



**MINDS MATTER**  
BAY AREA

# On MMBay's Mission

College Undermatching, Class  
Diversity in Elite Spaces,  
and Cross-Class Bridging

*A Note from Irene Shih (CEO)*

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As the heated discourse of a political moment can conflate issues and oversimplify why these large systemic problems exist in the first place, let's deconstruct some of the complexity around issues of race / ethnicity, economic class, and equity.

There are two *different* kinds of issues in education related to equity: the achievement gap and the opportunity gap.

### Issue #1: The Achievement Gap

The first issue is the achievement gap - that is, the substantial learning gap that exists between wealthy versus poor students, and (relatedly) between white versus black and brown students. The achievement gap starts at home, even before kids are of age to attend school. For example, studies have shown that children from wealthy families will hear roughly [30 million vocabulary words more than their poorer peers](#) by *age 3*.

By the time students reach the *third grade* (ages 8-9), the achievement gap is so perceivable between advantaged and disadvantaged students, that their test scores are highly predictive of who will end up in high-paying jobs and who may end up in the criminal justice system. In its very essence, the achievement gap means that the differences in life outcomes (mapped to stark differences in home life, peer networks, *and* school conditions) show up at a very early age for kids, such that many minority and low-income kids fall through the cracks *before and during elementary school*.

I have worked in education for nearly 20 years, always in communities with large populations of underserved students. And for the better part of my career, I focused on solving issues related to the achievement gap - a gap that persists in ways not automatically solvable, neither by school practices nor nonprofit services alone. In many ways, the achievement gap is a *combined* product of dysfunctional (often racist and classist) public policies.

Examples include:

1. Policies that incentivize [segregated housing](#) (thereby creating large urban centers with high concentrations of low-income minority families while white wealth stays in the suburbs);
2. Policies that prevent poor families from accessing adequate healthcare; and
3. Policies that prevent [redistribution of school funding](#) (which means wealthy communities will inevitably have better-resourced public schools).

The legacy of our government's relationship with its poor, black, and brown families is crucial to dismantle if we are truly committed to solving issues of systemic inequity. Putting the full blame on teachers and saddling the education ecosystem with all the accountability for this achievement gap - something our country has done increasingly in the last 25 years - has not been a meaningful

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approach to the problem. Any education nonprofit or school district claiming to significantly address the achievement gap is not telling the truth about their limits. The achievement gap and the wealth gap in this country are profoundly linked - in tandem, their solutions will be, too.

When it comes to institutional inequities that disproportionately keep poor, black, and brown kids from *achieving* in our existing systems, we have to look to the coordinated efforts of our policies and systems to equalize minority family access to housing in better neighborhoods, to fund schools more equitably, to provide adequate health care even if employers won't offer it...and so on.

We have to look at [how companies pay and provide benefits to their lower-wage minority employees](#) - because this directly impacts children in socio-economically disadvantaged families (that are disproportionately black and brown in our country - and in the Bay Area, [also disproportionately Asian](#)). We have to [consider whether there is a case for reparations](#) given the countless racist policies post-slavery that *specifically* prevented black families from finding and sustaining economic vitality. Our country and its voting citizens must look at this complex problem for what it is, and engage at the nodes of our system that best dismantle its roots.

**Mission:** Minds Matter Bay Area (MMBay) is an education nonprofit that connects driven and determined students from low-income families with the people, preparation, and possibilities to succeed in college, create their future, and change the world.

### Issue #2: College and Career Undermatching (An Opportunity Gap)

The achievement gap is the first problem. Alongside of that is the opportunity gap. Minds Matter Bay Area (MMBay) addresses an important problem - but that problem is not the achievement gap. It's *related* to the achievement gap, but its scope is tangible and within the reach of what a nonprofit can impact.

As our mission states, we serve low-income students who are *driven and determined* (typically high-achieving), and help them get into (and graduate from) selective colleges that they would otherwise not have the guidance nor resources nor exposure to know how to get into.

This (different) problem is called undermatching - in short, that gifted and hardworking students from low-income backgrounds severely underestimate their own potential, and lack the support systems required to help them access colleges and careers that they are actually academically qualified for.

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Now, you might ask: why is this a problem worth solving? If a student is already high-achieving, then they're going to be fine in life, right? Studies show that's not the case for low-income students at all.

1. **Overrepresentation of Wealthy Students at Elite Colleges:** On the heels of the Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, [The New York Times recently featured a comprehensive study](#) that indicated that - all other attributes held equal - applicants from the wealthiest 1% of families are more than twice as likely to receive admission to Ivy League and Ivy League-equivalent (e.g. Stanford, Duke, M.I.T., University of Chicago) schools.
2. **Underrepresentation of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students at Elite Colleges:** This [study from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation](#) shows that only 23% of high-achieving / low-income students even *apply* to a selective college as compared with 48% of their high-achieving / wealthier peers. And there is only one high-achieving / low-income student attending an elite college for every 24 high-achieving / high-income students ([source](#)). This matters, because graduating from a selective college is one of the few proven ways that a low-income student can enter the middle class and gain access to high-skilled jobs.

This quote from the Jack Kent Cooke study is especially eye-opening: "In the context of higher education admissions, 'diversity' often translates to mean racial and ethnic diversity. And yet, while racial discrimination remains an important problem in American society, today's economic status has actually eclipsed race as the primary source of academic disadvantage."

**Students:** In MMBay's history, 100% of our students have been low-income, and 91% have been first-generation college.

3. **Low-Income Students Are Incentivized Toward Vocational Rather Than Academic Pathways:** [A recent article from The Hechinger Report](#) highlights that government assistance programs for low-income students incentivize work over *study*. This is just one of many driving forces - imposed or situational - that put low-income students on accelerated paths toward jobs that do not require post-secondary degrees. This matters, because graduating from a selective college remains the most reliable way for low-income students to access well-resourced networks and competitive careers, leave poverty behind, and create their desired future. Yet, *only 3%* of low-income students in the U.S. graduate from a selective college.

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- While on the face of it, we acknowledge that a four-year university is not the best option for all students, it is also imperative to understand that a Bachelor's degree - especially from a selective college - is by far the leading pathway to economic opportunity. [As of 2021, 56% of "good" jobs](#) - professional and technical jobs that offer career advancement and talent development over time - require a Bachelor's degree.
- Graduating from a selective college [allows students in the lowest economic quartile \(bottom 25%\) to jump into the highest economic quartile \(top 25%\) within 10 years of college graduation.](#)

**Mission:** Founded in 2010, 100% of our alumni have been accepted to 4-year colleges, and 100% are on track to graduate from college within 4 years. Our students - compared with similar peers - are 25X as likely to graduate from a selective college that prepares them for career and beyond.

4. **Doing Well in High School is No Guarantee of Success Later in Life:** In 2019, the Boston Globe published their [Valedictorians Project](#). The project focused on 113 Boston valedictorians from three graduating classes: 2005, 2006, 2007. Racially and ethnically, there was diverse representation in this valedictorian group. Upsettingly, the life outcomes for these excellent students have not matched the promise they showed in their high school years. There are [multiple takeaways](#) from the project. Here are some that stand out:
  - This project is distinctly not about the achievement gap. It is studying students *who have achieved academically*. The low-income students in this study have already defied odds in their system to do well academically - and even then their pathway to graduating from a selective college remains uncertain. So what it illuminates is not the opportunity to solve for an achievement gap, but rather the opportunity to solve for barriers that prevent students from success in life *even when they have achieved the highest accolade possible in one's high school career*. It makes a compelling argument that this other gap - the gap between achieving in K-12 vs. being successful in life - is itself a problem worth solving for low-income students.

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- We can't overestimate the security that comes from high academic achievement in a low expectations environment. A 4.0 GPA at a school that isn't very good, is no guarantee of success later in life.
- Outcomes certainly differ along racial and ethnic lines, but it's more complex than simply white and Asian versus black and brown. We see in this study that one differentiator above all made a difference for Asian students - and that was if they went to one of Boston's coveted exam schools. If they didn't, their life outcomes didn't map with greater success than their black or brown peers. However, an Asian student's *chances* of getting into an exam school were (like white students) higher than their black and brown peers.

### Conclusion:

Our mission as an organization is deeply meaningful, because the gap between "achieving in high school" and "successful in life" persists, especially for low-income students (across multiple races and ethnicities). We recognize our place in the struggle not as an organization positioned to rewire *entire systems* of inequity that have led to achievement gaps, but rather as a community positioned to help socio-economically disadvantaged students in the Bay Area *close a specific opportunity gap*. These students have already defied odds in becoming academically accomplished, and we are here to help them *further* defy odds to graduate from selective colleges that will position them for high-skilled jobs.

MMBay must continue to place its focus on serving *low-income, high-achieving* students - because these students represent the hope that upward mobility is possible for their communities. The broad focus on "low-income" is intentional, because we have to address what the specific face of socio-economic and academic disadvantage looks like in the Bay Area (and that includes an *especially* high proportion of Asian and Latinx students).

[As the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation study found](#): "economic status has actually eclipsed race as the primary source of academic disadvantage". Our place in this struggle is to ensure that the diversity of socio-economically disadvantaged students in each MMBay class reflects the racial / ethnic distribution of socio-economically disadvantaged students in the cities we serve.

# A Note on Affirmative Action, Class Diversity in Elite Spaces, and Cross-Class Bridging

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Elite college institutions are exclusive by definition, but their intentional exclusivity is permissible as long as it remains meritocratic. In rhetoric, these institutions were built to discover and cultivate generations of exceptional talent - to ensure that those who step into decision-making roles in our society, are most qualified to speak for the needs of a society they represent. In rhetoric, the purpose of these elite institutions is to source for talent wherever talent may be found - which should in no way be determined by one's class or race.

But in practice, [elite colleges show a preference for students from wealthy families](#) - a preference not justified by merit nor excellence when these wealthy admits are compared with their lower-income peers. And because top employers like to recruit from elite colleges, this wealth-based bias impacts the talent demographic of all *elite careers* - ones that shape commerce, policy, innovation, and care for generations of people. In the absence of a force that counteracts this bias, elite college institutions perpetuate inequities of class by deciding who gets to walk their halls and - eventually - who gets to have power in our society. It reinforces a generational concentration of power and influence among those who *already* have power and influence.

And so, the conversation about *diversity* in college admissions is - above all - about the underrepresentation of low-income students at elite colleges, and of people from low-income backgrounds among industry leaders and decision-makers that get to impact society at scale. But, in the United States, our history of race is deeply intertwined with our history of class. There is an overwhelming representation of white Americans in the wealthiest classes of our country. There is an overwhelming representation of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, and Asian Americans in the poorest classes of our country. And so, if low-income students are underrepresented at elite colleges, then it is also accurate to say that *people of color who are overrepresented among low-income classes, are also underrepresented at elite colleges.*

To be clear: affirmative action policies fell short of fully solving for the underrepresentation of low-income students at elite colleges, as race alone does not account entirely for a person's background and story. To be clear: affirmative action policies, when exercised without transparent guardrails, were also used to wrongly disadvantage many Asian American students. Both of these glaring flaws indicate that the implementation of affirmative action, as a tool for building a truer meritocracy, still requires much more refinement.

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But the Supreme Court's decision to remove affirmative action - in the absence of replacement policies that better address class diversity, without exploring how race can be a factor for inclusion without becoming an excuse for exclusion, and during a time when elite universities continue to demonstrate a proven bias toward admitting wealthy applicants - does not actually help or serve low-income students. While a broader discussion about class diversity is long overdue, we simply cannot condone a bad faith argument that wields the letter of equality to strike down the spirit of equity.

Here at MMBay, we dedicate ourselves to help driven yet underserved students graduate from the nation's most selective colleges, and prepare to enter competitive careers of their own choice. We stand firmly by our mission, because we are all too aware that economic class can determine a child's possibilities, regardless of their potential to become judicious and excellent leaders in our society. In the coming years, as race and ethnicity are no longer explicit factors that college admissions officers may consider, it becomes all the more critical for nonprofits like MMBay to help our low-income students see the value in their own story, and to guide them as they craft personal statements that help admissions teams comprehend their unique potential for contribution in our society.

But even more than our programs and services, the ultimate value of MMBay lies in our incredible community. In the work of increasing economic mobility for low-income students, [no intervention has proven more successful than cross-class friendships](#). You see: the hidden reality about class and access, is that power and influence tend to be concentrated within the same communities *because people like to help those they already know*. MMBay is uniquely positioned to help our low-income students access elite academic spaces and exclusive career opportunities, precisely because our community of volunteers are highly-resourced, experienced, and connected professionals in the Bay Area who provide long-term value during, and well after, their time in our program. At MMBay, we build lasting bridges between the worlds our students represent and the spaces our volunteers inhabit. This is not a trivial task - relationships that truly bridge perspectives require a tremendous investment of time, intention, and care. A thriving community is not just a network; it is a self-elected support system.

The people we know, and what they know, influence the boundaries of our imagination. Thus, the truest role of MMBay is to ensure that our community remains well-positioned to inspire cross-class bridges between students and volunteers - who come from different walks of life, and are united in their belief that our kids have every potential to graduate from selective colleges, and to contribute future value in competitive industries and careers.

MMBay is dedicated to ensuring that our *program* and culture support students and volunteers to build deep bonds over many years of consistent relational investment, such that our tangible college and career advising services only graze the surface of what our students can gain - and contribute back to society - over decades.