

LOWER ED: THE TROUBLING RISE OF FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES IN THE
NEW ECONOMY

by Tressie McMillan Cottom

New York: The New Press, 2017. 256 pp. \$26.95 (hardcover).

It is rare when a scholarly book captures the attention of not just fellow academics but the popular imagination as well. Having garnered mainstream attention with an appearance on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and scholarly attention with favorable reviews from noted academics like Harvard economist Claudia Goldin, *Lower Ed* sociologist and Virginia Commonwealth University professor Tressie McMillan Cottom has managed to do just that. McMillan Cottom goes beyond the question “What are for-profit colleges?” to delve into the why and how of for-profit colleges. She does so with the rigor of a trained researcher and the sharp insights of an insider, leveraging her experience as a former for-profit admissions counselor.

Drawing on a range of methods—including analysis of Securities and Exchange Commission filing data, ethnographic fieldwork, and interviews—*Lower Ed* takes the reader from the initial question of what these institutions are, through the enrollment process at typical for-profits, and to an understanding of how the decision to enroll is indicative of larger systemic factors constraining and shaping people’s choices. In so doing, McMillan Cottom explains exactly why and how for-profit schools have come to occupy such a significant share of the higher education market. She brings her sociological insights to life with finely drawn portraits of participants like Mike, the Morehouse grad-turned-entrepreneur-and-MBA-seeker, and Clarice, the single mother struggling to get her beautician credentials and just trying to make it.

In the introduction, McMillan Cottom begins by revisiting Grubb and Lazerson’s (2004) idea of the “education gospel,” establishing the pervasiveness of faith in education that runs through so many Americans’ decisions to invest in schooling as a means of getting ahead. The key new insight that she offers is that there is a “gap between the education gospel and the real options available to people” and that that is precisely the gap “Lower Ed” fills (p. 11). Lower Ed, her apt coinage for the kinds of educational institutions that profit from societal inequalities and the ever-growing need for credentials, essentially thrives on the fact that poor people, people of color, and women want to get ahead but lack the means to effectively do so. It is the risk entailed in trying to make the leap, through Lower Ed, from where one is to where one hopes to be, that McMillan Cottom carefully reveals and brilliantly shines a light on.

One of the most remarkable things about this text is how McMillan Cottom moves seamlessly between illuminating individual stories and highlighting the political, economic, and social realities that structure those choices. In the first chapter she reviews what is known about for-profit schools: whether their graduates get jobs; whether they are “predatory,” as they’re so often accused

of being; and how they fit into the larger landscape of economic trends in the United States. She dedicates a subsequent chapter to “The Beauty College and the Technical College,” where she explores the differences between students like Clarice, who wind up in occupational certificate programs like beauty school, and those like Mike, who pursue graduate degrees at technical institutes like Strayer. Ultimately, however, McMillan Cottom likens these seemingly distinct streams to two tributaries of the same Lower Ed river. She carries that metaphor into the next chapter, poignantly titled “Jesus Is My Backup Plan,” as she delves into the risks people in each stream of the Lower Ed river balance as they enroll in for-profit colleges.

In a book that consistently challenges and unsettles assumptions, this chapter most effectively reframes the question “Why do students go to *those* schools?” (p. 99) into “Why are *these* schools the options most available to some people?” McMillan Cottom makes her point with devastating effect when she writes, “Being working poor and black and a mother means something in our society. What those things mean made the Beauty College a rational choice in the way that dousing your burning leg with cold water is rational: it helps but you are still scarred” (p. 100). What this example powerfully drives home is that although these credentials are expensive and may not have the expected and hoped-for payoff, they are the best, or at least most available, option for some. I found it impossible to read this chapter and not empathize with the plight of Mike and Clarice, especially when I remembered that they are not singular characters but representative of whole swaths of the population.

In chapter 4, McMillan Cottom takes the reader through her fieldwork navigating the enrollment process at a number of for-profit schools. She notes that the process is strikingly similar across schools and is expertly calibrated to meet students where they are, at least in the sense of assuming nothing about students’ aspirations or capacities. For-profits, according to her research, have a rapid enrollment process, do not ask prospective students to fill out lengthy forms alone, and often offer payment plans for enrollment fees as low as \$45. She tackles the question that those with experience in traditional higher education can’t help but ask: If nothing else sets off alarm bells, how do cost and the prospect of high debt for *that* kind of degree not do the trick? Here again, McMillan Cottom implicates larger social forces, especially traditional higher education’s deep investment in the maintenance of a prestige hierarchy and valuation of elite credentials, and reminds us that not everyone has the same understanding of the prestige economy that those in traditional higher education take for granted. When thought of as an investment, even the sort of education offered by Lower Ed institutions seems, to vulnerable students, like a solid value proposition. Traditional higher education, however, evinces more skepticism about the quality of Lower Ed credits, which is discussed in chapter 5’s look at how credits transfer across institutions. Noting how for-profit credits seldom transfer from one institution to another, both within the for-profit universe and especially between for-profit and nonprofit institutions, McMil-

lan Cottom further implicates traditional higher education in the discussion of how Lower Ed came to be and continues to proliferate.

The main body of the text closes with chapter 6's discussion of the current state of the labor market and higher education credentials, with workers stuck in the middle. McMillan Cottom returns to her idea of "risky credentialing" (p. 16)—how the responsibility for attaining credentials has shifted onto individual workers, giving rise to Lower Ed—and examines how it is linked to a larger economic trend of "risk shift" (p. 13), disabusing the reader of the idea that students in Lower Ed are individual failures. Condemning the reliance on market-based solutions to fix systemic social problems, she asserts that Lower Ed is, in effect, a "negative social insurance program" (p. 174), a system that, far from protecting workers from the labor market, renders them victims of it. In framing it this way, McMillan Cottom shows how, although not equally so, all Americans are vulnerable to the forces that promise education as a means of mobility but offer insufficient resources to cash in on that promise. In a needed antidote to the risk shift around who is responsible for needs like attaining a credential so that one can find a job to pay for one's necessities, McMillan Cottom shifts the onus of the problems of credentialing, job training, and job security back onto labor markets and the social safety net, instead of schools and vulnerable students.

In *Lower Ed*, McMillan Cottom brings readers into the world of for-profit colleges. But even more striking is how she brings for-profit colleges into the world of those of us who live in ivy-covered ivory towers. In connecting the rise of for-profit colleges to the elitism of traditional higher education, she implicates all who have moved through traditional colleges and universities. And by connecting for-profit colleges to the inequalities of American society writ large, she urges us all to rethink the policies and systems—like employers shedding responsibility for training workers or the federal financial aid system propping up Lower Ed—that have been allowed to make the inequalities suffered by those on the bottom of the economic ladder profitable for those perched at the top.

This is a *must-read book* for anyone in the fields of sociology or education. But it is also appropriate and important reading for a much broader audience. Teachers and school leaders may find provocative the way this book challenges the limits of the education gospel. Higher education personnel are likely to find satisfying food for thought in the discussion of the links between higher and "lower" education, particularly how education as an institution defines and polices the boundaries of legitimacy, signaling quality through acceptance of transfer credits, among other things. And on a methodological note, this book is a master class in research and triangulating across types of data, from which graduate students and other early-career researchers could learn much.

Lower Ed is theoretically provocative, empirically rich, and enjoyable to read. McMillan Cottom rejects simplistic notions of "good" and "bad" around for-profit colleges and instead probes deeper, investigating these institutions' role

in perpetuating American inequality. She moves the reader beyond thinking of the education outcomes of these students as individual issues and toward framing them as systemic social problems. More than that, she shows how Lower Ed is indicative of a societal shift toward trusting the market to provide for needs that the state might be better equipped to ensure. Those with political leanings different from McMillan Cottom's may disagree with her proposed solutions, but McMillan Cottom nonetheless draws the reader into the world of Lower Ed and effectively frames its problems as societal ills in which we are all enmeshed and which we all have a responsibility to help fix. In so doing, she issues a call to action, reminding all of us to fight not just for educational equity but also for a stronger social safety net. In a time of political, economic, and social turmoil, that call could not possibly feel more timely or urgent.

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Reference

Grubb, Norton W., & Lazerson, M. (2004). *The education gospel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

GRIT: THE POWER OF PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE

by Angela Duckworth

New York: Scribner's, 2016. 333 pp. \$28 (hardcover).

In *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Angela Duckworth, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, looks at grit—passion coupled with perseverance—as being essential to success and achievement. The book pushes back on society's overreliance on talent to explain excellence and instead highlights what relentless effort and an unwavering focus on a goal can achieve. Duckworth tells the story of grit's role in human flourishing by weaving together biographies and interviews with highly successful individuals, "grit paragons" (p. 60), with largely jargon-free summaries of psychological research on topics such as passion, optimism, interest, and excellence.

The book is organized into three sections: Part 1 introduces the concept of grit and why it matters; Part 2 presents ways in which individuals can grow their grit reserves from the "inside out" (p. 92); and Part 3 presents contexts such as parenting and the workplace that serve as "playing fields" (p. 223) for developing grit.

In the opening chapter of Part 1, "Showing Up," Duckworth introduces readers to grit and to her Grit Scale, which assesses the extent to which an individual "approaches life with grit" (p. 9), with passion and perseverance. Through examples of diverse contexts, ranging from the US Army's training program at West Point to winners of the National Spelling Bee competition, she seeks to demonstrate that grit is better than many other psychological factors at predicting individual success. For example, drawing from her research