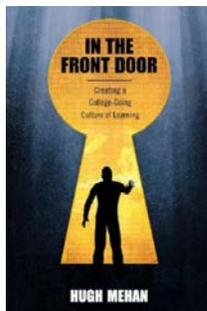


## Professional Book Review

Mehan, Hugh. (2012). *In the Front Door: Creating a College-going Culture of Learning*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. 187 pp., ISBN: 1567505864. \$49.99

Reviewed by Michael J. Evans, Independent, U. S. A.



Preparing low-income students of color for college admission has become a priority in educational reform efforts. Mehan's *In the Front Door* provides insight into three case studies of California high schools in the aftermath of legislation that disallowed affirmative action strategies for university admissions. Using a multiple case study approach, Mehan highlights three schools that were either created or reconstituted to better prepare under-resourced, low-income, minority students for college admissions without the help of affirmative action. He asserts that technical, cultural, and structural resources impact the ability of educators to prepare low-income high school students with the necessary aptitude and attitude for successful admissions into college. By integrating rich description and keen interpretation into each of the three cases, the author leads readers to appreciate the challenges and opportunities that face educators interested in closing the achievement gap and improving education for all students.

Mehan's choice of the case studies is masterful, for in selecting three unique cases he effectively describes how different types of schools—a start-up charter school, a traditional public school that converted to a charter school, and a traditional public school—instill principles of academic excellence and educational equity into their school programs. As a credible participant observer, Mehan provides an insider's perspective on the process of each school's creation of a college-going culture. He goes on to demonstrate that models of educational equity can be varied, and he describes in detail how each school developed a college-going culture through establishing rigorous academic curricula, providing intensive academic social supports, hiring quality teachers, connecting with neighborhoods and families, building visible signs of a college-going culture, and creating safe and inviting school facilities.

In addition to explaining the process of creating a rich school experience, Mehan also details the challenges faced by low-income students of color who are educated outside of their traditional neighborhood school in a new school with an explicit college-going culture. He provides a fresh perspective on educational

reform and provides a realistic picture of the associated tangible and intangible costs. The author also includes two appendices to include a strong theoretical frame of reference and a theory of social policy, building a compelling case for needed reform measures to effectively address the educational inequities that have plagued American schools for centuries. Mehan concludes the book with an explanation of the interrelated issues and factors that impact and impede equity for all students, and he proposes changes for university personnel, policymakers, and school leaders. He addresses concerns around racism, prejudice, and privilege in a way that helps readers to understand the larger context in which equity plays out. This timely book serves as a great resource for both scholars and educational practitioners engaged in charter schools, educational reform, and college readiness activities for under-resourced students.

The title of the book may not be a good match the book's content. While "in the front door" implies an alternative to the "backdoor" admission approach of affirmative action, this may not be clear to readers. Readers may not fully appreciate the multiple ways in which affirmative action continues to serve as a foundational piece to make other reform efforts possible. Additionally, casual readers who only read the introduction and the conclusion will miss the rich description of the schools and not appreciate the complexity of the reform efforts referenced. The concepts related to "creating a college-going culture of learning" are deeply embedded in the ethnographic accounts of the three schools and require intentional reading and study.

*In the Front Door* adds richness to the literature on charter school education, innovative educational reform practice, educational leadership, and college readiness for low income urban children. With the ongoing challenges to affirmative action programs and the deregulation of college admissions for children of color, there is an increased need for creative measures to ensure that all children have equal access to a high quality instruction and higher education. The book could be used with other resources in undergraduate or graduate courses, especially those focused on educational equity and reform.

While the academic achievement gap persists, Mehan reminds us not only of the ideals of excellence and equity, but he also provides hope that college can be a reality for more and more students who gain admissions through the front door.