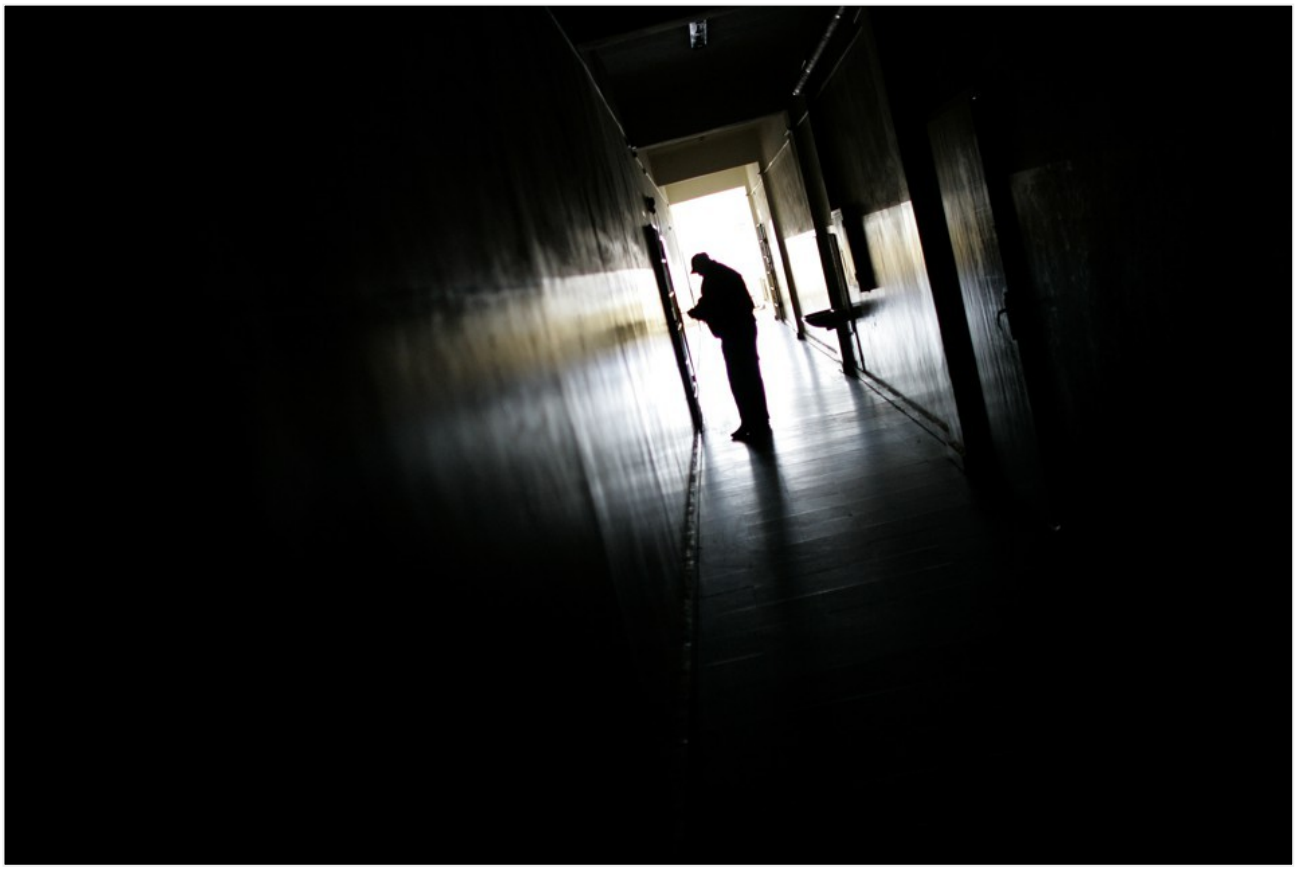
Solving the Mystery of Underachievement

Why work hard enough to earn an A when a D will suffice for college admission?



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As enrollment in higher education reaches record-levels-69.7 percent of all high-school graduates in 2016, a hidden danger awaits thousands at the starting line: Being "eligible" for college admission doesn't mean that students are academically prepared. This collision of expectations and reality creates a revolving door in higher education that can stifle individual talent and exacerbate inequality at the highest levels of the American education system. This is the story of how Travis Hill, growing up blocks from the White House in northeast Washington, D.C., learned what "college readiness" means when the pursuit of higher education becomes a reality.

Last month, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed pathbreaking legislation to provide many of the state's residents with tuition-free enrollment at public community colleges and four-year universities. In the swirl of commentary, which ranged from measured applause to outright skepticism, I could only think about one thing: the life of Travis Hill, a young man I met in the winter of 2000. Bright and conscientious, Travis joined my fourth-grade classroom at Emery Elementary School in the Eckington neighborhood of Washington, D.C., less than two miles north of the U.S. Capitol. He participated consistently in class, rarely missed a day of school, and tried to mask the emotional vacuum created by his father's murder on the streets of D.C. Over the course of the year, he shared his thoughts with such careful depth that I began calling him "the philosopher." We stayed in touch, and during his junior year of high school, I watched the same flashes of brilliance layer into his term paper on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. "The universal truth is we all start out as righteous," he wrote, "but sometimes we sin to the point of no return."

Travis's academic journey began much like those of the New Yorkers slated to benefit from Governor Cuomo's program. In the fifth grade, Travis and his parents received word of guaranteed tuition assistance through a scholarship program I helped launch with the "I Have A Dream" Foundation, the theory being that financial obstacles to college enrollment keep educational inequality entrenched, and that removing those obstacles early will increase the students' likelihood of long-term academic success. Growing up, Travis, like many of his classmates, believed there was "no doubt" he would graduate from high school and enroll in college, and in the spring of 2009, his family celebrated Travis' graduation from Hyde Leadership Public Charter School and his admission to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, a significant accomplishment in a city where at the time, just 43 of every 100 students graduated with a high-school diploma in four years and only 29 enrolled in postsecondary education within 18 months of graduating from high school.

It didn't work out: For Travis, like hundreds of thousands of students who struggle with the college transition each year, what could have become a heartwarming tale of beating the odds gave way to another, equally familiar story. After completing one semester, Travis returned home with a newfound status: college dropout.

So what happened? There are several commonly offered explanations for why students with Travis's background struggle academically. In the first, the problem for Travis and students like him is a "culture of poverty" where "low-effort syndrome" or cultural adaptations like equating success in school with "acting white" prevent young people from living up to their potential. In this version, individual students and disengaged parents form the core of the problem. In the second, "structural barriers" like poverty, institutional racism, segregation,

and lack of adequate health care block Travis and his peers from accessing equal opportunity. In this narrative, injustice is embedded into the structure of American society itself. Governor Cuomo's initiative builds on this tradition, creating a policy that will ostensibly produce a new generation of college graduates by removing a key financial burden that stands in their way: having adequate resources to pay for school.

The problem is that neither story is completely right. Over the course of a decade, beginning with two years as a classroom teacher followed by doctoral work in sociology at Princeton University, I witnessed a significant number of students develop a sophisticated logic of underachievement that challenged popular accounts for how inequality in higher education is created and sustained. For many students, their pursuit of long-term educational success was grounded and strategic. Educated in environments that measured academic success primarily by enrolling in college—not necessarily graduating with a degree—they developed strategies to achieve that goal with minimal effort in school. As a result, only two of my former students —now in their mid-20s—have completed a postsecondary degree. These are not the strivers who "realized the impossible" by escaping their cultural surroundings to succeed in college; nor are they disconnected dropouts who failed because they didn't have access to financial resources. Their untold struggle lies in the vast middle, where the majority of my students grew up fitting neither description.

Travis Hill, ages 11 and 17, in Washington, D.C. (Nick Ehrmann)

The goal of the "free-college" movement is, of course, to help more students access the benefits of a college education. To make that happen, it is necessary for policymakers to examine why that's not happening today. At the root of that story is academic preparation in high school (combining both course rigor and achievement in those classes), the single

strongest predictor of college completion according to a landmark study. In other words, the question that matters most is not why students like Travis scale back their efforts on *Scarlet Letter* term papers. He wrote it in under an hour and earned a grade of 70, dragged down by preventable grammatical and spelling errors. The question is under what conditions those behaviors, when applied to multiple courses over time, make logical sense. "Doesn't matter," he told me the morning he turned it in. "I work hard when I want to work hard, and that's what a lot of people can't do. Some people might not look at it as a skill, but to me it's a skill." I asked him to elaborate. Achieving As and Bs when you can satisfy your family's expectations and meet your own long-term academic goals with Cs and Ds, not to mention distinguishing yourself in a city where only three in 10 high-school graduates attend college? "I don't see the point in that," he said. It's a sentiment that years later, he wished he could have taken back.

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The prevailing academic-achievement ideology in the United States sends a clear message to young people: Higher education provides a ticket to a better life. Schools routinely hang college banners from classrooms starting in kindergarten, intending to create a college-going culture that is consistently reinforced by teachers, principals, parents, even U.S. presidents. But for decades, as more and more students celebrated reaching the "finish line" of K-12 education with admissions letters in hand, very little of the discussion of the improving rate of both high-school graduation and college enrollment has examined whether students are growing intellectually and becoming prepared for success in college-level coursework. During his freshman and sophomore years of high school, on overnight campus trips sponsored by Hyde's college-placement office, Travis learned firsthand that "a couple hundred" colleges and universities across the United States likely would offer him admission. "Everybody was telling me I could get into college with my grades," he told me. "I don't remember exactly how or when I heard it, but that message was seeping into my brain. If I got straight Cs, admission should be a breeze."

Neither of Travis's parents attended college. He's never witnessed a college graduation, and knows only a handful of people who enrolled in college, let alone finished with a degree. This vacuum creates a premium on just getting accepted to college, which triggers distinction and pride among family and community members who didn't get that far themselves. "It really doesn't matter where you go to school," Travis told me at the end of his junior year, "as long as you get into college and try to make something of yourself."

His mother, Val, agreed. She always wanted her son to go to college and was not particular about what college that happened to be. "As long as he goes," she said, "that's all I care about." "People always say 'You should get As because. You should get Bs because.' Because

of what?" Travis asked me, incredulous. "I can get straight Cs, and it's right where I wanna be, right where I need to be to reach my goals."

"Just go to the teacher and act like you care."

With enrollment in college front of mind, the logic of underachievement unfolded like clockwork for Travis. Every marking period, in nearly every class throughout high school, he allowed his grades to slip. Intentionally. Months passed. He put little effort into his classwork and turned in homework assignments sporadically. When midterm progress reports were sent home, his grades were typically Cs, Ds, and Fs. His mother got on his case. His stepfather lectured him. He nodded his head, listened attentively, and promised to get his act together. In the final weeks of the term, he approached teachers one by one and put forth greater levels of effort in class. "Just go to the teacher and act like you care," he told me.

It's not an accident that six years' worth of report cards from Hyde were nearly identical. In the seventh grade, Travis earned a 66 in English, a 68 in history, a 70 in math, a 72 in gym, a 73 in reading, a 75 in science, and a 79 in art. In the eighth grade: a 54 in math, a 71 in history, a 71 in reading comprehension, a 72 in English, a 73 in science, a 76 in health, an 80 in gym. Once Travis reached high school, his grades (with two exceptions) also landed within a few points of the 70 percent threshold required to pass. "You're going to give me a whole rack of stuff," he explained, channeling the typical post-midterm discussion he would have with teachers at Hyde, "and that whole rack of stuff is going to get me a passing grade. And then I'm going to be straight, and I'm going to turn around and do the same thing the next quarter … and no one's picked up on it yet."

DaVonte Little, a student who attended McKinley Technology High School in D.C., called the strategy "running in neutral." An academic standout at Emery, DaVonte was focused, quick, and well above national averages on standardized tests. He originally hoped to secure a management position in the entertainment industry after college, but when I asked him about using high-school classes as a building block for future success, he chuckled. "I don't like doing work. Plain and simple," he told me. "I know my grades have got to come out in the end," he told me. "So I say, 'What do I need to do?' … 'How many [assignments] do I need to get a C?'… I missed 15 assignments, and I can do at least 10 in the next four weeks and [his teacher] can promise me a D."

Herbert Kohl, an educator in New York, penned a collection of essays in the mid-1990s on the topic of "creative maladjustment," a term he borrowed from Martin Luther King, Jr. "I

have encountered willed not-learning throughout my 30 years of teaching," he wrote, "and believe that such not-learning is often and disastrously mistaken for failure to learn or inability to learn." The distinction is important. Were students like Travis and DaVonte unable to learn? Or simply unwilling? From the fourth grade, when Travis was a student in my classroom at Emery, to the seventh grade, two years into his schooling at Hyde, his test scores plummeted from the middle-range of national averages (the 53rd and 41st percentiles in reading and math) to the bottom end of the scale (27th and 10th percentiles, respectively). Travis wasn't getting "dumber" as a matter of cognitive aptitude. He was mastering progressively fewer concepts in school than his potential would have predicted. Not surprisingly, by the 11th grade, his scores on the SAT fell in the bottom fifth percentile nationally.

For years, Hyde boasted of high college-acceptance rates as evidence that students were obtaining a quality education. This statistic included 100 percent of Hyde's graduating seniors—a fact both impressive and misleading. These seniors were the survivors. Not included were the students who dropped out, or were "counseled" out of Hyde, before reaching their senior year. According to an assistant dean at Hyde who spoke to me, the school-wide tendency to celebrate high college-going rates also masked a sharp downward turn in student enrollment over time. Reviewing enrollment numbers provided by Hyde officials, the rosters showed 114 freshmen, 62 sophomores, 56 juniors, and 45 seniors, a drop off of 61 percent over four years. When teachers and administrators define success in terms of high-school graduation and college-enrollment rates and embrace subjective policies that optimize for credit accumulation, learning gets dismantled, as was the case with Travis. It's not until later, once those students transition to other schools or enter higher education, that the consequences become bracingly real.

When I mentioned this to a veteran geometry teacher at Hyde who spoke on the condition of anonymity, she hesitated. She was aware of Travis's ways and admitted to a liberal policy for make-up work, but ultimately she believed her practices were rooted in empathy. "In rich counties," she told me, "like in Fairfax [Virginia] and all that … they're very strict. But here, no, you give them as many opportunities, especially because you have a lot of, you know, predominantly African American children, that are supposedly having, you know, low economic issues, and so you give them opportunities."

I asked whether this sent the wrong message. "It does," she said. "But I, you know, I finally understand that we're trying to help them."

“Schools that simply prepare students to be college-eligible are doing them a disservice.”

What teachers like her might be overlooking is that this “low-effort syndrome” may happen not because students are black, poor, or living with parents who are not engaged in the school community. The primary reason Travis said he spent minimal effort in her class was that graduating from Hyde and enrolling in college—two objectively measurable goals—could be achieved via the low levels of performance that she and her colleagues were enabling. Defining success in terms of “attainment” measures like credit accumulation, high-school graduation, and college-enrollment rates can set up a cascade of unintended consequences that can systematically encourage students to underachieve in school. The purpose of learning—to spark student curiosity, empower young people to take creative control over their lives, and develop subject and skills mastery—becomes inverted. Grades are the stick, make-up work the carrot, and true achievement falls by the wayside.

In 2011, this pattern was a contributing factor in the Hyde’s Board of Trustees’ decision to sever their relationship with the Hyde Foundation—which supports a network of charter schools on the East Coast—and re-open as Perry Street Prep in northeast D.C. "Schools that simply prepare students to be college-eligible are doing them a disservice,” said Jo Anne Cason, the new head of school, in a press release. Unfortunately for Travis, this foundational shift came too late.

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On August 27, 2009, a group of young men gathered on Todd Place northeast, a block south of Travis’s childhood home, to celebrate with their lifelong friend. Travis had been accepted at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, one of the country’s first historically black colleges, and was set to depart Washington at 9 a.m. the next day. Lincoln University was founded in 1854 to provide opportunities in higher education for people of African descent. During its first century, as racial segregation largely enforced a two-track system of educational opportunity in higher education, Lincoln alumni accounted for a fifth of the country’s black physicians, a tenth of black lawyers, and attracted luminaries including Langston Hughes and Thurgood Marshall to campus. Ninety minutes into the trip, Travis’s stomach dropped. His stepfather exited the Pennsylvania interstate and curved the black Tahoe SUV through wooded, foreign territory. “I felt sick,” Travis told me. A patter of light rain hit the windshield, and he tried to keep his feelings bottled. It was a Friday. Classes started Monday.

Their destination was Frederick Douglass Hall, a red-brick, all-male dorm on the north end of campus built in the late 1960s. Travis and his parents lugged his stuff—clothing, a small refrigerator, a 17-inch flat screen, and incidentals—up a flight of stairs to the second floor. Travis and another D.C. public-school graduate were assigned to room 202. Travis took it as a good omen: 202 is also the area code for Washington, D.C. The room was sparse and traditional, with a grey door, twin-sized bunk beds, a desk, some drawers, and a "cubby-hole" closet.

About 2,000 undergraduates lived on campus at Lincoln, and nearly 100 percent of them were African American, a fact that provided Travis little comfort. A few acquaintances from Hyde also had accepted offers there, including his girlfriend, but Travis knew socially he was starting over. His D.C. slang would be mistaken for Atlanta or Alabama, somewhere South. Nobody said "loafin'" or "mo'." He wasn't "Travis." He wasn't even "T-Hill." In the months ahead, he'd eventually go by "Squirm," a skinny kid with swagger winding his way through parties packed to the walls. "That was the crazy thing," he said. "I went from everybody knowing who I am, and now I'm back to being square one."

But that first day, walking toward the Tahoe as his parents prepared to leave, Travis felt a lump in his throat. Val showed little emotion. She'd co-signed $8,500 in loans to make Travis's freshman year a reality. He survived the streets of D.C., and Travis knew she felt a sense of accomplishment—"I saw how happy it made her; it uplifted her spirits." There was only one option now. Val and Steve were getting back into the car. Their final obligation of Travis's childhood was to watch their son turn his back and walk into a new world.

Travis wanted no part of it. On the spot, he decided where he belonged was back home in Washington. Looking back at the SUV, Travis regressed into the young, almond-eyed boy I remembered from our classroom at Emery. "That was the first time I felt like a real-live baby," he told me. "I begged for 45 minutes straight. Ma, please. Please." Val and Steve told him it wasn't happening. "It was the first time I actually wanted for my mother, like I actually needed to go home." After watching the truck disappear onto Baltimore Pike, Travis wiped his eyes and walked back to room 202. The first thing he did was make his bed. It was still raining, and he laid down, eyes open, and stared at the ceiling.

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Of the five classes Travis enrolled in at Lincoln that fall, one in particular was a mystery. The course went by the acronym RAP. Travis was half-expecting a course on the history of hip-hop; what he found instead was the Reading Acceleration Program, a remedial course focused on basic skills that should have been mastered in elementary school. During the first

few weeks, Travis, over $8,000 in debt, watched his peers recite compound words written on cut-out pieces of cardstock. He was apoplectic. “Those people I was in class with, they didn’t know shit. I mean, how did you walk across a high-school stage without knowing this? I was sitting in the wrong class doing work I already knew how to do.”

In 2010, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education released a report identifying “key issues and problems associated with the college-readiness gap.” The scope of the problem was alarming. Every year, nearly 60 percent of first-year college students nationally discover that “they are not academically ready for postsecondary studies.” These students are required to take remedial courses in English or mathematics, which do not count for college credit. The problem is most severe at community colleges, where 75 percent of entering freshmen require remediation. At less-selective four-year colleges, which theoretically require prospective students to complete a college-prep curriculum, achieve competitive grade point averages, and perform well on admissions tests, nearly 50 percent of students still arrive underprepared.

Raising the college-readiness bar has dominated debate at the state and federal level over the past decade, an effort that effectively would require coordination across thousands of schools spread across two distinct systems: K-12 education and the national patchwork of postsecondary institutions with different institutional goals, financial models, and admissions standards. The crux occurs when students receive poor academic preparation in high school. In the D.C. Public Schools, it is possible to accumulate 24 credits (the minimum required for graduation) by earning straight Ds—a decidedly low bar for student performance. This form of credentialing is common in school districts across the country, with credits stacked on top of one another and grades subject to the discretion of individual teachers and administrators. There is no uniform policy in the United States for measuring what students have learned in high school. In about half of U.S. states, there are no exit exams, a policy that supporters see as critical for maintaining equity in high-school graduation rates. Supporters of high academic standards point to a profusion of unintended consequences in the other direction: Pressures to increase high-school graduation and college-going rates can lead to “credit-recovery” options that can decrease academic rigor and create opportunities for students to exploit cracks in the system.

Travis Hill, 11, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. (Nick Ehrmann)

The first in his immediate family to reach a college campus, Travis had internalized a rigorous vision of what higher education would be like. "I expected to be challenged," he told me, "to sit up and read, study, stay up all night like what you see in the movies: complicated trigonometry ... sleep at your desk ... [but] once I got here, it was nothing like that. It was like a [housing] project. Dorm here, a couple of buildings in the front, it's real... I don't know. It's savage." Reverting to familiar form, Travis began skipping classes, putting in just enough effort to get by. He made friends, and while he gradually felt more comfortable socially, the academic side never caught up. By the end of the semester, he had two Cs, two Ds, and an F. Rather than continue the struggle 100 miles away from home, Travis hatched a new plan. "I could have stayed in D.C. for this," he told his mother, and began researching ways of transferring his credits and re-enrolling somewhere local in the spring.

It never happened. What started as a lifelong dream transitioned to an effort to preserve dignity and independence in the low-wage labor market. After dropping out, Travis spent six months working at T.J. Maxx making $8.50 an hour, transferred to Whole Foods in Silver Spring, Maryland, as a cashier for an extra $1.50 per hour before realizing that people-facing jobs were exhausting. While he was glad to have escaped Lincoln, his memories were checkered with regret. "I was going to get my mass-communications degree, go into public

relations, a field I really wanted to do," he told me in the winter of 2015. "Try to go be a radio personality somewhere, marketing, something like that. It wasn't like I didn't have a plan."

On Super Bowl Sunday, Travis woke before dawn and pulled on clothes for his shift at COSTCO, a behind-the-scenes position at the deli counter he'd held for the past two years. As he approached the back delivery door, the temperature hovered around freezing. He wore a bright red apron, and his sleeves were rolled up, revealing a tattoo that commemorated his father's death. "They say in the Bible," he told me, "to start a new chapter, you have to finish a chapter. For a new life to come, another light needs to go out." By mid-morning, Travis and his co-workers labored to package enough chilled shrimp, macaroni and cheese, and ground hamburger to keep pace with the pre-game rush. As customers filled their carts, oblivious to the young man behind the glass, I caught Travis's eye. He motioned me over, and introduced me to his floor manager, Tie Lawrence. "Great member of the team," Lawrence said, smiling. We shook hands. Travis nodded a goodbye. There were six more hours before his shift was over, enough time to clock out, drive home, and catch the opening kickoff.

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