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What is This?
Class Matters in Higher Education

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By any measure, higher education in the United States expanded dramatically during the last half of the twentieth century. From around 2 million students in the late 1940s, more than 20 million now attend. The number of colleges and universities has increased dramatically as has the diversity of types of institutions. The usual explanations for this expansion include changes in the labor market and increased demand for access from segments of the population who have previously not been able to attend. In this way, higher education has been deeply linked with the adult status attainment process, and educational expansion has often been thought to increase educational opportunity. In our recent past, the analysis of this increase has been focused especially on access by racial and ethnic minorities—as the policies and policies of affirmative action attest. In part because of the limited success and application of these policies, the attention of policy makers and researchers has turned to investigating the role that social class plays in higher education, from admissions through college life, and to graduation. The overarching question of these books is whether, on balance, higher education has produced greater equality of opportunity or helped to perpetuate existing inequalities (an excellent source of student economic and other related data by institution is at www.college-insight.org).

While these studies explore a variety of colleges and universities in various parts of the United States, they are all qualitative studies about social class and higher education and are designed to address how higher education is experienced by students from different social class backgrounds. They all see higher education as oriented toward the middle- and upper-middle-classes and, in one way or another, note that working-class students are likely to face adjustment issues beyond what all first-year students face. Allison Hurst, in The Burden of Academic Success, is especially concerned with the “burdens” that working-class students face as they attend a flagship state university. From her interviews with working-class students, she develops a typology of students based on their relationship with their origins: some remain loyal to their class, others reject the value of their origins as they embrace the class they hope to enter as a result of their educational success. A third
group seeks to maintain their links with their past as they develop connections to the middle class.

Hurst’s sympathies are clearly with the loyalists, the group with whom she counts herself a member. She argues that the payoff for renegades and double agents is not worth the cost. The renegades are likely to see their families as dysfunctional and not to be emulated, thus helping to motivate a break from their past (Jenny Stuber, in Inside the College Gates, also notes that a number of her working class interviewees saw family troubles as motivating their attempt to escape their origins by attending college). Renegades are likely to interpret the difficulties their family and friends experience to result from personal faults and bad choices, not structural constraints. Loyalists see college as a hoop to jump through on the way to a credential, and they are more likely than other types to understand the need for credentials as a fact of the labor market, something needed for a good job, but not necessary for personal worth or growth. They are wary of becoming contaminated by too much success in school. Double agents pride themselves on their ability to move between groups and across boundaries. They shy away from making moral judgments about the working class or the middle class. They take pride in their families, but want to move beyond them. This summary does not do justice to the typology that is extensively elaborated in the text.

Hurst’s typology is used to explain why students in each group make their choices regarding college and understanding its purpose in their lives. While I found the categories illuminating, I would have liked to read more about why students fell into one group or another. Hurst argues that the loyalists are more likely to have a structurally-oriented view of society and to maintain the centrality of the working class in their identities. But the question remains why some have a more structurally-oriented view while others embrace the idea of an opportunity to move up the ladder.

Ann Mullen, in Degrees of Inequality, seeks to understand how students “make sense of their own place in the hierarchy of higher education” (p. 11) and how this influences the decisions they make. Her research involved interviewing a hundred students, evenly divided between Yale and Southern Connecticut State University, institutions approximately two miles apart, but in very different worlds of higher education. The distance between Yale and Southern was so large that they might as well be in parallel universes—highlighting for her how socially balkanized U.S. higher education has become. There was virtually no overlap among students (or faculty, for that matter). She has the benefit of being able to contrast the differences between these two types of college contexts, especially as they affect students’ out-of-class lives. Whether and how students from different social origins learn new ways of acting and interacting is an important focus. The book provides an account of the high school years of the students, and shows how some end up at Yale and others at Southern. The chapters that follow detail differences in how colleges are chosen, how students attend, and how they select majors. Since there are labor market consequences to these choices and processes, the book questions the ability of higher education to alter the trajectories set earlier in the lives of students.

While Mullen finds the experiences of working-class students at Yale as often being a “burden,” she finds that athletes (including a number of working-class youth) create a world of their own that protects, to some degree, their identities. Her work specifically addresses issues of gender, especially as it interacts with choices of major, and attitudes toward knowledge. While women have gained parity in a number of major fields, large disparities remain that influence women’s labor-market success. Knowledge remains gendered. She ends her work with an effort to assess whether higher education has helped to open opportunity or to close it off in new ways. Using Christopher New’s phrase, she sees limits and possibilities in higher education. Yale is described as maintaining the privileged status of many of its upper-middle-class students, while Southern was more explicit about affording the opportunity for social mobility to middle-class positions for its working-class students. While the expansion of higher education may have increased the opportunity to experience higher education, she asserts
that its social and academic differentiation has had little effect on lessening inequality.

Finally, Stuber is primarily focused on how social origins influence the ways that students navigate the college environment. Interviewing students attending a large Midwest public university and a selective liberal arts college in the same state, she is, like Mullen, able to investigate how student background and college context interact to influence student development and experiences. Perhaps a double agent in Hurst’s terms (she describes herself as having a “mixed class” identity), Stuber’s focus emphasizes the extracurricular experiences of her interviewees. She has some excellent material on life in dormitories, particularly on how resident assistants from working-class backgrounds (who need to work, after all) perceive their middle- and upper-middle-class charges. She identifies many barriers to cross-class contact, especially in the state university, as background experiences influence the social and academic choices that students make. Moreover, the perceptions of students from different backgrounds are affected by those differences—working-class students view upper-middle-class students as taking their privileges for granted, as lazy, as no: having had to work for the things they possess, and not appreciating the opportunities that college affords. Working-class kids are virtually invisible to those from upper classes who are unaware of the constraints faced by these students. Working-class students often feel morally superior and despite wanting the economic benefits of moving into the middle class, have “considerable trepidation about acquiring the cultural trappings” (p. 149).

Stuber organizes her chapters to follow her students in and through their college experiences. Among her more interesting conclusions is that working-class students in the liberal arts college she studied had more opportunities to interact with middle- and upper-middle-class classmates than was the case for those at the large state university. More attuned to the efforts of college administrators who wished to affect the experiences that students encounter, her book is both sociologically adept and offers a variety of thoughtful suggestions that can make college life better for students from diverse backgrounds (Hurst, too, offers suggestions for improving the collegiate experiences of working-class students).

These books are filled with insight, close sociological observation, and are theoretically sophisticated. All three authors draw on Bourdieu (and Lamont and Lareau, among others), especially investigating how habitus channels students’ choices—of which college to both apply to and attend, which college social life activities to engage in, and of what major to select. The preparation for college experienced by students from working-class and middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds is vastly different, according to Mullen. From their high school courses to college counseling and standardized test-taking, students are prepared for unequal paths by their high schools. These preparation differences sort students’ college aspirations such that they apply to socially segregated segments of the higher education hierarchy. Some students do end up in colleges with a broad diversity of students, however, and, though uncommon, such schools can provide the possibility for cross-class contact. These class-linked differences, however, like other forms of diversity in college, create barriers to understanding and the formation of cross-class friendship. Colleges do not seem, from these studies, to be particularly successful in promoting mutual respect and communication across class boundaries.

Moreover, the material differences among students can be significant, requiring some students to work almost, if not full-time, while enrolled, while others have the resources not to work. These differences have consequences for students’ abilities to take advantage of extracurricular activities and therefore can limit or expand the experience of college. But these differences go further than that: students’ assessments of the value of extracurricular activities depends on their background, Mullen asserts. Many working-class students attend college to gain skills and knowledge that will bring them advantage in the labor market, while upper-middle-class students seek to build a particular kind of self, perhaps best crafted through the social life of college, as well as to gain credentials.

Reading these accounts of social class and higher education highlighted that the
Review Essays  463

authors could have been more systematic about their conceptualization of class. Hurst is the most detailed and explicit, with a clear Marxist perspective, which sees antagonism between classes. But to one degree or another, the other authors blur class and status boundaries. Academic success is often associated with the adoption of middle-class norms, behaviors, and allegiances at the expense of working-class norms of self-reliance, hard work, and solidarity to family and the working class. Hurst argues that formal education is a means of colonizing and subordinating the working class, whose relationship with the middle class is one of "domination and resistance" (p. 201). "Our current educational structure contributes to hardening class divisions" (p. 202). But is the middle class really the enemy of the working class? The current median family income, as a measure of the "middle," is somewhere around $50,000, hardly a large sum. The families earning this income level are unlikely to be composed of persons holding positions in the labor market where they exploit or oversee the exploitation of working-class employees below them. The boundaries between working-class and the middle-class groups seem more blurred and complicated than portrayed here. Yet it is clear from all three books that colleges are not very hospitable places for working-class students, though some may be more comfortable than others.

All three of these authors conclude that our collective hope in the ability of education, and of higher education, more specifically, to reduce inequality is misplaced. Attending college benefits the individual student. This is especially so if they graduate, and even moreso if they receive a graduate or professional degree. But dropping out remains a very big problem, and one that is strongly associated with social origins. College major also matters in influencing labor market payoffs. Finally, while the data are mixed, the relative standing of colleges in the vertical hierarchy of colleges seems to matter, at least with respect to improving the probabilities of graduation and attaining a further degree. All of these factors condition the benefits of college attendance, although none of them eliminate them—it is still better to be a graduate of any college than a dropout.

Religious Diversity and Devotion: Explaining a Peaceful Coexistence

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This book is targeted for a wide readership. When the publisher is Simon and Schuster and the senior author is Robert Putnam, you know it is intended for a general audience. Yet, social scientists would be remiss to ignore its contributions. Along with giving a detailed overview of American religion, the book seeks to explain how high levels of religious diversity and devotion can have a peaceful coexistence.

The most obvious contribution of American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us is that it offers an accessible, easy to read 673-page overview of American religion, including the religious beliefs, belonging, and behavior of Americans. Specialists in the area will view some of the findings as old news or common knowledge, but virtually all will learn something from this comprehensive review. For those new to the study of American religion, the book provides a detailed and balanced tour of contemporary American religion.

Yet, the book offers much more than a descriptive profile. As the subtitle suggests, Putnam and David Campbell explore how


Contemporary Sociology 41, 4