

Behind Closed 'Dores: The Lack of Opportunity for P.O.C. and First-Generation Students at Vanderbilt

Chance Brown

As I sat on the couch of my childhood home and started my favorite cartoon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, I began my daily tradition. As the elements danced across the screen, the door opened, and my mother and father began *their* daily tradition.

She kissed him on the cheek and, as always, asked, "How was work?" He always just replied, "Work." He tossed his toolbox in the closet, pulled off his work boots with a grunt, and headed straight for the shower. That day, I asked Mom, "Why does Dad look so upset when he gets home?"

She replied, "Chance, in life you have two choices: work with your back or your brain. Your dad works with his back, and it's not easy to be on that roof all day in the sun."

In childish ignorance, I responded, "Why would someone work with their back?"

My mom then explained, "Not everyone has a choice. That's why it's important that you work hard in school. You are so bright. If you work hard with your brain, you'll never have to work hard with your back."

From then on, school became my first priority because, like many first-generation college students, I was always told that college was a path to escaping poverty. That, by simply being admitted to college, I would have access to jobs and opportunities otherwise unavailable. While this is partly true, what often goes unsaid is the harsh realities of college for many students like me.

I am first generation. My parents didn't finish high school, and now I attend one of the best universities in the country. My hard work and high school success made me believe in the meritocracy my parents instilled within me: "You are a Black man; you have to work twice as hard for half as much."

When I arrived at college, I had an inflated sense of self. School has always been a place of affirmation and support. Despite extreme financial and familial struggles, I had made it to Vanderbilt, and the journey toward financial and personal freedom had begun...or so I thought.

When I landed on Vanderbilt's campus, I assumed that all my peers and I were at the same place professionally. While I had heard that college was more difficult for students of lower socio-economic backgrounds, in my 18-year-old naivete, I believed that my four years of private schooling had equipped me to navigate white and affluent spaces. Because of this, I saw admission to an "elite" college as the universal equalizer. However, I quickly learned this was not the case. Much of the "success" seen in elite universities is actually rooted in systems of privilege that predate admission.

A distinct phenomenon at prestigious universities is the presence of "elite organizations." These highly competitive groups are typically tied to pre-professional pathways. For example, at Vanderbilt, business fraternities and exclusive clubs serve as paramount signals of future success. While the benefits these organizations provide are impactful, they are often exclusionary by nature. In fact, most accept fewer than five percent of applicants, creating a funnel that

disadvantages students unfamiliar with the "hidden curriculum" of corporate, affluent, and often predominantly white professional spaces.

This cycle is self-reinforcing. Experience and connections are needed to enter elite clubs. These clubs provide access to internships, which in turn lead to full-time employment offers. While admissions claim to weigh "business acumen" and "potential," clubs often rely on arbitrary, nebulous, and entrenched biases to select members. The time and financial commitments can also exclude low-income students who must work to support themselves.

I participated in recruitment for a pre-professional fraternity at Vanderbilt. The process had four rounds: a résumé drop, a small group interview, an elevator pitch, and the final round. At each stage, about half the students were cut. The applicant pool shrank from about 500 to 150, then 75, then 30, before the final cohort of 20 was chosen.

Before the third-round elevator pitch, I attended a fraternity workshop for first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students. Only 75 applicants remained; 7 identified as FGLI. I counted the applicants and was shocked: "How could so few FGLI students be remaining?" Noticing my puzzled expression, the DEI chair asked what I was thinking. When I shared my surprise, he said, "This is amazing! During my recruitment, only 2 FGLI people made it to the elevator pitch."

Unfortunately, I was a victim of the dreaded elevator pitch. I was not granted entry into the fraternity. Of the final cohort of 20 admitted members, only 2 were FGLI students (10%). This resulted in a 1% acceptance rate for the club. The likelihood of being both an admitted member and FGLI was 0.1 percentage points.

This lack of representation does not reflect a lack of talent or ambition among FGLI students. Instead, it shows how elite organizations and their selective processes reinforce systems of privilege. Unspoken norms and the hidden curriculum mark who belongs to the social "in-group." I argue that vague ideas of "business acumen" and "potential" act as coded proxies for closeness to dominant (often white, upper-class) standards of professionalism, rather than true assessments of ability or future success. This shows that professionalism is less a neutral evaluative framework and more a socially constructed standard shaped by white, upper-class norms.

This hegemonic professionalism does not exist in a vacuum. The lack of opportunity for POC and FGLI students has been further compounded by recent attacks on DEI by the current administration. Programs and pathways that supported marginalized students in entering exclusionary industries—such as management consulting, investment banking, law, and finance—have dwindled significantly due to federal mandates. As these programs vanish, students from different backgrounds compete for the same limited positions under the guise of 'equality.' This competition rewards those with access to the networks, social capital, and cultural knowledge within these industries. Without these support structures, campus involvement has become even more important. Thus, the pathways that once bridged the gap between unprivileged students and prestigious careers have been eliminated.

My mom was right: education opens doors. But not all doors are equally accessible. At Vanderbilt, I saw that success often reflects access to networks, hidden curricula, and privilege, not just ability or effort.

Thus, the proclaimed meritocracy championed by conservatives is, in reality, the reinforcement of a system of inequality under the guise of fairness. Selective recruitment and the elimination of diversity programs not only limit opportunity but also define who is seen as competent. This increasingly narrow definition of competency forces students from underrepresented backgrounds to navigate persistent structural barriers within institutions that claim to reward talent but continue to privilege those who are already most advantaged.

For higher education to deliver the economic mobility so often ascribed to it, institutions must change. Otherwise, opportunity cannot depend on exposure, nor can potential hinge on proximity to a hegemonic ideal. Until change occurs, less privileged students must rely on their brains *and* their backs: their minds meet academic goals while their backs toil against systemic barriers that minimize and ignore their abilities.