

## Book Review

*Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs.*

Laura A. Rivera. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. 392 pp. ISBN: 9780691155623. Hardcover, \$35.

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Laura A. Rivera's *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* gives us a glimpse into the world of top-tier investment banks, management consulting firms, and law firms and the ways in which their hiring practices reproduce economic privilege. Rivera examines how elite reproduction occurs in labor markets after students graduate from institutions of higher education. Specifically, she investigates how access to the highest-paying elite jobs is closely tied to socio-economic class, cultural resources, and social connections. Her research challenges the belief held by most Americans that individual merit and hard work, not socioeconomic class and social connections, are the most important factors for social mobility.

Rivera describes the transmission of economic privilege from one generation to the next as occurring through the educational system. She states that although access to higher education has expanded for all, children from the most affluent families lead university attendance—even more so at elite colleges and universities. This phenomenon persists into graduate education where over half of the students at top-tier business and law schools come from families from the top 10 percent of incomes nationally (Fisher, 2012). Rivera argues that higher education has *become* the mechanism of social stratification and inequality.

Rivera outlines other factors, such as social connections and cultural resources, which increase candidates' chances of securing the highest-paying elite jobs. Rivera found that parents' social connections can give their children an advantage by providing access to important opportunities such as social networks, insider tips, and coveted internships. Similarly, Rivera's study revealed that a shared world view, class-specific tastes, values, and interaction styles give candidates from affluent backgrounds the upper hand and frequently influence hiring decisions.

Rivera studied hiring methods in elite professional service firms through a combination of interviews and participant observation. Her qualitative study focuses on the phenomenon of elite reproduction through access to elite jobs and high incomes. Rivera conducted 120 semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in undergraduate and graduate hiring in top-tier consulting, banking and law firms. She refers to the firms as *elite professional services* (EPS) firms. These professionals were made up of hiring partners, managing directors, and mid-level employees charged with conducting interviews and screening resumes. The interviews concentrated on the evaluators' approach

to assessing candidates—which qualities they sought and details of their interactions with the candidates at each stage of the hiring process. Rivera also presented fictitious candidates' resumes to the hiring professionals in order to tease out what evaluative criteria the participants used and how they interpreted the resumes.

Rivera's study also includes participant observation of recruitment activities. She sought to better understand how EPS firms seek new employees and the ways in which they communicate the qualities that they look for in candidates. Rivera also presented herself as a graduate student who was interested in employment opportunities with these firms. She attended recruitment presentations and diversity job fairs over a period of six months. In addition, she conducted fieldwork as a recruiting intern within the recruiting department of one of the EPS firms over a nine-month period. Rivera shadowed the recruitment team through full-time and summer intern recruitment in order to observe candidate selection directly and to note patterns outside of the evaluators' consciousness.

This book takes the reader through the entire hiring process, from recruitment to the final offer of employment or rejection. Rivera systematically outlines the ways in which candidates are evaluated and how hiring decisions are made, revealing a "golden pipeline" of prestigious universities from which these EPS firms recruit and select their employees. In most cases, only students who attended a university with strong ties to these firms or had social connections to individuals within the firms were selected for interviews—prerequisites which are strongly associated with parental socioeconomic status.

**In a time when the cost of the college degree is rising and social mobility is stagnant, Rivera challenges us to honestly look at the ways in which we address social and economic inequality through our current system of education.**

*Pedigree* exposes the ways in which elite reproduction occurs in the hiring process through its close ties to elite universities. Rivera asserts that despite the perception that elite schools have rigorous merit-based admissions concerned only with finding the best and the brightest these schools are socio-economically homogeneous; they have a student body disproportionately made up of students from affluent families. Further, Rivera describes a hiring process which exclusively recruits from elite universities, thus restricting access by diverse non-affluent applicants. The candidates are almost exclusively from affluent backgrounds and the high-paying positions are systematically offered to students from the same prestigious universities with ties to the EPS firms.

Rivera explains how a small number of candidates from less affluent backgrounds were able to secure employment with these EPS firms through various pathways. Some non-elite applicants had a serendipitous match with

an interviewer who valued non-traditional applicants; others received insider coaching or benefited from cultural osmosis. Some applicants relied on mimicry, caricaturing class difference, or compensatory credentialing. Rivera describes cases where candidates from non-elite backgrounds had the fortune of being interviewed by people who championed candidates that would most likely be rejected by the hiring team. Other non-elite candidates were able to secure employment with the EPS firms through insider coaching from friends, romantic partners, or classmates who had connections to or were themselves inside the firms. They received insider or class-based knowledge about how to navigate the interview process of the EPS firms.

Less affluent candidates sometimes used mimicry in order to emulate the self-presentation and interaction styles of the elite individuals they knew. This strategy helped non-elite candidates to connect with the interviewers from the EPS firms. Rivera presents some instances when cultural osmosis was used by individuals from non-elite backgrounds who had attended elite primary or secondary schools and learned cultural signals and knowledge through immersion in privileged environments. Other tactics included caricaturing difference, in which a candidate exaggerates class difference to convey a rags-to-riches narrative. This strategy tended to evoke admiration from the interviewers but did not always pay off. Last, compensatory credentialing was sometimes used by candidates of non-elite backgrounds to gain legitimacy. This approach involves obtaining a third-party organization's certification of a job candidate's worth. Examples include the United States Military and non-profit organizations tied to elite universities. The non-profit organizations provide job opportunities in investment banking and law firms to underrepresented students. These third-party organizations are respected institutions that vouch for the applicants and are given credibility for their level of discipline, rigor, or cultural capital.

Rivera's research would be of interest to anyone working in higher education, as it tests some of the preconceived notions of the impact that higher education has on one's future while focusing on equality—a strongly shared value across colleges and universities. Her work is helpful to assessment professionals because it challenges us to rethink the relationship between social mobility and educational attainment. While educational attainment is thought to be a driver of social mobility, Rivera's research exposes higher education as the pathway for the transmission of privilege for some and a glass ceiling for others. Although Rivera's study focuses on students attending prestigious universities and an elite group of employers, her findings underscore the importance of correctly identifying the necessary skills to enter all ranks of employment for college graduates.

All institutes of higher learning have vested interests in understanding what outcomes employers are looking for—which skill sets, content knowledge, and dispositions are expected in order to successfully enter the labor

market. Rivera's work reveals that among elite employers a combination of interpersonal skills and dispositions, such as well-roundedness, social skills, and “polish,”<sup>1</sup> were more important than content knowledge in hiring decisions. As such, assessing the extent to which institutes of higher learning are adequately preparing students for the labor force may be increasingly pertinent to measuring the value of a college degree. This also underscores the importance of involving students in co-curricular experiences, in addition to their academics. Co-curricular programs often focus on outcomes such as leadership and professionalism that could help less-advantaged students prepare for the workforce and obtain higher-paying jobs following graduation.

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Rivera aptly shines a light on a hidden system of exclusive networks between top-tiered institutes of higher learning and the most prestigious, highest-paying jobs. Her research suggests that most moderate- and low-income students, even those attending elite colleges and universities, still believe that a college degree, hard work, and persistence will result in their social and economic mobility. In fact, social mobility research supports her assertion that the current system serves to transmit privilege rather than equalize social and economic differences (Haverman & Smeeding, 2006). The original goal of increasing access to higher education for moderate- and low-income students as a means to improve social and economic differences and close income gaps has fallen short of expectations (Haverman & Smeeding, 2006). Conversely, Rivera's work suggests that middle- and lower-income students are actually unprepared to compete in a contest in which they are unaware of the rules.

This book is significant because it pulls back the curtain and provides some justification for current skepticism about the viability of achieving the “American Dream” through educational attainment. In a time when the cost of the college degree is rising and social mobility is stagnant, Rivera challenges us to honestly look at the ways in which we address social and economic inequality through our current system of education.

*Pedigree* thoroughly investigates how elite students get elite jobs, illuminating the reproduction of privilege through the educational system. Rivera concludes that “successfully reducing class inequalities or increasing social mobility requires addressing biases in both” (p. 274). Her research encourages us to think about the ways in which

1 Polish is defined as a job candidate's style of communication and self-presentation.

higher education is closely linked to social and economic stratification and the difficulty in disentangling the two.

### References

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