Kahlenberg, R.D. (2025). *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at American Colleges*. Hachette Book Group.

Review by Kenneth Oldfield

In *Class Matters*, Richard Kahlenberg argues that America's top colleges should redefine merit to include socioeconomic obstacles overcome when considering an applicant's qualifications. He supports this change, believing it will lead to many more students from low-income and working-class backgrounds gaining admission to these premier schools. Kahlenberg makes a strong case for why these exclusive colleges are justified in democratizing their student ranks according to socioeconomic background. He reports, for example, that 1) wealthy students at the University of North Carolina campus, the so-called "university of the people," outnumber low-income students sixteen to one (p.3); 2) there are more legacy students at UNC than first-generation students, notwithstanding the fact that "there were *451 times* more American adults age twenty-five and older without a college degree compared to adults in the world who graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill" (p. 215, emphasis in original); and 3) anyone who visits one of American's top colleges is "twenty times as likely to bump into a wealthy student as a student from a low income background. The über rich – students from families in the top 1% of income nationally – often took up more seats than students from the bottom 60% by income combined" (p. 121, citing Chetty et al., 2017).

For present purposes, think of Kahlenberg's hypothetical individual, let's call the person "Chris," of humble beginnings as an applicant with high SAT (or ACT) scores, strong personal recommendations, and an impressive grade point average whose parents quit school in the eleventh grade to work at minimum wage jobs all their lives. For Kahlenberg Chris is prima facia meritorious and should receive special attention from admissions committees at any of the nation's best colleges. (Hereinafter, Kahlenberg's proposal that affirmative action be based on obstacles overcome is called SESAA for socioeconomic status affirmation action.)

Kahlenberg wants to increase social class diversity at America's top colleges for two interrelated reasons, including (a) a highly disproportionate number of those leading the nation's most influential public and private organizations graduated from one of these schools, and (b) SESAA will cause these organizations to better reflect the country's demographic characteristics and thus expand the range of viewpoints considered in discussions and decision making. For those claiming that despite their on-paper qualifications, SESAA students are not academically suited to study at a top-ranked school, Kahlenberg cites empirical evidence to the contrary.

In *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action* (1996), Kahlenberg argued that American colleges should adopt SESAA plans. His primary focus in that book, however, was reviewing the legal precedents showing that college admissions committees are free to employ SESAA criteria without fearing the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) will declare the practice

unconstitutional as it has done with race-based affirmative action programs. Kahlenberg demonstrated that the Justices had never rejected a public policy employing social class distinctions, a conclusion that remains true. He was not the first person to make this claim about prior Court rulings. In a *Connecticut Law Tribune* essay, Stuart Taylor Jr. called SESAA "legally unassailable" (1991, p. 23).

The American legal and political (to make an admittedly artificial distinction) environments have shifted markedly in Kahlenberg's favor since he published *The Remedy*. Using varied tactics including executive orders and public referenda, California, Florida, Washington, and Michigan, among others, outlawed race-based affirmative action policies in higher education. Most importantly in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), SCOTUS ruled 6-3 that it is unconstitutional to weigh racial criteria when deciding student admissions. At the same time, the Court readily acknowledged the social class distortions associated with attending a top-rated American college. In a concurring opinion, Justice Gorsuch (note 3, p. 14) cited Bazelon's 2023 *The New York Times* article showing that, "In the Ivy League, children whose parents are in the top 1 percent of the income distribution are 77 times as likely to attend as those whose parents are in the bottom 20 percent of the income bracket" (p. 41).

Using *Students for Fair Admissions*, historical events, and statistics to buttress his proposal, in *Class Matters* Kahlenberg argues that America's prestigious colleges have good reason to replace the now unconstitutional practice of race-based affirmative action policies with SESAA alone. He references sources showing that SESAA initiatives can improve racial *and* socioeconomic diversity among students attending these exclusive schools.

Despite *Students for Fair Admissions* and evidence justifying SESAA, Kahlenberg explains that the nation's selective schools have five reasons for being slow to recruit and support more students of humble origin. *First*, SESAA means selective colleges must expand the amount of financial aid they provide to a much larger number of students whose families could not otherwise afford to send their children to an exclusive school, assistance these institutions claim is beyond their means.

A *second* reason is legacy preferences. Kahlenberg believes legacy admissions should be abolished. This change is easier said than done, as he acknowledges. He points out that legacy students are more likely to come from families, sometimes legacies themselves, who can pay full price to attend an elite school. Besides their family's financial ability, legacy students may later make large donations to their alma mater. Finally, wealthy family members who graduated from an exclusive college but not an Ivy League school may donate money to an Ivy to help a son or daughter gain admission. Although he was not a Harvard graduate, Jared Kushner's father, Charles, a New York University alumnus, donated $2.5 million to Harvard to improve his son's chance of being accepted. Kahlenberg describes Jared, President Trump's son-in-law, as a less than stellar student and quotes a Harvard official he interviewed who explained, "There were at the time other kids we thought should really get in on the merits, and they did not" (p. 191). Jared is now a Harvard graduate.

Third, America's selective colleges do not want to jettison legacy preferences because of something both Kahlenberg and SCOTUS recognize. In *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.*, the Court noted that, "College admissions are zero-sum; a benefit provided to some applicants but not

to others necessarily advantages the former at the expense of the latter" (p. 7). In other words, because there are a fixed number of seats available at each college, reducing or abandoning legacy preferences to admit more SESAA students risks losing the financial benefits of legacy admissions, a one-for-one tradeoff the schools want to avoid.

Fourth, "Universities," according to Kahlenberg, "take great pains to signal their virtue on issues of race, [but] turn a blind eye to class" (p. 9). He mentions, for instance, that minorities at these exclusive colleges closely mirror majority students in having upper-middle or upper-class roots, meaning that racial affirmative action policies have primarily advantaged the advantaged. Kahlenberg's reasoning is evocative of Robert Michels's observation that, "Who says organization, says oligarchy" (2001, 1911, p. 241). In his book *Political Parties*, Michels reported that even when an organization starts with a flat, democratic structure, it inevitably evolves a governing class whose selection process favors new members of like mind and circumstances, a self-perpetuating elite. Even when pressured to alter their admissions criteria, the ensuing reforms are modest, just enough to satisfy the political zeitgeist. Michels described this situation as "new conductor, but the music is just the same" (n.330, p. 266). *Class Matters* offers a way of lessening this problem of structural sclerosis by granting access to many students who would otherwise be denied entry, a major democratic reform that can significantly alter how these exclusive colleges operate.

Last, Kahlenberg argues that the continuing emphasis on racial and ethnic disparities in higher education (and most other aspects of American life for that matter) pits poor and working-class people of all stripes against each other, a red herring that, again, advantages the advantaged. He asserts that when poor and working-class people join forces, every member benefits from the amalgamation no matter their otherwise differing characteristics. An example of Kahlenberg's interests-in-common argument is television news reports showing racial, ethnic, and gender integrated union members picketing for better wages, working conditions, and other benefits. (See, for instance, the *Point of View* broadcast on PBS recounting the efforts of a diverse mix of current and former warehouse workers who founded a union at an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Staten Island, New York (*Union*, 2025)).

It is impossible to read *Class Matters* without hoping that Kahlenberg persists in his pursuit of equalizing learning opportunities and intellectual diversity in higher education. Based on the ideas he presents in *Class Matters*, here are three topics he should consider addressing in his next book about classism in American higher learning.

First, in *Class Matters* Kahlenberg focuses exclusively on having America's leading colleges adopt SESAA policies, because, as noted, so many of these schools' graduates become leading figures in major businesses, industries, and the federal government. Certainly, the same logic applies to the country's remaining colleges. These institutions feed membership in state and local governments and other influential institutions such as the press, financial establishments, K-12 schools, the Better Business Bureau, and Planned Parenthood. Shouldn't the rewards of diversity flow to all organizations where the evidence shows SESAA policies are justified? Besides, calling attention to the long-overlooked effects of social class origin on the trajectory of people's lives will generate still more support for SESAA policies in higher learning and elsewhere by expanding the interpretation of "merit" to include Kahlenberg's idea of socioeconomic hurdles overcome.

Second, the bounties of social class diversity in higher education do not apply to students alone. The logic and benefits of SESAA that Kahlenberg lists in *Class Matters* apply equally to those teaching these predominantly younger learners (see, e.g., Morgan et al., 2022). Professors have considerable power over the ideas students encounter in and out of class. Faculty select lecture and discussion topics, textbooks, writing assignments, and which classes students must complete to graduate, to name only a few instances of this influence. Kahlenberg should amplify his efforts to overcome classism in higher learning by expanding his SESAA concerns to include professors everywhere. This integrative reform will spread diversity's payoffs to both sides of the podium.

Finally, Kahlenberg should detail ways to hold colleges accountable for their successes and failures in implementing widespread SESAA diversity plans for students and professors. Currently, many schools list racial and gender figures and related visuals on their websites. Kahlenberg should devise ways to measure and publicize information showing the socioeconomic origin of students and faculty at every American college. Otherwise, the things you can count, but don't count, can't count.

In *Class Matters* Kahlenberg offers a highly readable, well-researched, and persuasively argued case for why America's exclusive colleges should adopt SESAA policies to accommodate the Court's *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.* ruling. He shows that this reform will democratize student ranks by both race and class. He further demonstrates that this approach will help unite working class people in general and counteract the divide-and-conquer consequences of using racial affirmative action plans. Once SESAA becomes commonplace, this reform will speak to the leitmotif in Kahlenberg's writings: the unstated complaint that "class rooms" aptly describes the workings of America's top-rated colleges, and the rest of tertiary schooling for that matter, if only to a lesser extent.

Reviewer Bio:

Kenneth Oldfield is an emeritus professor of public administration at the University of Illinois-Springfield. He has published articles on various topics including property tax administration, Graduate Record Examination predictive validity, the Office of Economic Opportunity, personnel selection and orientation, community college funding disparities, property-assessment uniformity, tax increment financing, the human genome project, graduate internships, the philosophy of science, and the sociology of knowledge. His current research, conference presentations, and publications focus on democratizing higher education by recruiting more students, professors, and administrators who are first-generation college and of poverty or working-class origin.

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