The American dream of equal opportunity, based on the conviction that intelligence, hard work and character are the keys to success, may be on life support. These days children raised at the top or bottom fifths of the income pyramid tend to stay there, even as adults.

Higher education is considered a major contributor to economic success. Parental income, a strong predictor of admission to elite universities, doubled in importance from 1982-1992 and has continued to rise.

Now, Lauren Rivera, an associate professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, shows us through her new book, Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs, how those at the bottom of the income ladder are stuck, as it is the socioeconomically privileged students who tend to get a disproportionate share of elite jobs.

College matters

Rivera draws on in-depth interviews and first-hand observations of hiring practices at top-tier investment banks, law firms and consulting companies to reveal how the playing field is tilted toward affluent students.
In the definition and evaluation of merit, a “class ceiling” gets created for their less affluent classmates. Higher education and employment, she indicates, are “interlocking systems of social stratification.”

Convinced that having employees from prestigious colleges and universities enhances a firm’s status, recruiters tend to spend the vast majority of their time with graduates of 15 to 20 institutions.

They sort resumes rapidly, spending between 10 seconds and four minutes on each and bypassing cover letters (fewer than 15% reported even looking at them).

The qualities most commonly used to sort applications, in descending order, are school prestige, extracurricular activities and grades. Well down the line are standardized tests, previous employment and diversity.

Rivera reports that many evaluators believe that attendance at a lesser-ranked institution constitutes evidence of a slip up somewhere along the line and/or warrants “a question mark” around analytical ability.

The remaining steps of the screening process further skew the competition toward children from privileged families.

Applicants who were not involved in formalized, high-status extracurricular activities (rock-climbing, lacrosse, cello playing, unpaid internships at organizations with a brand name) were judged unlikely to fit into “a fraternity of smart people” – and did not often move to the interview stage.

**The interview process**

Working-class students, Rivera reminds us, have fewer opportunities to participate in such activities. And, ironically, their conviction that employees really care more about grades and tangible skills than extracurricular activities “constrains, not expands, the types of jobs and incomes available to them when they graduate.”

During the interviews, Rivera points out, the response of the applicant to a concrete “case study” problem can be determinative, especially for consulting firms.

Far more often, however, it’s all about “the fit.”
Interviewers saw fit more in terms of the personality traits conducive to the creation of a tight-knit workplace than the social and communication skills for assessing and attending to client needs.

They sought "surface-level demographic diversity in applicant pools," Rivera writes, "but deep-level cultural homogeneity in new hires."

Interviewers also rewarded applicants who told compelling life stories that emphasized individual choice, freedom, passion and control.

Bootstrapping narratives can subvert existing socioeconomic and racial biases in hiring. However, Rivera suggests, quite often individuals who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are reluctant to disclose personal information to a stranger in a workplace setting.

In firms where teamwork and client satisfaction are important, interpersonal qualities are deemed as important as job-relevant skills.

Convinced that a baseline of intelligence is sufficient, evaluators are content to "outsource" screening for "skills and smarts" to elite universities – and to make selections that privilege fit and polish.

"Of course class matters," a banker told Rivera. "It comes through in the way you speak, the language you use, the way you dress and the general impression that you give off when you talk to someone."

A class-based society

Rivera makes a compelling case that although on the surface the United States is a meritocracy and committed to equal opportunity, in fact it is "creating a rigid class hierarchy based on ascription and birth."

To be sure, some individuals from modest backgrounds get hired by elite organizations; their success is sometimes cited as evidence of a selection process free of bias and based on ability rather than pedigree.

Despite the popular narratives that highlight these successes, Rivera’s book adds to already abundant evidence that “movement from the very bottom to the very top of the economic ladder has become exceedingly rare,” in higher education and employment, despite metrics that on the surface are class-neutral.

Moreover, since social class has not been deemed a protected status under the law, discrimination on its basis remains legal.

For as long as the reputation of organizations are tied to the status of its employees, current practices are likely to remain in place.

To bring change, each of us will need to recognize the high economic and ethical costs of inequality and take ever more affirmative action to level the playing field in all aspects of American culture and society.