

# @issue

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**OUR WEEKLY COLUMNIST LINEUP:**

- **Sunday:** George Will
- **Tuesday:** David Brooks
- **Wednesday:** Leonard Pitts
- **Thursday:** Richard Cohen, Thomas Friedman
- **Friday:** Charles Krauthammer

**3 PAGES DAILY OF DEBATE AND DISCUSSION**

**Page one**

**Hard to believe,** but would-be hair braiders in some states require more training than prospective paramedics.

**Page two**

**Editorial:** Gov. Sonny Perdue's decisions on closing schools and suspending the fuel tax lack a long-term energy vision.

**Page three**

**New Attitudes:** A check of some SAT preparation strategies shows how invalid a measure the test is.

# Education levels widen societal divide

Especially in these days after Katrina, everybody laments poverty and inequality. But what are you doing about it? For example, let's say you work at a university or a college. You are a cog in the one of the great inequality-producing machines America has known. What are you doing to change that?

As you doubtless know, as the information age matures, a new sort of stratification is setting in, between those with higher education and those without. College graduates earn nearly twice as much as high school graduates, and people with professional degrees earn nearly twice as much as those with college degrees.

But worse, this economic stratification is translating into social stratification. Only 28 percent of American adults have a college degree, but most of us in this group find ourselves in workplaces in social milieus where almost everybody has been to college. A social chasm is opening up between those in educated society and those



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in noneducated society, and you are beginning to see vast behavioral differences between the two groups.

For example, divorce rates for college grads are plummeting, but they are not for everyone else. The divorce rate for high school grads is now twice as high as that of college grads.

There are other behavior differences, large and small, which reflect the different social norms in the two classes. High school grads are twice as likely to smoke as college grads. They are much less likely to exercise. College grads are nearly twice as likely to vote. They are more than twice as likely to do volunteer work. They are

much more likely to give blood. These behavioral gaps are widening.

We once had a society stratified by bloodlines, in which the Protestant Establishment was in one class, immigrants were in another and African-Americans were in another. Now we live in a society stratified by education. In many ways this system is more fair, but as the information economy matures, we are learning it comes with its own brutal barriers to opportunity and ascent.

In an agricultural or industrial society, you might grow up in a poor or disorganized family, but you could get a job in a factory and with some grit and determination work your way to respectability. But in an information society, college is the gateway to opportunity. Crucial life paths are set at age 18, which means family and upbringing matter more.

Educated parents not only pass down economic resources to their children, they pass down expectations, habits, knowledge and cogni-

tive abilities. Pretty soon you end up with a hereditary meritocratic class that reinforces itself generation after generation.

You see the results in the college graduation data. In the 1970s, when the information age was young, kids from poorer, less educated families were catching up to kids from more affluent families when it came to earning college degrees. But now the gap between rich and poor is widening.

Students in the poorest quarter of the population have an 8.6 percent chance of getting a college degree. Students in the top quarter have a 74.9 percent chance.

The most damning indictment of our university system is that these poorer kids are graduating from high school in greater numbers. It's when they get to college that they begin failing and dropping out.

Thomas Mortenson of the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education has collected a

mountain of data on growing educational inequality. As he points out, universities have done a wonderful job educating affluent kids since 1980. But they "have done a terrible job of including those from the bottom half of the family income distribution. In this respect, higher education is now causing most of the growing inequality and strengthening class structure of the United States."

Part of the problem is that kids from poorer families have trouble affording higher education. But given the rising flow of aid money, financial barriers are not the main issue. A lot of it has to do with being academically prepared, psychologically prepared and culturally prepared for college.

While we have big political debates in America about equality of results, all those on the left and right say they believe in equality of opportunity.

This is where America is failing most.

► **David Brooks** is a New York Times columnist. His column appears Tuesdays.