Interview with Arthur Levine  
by Adam Howard

Howard: What are some of the main obstacles that prevent most poor students from making it to college?

Levine: The poor are growing increasingly isolated. Examples of success don’t exist in most poor communities anymore. The people who have been most advantaged are gang leaders and pimps and drug dealers. There are no educational requirements for those positions. It’s a world in which students are unaware of avenues out and in which parents haven’t had a great deal of success with the educational system. There’s no connection seen between schooling and future opportunity. Children haven’t done very well in schools. By the time they enter, they are behind expectations in many cases and most fall behind grade level by third grade. Rather than “barriers” I’d describe a system that prepares people to continue to live where they live. It’s more than barriers. It’s an absence of opportunity.

Howard: What did you discover from your research about poor students beating the odds by entering college? What made it possible for poor students to enter postsecondary education?

Levine: I was really surprised after coming back from spending a few weeks living in a low-income housing project. I came back really quite depressed. I would ask the kids, “How far would you go in school if you could go as far as you want?” The common answer was tenth grade, followed distantly by twelfth grade. I asked their moms what they want for their kids and they said they want the same things any parent wants. I want my kid to do well. I want my kid to not get in trouble. I want my kid to be happy. I asked them about college and whether they wanted their children to go to college. Their eyes glazed over. I might as well have asked, “do you expect your child to go to Mars?” When I went back to campus after that visit, I was President of Bradford College and we created a scholarship designed specifically for children living in that housing project. The first student arrived and a few weeks later, so I invited him to my office and asked him, “Was it our scholarship that got you to college?” And he said, “No. I was always going to college. Your scholarship got me to this college.” I realized that my focus had been wrong. I had been focusing on pathologies, what we just called “barriers” to college. I should have been focusing on the anomalies—the kids who should have ended up being pregnant, who should have ended up being dead, who should have ended up being imprisoned, who should have ended up prostituting themselves, and who should have ended up using drugs. According to statistics, they shouldn’t have ended up in college and yet somehow they beat the odds. And so I started studying those youngsters in two schools: a community college in Boston and Harvard University. The most amazing feature was that when one spoke to the students it was like reading the same novel by the same B novelist over and over and over again. They all told the same story, which is somebody intervened in their lives—one person. And what’s common about these students, particularly those who ended up going to the best schools in the country, is that the intervention occurred early, helped them miss the potholes
that the other kids in the neighborhood stumbled over, assisted them with enrichment, was continuous, and involved the person who initiated it or another who the child was passed on to until college. They took the child from wherever the child was and provided a sense of opportunity. They provided a large view of the world, and they may even have marched them to the college gate.

**Howard**: Did that happen only with individual mentors? Did service organizations also provide this type of mentoring and guidance for the children?

**Levine**: I didn’t find that organizations provided this support. It was always a person. It could have been a person within such an organization, particularly for older adults. Social welfare organizations were important, for example, rehab clinics, psychological counseling, child placement and those kinds of experiences were more likely relevant to older students, who missed the mentor early in their lives.

**Howard**: Is higher education moving in the direction of making college more accessible to poor students?

**Levine**: No. I think we’re moving in the opposite direction. When I talk with college presidents I find that budgets are becoming larger, and they have to make cuts. I frequently ask what the priorities are and the answers are, I want to preserve morale, I want to preserve quality, and I want to preserve access. The real emphasis goes into morale and whatever it is that we define as quality. And in this world, access has become a rhetoric flare, not something institutions are committed to. The expectation is that the state or the government will make access possible. The fact is that colleges are raising tuition and reducing financial aid relative to the tuition raises, and poor kids aren’t going to college at the rates they use to, particularly poor males.

**Howard**: So what should be the responsibility of higher education?

**Levine**: Higher education in America began with the notion that it is an imperative to provide access to higher education for the poor. Harvard made that very clear when they talked about the admission of poor scholars. Every college since, for the most part, has taken that on as a mission. Higher education provided financial aid historically only to those in need. What we found in recent years is that there has been a switch. Recently, we’re seeing more and more merit aid, which goes to students who may not need it. It is simply a tool to attract them to a college and to increase U.S. News and World rankings. It is used to increase the quality of the student body in terms of scores that students have on standardized tests. But who gets lost? Poor kids for whom the amount of financial aid available from institutions has diminished because of the switch to merit aid.

**Howard**: Being at a liberal arts college, I have learned a new meaning for “sticker price.” Families rarely pay the “sticker price” of tuition because colleges provide students enough merit aid so that families feel they are getting a good deal.

**Levine**: Sticker prices are also enough to scare off poor people.

**Howard**: Absolutely.

**Levine**: One of the conversations I remember having with students at Harvard, these were poor kids who were first generation to attend college, was about the tuition at Harvard. I asked them where they got the nerve to apply to a school that
costs more than their parents made last year. They told me about the financial aid that was available. They told me about issues like sticker price. These youngsters were very sophisticated about issues of financial aid and access to college. For many poor kids—the vast majority—there is no such knowledge. Sticker price scares them off.

Howard: What are the challenges poor students face once they get to college? Do you think the challenges they face are more than about money and being able to afford college?

Levine: Absolutely. I wouldn’t diminish money problems. My most poignant conversation was with an adult who dropped out of college because she couldn’t afford the bus fare to go. Those issues are real. Poor kids need to understand money, but that may not be the biggest issue. For every poor youngster, there is a sense of living in two worlds. There is the world of the college and the world they came from. The worlds are dramatically different in terms of experience, in terms of values. The sad news for the poor kid getting to college is that he or she doesn’t fit in either world anymore. At home, a student has in some ways learned a language that family may no longer understand. In most cases, poor college students deal with subjects that their family hasn’t dealt with in the past. They are also experiencing a socialization process that differentiates them from everybody in the family and neighborhood. The difficulty is that it is hard for the youngster to feel part of the new community he or she has entered. I remember someone saying to me, “I don’t dress like they do. I don’t understand their jokes. I don’t like their music. I can’t even figure out what utensils to use in the dinning room for the different kinds of food.” It’s not like there’s an enormous assortment of dining utensils available. There are no lobster forks. So we’re talking about basic kinds of issues. What that student needs is a peer group. We need significant numbers of students so that they have each other. What the student needs is counseling to address the kinds of emotions that are being raised. What the student needs is preparation support, sometimes in terms of academic skills, sometimes just in terms of language and colloquialisms. It’s like entering a new country. We at least have guides available for us when we enter another country. Poor kids haven’t got that. In an ideal world, what’s also necessary is to have someone talk with the family and have the family understand these problems. We should work with students with their families.

Howard: In the era of tight budgets and higher standards, what are colleges and universities doing and what are they not doing to provide the necessary support for poor students to be successful? By “successful,” I mean they complete their degrees.

Levine: There are universities that are better at providing money. Better endowed institutions do that. A place like Berea College has been designed specifically for poor students, and that is probably the model in the country for the best kinds of programs that are available. For most institutions, disadvantaged youngsters aren’t the whole population, and it’s a special group with a special need like every other group on campus with special needs. As the mitosis of groups on campus continues, we get smaller and smaller, more specific kinds of groups advocating for their own needs. With poor students, the minimum is financial aid and counseling.
Howard: Who provides that counseling? I mean how would that counseling play itself out?

Levine: It could be put anywhere. What we have now are Latino counselors. We have gay and lesbian counselors. We have international student counselors. We could have counselors for disadvantaged students.

Howard: What are the necessary conditions and types of support needed for all students to be successful in college?

Levine: Sandy Astin has probably done the best work in this area. Astin looked at the conditions in which students thrive in college. It’s a sense of participation. It’s actively being involved in college life. We need to do those things. Those things can’t happen without us. Students won’t get actively involved unless the campus ends up being a welcoming place, unless the campus provides adequate resources so the student doesn’t have to work 100 hours a week, unless the campus provides academic support for the student in order for the student to succeed in classes. But once we get beyond the basics—supports needed for a student to come to college—participation is the key to success, active involvement in campus activities.

Howard: I completely agree. At a lot of institutions, students have to have the economic and other resources to be involved. They have to have the money but also resources that allow them to figure out their place in the community and how to participate in campus life.

Levine: Let me return to an earlier question about the lack of support for poor college students. The rhetoric is right but the actions aren’t. The tuition and financial aid structure discourages students from coming. Institutions are creating a greater disparity as tuition costs rise and as financial aid is increasingly diverted into merit based rather than need based. Colleges and universities don’t provide adequate support for poor students to remain on campus. When asked why they don’t do more, universities will likely point at the state and say, “The state’s commitment to poor people has diminished.” Then they express chagrin at the lack of state’s efforts in this regard.

Howard: Especially so with the shift in financial aid from grants to loans.

Levine: That is a critical point. That’s exactly what’s happened. What we’ve seen is a silent revolution. Until the Reagan administration, Americans believed that the primary beneficiary of a college education was the nation. So we offered a high proportion of grants to the students. During the Reagan administration, that assumption was changed without a national debate. And we reached the conclusion that the primary beneficiary of a college education was the individual. Once that change of opinion occurred there was a dramatic shift of resources from grants to loans. If one lives in a poor family the thought of taking out loans that amount to more than the family earns is absolutely ridiculous.

Howard: Another part of that is when only a small percentage of poor students complete college, the others are leaving with no degree and a debt to pay. They are in a worse financial shape than before they entered college.

Levine: That’s just terrible.
Howard: What can we do to assist in the efforts of making college a successful experience for poor students?

Levine: There are several things that I think they can do and need to do. The first is that they know students better than any group on campus. They need to educate the rest of the campus about student characteristics, student needs, the ways the campus can better serve them and the ways in which the campus serves them well already. Nobody does that on campuses. I realize that this is difficult but it’s important. Academics don’t have a great track record of listening to student affairs people, and that problem has several dimensions. Part of it is different kinds of backgrounds. They speak different languages, and there’s a class system on campus. What this means is that student affairs people have to be bilingual. They have to speak student affairs lingo as well as academese. What it also means is they have to make the effort to talk with the academics on campus who are going to have those students in their classes and the other senior administrators on the campus, to explain what’s necessary. That may be a particularly large issue as the economy becomes more and more difficult and there are limits to how high colleges and universities can continue to raise tuition. At the moment, only 4% of American families can afford to pay the full sticker price of a private college education. So there’s really only one role for student affairs professionals and counselors, and that’s supporting students. That means providing students with information and assistance in financial aid, with academic support as necessary, with personal counseling, and with assistance with the problems that are a part of their lives and may not be a part of other students’ lives. It may mean things like childcare for single adults with children. It may mean any number of different things that are unique to poor students and don’t come in the lives of most college students. It’s additional to all the things that come in the lives of most college students.

Howard: In terms of academic support, I think it’s important for us to recognize that most poor students attend schools before they enter college that really don’t provide the educational experiences necessary for them to be fully prepared for college work. What type of academic support should colleges provide poor students?

Levine: I think the most useful kind is pre-freshman programs. These are for early identification students. It would be wonderful to let those students know in their junior year of high school that you’re accepted to college so that you can keep up your work. Throughout their senior year augment what goes on in the high school with college work so that one can imagine a split between the two with the college providing some of the activities, particularly for local students. Summer programs after the junior or senior year aim to bring students to a level that’s thought to be required. So the first day they walk in they walk in with a smaller deficit than students have traditionally walked in to college with.

Howard: Earlier I asked how the current trend in higher education relates to making college accessible to poor students. Similarly, is higher education moving in the direction of providing poor students the necessary support they need to be successful in college so that they complete their degrees?

Levine: Access to college for poor kids, bottom quartile income, is actually declining. We did better years ago. So one can look back and pick out practices
that work. In 1947 President Truman created a commission to study higher education and identified five barriers to college. These barriers were race, gender, income, religion and geographic location. We’ve done very well in gender. We’re doing better on race. In terms of location we’ve almost beaten it entirely. We have campuses in easy access to more than 90% of the population. Religion is no longer a major issue. Usually the issue we fail most miserably on is income. We haven’t gotten rid of that barrier.

Howard: So, you’re referring to the barrier in terms of access and poor students being successful once they’ve entered college?

Levine: There are examples. There are success stories. But we’re not doing enough.

Howard: Oftentimes these success stories are used to justify not doing more than what we’re currently doing.

Levine: You may well be right. When we think of classification of students we don’t think of the poor as a classification. Too often “poor” gets lost in the race. We think of age differences. We think of race differences. We think of urban and suburban differences. We don’t think about class though. And maybe this is something we need to think about again.

Howard: Why do you think we avoid thinking about class?

Levine: Because too often we just move on. We equilibrate race and poverty. I once taught a course on higher education and the poor while I taught at Harvard. I spent most of the term arguing with the students that race and poverty weren’t synonyms. Throughout the course, there was one fellow who continued, no matter what I said, no matter what I did, to talk about blacks when what he meant was poor people.