POV

Community Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ACCEPTED

a film by Dan Chen

www.pbs.org/pov

ACCEPTED

Accepted follows four high school students at T.M. Landry, a prep school in rural Louisiana known for its viral videos of seniors being accepted to Ivy League universities and for sending 100% of its graduates to college. But an explosive *New York Times* article exposes the controversial methods of its dynamic founder—and the fiction of meritocracy in American higher education.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Accepted* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing experiences and viewpoints and actively listening to one another in a care-forward environment.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/.

DEAR POV COMMUNITY,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *Accepted.* Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and these conversations require learning the truths of our history that have not typically been taught in schools and universities. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the safety of BIPOC and youth in your community while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection. It is our intention that this guide will support you in facilitating dialogue that generates new awareness.

This guide, and our additional resources, offer information that will support you in the process of challenging assumptions by presenting historical facts and contemporary realities. POV's Critical Concept list offers common language and understanding, and POV's Delve Deeper Reading List is also a great resource for learning more. Lastly, we invite you to share with us how your conversations fostered engagement and transformation in your own community!

Tips and Tools for Facilitators:
Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

SHARE COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?
Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. Here is a model of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion
Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions; make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.

ESTABLISH COMMON LANGUAGE

We encourage you to review this collection of helpful concepts related to race, class, and education ahead of facilitating your discussion. If you choose, you can share this list with

participants in the conversation so you can all work from common language and understanding of sometimes difficult ideas.

HELPFUL STATISTICS FOR GROUNDING KNOWLEDGE

Annual Cost of College, Public

Institution Type	Cost of Tuition	Cost of Attendance**
4-Year In-State	$9,377	$25,707
4-Year Out-of-State	$27,091	$43,421
2-Year In-State	$3,501	$15,862

Source: https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college

Annual Cost of College, Private

Institution Type	Cost of Tuition	Cost of Attendance**
4-Year Nonprofit	$37,641	$54,501
4-Year For-profit	$18,244	$33,528
2-Year Nonprofit	$17,968	$33,270
2-Year For-profit	$15,765	$27,246

***Cost of Attendance does not account for potential lost income nor student loan interest.*

Source: https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER, DAN CHEN

What struck me first about T.M. Landry was how the school flouted societal expectations. The students were mostly Black, the school was a warehouse in rural Louisiana, and the seniors had just been accepted into Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and other prestigious universities. The joy in those viral acceptance videos was visceral, real, and communal.

I'm Chinese American, and I grew up in Kansas. I don't share the experience of being Black in America. But I know what it feels like to be underestimated at large, to resist the stereotypes put upon you, and to work for acceptance that's elusive. As someone who grew up in a small town with big dreams, I wanted to center what it felt like to be a student at this school. After our first trip T.M. Landry, we committed to helping to tell the story of the next senior class, as they strived to achieve their own college ambitions.

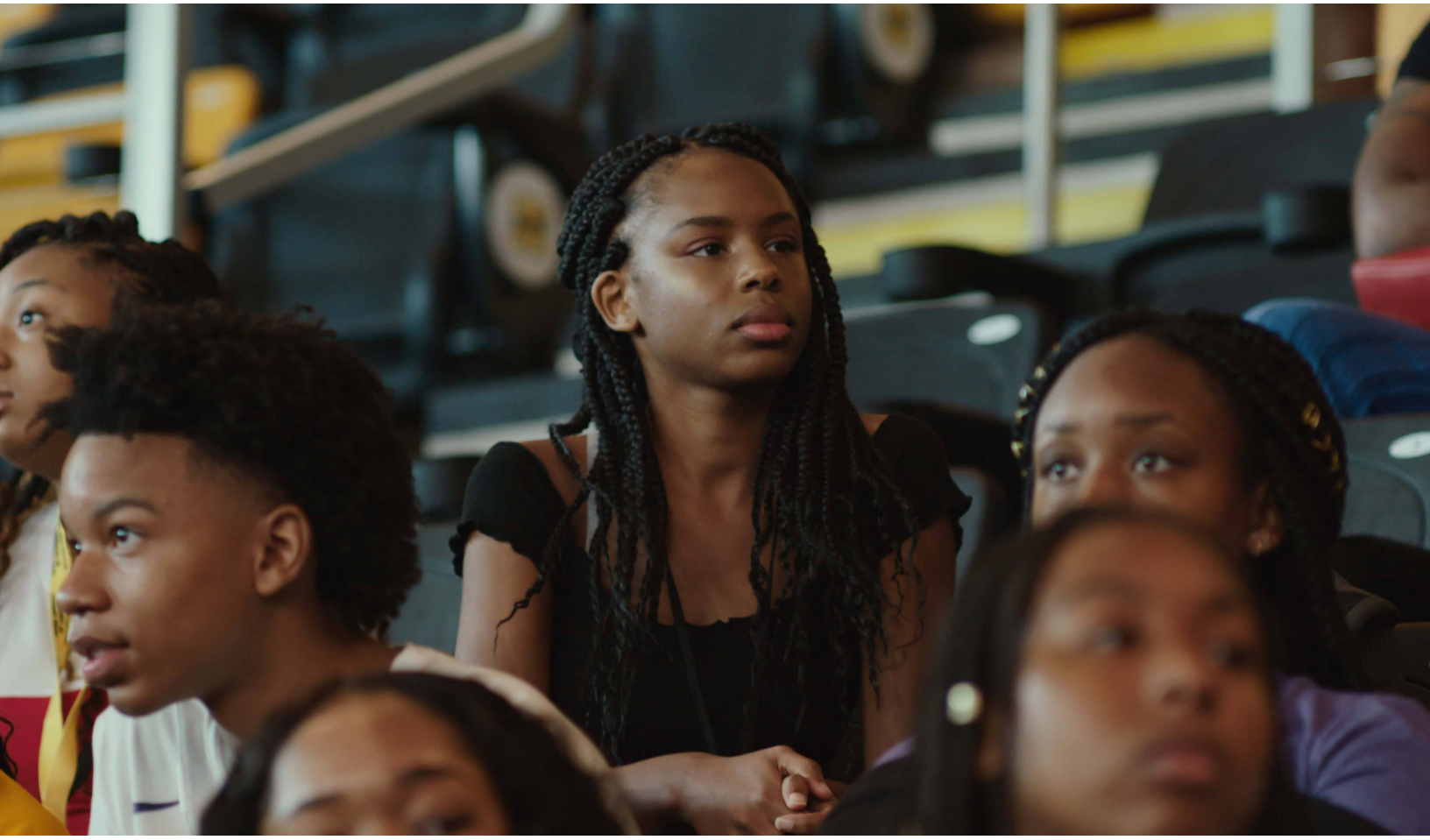
The year did not go as anyone expected. The simple story of a miracle school did not hold. The filmmaking team and the students in this film were confronted with shocking developments that questioned the foundational beliefs of fairness and meritocracy in America. In an unjust society, what is the cost of success? How do those in communities with less secure their futures? And how does a young person coming of age grapple with truths as they discover their place in this world?

Through it all, we filmed as if the camera belonged to one of the students in the class of 2019. We show you inspirational speeches and long hours. Fireworks in the park and tears in the classroom. The joy and the terror of clicking on a webpage that will change your life forever. And the voices of five students who stand in the center of a hurricane and tell it like they see it.

I hope this film helps viewers question the comfortable lies we tell ourselves about our society. And I hope that audiences will find inspiration in a new generation of students who see the world with clear and unsparing eyes. In the end, I'd like to pose a question to the viewer: In every sense and meaning of the word, what will you accept?

PARTICIPANTS

- **Adia**: a spirited and creative young artist who attends T.M. Landry after a family tragedy derailed her academic career
- **Alicia**: daughter of Nigerian immigrants, a studious and serious student who seeks an academic challenge and a sense of community
- **Cathy**: daughter of Vietnamese immigrants with two disabled sisters who sees education as a way to improve her family's quality of life
- **Isaac**: a principled young man with an interest in engineering who felt that T.M. Landry opened up possibilities for himself and his family
- **Mike Landry**: the controversial founder of T.M. Landry College Preparatory, a school made famous for viral videos of its graduates being accepted into elite colleges



KEY ISSUES

Accepted is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Power, Education, and Exploitation
- Secondary Schooling and Higher Education
- Race, Class, and Social Reproduction
- Mental and Emotional Health of Students
- Whiteness and How It Shapes Educational Experiences
- Myth of Meritocracy/Violence of Grit Discourse
- Myth of American Dream and Exceptionalism
- Opportunity, Access, and Harmful Framings of "Achievement"
- Standards, Curriculum, and Exclusion
- Culturally Responsive, Liberatory, and Care-informed Pedagogies
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
- Family Caregiving
- Inequality and Systemic Racism

A (VERY) SHORT HISTORY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Knowledge of the history of American education is important for understanding lasting structural inequities experienced by marginalized students today and offers context to better understand the experiences of the students in *Accepted*.

COLONIZATION AND INDIGENOUS BOARDING SCHOOLS

Before the formal establishment of common schools (the precursor to public education), the U.S. government dispossessed Native Americans of their land and forced their children into boarding schools. Driven by supremacist motivations (i.e., Manifest Destiny/land theft, forced assimilation to an "American" way of life, Protestant ideology, control), the first federally funded boarding school was founded in 1879. The schools worked, sometimes violently, to stop the children from speaking their native languages, wearing traditional dress, and practicing Native religions in an attempt to eradicate any vestiges of their Native identity. A May 2020 report by assistant secretary of Indian affairs Bryan Newland found that between 1819 and 1969, the United States operated or supported 408 boarding schools in more than 37 states. As of May 2022, the federal government continues to operate four off-reservation, boarding schools.

Chiricahua Apaches at the Carlisle Indian School, Pennsylvania., 188-?: as they looked upon arrival at the school. [Photograph]. (1885 or 1886). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT

The goals of public education have always reflected what people with power believe will be good for society and often mirror dominant beliefs about how people should act and how society should be organized. In the late 1830s, the common school movement, guided by Massachusetts secretary of education Horace Mann, was instrumental in establishing mandatory attendance of free non-sectarian public schools. (Before this, churches or private schools provided education and students had to pay tuition.) Mann focused on teacher training and expanding elementary education regardless of class or gender and established the practice of separating students by age and grade. In addition to teaching basic literacy and math, these new schools instilled common political philosophies and moral values that it was believed would help children become productive democratic

citizens. By 1900, 34 states had established compulsory schooling laws requiring students to attend school until a particular age and by 1918, all American children were required to attend elementary school.

While the first public high school opened in Boston in 1821, it only aimed to meet the educational needs of working-class boys. The first municipally funded secondary school for girls would not be established until 1848, and the first public high school for African Americans would not be founded until 1870.

A persistent educational goal, as stated by Mann, was that free, public education would be the "great equalizer . . . the balance-wheel of the social machinery," by which he meant that everyone would have equal opportunity to pursue wealth. Industrialization, urbanization, and increased immigration to the United States from the 1880s until the 1920s, as well as fears of conflict between the rich and poor, motivated goals for education during this time. Some common goals were Americanization of immigrants, training the labor force for a newly industrialized workplace, providing food and medical care, and fighting Communism.

However significant Mann's legacy, his attempts to establish public education as the great equalizer proved fruitless due to the existence of slavery, denial of citizenship to Native Americans, and limited rights of everyone other than White men. In 1896, in *Plessy v. Ferguson* the Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools did not violate the U.S. Constitution, and it wasn't until the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that schools were legally desegregated. Although the federal government declared segregation unconstitutional, the "with all deliberate speed" clause delayed desegregation well into the 1960s. As Black students enrolled in historically White schools, White families fled. Access to higher education followed suit. The common school movement created a greater need for trained educators, which led to the founding of the first public teachers' colleges, or normal schools, in Massachusetts in 1838; these were dedicated to training women to become teachers.

RACE, CLASS, AND EDUCATION

> *When you have these miracle students who pull themselves up by their bootstraps, you don't have to think about systematic oppression . . . and that's just wrong, because you're doing a huge disservice to every other student.*
> *-Alicia's College Essay*

Considering the origins and trajectory of public education through various political, social, and economic scenarios, the question of which knowledge is valued and taught and how that knowledge is taught casts light on certain myths that contemporary educational practice still relies upon. These foundational myths—reforming the individual, equal opportunity,

meritocracy, and the model minority—are rooted in the origins of American education and were standardized through norms established by White, upper-class men with power. The systems that persist today are still rooted in this history and all too often function as a mode for denying structural and systemic realities that continue to create unequal opportunities for marginalized students as compared to those available to wealthy, White students.

In *Accepted*, audiences can see how these myths uphold illusions that directly impact students of color and maintain structural inequalities that limit these students' educational outcomes along the lines of race and class. Here are a few common myths that are visible in *Accepted:*

1. Equality: Education is the great equalizer and public education means equal opportunity.
2. Grit and Exceptionalism: Anyone can pick themselves up by their bootstraps, despite their circumstances or conditions, because we have examples of a few who have.
3. Meritocracy: If someone works hard enough they will succeed based on merit alone and educational outcomes are solely an individual's responsibility and a reflection of their effort. The system is not a factor in determining success.
4. Model Minority Stereotype: Asian American students are "model minorities," which means that all Asian American students will be smart, wealthy, hard-working, and self-reliant.
5. Standardized Assessments: Standardized tests are a fair and equal measure of intelligence and capacity to succeed.

These ideas unfairly place responsibility on students without being critical of the structural inequities built into the American education systems. They also perpetuate historically established prejudices about who deserves to succeed, whose knowledge is most valuable, and how that knowledge is assessed. In this way, the history of public education demonstrates the unequal ways that different people were valued and offered opportunities. Understanding that history means returning the focus to the systems, structures, and histories that continue to organize education and society today in unequal ways.

SUSTAINED INEQUALITIES, IVY LEAGUE SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

The original promise that college would provide equal opportunity and upward social mobility continues to perpetuate inequality along the lines of race and class, particularly with regard to elite colleges. Ivy League schools share public education's history of colonialism, slavery, White supremacy, and classism (originally ranking students by their families' status in society). For centuries, these institutions were almost exclusively White, wealthy, and male. Established to train generations of Protestant aristocracy, the schools in the Ivy League (Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth

College, Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, and Yale University) relied on ableist, classist, gendered, and racial qualifications as guidelines for admission and exclusion. While each institution has its own nuanced history, all of them were founded upon practices of exclusion and social elitism. In fact, the pseudoscientific eugenics scholarship professed at these universities reified the systemic oppression of marginalized people. By 1939 (the start of World War II) fewer than 125 Black students had graduated from Columbia, Penn, Cornell, Harvard, and Yale combined. Women were not allowed to attend Ivy League schools until as late as the 1960s and in some cases the 1970s. These universities only began accepting members of more diverse demographic groups (Jewish people and other minorities) when they felt doing so would enhance their status as meritocratic institutions. More recently they have been accused of using the same race-based quotas for admission to limit the number of Asian American students who are accepted.

Clearly an intersectional issue, meritocracy is now used to refocus exclusionary practices along the "objective" rankings of standardized test scores. However, a 2021 study from Student Aid Policy found the following:

- Male students are 42% more likely to have combined SAT test scores in the 1400 to 1600 range than female students.
- White students are three times more likely than Black or African-American students and twice as likely as Hispanic or Latino students to have combined SAT test scores of 1400 to 1600.
- Students with family incomes of $100,000 or more are more than twice as likely as students with family incomes under $50,000 to have combined SAT test scores of 1400 to 1600.

College Board data continues to show that the most consistent and significant correlation for high test scores is the family income of the test taker, and that these tests benefit White, upper-middle-class students. Placing value on standardized test scores drives the myth of meritocracy disguised by testing intelligence—a practice that also has roots in supremacist ideology.

Today, America's elite universities are still largely inaccessible to members of working-poor families, disabled students, undocumented young people, and students of color. Despite discourse about diversity and inclusion, being admitted to a selective institution is still harder for a high-achieving, low-income student than it is for others. In 2017, a child from the richest 1 percent of families was 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League school than a child from a low-income family, and according to an article in *Business Insider,* 86.6% of Black students take out federal loans, as compared to 59.9% of their White peers. These

institutions are still predominantly White institutions, and this fact is inextricably connected to race, class, mobility, and access in American society. Ultimately, "elite" colleges are still founded on common legacies of inequality and exclusion; today these universities reproduce racialized income gaps and opportunities for upward social mobility that begin with educational experiences. Simultaneously, the lasting myth of meritocracy that is used to justify sustained inequality becomes veiled in test scores, academic rigor, and an ability to participate in extracurricular activities (which for members of working-poor families is commonly not an option). When it comes to college admissions and equal opportunity for all students in America to become upwardly mobile, the system is not broken. In fact, it is working precisely the way it was designed.

Accepted also highlights the mental-health toll that aspiring to achieve admission to elite colleges (and public universities) takes on students who are striving to be accepted into a system that was not designed for their success. Mental and emotional health has become a crisis for students aspiring to attain the opportunities they were promised college would provide. We see this in the film as all students, from unique backgrounds and family structures, work incredibly hard toward a vision of success determined by the larger educational structure. What becomes apparent is that the results of their educational journeys have little to do with their capacities, desires, and aspirations. While Mike Landry began his career working to intervene on behalf of the students he believed in, ultimately he became caught up in the harmful practices, ideas, and determination to "succeed" that have been normalized by it. This begs the question of how those who historically have been oppressed can find avenues to become exceptions in a system without becoming part of the harmful system itself.

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STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask each participant to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- Did you think that college was an option for you when you were growing up? What—or who—gave you that idea?
- In what ways did this film impact you? Were you able to relate to these students? If not, what did you learn from their experiences?
- In what ways did this film make you reconsider your thoughts about educational opportunity? What surprised you as you were watching this film?
- What are some things you admire about each student in the film? What lessons did they teach you?

QUESTIONING MERITOCRACY

- In what ways do schools contribute to reproducing class positions?
  - In what ways is this connected to race?
- In what ways are opportunities offered by schools unequal? Can you think of some examples from your own experiences?
- In what ways did *Accepted* disprove the idea that if someone simply works hard enough then they will be able to succeed?
  - How does this film expose the realities that meritocracy denies?
- What are some structural aspects of education that reproduce inequality (i.e., standardized tests, tests written in English, resourcing)?
- In what ways are students whose first language is not English treated as if their asset (speaking more than one language) is a deficit?
- In what ways does the myth of the model minority (minority students who are seen as "naturally good" at certain subjects) harm students who belong to that minority group?
  - How does someone like Cathy from the film fit or refute the model minority stereotype?
- How does celebrating exceptions produce a skewed understanding of the reality of college acceptance?
  - Why do we celebrate exceptions rather than critiquing the structure (the rule)?
  - Is this a harmful practice? If so, who is most likely harmed by this viewpoint?
- What are some everyday obstacles that can make attending Ivy League schools more challenging for first-generation students of color than their White peers whose parents attended the same Ivy League schools?

- In what ways are the metrics of "success" harmful? Who, or what group of people, determined what educational "success" meant in the past? Who determines this today?

EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

- What is the purpose of American education?
- What are some ways public education offers equal opportunity to all? What are some ways that the idea of "equality" in public education should be more deeply interrogated?
- In what ways is American education unequal and unjust?
- Who is most likely to benefit from the system of American education (considering both public and private opportunities)? Why is this? What does it teach you?
- In what ways does American education reproduce class status rather than offering opportunities for upward mobility?
- What groups in the United States are most likely to be impacted by rising college tuition?
  - What impact might this have on those communities and individuals?
  - What impact will that have on all Americans?
- Given the foundational structures of education in the United States, can it ever be truly equal? Why or why not?

HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (HBCUS)

- How much or little do you know about HBCUs and their history in the United States?
- Given the history of American education and society, why are HBCUs important for students of color?
- What are some benefits for Black students who attend HBCUs?
- As Alicia's college essay highlights, "Too often in our society, we think of educating Black children as a philanthropic enterprise. We see education as a gift to be bestowed upon Black students instead of a public good to be accessed." Why do you think this is?
  - In what ways have we been miseducated to think this way?
  - In what ways do HBCUs refuse this mentality simply by existing?
  - What alternative approaches to education are required to unlearn these ideas?

MENTAL/EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

- How might the college application process take a toll on students' mental and emotional health?
- What, specifically, are some ways that Ivy League universities remain inaccessible to students of color and the working poor in America?
- What role do Ivy League universities play in reproducing class status along the lines of race? How does this play out in American society?
- What are some reasons that certain students and families may not be able to join extracurricular activities, have internships, and build the sorts of applications that elite universities demand?
    - What is the responsibility of these universities to consider these circumstantial factors?
- What are some ways that schools teach students they are, or are not, valuable?
- What can teachers, counselors, and families do to support students through the college application process?
- In what ways can we teach students and young people they are valuable outside of the values system that is reproduced by assessments, test scores, and this education system?

Film: Accepted
Accepted is a film that follows the T.M. Landry, a small school in a small town in Louisiana. The school received national recognition, appearing on the CBS Morning Show and The Ellen Show, due to its 100% college acceptance rate and the fact that 32% of its students were accepted into Ivy League institutions. Eventually, the school faces backlash and is accused of falsifying records, corporal punishment and other misdeeds.

College Possible
College Possible is a national nonprofit that provides coaching and support to low-income students in an effort to close the degree divide. The organization asserts that the degree divide is influenced by race and socio-conomic status, not by a lack of talent or desire. College Possible utilizes recent college graduates to use an evidence based curriculum to mentor and coach high school students.

Equal Opportunity Schools
Equal opportunity is an organization that seeks to increase the amount of students of color and low-income students in rigorous high school classes such as AP or IB. They maintain that enrollment in such courses is one of the best ways to close the achievement gap. Equal Opportunity Schools has partnered with schools all over the nation to enroll tens of thousands of students of color and low income students in college readiness courses.

Excelencia in Education
Excelencia in Education is a Latina-led organization that promotes Latino student success in higher education. The organization was founded in 2004 in Washington, D.C. Excelencia in Education collaborates with educators and policymakers to inform policy and advance certain institutional practices.

Gatecrashers podcast:
A podcast about the hidden history of Jews and the Ivy League, from Unorthodox co-host Mark Oppenheimer.

MDRC
MDRC (formerly Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation) is a United States based nonprofit located in various cities. It is a non-partisan education and social policy research organization. According to its website, its goal is “improving the lives of low-income individuals, families and children.”

OneGoal
OneGoal is a Chicago, IL based nonprofit whose aim is to close the degree divide in America. The goal of the organization is to significantly increase the amount of low-income students who earn a postsecondary education. The guiding principles of OneGoal are equity, people, innovation, community, and impact.

QuestBridge
QuestBridge is a nonprofit based in Palo Alto, CA. The organization follows students from high school through college and to their first job. According to their website, "QuestBridge aims to increase the percentage of talented low-income students attending the nation's best colleges and to support them to achieve success in their careers and communities."

POV's Delve Deeper Reading List
A list of fiction and nonfiction books that take deeper dives into the themes and histories examined in Accepted.

The Education Trust
The Education Trust is a national nonprofit that engages in research and advocacy work beginning in preschool and lasting until college. It aims to increase access to college and college completion rates for historically underserved students.

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