

Ross Douthat takes the unpopular position that elite schools perpetuate elitism — deliberately, consistently, and effectively — at the same time they pay lip service to the concept of meritocracy. He argues that Americans claim to believe in “theories of equal opportunity and upward mobility” (par. 10), yet elite universities’ attempts to “diversify” and reflect a more egalitarian society mostly reproduce “the previous generation’s elite” (par. 8). Do you agree that what he calls “assortative mating” is “blindingly obvious” (par. 6)? Do you find the fact that “in a country of 300 million people and countless universities, we can’t seem to elect a president or nominate a Supreme Court justice who doesn’t have a Harvard or Yale degree” (par. 9) evidence of elitism? Is the concept of the United States as a meritocracy — that is, a system in which people’s success in life depends primarily on their own intelligence and hard work rather than on birthright — an ideal more than a reality? Do you find Douthat’s position (and tone) in this essay too cynical?

from *The Missing “One-Offs”*

The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students

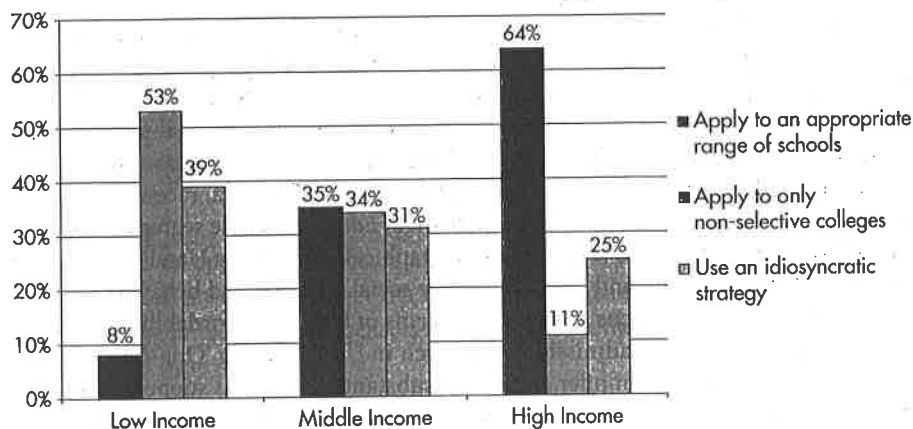
CAROLINE M. HOXBY AND CHRISTOPHER AVERY

Caroline M. Hoxby of Stanford University and Christopher Avery of Harvard University studied college application patterns of low-income students with top test scores and grades. Following is a summary of their research and a chart based on their findings.

Abstract

We show that the vast majority of very high-achieving students who are low-income do not apply to any selective college or university. This is despite the fact that selective institutions would often cost them less, owing to generous financial aid, than the resource-poor two-year and non-selective four-year institutions to which they actually apply. Moreover, high-achieving, low-income students who do apply to selective institutions are admitted and graduate at high rates. We demonstrate that these low-income students’ application behavior differs greatly from that of their high-income counterparts who have similar achievement. The latter group generally follows the advice to apply to a few “par” colleges, a few “reach” colleges, and a couple of “safety” schools. We separate the low-income, high-achieving students into those whose application behavior is similar to that of their high-income counterparts (“achievement-typical” behavior) and those whose apply to no selective institutions (“income-typical” behavior). We show that income-typical students do not come from families or neighborhoods that are more disadvantaged than those of achievement-typical students. However, in contrast to the achievement-typical students, the income-typical students come from districts too small to support selective public high schools, are not

in a critical mass of fellow high achievers, and are unlikely to encounter a teacher or schoolmate from an older cohort who attended a selective college. We demonstrate that widely-used policies — college admissions staff recruiting, college campus visits, college access programs — are likely to be ineffective with income-typical students, and we suggest policies that will be effective must depend less on geographic concentration of high achievers.



(2013)

Writing a Synthesis Essay

Now that you have read the sources in this chapter's Conversation on whether education is the civil rights issue of our time, let's walk through the process of synthesizing the sources and writing a synthesis essay. As you move from reading and analyzing the sources to integrating them into your own writing, you will engage in a process of selection. This is often a complex step in which, ideally, you explore the individual texts and start to see connections between and among them. Essential to this process is your willingness to understand each text on its own terms, even if you disagree with its ideas or position; in fact, texts that present viewpoints different from those you initially hold are often the ones that become most important to the development of your argument.

Formulating Your Position

Before you formulate your own position, you should take stock of the issues. Try not to divide the sources into "pro" and "con" positions because that will just create a dividing line between agreement and disagreement rather than allow you to delve into more subtle ideas. Your goal when you read sources provided for you or when you research on your own is to look for multiple perspectives — a range of ways to consider a topic

or subject. It's especially important to be open to positions that you find less appealing or actually disagree with, at least at the beginning of your research. What would be the purpose of consulting sources if all you want to do is validate your own position? You may, in fact, find sources that do just that, but in the process of reading and analyzing, you are likely to gain a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of your subject. The more ways you consider an issue, the more likely you are to write a clear and logically informed argument.

For example, you might note that both the story "The First Day" and the first-person narrative "Out of My Hands" focus on families struggling economically. Yet both of these texts are evidence of a profound faith in the power of education to improve financial security and to provide opportunities for personal growth. That faith reflects the potential that Horace Mann expressed. Looking at the Norman Rockwell painting, however, we see that during the civil rights era, race was a barrier to equal access to education. Has *Brown v. Board of Education* made segregated schools illegal? The Rockwell image and the autobiographical "Out of My Hands" both seem to ask whether legislation and laws can change social attitudes and behavior.

Several of the texts focus on money in terms of both the affordability of college and how it affects college admissions. Research in "The Missing 'One-Offs'" shows that exclusive schools often offer applicants substantial financial support, yet high-achieving, low-income students are less inclined to apply to those schools. David Kirp's report on Union City schools, however, provides conflicting evidence: that is, he shows that given high expectations and high-quality instruction, students who are not born into affluent, well-educated families can start their own tradition of graduating from college. Will these Union City graduates, then, break the spell of "elite self-segregation" that Ross Douhat argues prevails at such competitive institutions?

Now that you've begun to explore the texts through the lens of multiple perspectives, a series of issues should emerge. It's often useful to restate issues as questions. Consider the following and develop at least three other questions of your own:

- In the past, has education been a viable means for citizens to exercise their rights of personal liberty — particularly the potential for upward mobility?
- What influence does socioeconomic status play in opportunities in K–12 education? In access to colleges and universities?
- Does delivery of an inadequate K–12 education that limits the choices students have in higher education constitute a violation of civil rights?
- Does the availability of quality K–12 education in public schools correlate with family income level?
- Did Horace Mann intend that "universal education" be extended to include equal access at the college and university level?

These questions — and others you might have — illustrate the complexity of the issue and ensure that you do not develop an argument that is one-sided, polarized between

“yes” and “no,” or the written equivalent of a shouting match. Instead, you want to present your viewpoint in an essay that reflects the complexities surrounding the topic.

The fact is, you can rarely change a reader’s mind radically or immediately. But you can aim for creating a compelling argument that leaves the reader thinking, questioning, considering, and reconsidering. To do this, you have to acknowledge that the issue at hand is a complex one with no easy solutions and that a variety of valid perspectives on the matter exist. You want to present a reasonable idea in a voice that is logical, informed, and sincere. To write a qualified argument, you must anticipate objections to your position and recognize and respect the complexities of multiple perspectives.

With these questions and issues in mind, you can begin to formulate a thesis, or claim, that captures your position on the topic. Consider the following working thesis statements:

Limits on opportunity because of race, gender, and ethnicity have been to a large extent eliminated, yet the vastly different quality of education students receive in today’s public schools makes education the most pressing civil rights issue of our day.

Obstacles to achieving admission to selective colleges exist today, but the opportunities are available for anyone who has the intelligence, drive, and determination to succeed.

Although Horace Mann’s vision of education as the “balance wheel of the social machinery” has been realized in our system of K-12 public education, the inequalities at the college and university level are evidence that education today is the civil rights issue of our time.

Characterizing our current educational system as “the civil rights issue of our time” is a deceptive attempt to equate a serious but practical and solvable problem with a true moral crisis that the civil rights movement represented.

Although you might want to tailor one of these working thesis statements to use in your essay, each one suggests a clear focus while acknowledging the complexities of the issue.

• **ACTIVITY** •

Of the thesis statements above, select one you *disagree* — or *at least partially disagree* — with. Then, using the readings in the Conversation, find three pieces of evidence that support that thesis.

Framing Quotations

When writing with sources, it's important not to simply summarize or paraphrase them. You need to use the sources to strengthen your own argument. One effective way to make sure the sources are working for you is to include a sentence or two of explanation or commentary with each quotation. You might use a lead-in sentence, so your readers know what to look for, as in the following:

Family income need not limit the quality of education in public schools; nor is it essential to have state-of-the-art technology and a cadre of teachers proven to be the best and the brightest. Using the example of Union City, New Jersey, pre-K through 12 schools, David Kirp reports that there is an "absence of pizzazz" but an abundance of strategies committed to a "coherent system that marries high expectations with a 'we can do it' attitude."

Alternatively, you might follow a quotation with a sentence or two of commentary to remind readers of your point and how the quotation reinforces it, as you see here:

Key to making Mann's concept of "universal education" a reality is creating a positive environment for learning with the shared values embodied in Union City Schools. Kirp describes a "single theme—pride and respect in 'our house'—that resonates with the community culture of family, unity, and respect." Thus, specific behaviors such as adhering to dress codes, not participating in bullying, and avoiding curse words uphold the commitment to the stated values. Similarly, seminar-like class discussions demonstrate those values at work as students show respect for their teachers, classmates, and themselves even as they engage in lively debate.

And, of course, be careful not to represent ideas or words as your own if they are not: give credit where it is due!

Integrating Quotations

When using multiple sources in your writing, it becomes even more important to incorporate the quotations in a way that is both clear and interesting. You want the transition from your own voice to others' words and ideas to be smooth and natural sounding. The most effective way to accomplish this is to integrate the quotations into your own sentences. This may be a bit challenging, but the benefit is seamless prose. When you integrate quotations in this way, the reader can follow your ideas and see the sources in the context of your argument. Be sure that the result is a grammatically correct and syntactically fluent sentence. For instance, suppose you want to use the ideas in these two sentences from David Kirp:

Cognitive and noncognitive, thinking and feeling; here, this line vanishes. The good teacher is always on the lookout for both kinds of lessons, always aiming to reach both head and heart.

In an effort to paraphrase and include some direct quotations, you might draft this sentence:

In Union City, the distinction between "cognitive and noncognitive, thinking and feeling" "vanishes" because of "aiming to reach both head and heart."

This sentence has a couple of problems, starting with a heavy load of quoted phrases at the beginning: the writer's own voice doesn't have a chance to be heard. Then, the second part of the sentence veers off without a subject: Who is "aiming"? An improved sentence uses fewer quotations and syntax that allows for accurate quoting:

David Kirp explains that in Union City, the usual dichotomy of thought and feeling "vanishes" as teachers develop instruction "aiming to reach both head and heart."

• ACTIVITY •

Below you will find a paragraph using the excerpt from Horace Mann as a source. Read the paragraph, and then revise it in order to make more effective use of the source.

In the "Report of the Massachusetts Board of Education," Horace Mann expresses his belief in the power of "universal education" to counteract the "tendency to the domination of capital and servility of labor." If society is split between those who are "ignorant and poor" and those who hold "all the wealth and the education," then the latter are powerful and the former are both powerless and hopeless. Education must be made available to all, he believes, because it is "beyond all other devices of human origin . . . the great equalizer of the conditions of men, — the balance-wheel of the social machinery." Access to education "will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society." Mann shows himself to be an idealist as well as a pragmatist when he argues that there is a direct correlation between increasing intelligence through education and increasing the wealth of a society: "The greatest of all the arts in political economy is to change a consumer into a producer; and the next greatest is to increase the producer's producing power, — an end to be directly attained by increasing his intelligence."

Citing Sources

Since you will be quoting from several works, you have to keep track of your sources for your reader. In timed situations, you'll probably include only the source number or the author's name in parentheses after the quotation or paraphrase, as shown below:

Recent research reveals that many ("probably the vast majority") of very high-achieving high school students from low-income families do not even apply to selective colleges; in fact, only 8 percent of these students apply to a variety of schools that include high reach and so-called "safe" choices, while 35 percent of their middle-income counterparts and 64 percent of high-income students apply to the full range (Hoxby and Avery).

You need to cite the source of paraphrases as well as direct quotations. Any time you use other people's ideas, you must give them credit.

Another, more elegant option is to mention the author and title of the work in the sentence introducing or including the quotation:

In their study published in 2013, researchers Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery report that only 8 percent of high-achieving students from low-income families apply to a variety of colleges, including selective institutions and so-called "safe" choices, while 35 percent of their middle-income counterparts and 64 percent of high-income students apply to the full range.

If you are writing a more formal research paper, you will likely need to follow Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation procedures, including providing a works cited page. Ask your teacher if you are unclear about what is required for an assignment. Guidelines for MLA documentation appear in the back of this book.

As you go through the readings and selections in the following chapters, you will join conversations on a range of topics and reflect on and integrate the ideas of writers from different times and places into your own thinking and writing. Each chapter includes three Conversations in which you will practice synthesizing with a series of texts (including visuals) related to the chapter's readings. You should also be aware of the conversations going on around you all the time. How do people call on sources to reinforce their positions? And how do people enter an ongoing conversation and move it forward?

A Sample Synthesis Essay

Following is a complete synthesis essay responding to the prompt that asks whether education is the civil rights issue of our time. Read it carefully, and then consider its effectiveness by responding to the questions that follow.

You Gotta Fight for Your Right . . . to Education

Mackenzie Broderick

When Horace Mann wrote his report for the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1848, he envisioned a society where everyone in the United States, regardless of background or economic status, would have an opportunity—an equal opportunity—to acquire an education. Tied to the concept of liberty as defined in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, public education from elementary grades through high school became a “civil right.” Although today most of us think of the “civil rights movement” as an era that ended racial segregation, including “separate but equal” schools, education as a “civil right” still needs safeguarding. Unfortunately, during the second decade of the twenty-first century, Mann’s vision for a populace enjoying the civil right of equal access to education has been achieved only to a limited extent in primary and secondary schools, and the inequalities he lamented as privileging the wealthiest citizens are starkly apparent in colleges and universities.

To some extent, the egalitarian dreams of Mann have come true. He witnessed the effects of the Industrial Revolution on American society; instead of attending school, many children were sent to work in factories alongside their parents; many child-labor laws would not even be considered until the next century. But the advent of free and compulsory education took children out of the factory and placed them in the schoolhouse. A free education offered the opportunity for many to rise above the station they were born into, resulting in a large middle class that was almost nonexistent in Mann’s time. Furthermore, even the simple ability to read helped create the fraternity Mann championed because a population that is literate is able to make more informed decisions, from voting to creating labor unions. While education has traditionally been more difficult for women and minorities to achieve, the fact that the disenfranchised still managed to change the status quo speaks to the power of education.

We see the struggle to grasp the civil right of education continuing well into the twentieth century. Norman Rockwell’s iconic painting entitled *The Problem We All Live With* dramatizes the school desegregation battles that occurred even after *Brown v. Board of Education* declared the “separate but equal” policy of schools reserved for African Americans to be illegal. The little girl looks toward her future as she walks into her school building carrying the book and ruler that symbolize her readiness to start class, but she has to be guarded by federal marshals in order to make her journey across racial divides. Even later on, we see disparity in opportunities that are class rather than race based. In the short story “The First Day,” another girl makes her start in school thanks to the determined efforts of her mother, who can neither read nor write. But author Edward P. Jones reminds us of the socioeconomic

factors that govern which school a child attends. When the mother and daughter try to enroll in the school across from their church, they are told firmly that they do not belong: “my mother tells her [the teacher greeting students] that we live at 1227 New Jersey Avenue, the woman first seems to be picturing in her head where we live. Then she shakes her head and says that we are at the wrong school, that we should be at Walker-Jones.” The mother wants more than anything for her daughter to attend school, a place to “learn about the whole world,” so she has no choice but to take her to the designated school.

While the feudal system Mann wrote of is a relic of the past, the divide between the rich and the rest is widening today. Those already wealthy can afford to send their children to top-notch private schools if the neighborhood ones are inadequate—as many of our urban schools are—or hire private counselors and tutors to supplement their education and prepare them for high-stakes tests that open or close college doors. Schools such as the one described in David Kirp’s article about Union City, New Jersey, that have brought “poor, mostly immigrant kids into the educational mainstream” are praiseworthy but exceptional. Without the advantage of a rigorous K–12 education, what hope do most students have of being admitted to a good college, let alone receiving a scholarship?

The economic divide is most apparent at the college level. Although we have an extensive system of public universities, they are by no means free or “universal,” as Mann described. Even applying to colleges can be more than \$1,000 with the cost of standardized tests and application fees. A recent research study showed that low-income students who are also high achievers in terms of high school grades and test scores are less likely to even apply to selective schools: only 8 percent of low-income, high-achieving students know enough about the application process to apply to a variety of colleges, while 64 percent of their high-income counterparts apply to a full range, from safe to highly selective colleges and universities (Hoxby and Avery). Plus, when students graduate from college, and not just exceedingly expensive private ones, inequality takes a stronger hold: the average student loan debt in 2011 was \$27,000, according to a CNN report (Ellis); today, it is even higher, making the choice to attend college for all but the very affluent a trade-off between debt and degree.

Civil rights are those rights guaranteed to all citizens, especially the right to equality in social, political, and economic rights. If education is the means to social mobility, political influence, and a higher income level—as Mann believed it should and would be—then in today’s world of inadequate public schools and out-of-control college costs, education definitely is the civil rights issue of our time.

Questions

1. How effectively do you think Mackenzie Broderick uses Horace Mann's selection as a source? To what extent has she integrated it into the bigger picture of education as a civil rights issue?
2. Where in the essay do you think Mackenzie uses sources especially well? Where do you think their use could be improved? Are there any instances where your interpretation of a source differs from Mackenzie's? Explain your responses.
3. How effectively does Mackenzie address the counterargument?
4. Why do you think the conclusion is or is not effective? Does it answer the "so what" question? How might it be improved?
5. Mackenzie uses first person occasionally, yet she does not draw on her personal experience in this essay. Do you think that developing one or more of her points with a personal anecdote about her own experience or that of a family member would strengthen the essay, or would it detract from a more objective tone?
6. If you were talking to Mackenzie as a peer critic, what would you tell her is the main strength of her essay? What one suggestion would you make for her to revise and improve her work?

Culminating Activity

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, proposed that high school as we know it should be abolished. After reading his proposal, which was published as an article in the *New York Times* in 1999, write an essay explaining what you believe are the chief issues that must be addressed in order to improve America's high schools. Develop your argument by drawing on your own experience and at least two of the sources you have just read.

Let Teenagers Try Adulthood

LEON BOTSTEIN

The national outpouring after the Littleton [Columbine High School] shootings has forced us to confront something we have suspected for a long time: the American high school is obsolete and should be abolished. In the . . . month [after the shootings] high school students present and past [came] forward with stories about cliques and the artificial intensity of a world defined by insiders and outsiders, in which the insiders hold sway because of superficial definitions of good looks and attractiveness, popularity and sports prowess.

The team sports of high school dominate more than student culture. A community's loyalty to the high school system is often based on the extent to which varsity teams succeed. High school administrators and faculty members are often former coaches, and the coaches themselves are placed in a separate, untouchable