

SEM Q REVIEW

Lifting the Veil on Enrollment Management: How a Powerful Industry is Limiting Social Mobility in American Higher Education

BURD, S. 2024. CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS. 288 PP.

Reviewed by Kimberley Buster-Williams

The book *Lifting the Veil on Enrollment Management: How a Powerful Industry is Limiting Social Mobility in American Higher Education* examines the current higher education landscape through the lens of enrollment management. The reader is introduced to key historical milestones in U.S. higher education, such as the rise of college rankings (e.g., *U.S. News & World Report*), and how these developments have shaped today's highly competitive, "win at all costs" environment.

The opening chapters illustrate what can best be characterized as a perfect storm—a convergence of factors where once innovative and avant-garde enrollment management strategies and tactics have become increasingly perilous in the era of big data. With the right technology and expertise, universities can now harness big data and analytics to drive admissions and enhance student engagement (Tattersfield 2024, para. 2). While the use of big data can positively impact students, such as by improving retention through just-in-time interventions, this book places greater emphasis on its potential downsides—namely, the tailoring of recruitment campaigns to yield cohorts with specific characteristics that overwhelmingly benefit the institution.

In the concluding section, the book invites readers to contemplate policy changes aimed at addressing growing concerns, particularly those related to academic capitalism.

With nearly 30 years of experience in enrollment management, I was particularly curious about three things:

- How accurately the profession would be portrayed;
- How comprehensive the history of enrollment management would be; and
- Whether recent negative news stories about higher education, combined with aggressive negative stimuli, might unduly influence perceptions of the content. In other words, would a *mere exposure effect* shape how someone evaluates the material?

These considerations form what I'm calling my "three-prong test"—the criteria for my overall assessment.

What is the Mere Exposure Effect?

The mere exposure effect is an example of cognitive bias and is also called the familiarity principle (Nickerson 2023). Essentially, the more we encounter something, the more we tend to prefer it, based on familiarity alone.

In 1968, social psychologist Robert Zajonc published a landmark paper on the mere exposure effect. Zajonc explored the mere exposure effect through three types of supporting studies. These studies involved word fre-

quency and word evaluation, interpersonal contact and interpersonal attraction, and musical frequency and liking (Nickerson 2023, para. 2).

Humans are not perfect decision-makers. Not only are we not perfect, but we depart from perfection or rationality in systematic and predictable ways (Bazerman 2025, para. 1). By understanding these limitations, we can also identify strategies for making better and more effective decisions. Among other factors, we are swayed by our experience of information processing. Repeated statements, whether they are factually true or false, are easier to process—they create processing fluency, which lends them validity.

According to the mere exposure effect, people make a range of decisions because they are more familiar with one of the choices, despite evidence that an alternative might be better. This exposure can, in some cases, lead to perceptual fluency, which may make certain tasks or decisions easier to complete after being exposed to a stimulus. It may also lead someone to make the “incorrect” decision simply because they are more familiar with one of the options (Dodson 2024, para. 12).

Disclaimer

I knew that doing a review of a book about my chosen profession would require that I put a few strategies in place to address potential bias. To this end, this review will incorporate the aforementioned “three-prong test,” a set of criteria used to determine if I would recommend this book to others. In addition to this evaluation criteria, at times, I will compare elements of this book to one I read nearly 25 years ago: *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, by Lawrence Otis Graham.

In 1999, just before reading Graham's book, I was apprehensive. At the time, this tell-all book had been met with harsh criticism for “lifting the veil” on a group of Black families. This controversial book, which exposed the Black upper class, went on to become a national bestseller. As Graham shared in the book's introduction:

For many people, this book is a political or social hot potato in the sense that even though most blacks talk about the issues of elitism, racial passing, class structure, and

skin color within the black community, they don't want to see it broadcast in a book (ix).

Although it may have been uncomfortable for some, Graham's book was accurate and made a valuable contribution to the body of work on race and class. As I began reading Burd's book on a similarly contentious topic, I was eager to discover what new insights it might offer and whether it would pass my three-prong test: accuracy, historical comprehensiveness, and appropriate stimuli.

A Tale of Two Tell-All Books

The Britannica Dictionary defines a “tell-all” as a book that contains new and unusually shocking information about someone or some things—often used before another noun (Britannica Online, retrieved on August 30, 2024). From the outset, I considered both books to fall in this category—a tell-all. While there are many notable differences between these two books, a few stood out.

One major difference between *Lifting the Veil on Enrollment Management* and *Our Kind of People* is that *Lifting the Veil* is an edited volume with eleven chapters written by different authors. Another difference between the two books is that *Lifting the Veil on Enrollment Management* calls for policy changes that would reduce (or remove) the current “winner takes all” mindset in higher education while *Our Kind of People* did not.

Regarding similarities, both books had intriguing introductions. For example, in *Lifting the Veil*, the reader is introduced to main points such as:

- Many public colleges have embraced the enrollment management strategies of their private college counterparts.
- In the 1980s, the Reagan administration emphasized the private returns of higher education over the public ones as it pushed Congress to slash federal student aid spending. Also, in the 1980s, the *U.S. News & World Report* began ranking colleges.

Before reading the *Lifting the Veil* introduction, I noted the eleven chapter titles. After reading the titles

of the first two chapters, *Reign and Ruin* and *Going to the Witch Doctor*, I proceeded to the introduction with slight trepidation. My concerns deepened when I read these statements on page two:

Private colleges first adopted enrollment management policies and practices in the late 1970s and 1980s. In the previous three decades, these colleges opened their doors wider to low-income students and students of color than ever before.

What caught my attention was that Burd overlooked a major practice in the 1960s: shaping a class based on gender. As shared in my review (Buster-Williams 2003) of the book *Yale Needs Women How the First Group of Girls Rewrote the Rules of an Ivy League Giant*:

- In 1968, the list of U.S. colleges that banned women undergraduates read like an academic who's who: Amherst, Boston College, Bowdoin, Brown, Carnegie Mellon, Columbia, Dartmouth, Davidson, Duke, Georgetown, Harvard, John Hopkins, Notre Dame, Penn, Princeton, Rutgers, Tufts, Tulane, UVA, Washington & Lee, West Point, and Yale.
- A few schools, like Harvard and Brown, had created sister schools that kept women nearby, but none were admitted to the same college that men attended (8).

In this review, I went on to share that:

- In 1968, for the first time, Yale began to reconsider its staunch position on co-education and the reason was simple—declining yield rates.
- The author shared that, by 1968, more than 40 percent of students admitted to Yale were declining the offer citing Yale's single-sex status.
- Yale's overall yield rate in 1968 was 56 percent. Yale's president, Kingman Brewster, cited two reasons for going co-ed: "the loss of first-rate students who turned down Yale to attend colleges with 'co-educational attractions' and a Princeton report which

indicated that women students were vital to Princeton's future" (Buster-Williams 2022).

In addition to this oversight, as I read the introduction, I was reminded that private colleges have utilized elements of enrollment management since as early as 1840, some of which could certainly be considered academic capitalism.

George Ticknor: The Notion of Financial Aid

As detailed in *The History of College Affordability in the United States from Colonial Times to the Cold War*, when Dartmouth graduate and soon-to-become Harvard professor George Ticknor began his studies at the University of Göttingen in Germany in 1815, he sought not only to further his education but also to gather insights into the workings of German universities that could inform college reform in the United States (38).

While in Germany, Ticknor discovered the custom of Freitische at Göttingen, which provided free meals to 204 of the 1,132 students enrolled in the winter of 1816 (Adam 2020, 38). Such financial support was largely unknown in American colleges at that time. Through his travel logs, Ticknor introduced his Bostonian audience to the concept of financial aid and the establishment of scholarship funds.

Scholarship endowments at Harvard College gained momentum only after 1850, as student numbers increased (Adam 2020, 39). Long before the United States was founded, colonial colleges used these endowments as a way to provide financial aid, enroll low-income students, and expand their enrollments in a highly competitive era.

Part 1: An Introduction to the Enrollment Management Industry

Part 1 introduces the reader to the field of enrollment management. Chapters in this section include:

- "Reign and Ruin—The Rise of Enrollment Management and the U.S. *News College Rankings*" by Neil Swidey

- “Going to see a “Witch Doctor”—Colleges’ Reliance on Enrollment Management Firms Grows Despite Alarm over Companies’ Strategies” by Jon Marcus
- “A View from the Inside—Reflections of a Former Enrollment Manager” by Don Hossler

Chapter One is written in a notably harsh tone. The reader is introduced to key terms such as “draw rate” (the yield rate divided by the admit rate), enrollment management trailblazers, and financial aid leveraging. The chapter delves into the significant shifts in the higher education landscape during the 1980s under the Reagan administration, describing this period as one of “Yuppie status seeking.” The author also discusses the impact of *U.S. News & World Report* and its detrimental effect on higher education competition.

In contrast, the authors of chapters two and three adopt a less aggressive tone, making these chapters more enjoyable to read. Chapter Two explores the growth of the enrollment management marketing industry, noting a staggering 5,233 percent increase, from 150 vendors in 2011 to 8,000 (49). The chapter also provides insight into the costs schools incur for vendor services. For instance, between 2010 and 2018, the University of Alabama paid \$1.9 million to the College Board and \$4.4 million to Hobsons for consulting services. While this data is appropriately cited, there are areas in the chapter where citations are lacking.

Chapter Three, authored by Don Hossler, is particularly revealing in its exploration of what occurs inside planning rooms, including the “marching orders” that chief enrollment management officers (CEMOs) receive from presidents and how they strive to meet targets. Hossler begins by distinguishing between the concept and practice of enrollment management, reminding readers that there was never a golden age when colleges existed solely to serve society’s needs and didn’t care about their bottom line. Introduced in this chapter is the practice of “financial aid gapping.” Hossler shares that “the troubling practice of financial aid gapping has become common at both public and private institutions, with the average gap being \$16,000 at private institu-

tions and \$100,000 at public universities (66). He also discusses how the shortened tenure of college presidents influences the goals set for CEMOs.

Part 2: How the Federal Government Helped Fuel the Growth of Enrollment Management

Part 2 introduces the reader to the federal government’s higher education policies. Chapters in this section include:

- “The Design of Federal Student Aid Made Enrollment Management’s Worst Practices Possible” by Jon H. Oberg
- “The Justice Department’s Views on Antitrust in Higher Ed Have Bolstered the Enrollment Management Industry” by Catharine Bond Hill

Chapter Four is written by a former budget analyst and Education Department researcher and includes interesting historical information and language. The author often employs accusatory language and, at times, lacks essential citations, leaving the reader to “trust” the information presented at face value. As in previous chapters, the author discusses the Reagan administration, suggesting that this era marked a shift from grants to loans. Oberg shared that “tuition went up, but many colleges promised to return the extra revenue to needier students in the form of grants to achieve so-called *vertical equity* based on students’ ability to pay” (78). The chapter concludes on a constructive note, offering seven remedies, including revisiting the Department of Justice’s antitrust rulings. The author also argues that colleges and universities need to have more “skin in the game.” Notably, he references the German higher education model as a potential framework for reform.

However, Chapter Five was a particularly enjoyable read. The author delves into the historical context of the Overlap Groups and their efforts to avoid bidding wars, presenting this without the vitriol found in other chapters. In this chapter the reader learns that in May 1991, the Department of Justice charged Ivy League universities and MIT, members of the Ivy Overlap group, with violating the Sherman Antitrust Law (94). As a conse-

quence, the Overlap Groups were disbanded. The chapter also introduces important economic concepts such as efficiency and associative good. The author provides recommendations, including antitrust exemptions, and highlights the federal government's seemingly contradictory approach to higher education policy.

Part 3: How Enrollment Management Works to Limit College Access and Affordability

Part 3 introduces the reader to admission and financial aid practices. Chapters in this section include:

- "Finding the "Right" Students—The Student List Business and Enrollment Management" by Ozan Jaquette, Karina Salazar, and Patricia Martin
- "Words Without Action—The Troubled Relationship Between Enrollment Management and Diversity" by Peter Schmidt
- "The Dangerous Game of Financial Aid Leveraging" by Stephen J. Burd
- "Gapping Through College" by Beth Zasloff

Chapter Six highlights a significant flaw in the book: the focus on enrollment management is primarily on recruiting new students rather than retaining them. The authors begin by stating that enrollment management consulting firms play a central role in the recruitment process (109) and provide examples such as the use of geographic search filters. For readers unfamiliar with modern search practices, this chapter offers valuable insights. The emergence of EAB as a major player in the student list business, driven by strategic acquisitions, is particularly noteworthy. The authors correctly point out that EAB's rise is significant, especially as the College Board and ACT face existential challenges due to the test-optional movement. The chapter's analysis is framed around the Resource Dependence Theory, an interesting approach, and concludes with a call for a public option for student lists, similar to voter registration lists.

Chapter Seven, however, suffers from overly inflammatory language, illustrating how tone can affect overall

readability. In some instances, hyperbole detracts from otherwise important content. A redeeming aspect of this chapter is the section on the origins of the concept of diversity, which includes case law dating back to the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision. The longitudinal diversity data from several selective institutions is both illustrative and thought-provoking. The chapter concludes with a call to ban legacy admissions and offer more admissions "guarantees" through percent plans.

Chapters Eight and nine delve into the intricate topic of financial aid. Chapter eight offers valuable insights into how enrollment goals are set by college leadership and the challenges that arise when those goals face obstacles. For example, the reader learns that in 1999 Clemson University's president, James Barker, set a goal for Clemson to be ranked among the Top 20 public universities in *U.S. News & World Report*. However, in 2011, this objective encountered hurdles, prompting the institution to adopt strategies like financial aid leveraging. Notably, the chapter omits any discussion of the significant role athletics plays in Clemson's overall enrollment management strategy.

After the Tigers' 2016 National Championship, the number of undergraduate applications increased by 3,000 (Nicholson 2019, para. 9). However, the university's enrollment had been increasing steadily for a decade, adding an average of 850 students a year since 2010 (Nicholson 2019, para. 9). Since 2010, annual ticket revenue has grown from less than \$18 million to about \$26 million. In total, the football team generates about \$50 million a year, allowing them to pay competitive coaches' salaries, increase recruitment, and build new facilities (Nicholson 2019, para. 4).

Some of the charges in Chapter Eight, such as the claim that "loading low-income families with PLUS debt is part of the deliberate financial aid leveraging strategies that the country's largest enrollment management firms have sold colleges" (170), require substantiation. Like other authors, Burd concludes the chapter with a series of recommendations to curb financial aid leveraging.

Chapter Nine is particularly moving, sharing real-life stories of the difficult decisions low-income parents face regarding PLUS loans to support their chil-

dren's education. The phrase "putting it all on the line" encapsulates the ultimate choice many families make. The author notes that "given the enormous collection power of the federal government, the Parent PLUS Loan is becoming predatory for Black PLUS borrowers who are more likely to be low-income and low-wealth and who will likely struggle to repay" (187). While the chapter powerfully opens with stories of several students, it would have been strengthened by following up on the outcomes. Did Joanne's mother's gamble pay off? The reader is left to wonder.

Part 4: Recommendations for Reining in the Enrollment Management Industry

Part 4 introduces the reader to policy reform ideas. Chapters in this section include:

- "Why National Price Controls Are Needed in Public Higher Education" by Kevin Carey
- "Cooperation for The Greater Good—Forging a New Covenant for Equitable Educational Results in Higher Education" by Jerome A. Lucido

Chapters Ten and eleven are rich with recommendations aimed at restoring higher education to "simpler times." The chapter titles hint at proposals such as establishing national price controls and fostering greater collaboration between higher education and the federal government. These changes are presented as both historically rooted and relevant to contemporary challenges.

In Chapter Eleven, Lucido argues for a shift away from the current "positional arms race." He proposes a three-part plan that is both practical and aspirational, including doubling the Pell Grant, creating a Title I program for higher education, and reducing destructive competition. Lucido also advocates for a code of ethics for enrollment professionals, providing examples of the language it should include. He concludes by emphasizing that the framework he presents is just and that the industry has overcome similar challenges before.

Concluding Chapter: Recapping the Book's Aim

The final chapter, just four pages long, reiterates the book's purpose and reminds readers of the history of higher education in the context of public policy and government involvement. The author reflects on past eras when the federal government played a more active role, from the 1862 Morrill Act to the 1944 GI Bill of Rights. He notably states that "the critiques in this book are not directed at any individual campus enrollment manager." Additionally, he highlights how surprisingly few people are aware of this multibillion-dollar industry (227).

Results: Three-Prong Test—Accuracy, Historical Comprehensiveness, and Appropriate Stimuli

This book partially met my three-prong test. While it provided valuable historical insights, the appropriateness of the stimuli varied between chapters. I found that the tone, often marked by inflammatory language and phrasing, could unduly influence readers' perceptions, potentially causing the mere exposure effect to shape their evaluation of the content. Additionally, the book focused primarily on the role of enrollment managers in admissions and financial aid, with little attention given to other critical aspects of enrollment management, such as retention specialists and registrars.

The book also overlooks significant factors like college athletics, which would have been particularly relevant in discussions about Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and Southeastern Conference (SEC) schools, such as Clemson and Alabama, respectively. Furthermore, the impact of international enrollments following the repeal of the 1924 Immigration Act in 1965 was not addressed. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, known as the Hart-Celler Act, replaced the 1924 law and was authored by Sen. Philip Hart (D-MI) and Rep. Emanuel Celler (D-NY), who persistently advocated for its end. It was not until 1965 that the discriminatory remnants of the 1924 law and the national-origin quotas were finally abolished (Chishti and Gelatt 2024).

From just 26,000 international students in the 1949–50 school year, the number grew to nearly 1.1 million by 2019–20. The share of international students in U.S. higher education also rose from 1 percent in 1949–50 to nearly 6 percent in 2019–20 (Israel and Batalova 2021, para. 9). The omission of discussions on college athletics, international enrollment, and non-traditional student enrollment was a significant missed opportunity.

Lastly, the most significant issue was the inconsistency in citations across chapters. Several claims lacked factual support, undermining the book's credibility. At

times, it was challenging to differentiate between fact and exaggeration. As a result, this book didn't have the same compelling impact as the Graham tell-all I read over 20 years ago. However, I still recommend it for those interested in specific aspects of enrollment management—keeping in mind that it doesn't fully meet my three-prong test and that, especially in the United States, the landscape can shift rapidly, particularly with election outcomes influencing higher education policy. Caveat emptor!

References

- Adam, T. 2020. *The History of College Affordability in the United States from Colonial Times to the Cold War*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Bazerman, M. 2025. Judgment and decision making. In *Noba Textbook Series: Psychology*. Champaign, IL: DEF publishers. Retrieved from: <nobaproject.com/modules/judgment-and-decision-making>.
- Buster-Williams, K. 2023. Yale needs women: How the first group of girls rewrote the rules of an Ivy League giant. *College and University*. 98(4): 75–80.
- Chishti, M., and J. Gelatt. 2024. A century later, restrictive 1924 U.S. immigration law has reverberations in immigration debate. *Migration Information Source*. May 15. Retrieved from: <migrationpolicy.org/article/1924-us-immigration-act-history>.
- Dodson, J. 2024. Understanding the mere exposure effect: How familiarity shapes preferences and behavior. *Better Help*. August 12. Retrieved from: <betterhelp.com/advice/general/what-is-the-mere-exposure-effect/>.
- Graham, L. 1999. *Our Kind of People*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Hopper, E. 2019. What is the mere exposure effect in psychology? *Thought Co*. December 13. Retrieved from: <thoughtco.com/mere-exposure-effect-4777824>.
- Israel, E., and J. Batalova. 2021. International students in the United States. *Migration Information Source*. January 14. Retrieved from: <migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states>.
- Lindsay, D.S. 2014. Memory source monitoring applied. In *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Memory*, edited by T.J. Perfect and D.S. Lindsay. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc. Retrieved from: <books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=zN_WAGAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA59&dq=source+monitoring+framework&ots=-cbeiNwFSI&sig=Bd4YCFfLLrS1aYCYnmsbVXQpUkQ#v=onepage&q=source%20monitoring%20framework&f=false>.
- Nickerson, C. 2023. Mere exposure effect in psychology: Biases & heuristics. *Simply Psychology*. October 10. Retrieved from: <simplypsychology.org/mere-exposure-effect.html>.
- Nicholson, Z. 2019. A decade of unprecedented change at Clemson University: Here are a few of the big stories. *Greenville News*. December 29. Retrieved from: <greenvilleonline.com/story/news/local/2019/12/29/clemson-university-big-stories-over-decade-football-dabo-swinney-jim-clements-tucker-hipps/2673286001/>.
- Ositelu, M., and A. Acosta. 2021. The iron triangle of college admissions: Institutional goals to admit the perfect first-year class may create racial inequities to college access. *New America*. October 6. Retrieved from: <newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/the-iron-triangle-of-college-admissions-institutional-goals-to-admit-the-perfect-first-year-class-may-create-racial-inequities-to-college-access/>.
- Tattersfield, K. 2024. How are universities leveraging big data and analytics in the admissions process? *Full Fabric*. August 13. Retrieved from: <fullfabric.com/articles/how-are-universities-leveraging-big-data-and-analytics-in-the-admissions-process>.
- Tell All. 2024. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Chicago: Author. Retrieved from: <britannica.com/dictionary/tell%E2%80%93all>.

About the Author



Kimberley Buster-Williams

Dr. Kimberley Buster-Williams is a distinguished scholar-practitioner with more than 30 years of experience in higher education. She serves as the Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and Retention at The George Washington University (GW), where she is recognized as one of the nation's leading enrollment professionals.

A published author and thought leader, Dr. Williams has contributed significantly to the field of higher education. She recently co-authored *Navigating Shift-*

ing Terrain: The Current Landscape of American Higher Education in NACAC's *Fundamentals of College Admissions Counseling* (Sixth Edition) and is the author of the 2021 book *History of American Higher Education A to Z: A Primer for Enrollment Managers*. Her scholarly work focuses on student success, retention, and enrollment management, with numerous articles and publications addressing these critical areas.

Dr. Williams earned her Ed.D. in Higher Education from Regent University (VA), where her dissertation examined

employee engagement and succession planning to retain enrollment middle managers during the "Big Quit," "Great Reshuffle," and "Great Resignation" eras. She also holds an Ed.S. in Higher Education Administration, a Master's in Education Administration, and a Bachelor's in English—all from Old Dominion University (VA). Additionally, she completed a post-master's certificate in leadership at the University of Michigan's Center for the Education of Women.