

Robert D. Putnam brings our attention to the worsening problem of inequality of opportunity in American society. Though it is a daunting problem that goes far beyond the realm of higher education, Putnam shares a hopeful message of the potential to return to our core values of fairness and equity.

By Robert D. Putnam

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# A Candid Conversation about Schools, Culture, and the Widening Opportunity Gap in America with Professor Robert D. Putnam

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**O**N MAY 13, 2015, EXECUTIVE EDITOR Frank Shushok, Jr., interviewed Robert D. Putnam, Malkin Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, about his new book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*.

**Shushok:** Thank you for making time in your schedule to visit with me. As you know, *About Campus* is read by people who work in higher education and care deeply about students, their learning, and all the associated complexities that confront college and university faculty, administrators, and policy makers.

When I read your new book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, I knew our readers would be compelled by what you've written.

We want to be part of the solution, and we think colleges and universities have an important role addressing the issues you describe. In your book, you paint a dire picture of an ever-widening opportunity gap between rich kids and poor kids. As I was turning the pages, the sense of urgency was palpable. Can you summarize the nature of your concern for *About Campus* readers and explain how we've found ourselves in such a position?

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**Putnam:** The book summarizes a wide range of evidence that, over the last 30 years, there has been a growing class gap among America's young people in terms of the resources and opportunities available to them, or on the other side, the challenges they have to overcome to have success in life. That gap shows up in many, many domains of the lives of young kids. My book shows this in a series of graphs that demonstrate the widening gaps between kids growing up in college-educated homes and kids coming from what we used to call the working class (or high-school-educated homes). Those gaps begin in the area of family stability: kids from working class homes are now—unlike a generation ago and unlike kids from upper-middle class homes today—likely coming from single-parent families. This is true across all races, so this is not just a matter of race. There is a growing gap of what parents can invest in their kids. They can invest basically time or money, and in most cases there's a growing gap between the amount of time and money that affluent, college-educated parents invest in their kids, compared to the amount of time and money that working class parents can invest in their kids. There is also a gap in the quality of schools that kids attend, mostly because there is growing class segregation in America. Increasingly, rich folks are living in enclaves with other rich folks, and poor folks are living in enclaves with other poor folks, and this has inevitable consequences for the quality of schools kids go to. There is also a gap in the amount of support that kids get from their neighborhoods, from community institutions, from churches, and so on. In short, the income gap between rich adults and poor adults, which we've known about for some time now, is affecting the prospects for kids to make progress in their lives, and that fundamentally violates the core principle of American democracy—that everybody gets a fair start in life.

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**ROBERT D. PUTNAM**, Malkin Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a fellow of the British Academy. In 2006, he received the Skytte Prize, the world's highest accolade for a political scientist, and in 2012, he received the National Humanities Medal, the nation's highest honor for contributions to the humanities. Educated at Swarthmore, Oxford, and Yale, he has served as dean of Harvard Kennedy School. He has written 15 books, including *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.

In the past, that principle has not been controversial along party lines. How well you do in life should depend upon your own gifts and talents and hard work, not on what your parents did or didn't do. One of the clearest examples is that high-test-scoring kids from poor backgrounds are less likely to finish a college degree now than low-test-scoring kids from rich families. Your family income matters more than your own abilities and hard work in whether you complete college. This is fundamentally wrong and is certainly costing us economically. Our country is paying a high price, and we will pay a higher price going forward if we don't fix this problem.

**Shushok:** I'm glad you mentioned this particular issue, as I've already shared with my editorial team your data about the correlation between eighth grade

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test scores and college completion. Since our readers span virtually every college and university type, and hold many different roles in these environments, I'm interested in hearing your thoughts about the role higher education leaders can and should play in closing the opportunity gap you describe.

**Putnam:** Since I have worked in higher education all my life, I'm aware of this issue. All these growing gaps show up most clearly in the rates at which kids enter and graduate from college, but that does not mean that the colleges and universities *caused* the gap. Of course there are issues about the affordability of colleges and universities, and I don't doubt for a moment there are things we can do as an industry

to improve affordability—but that is actually not the major cause of this opportunity gap.

I think that all colleges and universities ought to be reaching out and doing more to get first-generation kids into colleges and universities. (I'm not at the moment making a distinction between two-year colleges and four-year colleges, though that is an important distinction to make.)

With respect to my own alma mater, Swarthmore, which is a small college outside Philadelphia, I have been pushing the College to do much more, not only to get more first-generation kids *into* Swarthmore, but to get them *through* Swarthmore. Your readers will likely know, although most Americans don't know, that it's not just a problem of money. It's a problem of reaching out to find these kids, most of who are not in backgrounds where they would naturally learn about Swarthmore, Harvard, Berkeley, or Stanford. So we need to do a lot more to recruit them, and then we have to do a lot more to help them get through. That process of mentoring and supporting first-generation kids within colleges and universities is a big deal, and I don't think we should focus entirely on the issue of finances, tuition, or fellowships.

**Shushok:** As I was reading your book, I was startled by compelling evidence that the class gap with college completion has steadily expanded over the last decades. One might assume we would be closing that gap. Given that students from affluent backgrounds are pulling further and further apart from students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, what are the first steps toward changing this course?

**Putnam:** Well, it follows from what I've said so far that the solution has to begin much earlier in the pipeline. Most of these class gaps—for example, the gap in test scores that Sean Reardon at Stanford has documented—appear even before kids get to first grade. I recognize your question concerns what colleges and universities can do, but the country as a whole has to begin much, much earlier. We have to do much more in mentoring poor kids, finding steady, decent jobs for these kids' parents, increasing access to early childhood education, and many other things.

But to stay within the domain of what colleges and universities can do, I think outreach is an important part of the problem, and I'm going to speak for a moment specifically about community colleges. As you know, the issue of community college tuition has risen up the national agenda because of the Obama administration's emphasis on cutting the tuition to zero, and I think that's a good idea. However, as you and your readers probably know, the real problem with community colleges is not the price of entry; it's getting kids through. Community colleges have a low rate of degree

completion and that has a number of causes. I'm not blaming community colleges for that exactly, except to say that I don't think it is mostly about money. (Thomas Bailey and his colleagues have just published a great overview of the challenges facing community colleges, entitled *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*.)

Beyond money, these students don't have stable, responsible, well-informed adults in their lives, so they lack institutional savvy. They don't know how to make institutions work for them. This is the kind of institutional savvy that my grandchildren have just by living in a well-educated home. On the other hand, there are young people such as the one whose story I share in chapter four of the book: a young woman who comes from a bad neighborhood in Santa Ana, California. Through a miracle, a stranger has agreed to fund everything about her community college attendance, so there are no economic barriers between her and succeeding at community college. Yet, she knows

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nothing about the college that she is nominally attending. She doesn't know whether she's in a two-year or a four-year program. She doesn't know whether the community college even has a curriculum in what she wants to study.

You might say, "How could that possibly be? How could she get into college and not know these things?" The answer is, "that's what it looks like when kids don't have any responsible adults in their lives, any mentors, any guides." Of course I mean in part conventional guidance counselors, but I don't mean only that. If I were trying to improve access to and completion of community colleges, I'd put a lot more emphasis and a lot more money into providing the sorts of student support services and curricular clarity that these kids need—*not* because they are dumb, I want to emphasize that. They are not dumb. It is because they have grown up unbelievably isolated from competent, caring adults.



PROFESSOR ROBERT D. PUTNAM

**Shushok:** On the one hand, your book presents a bleak trajectory for social mobility in the United States. On the other hand, I sense in your voice hope and possibility for a different future. Are you more discouraged or hopeful?

**Putnam:** Oh, I'm optimistic! I think the important and irreplaceable first step is to recognize how serious the problem has become, and that is the first objective of the book, and what we have been talking about so far. It's to get the facts out, and make it clear to Americans on the "up-side" of the opportunity gap just how bad the problem has become on the "down-side" of the gap. I want to put the whole issue of mobility and inequality of opportunity higher on the national agenda. I think progress is being made on that score; in fact, this could easily be the most important domestic issue in the upcoming election, though that's not why I'm optimistic.

I'm optimistic because Americans have faced this kind of problem before, and we have solved it. The end of the nineteenth century, the last "Gilded Age," was very much like America is today: a huge gap between rich and poor; waves of immigration by people who were at that time called "other races," meaning Italians and Jews and Poles and so on. It was a period of enormous political corruption; money dominated politics in that period as it does in our time. It was a period in which the public philosophy was the philosophy called "Social Darwinism," which was the belief that basically "everybody is better off if everybody is selfish." That is not unlike the type of Ayn Rand individualism we have now, where everyone looks out only for number one. And there was widespread political cynicism, a belief that the parties were not solving the problems.

Then, in a relatively short period of time, we actually began to address and to solve these big social problems. I'll give you just one example of a reform that came out of that period that many Americans are

not even aware was a reform. That is, the creation of the free public high school. God did not invent high schools. Public high schools were invented by social reformers around 1910 to give everybody a fair start in life. The idea started in small towns in the Midwest, in Iowa and Kansas and Nebraska and so on. Reformers had to make the case to rich bankers and lawyers and farmers in town to pay for other people's kids to get a free secondary education. Nowadays, that doesn't seem controversial, but at that time of course it was. The rich had already paid for their kids to attend private secondary schools, but the proposal was that everybody—everybody—would be better off, including the bankers and the lawyers and the farmers, if *all* kids got a secondary education. It turned out that was completely right—everybody benefitted. Most of the economic growth during the whole of the twentieth century came from that decision, because it meant that we had a better educated work force than any other country in the world, so it helped the whole country, but it also leveled the playing field.

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I'm not saying I'm sure that's going to happen now, but I can see a clear path in which it could happen. It begins with this national conversation about rich kids and poor kids and the opportunity gap that I hope my book is contributing to, but it doesn't end there. It's not that on February 1, 2017, a new president will submit a bill to Congress and Congress will pass it and we've solved that problem, and we can move on to global warming or some other big problem. Instead, the way it worked in the Progressive Era is that the national conversation gave oxygen to local reformers in out-of-the-way places. Most of the good ideas in that progressive era came from places like Toledo or Galveston or Sacramento or Madison—they did not come from Washington, and they did not come from Harvard. They came from ordinary people in ordinary places trying to solve their versions of the opportunity gap and then discovering that some of those ideas worked.

So, in part I'm trying to sound the alarm for Americans to say, "Look, this is a big, big problem,"

but in part I'm trying to say, "Don't be cynical, we can solve this. We've done it before, and all the obstacles you think there are—like unresponsive political parties, like the power of money in politics, like the ethnic diversity or immigration—we've done this before!" My main point is this: I am not trying to make America into Sweden. I'm trying to make America return to its core values. This is as American as apple pie. I know that sounds really hokie, but we can do this; we just have to recognize how big the problem has become. I can't say for sure that we will solve it, but I can certainly see the path by which we can. It begins by everybody across party lines realizing how dangerous this problem has become. If we do fix it, great, I'm really an American optimist. But if we don't solve it, we will continue to move in a very dangerous direction, toward two Americas—the haves and the have-nots—and that's not an America I think any of us, if we think about it, would want to live in.

**Shushok:** Readers won't be able to hear the inflection in your voice and the passion behind your words, but it's so very clear to me that you care deeply about this. Can you tell me why?

**Putnam:** I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. While I was in college, I met this really cute young co-ed in a political science class, and we've been hanging out together for the last 55 years. She and I took a train from Swarthmore down to Washington, DC on January 20, 1961, stood at the back of the crowd at the east front of the Capitol building, and I heard President Kennedy say, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." I realize this sounds unbelievably hokey, but I thought he was talking to me! Yet, America's been going to hell in a handbasket ever since I started to vote, so I in some sense feel personally responsible for this mess. I want to contribute a little bit to the solution.

I want to be really clear about this because my book could be mistaken for nostalgia. There were a lot of bad things about America in 1950—racism and sexism and many other problems. I'm not saying for a

second that I want to return to the 1950s or 1960s, but I do say there were some things about that period—especially a sense of responsibility for one another, and a sense of equality. That core value was the foundation upon which the civil rights revolution of the 1960s was founded. That core notion that everybody ought to have a fair chance was the ideal out of which the women's revolution in part came. But on the way to that, we lost track of these important class differences that have now widened beyond belief and beyond

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endurance. I think we can fix it, that's all. I want to make my little contribution by trying to re-awaken America to this unfinished business.

**Shushok:** I hope you know that those of us working on college and university campuses take your words seriously and will ask ourselves how we plan to contribute to closing the opportunity gap.

**Putnam:** I appreciate your kind words and your pledge to help with the problem!