

# A Real Analysis of

ANTHONY P. CARNEVALE

PERSPECTIVES

CHARLES MURRAY, who argued in *The Bell Curve* (1994) that low test scores among minority students are caused more by nature than nurture, has now extended his argument from race to class. In *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality* (2008), Murray concludes that efforts to prepare children from working-class or poor families for the Bachelor of Arts degree are doomed to fail because parental income reflects innate ability: children inevitably inherit their parents' abilities and, thereby, their socioeconomic status. Murray proposes to reserve the BA for those who score in the top 10 percent on the SAT or ACT because, he asserts, "whether we like it or not . . . America's future does depend on an elite that is educated to run the country" (2008, 107). Trying to pre-

pare kids in the bottom 90 percent of the test score distribution for the BA is a waste of time, because even "if" there were marginal improvements in academic performance the "effects would predominantly occur among children with low academic ability" (2008, 60).

It is tempting to dismiss Murray as a throwback who keeps exhuming the junk science of eugenics for its shock value. But he deserves to be taken seriously, if only because he represents an extreme version of a lingering set of biases that is shared in varying degrees by many Americans.

## **Real Education ignores the real economy**

There is a lot wrong with Murray's book. *Real Education* is easily dismissed as fruit of the same poisonous intellectual tree that produced *The Bell Curve*. And Murray's argument for limiting access to the BA is little more than a rearguard argument in the United States, where access has been expanding inexorably since the GI Bill. In general, he ignores the cultural and political value of the BA in

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making good neighbors and good citizens in an increasingly complex global society. But my quarrel with Murray, and those who agree with him, is mostly about the economic implications of their views.

In the United States, the distribution of money, status, and personal power is increasingly determined by the distribution in access to education. With the death of the blue-collar economy, college is the preferred route, if not the only route, to middle-class status and earnings. The BA is also the gateway to the graduate and professional degrees that confer the highest levels of personal empowerment and power over others. That's why young people and their parents flee vocational programs and aspire to the BA degree.

The BA has long been the keystone in preserving middle-class status and upward mobility. Historical data from the Current Population Survey show that since the early seventies, those with a BA or better have either remained in the middle class or climbed into the top 20 percent of the income distribution. Meanwhile, about half of those with some college but no BA have stayed in the middle class or moved up. The other half have lost economic ground as have the majority of those who ended their education with high school or less (U.S. Census Bureau).

In Murray's America, college education becomes a device for promoting the intergenerational reproduction of elites and a society divided into BA-haves and BA-have-nots. He proposes effectively to truncate upward mobility for most of those who are not in his select 10 percent of BA-worthies. Those who score in the top 10 percent on the SAT or ACT come from families with a minimum income of \$175,000 per annum and with average earnings that are at least twice that amount. Murray's top 10 percent would be very elite indeed. Ultimately, Murray's vision for America leads to the proliferation of elites-only education for generations to come.

What *Real Education* ignores about the real economy is a lot. Murray's arguments are clearly on the wrong side of economic history. He argues that too many people are going to

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# *Real Education*



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college, but the evidence says otherwise. Since 1972, the percentage of jobs that require at least a BA has increased from 16 to 32 percent of all jobs—or from fifteen million to forty million jobs. The future promises more of the same, and shortages of qualified workers are likely. Our preliminary projections at the Center on Education and the Workforce show an increase over the next decade of over ten million jobs that require at least a BA. Moreover, the flat performance in BA production and increasing replacement needs brought on by baby-boom retirements make shortages an even safer bet.

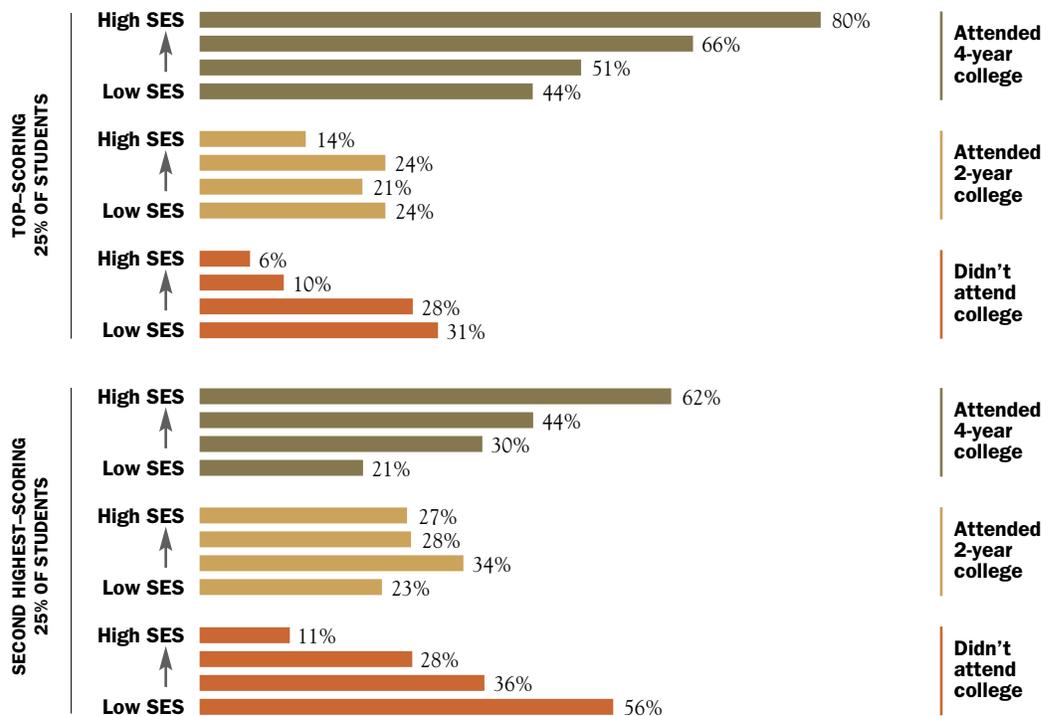
Murray continues to assert that racial and economic class differences in educational performance are driven by innate ability, not by differences in the opportunity to learn. On race, class, and test scores, Murray insists on raising questions settled long before he dredged them up the last time for *The Bell Curve*. The core assertion in Murray’s argument is that cognitive ability is fixed at birth, immutable, and one-dimensional. Murray clings stubbornly to this view despite the fact that it was relegated

to the status of junk science in the mid-twentieth century. The psychometric literature is very clear on the relationships between race, class, and test scores, especially in fresh work done, but not well advertised in the public dialogue, since *The Bell Curve*. A recent example is the work of Eric Turkheimer and his team at the University of Virginia (2003), which shows that *for most low-income kids* there is no relationship between abilities measured in childhood and aptitudes developed by the time they are old enough for college. In other words, if you come from a poor or working-poor family, the chances are about 60 percent that you won’t be able to “be all you can be.”

*Among low-income youth*, measurements of ability in their early school years do not predict developed ability measured when they are ready to go to college. Conversely, measured ability in the adolescent years does predict developed ability of college-age youth about 60 percent of the time *among middle-class and upper-class kids*. For example, Turkheimer and his team found that most of the difference in the developed aptitudes among college-age youth

**Figure 1**

**Among High-Scoring Students, Family Socioeconomic Status Helps Determine What Type of Colleges Students Attend** (Percent of Students)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS 1988–2000)

can be accounted for by measured differences in their innate abilities when they were children. For the most part, kids who come from families that make more than \$60,000 a year do get a good shot at being all they can be.

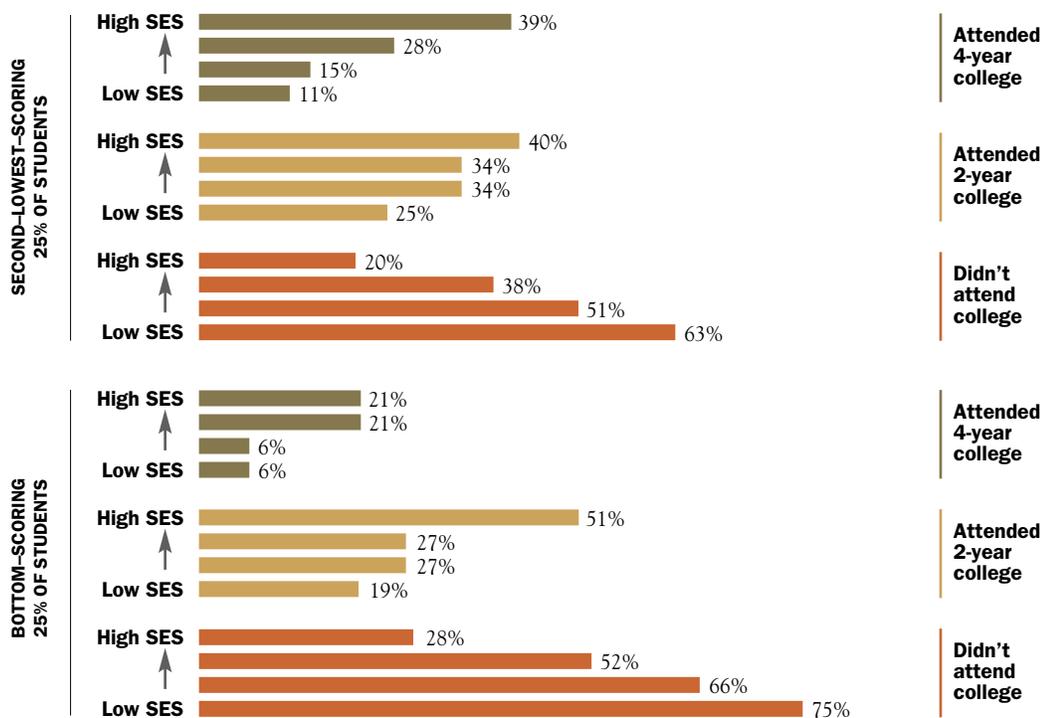
Murray's book validates an America where the reproduction of class and race hierarchy is inevitable. He argues that the current distribution of educational attainment is an inevitable result of innate ability. For Murray, the differences in educational attainment by parental income reflect natural endowments that parents pass on to their children. In his view, differences in educational attainment as well as class and race differences in opportunity are merit-based and inevitable.

*Real Education* ignores the evidence that a forced choice between merit and opportunity is a false choice. We can remain faithful to merit-based college admissions and still increase access to the BA. There are lots of young Americans from working-class and low-income families who are ready for college but never get college degrees. Murray asserts that BA attainment is about ability, but the data

say otherwise. For example, according to the National Education Longitudinal Study, among students in the top half of the test score distribution in their high school graduating class, 17 percent (or 560,000) do not get a two- or four-year degree within eight years. Of these top students who don't make it, 185,000 come from families in the second income quartile from the top (\$50,280 to \$83,000, with a median income of \$65,512 in 2005); 140,000 come from families in the third income quartile from the top (\$26,730 to \$50,279, with a median income of \$38,306 in 2005); and 106,000 come from families in the bottom income quartile (\$26,729 or less, with a median income of \$15,000 in 2005).

As shown in figure 1, *equally qualified students* have vastly different college-going opportunities, depending at every level on their socioeconomic status. For example, among the most highly qualified students (the top testing 25 percent), the kids from the top socioeconomic group go to four-year colleges at almost twice the rate of equally qualified kids from the bottom socioeconomic quartile.

**Among Low-Scoring Students, Family Socioeconomic Status Helps Determine Whether Student Attends College At All** (Percent of Students)



Murray assumes that individual ability is the barrier to BA attainment, but there is a lot more than academic readiness involved in getting a BA. Even among the highest scorers on the SAT or ACT, differences in parental income have powerful effects on actually getting the degree. For example, as table 1 shows, among students whose SAT or ACT equivalent score is between 1200 and 1600 (out of a possible 1600 points), BA attainment ranges from 82 percent in the top socioeconomic status quartile to 44 percent among equally qualified students in the bottom socioeconomic quartile.

**Table 1**  
**BA plus attainment rates by Socio-Economic Status (SES) quartiles and SAT/ACT\* score bands for students in the 12th grade cohort**

|                   | 1200–<br>1600 | 1100–<br>1199 | 1000–<br>1099 | 800–<br>999 | 400–<br>799 |
|-------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Top SES</b>    | 82%           | 67%           | 65%           | 52%         | 21%         |
| <b>2nd SES</b>    | 59%           | 48%           | 42%           | 34%         | 11%         |
| <b>3rd SES</b>    | 40%           | 39%           | 30%           | 16%         | 7%          |
| <b>Bottom SES</b> | 44%           | 20%           | 15%           | 8%          | 5%          |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS 1988–2000)  
\*Author's concordance of SAT and corresponding ACT scores (2005).

Murray's assertion that ability is fixed, immutable, and class-based leads him to suggest in *Real Education* that we should begin sorting students into those with and without BA abilities in the first grade. While Murray's arm-chair theories have always sold well in the better clubs, they still cannot withstand analytic scrutiny. In the real first-grade classrooms in American schools, ability is not faithful to racial and class divisions. Ability is broadly distributed in the early grades. But early ability does get sorted by differences in the opportunity for students to develop their abilities as they move through the social and educational gauntlet along the way to the massive sorting of American youth by race and class that occurs between high school and college.

Analysis of the longitudinal data on K–6 student performance, for instance, shows that among students in the top tested quartile of ability in the first grade, almost 75 percent of the more affluent students will still be in the top quartile of their class in the fifth grade, compared with only 45 percent of the students

from less affluent families. Among students in the first grade who are not in the top quartile of school performance, affluent students will move in the top quartile performance at more than three times the rate of equally qualified students from lower-income families (Wyner, Bridgeland, and Dilulio 2007).

### Historical context

Murray's argument in *Real Education* resonates with a long history of elitism in our culture, which can be traced all the way back to the precious arguments over the Calvinist elect. Most still believe that talent is bred in the bone, rather than developed in schools, and Murray is not alone in his cavalier dismissal of the abilities of other people's children. Americans are of two minds about who should get a BA. The vast majority of American parents believe that their own children are qualified for college, but that other people's children are not. When asked if every child should aim for college, a majority of Americans say no. When asked if their own children should go to college, an even larger majority say yes (Carnevale and Rose 2004; Career College Association 2008).

Ideas about the innateness of cognitive ability are a consistent thread running through the history of American higher education. The exquisite tension between the four-year college's role as a bastion of privilege and its role as a fount of opportunity continues to be relevant at a time when only 3 percent of the students in the top 150 colleges come from the bottom 25 percent of the nation's family income distribution. American colleges are stuck with the daunting challenge of reconciling our cherished value of selectivity in admissions with an equally strong commitment to upward mobility and diversity.

Murray dismisses the cultural tensions between test-based educational merit, upward mobility, and diversity in favor of a no-nonsense exclusivity. Exclusivity is a persistent feature of leading institutions, including institutions of higher education. Exclusion survives in every culture, less as a fixed idea than as a resilient scavenger of ideas living off whatever cultural scraps come to hand. Exclusion by race, class, gender, and religion have lost their mojo as a spur to exclusion in higher education, but snarky class biases and the latest international threat survive as fodder for

exclusivity. Murray contends that the majority of kids—many among the working class and the poor—don't have the right stuff for college, and so we need to give up on college and “teach the forgotten half how to make a living” (2008, 147). He argues further that we must focus on the gifted or risk our future: “America’s future depends on how we educate the gifted.”

Murray’s views are reminiscent of an elitist view of higher education that staged its last

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hurrah in the immediate post-World War II era. In those early days of the Cold War, the United States scrambled to create an elite cadre to lead the new superpower and hold off the Soviet threat to the East. James Conant, then president of Harvard University and one of the indispen-

ble Americans in the righteous fight against fascism and communism, spoke for American elites at the time (Hershberg 1993). In Conant’s view, American higher education had



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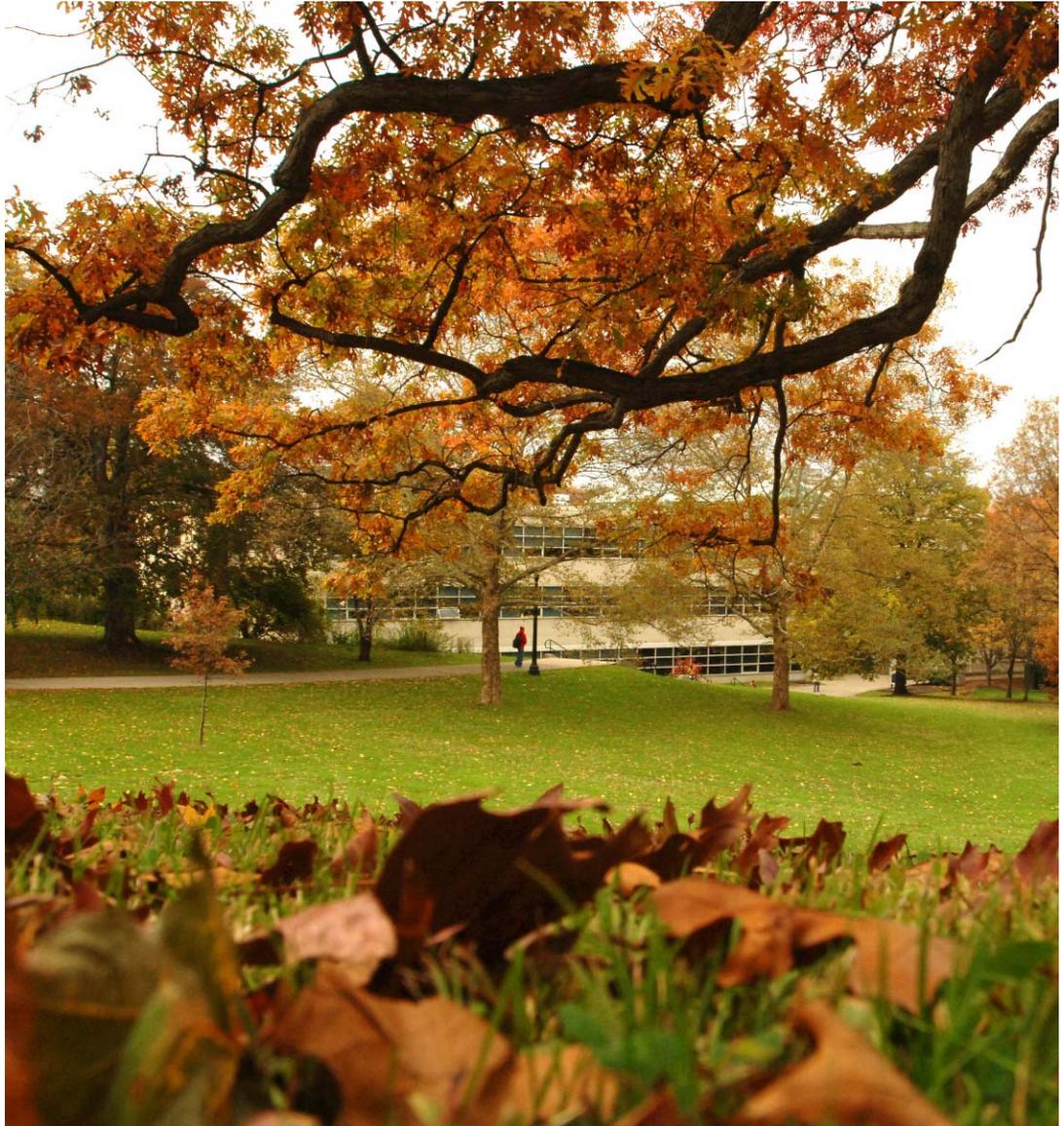
to mobilize the best and the brightest in the fight against communism. Conant opposed the GI Bill and federal student aid. He argued that college should be reserved for a ruling class of meritocrats developed from the top 15 percent of high school students with IQs over 115. Murray ups the ante to an IQ of 120.

Ironically, the same arguments for building an elite governing class made then by Conant to protect the United States from international communism are now being made by Murray to protect us from international capitalism. Like Murray, Conant was a self-styled

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realist who regarded the idea of democratizing higher education as self-destructive democratic romanticism. Like Murray, he believed that cognitive ability is innate, fixed, and one-dimensional. For Conant, cognitive ability was expressed as a single test number, called an IQ. For

Murray, the single number is the SAT score—the old IQ wine in a new bottle. Since Conant’s time, the bold but disreputable notion of IQ morphed into the more genteel notion of *aptitude* as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). And when “aptitude” lost its uptown intellectual standing, the Scholastic



**Kent State  
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Aptitude Test became the plain old “SAT,” and the ineffable capacity the SAT measures became the homely ability known only to the cognoscenti as “Spearman’s *g*,” the humble and mysterious yet all-powerful hero in Murray’s narrative.

It is instructive but unfair to compare Conant and Murray. Conant positioned talent to challenge conventional social arrangements, while Murray believes conventional social arrangements signal talent. Conant’s own journey took him from Dorchester, a working-class suburb of Boston, to the Harvard presidency and beyond. He believed talent ought to trump social standing—a radical view in the elite colleges of his day. Initially, Conant liked IQ tests because he thought they might turn up another Einstein stuck behind a plow somewhere in the American heartland. Conant sent his admissions director, Henry Chauncey, off to start up the Education Testing Service and the SAT (Lemann 2000). In the end, however, Conant opposed the SAT because he saw it as a way to smother talent and preserve the dead hand of elites. Conant was willing to disturb conventional social standing in order to mobilize talent in the national defense of democracy in a hostile world. In contrast, Murray believes that social standing is the primary proof of talent and claims that all the research from the Coleman report to the latest studies on No Child Left Behind proves it.

What separates Conant and Murray is fifty years’ time. In his time, Conant urged strict merit-based selection as a step forward from the clubby Ivy League and as a short-term stopgap against world communism. He said that his “recommendation for the academically talented was very largely based on national need,” and that he would not recommend it “if we were not living in such a grim world.” As a leader in a generation that put down fascism, Conant was still dug in to fight Stalin. To his credit, he defended standards in higher education in a postwar world in which the British and Europeans were systematically destroying their higher education systems by outlawing selectivity and standards altogether.

Conant’s views seem quaint in the wake of the GI Bill, federal student aid, and the surge in higher education degrees that has resulted from increasing skill demands on the job. Mass higher education coevolved with the

economy and culture, and it quickly outgrew Conant’s original vision. Nonetheless, many still believe, like Murray, that “too many people are going to college” and that expanded access to the BA has come at the cost of lower standards. But Murray and the rest who worry over declining standards get it exactly backward: In truth, expanding access to the BA does not lower standards; instead, higher educational standards for work and citizenship require expanded access to the BA. We don’t need less liberal education, we need more. □

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