figure in experiential classes and exercises). Although the solutions necessarily vary by field, she said, each course aims to realize the Gen Ed ambition of connecting learning to the wider world by devising assignments that are outward-facing—in disciplinary terms, by crossing scholarly boundaries; or even through engagement with real-world circumstances and challenges.

We spend a lot of our time in the labs” with researchers, rather than in the OTD offices.

The new faculty chairs of the Gen Ed committee—Suzannah Clark, Knafel professor of music, and Amy Wagers, Forst Family professor of stem cell and regenerative biology (see Harvard Portrait, page 19)—are helping ensure that the professors teaching these new courses are also building a common culture. During the winter, the Gen Ed faculty will convene over dinners to talk about their courses, solicit and offer suggestions, and take the first steps toward becoming an interdisciplinary teach-

~JONATHAN SHAW

JUSTINE COOPER

Amanda Claybaugh