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(Social) Class is in Session: Becoming Student-Ready for the Working-Class

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When I began my first year at the University of California (UC) Davis in the fall of 2003, I became friends with four other working-class students. At the time, I could not clearly articulate that these friends shared a working-class background with me. I just knew that their parents, like my dad, worked blue collar jobs and had not gone to college. Like me, they navigated many college processes on their own, plodding through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and navigating tuition and registration. We spent that initial year adjusting to college life and embracing our newly found independence by riding our bikes to the nearby Rite Aid for $1 ice cream scoops, taking afternoon naps on the ample sunny knolls of campus, and spending too much time on social media.

By senior year, only two of us were still enrolled at and would eventually graduate from UC Davis. One friend moved back home and spent the next decade working through courses at a regional comprehensive university. One transferred to a community college. One I lost touch with completely. Looking back, there were warning signs during that first year that my friends were encountering challenges at UC Davis that would eventually push them into alternative educational paths. One experienced early bouts with depression, amplified by the four hundred miles between Davis and her hometown, that went unnoticed by university staff. All three were uninvolved on campus beyond going to and coming from class, continuing to feel more connected to home communities than to the campus. While we shared working-class backgrounds, my family provided me with significant financial support to fund my education, preventing me from having to navigate varied aid packages every term. Additionally, I alone was white and came from a suburban background. I did not have to navigate the racial climate and culture shock that my friends, students of color from urban backgrounds, experienced.

My experiences at UC Davis eventually led me to a career in higher education, first as a practitioner in student affairs and then in pursuit of a doctorate in Higher Education from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Consistently, I saw ways that institutions could do more to support working-class students. In their book *Becoming a student-ready college: A new culture of leadership for student success*, Tia Brown McNair, Susan Albertine, Michelle Asha Cooper, Nicole McDonald, and Thomas Major, Jr. described the barriers that students encounter as a gap in the responsiveness of college and universities. Reversing traditional narratives that expect students to be college-ready, the authors called on institutions to be student-ready and adapt to the needs of diverse populations. Their suggestions include creating opportunities for shared governance, centering campus-wide learning objectives, and developing partnerships across and beyond campus. For working-class students, student-ready institutions can affirm their presence on campus and provide direct resources for their support.

A decade after my undergraduate graduation, I began work on a dissertation that explored the experiences of working-class students at public research institutions. In three empirical articles, I explored different facets of working-class students' experiences on campus, specifically how students made meaning of their social class identity, what they viewed as allyship related to social class, and how they described their sense of belonging. Across my research, three key emphases came up repeatedly about how working-class participants viewed the impact of their social class backgrounds in higher education. If colleges are to be ready for working-class students, stakeholders across practitioners, administrators, and faculty need to better understand the diversity of social class backgrounds on their campuses and shape environments that can fully support students' lived experiences. In this article, I share three

participant narratives to illuminate recommendations to facilitate working-class students' success.

Who Are Working-Class Students?

Before I share my findings, it is important to clarify what I mean by working-class students. Indeed, one of the first barriers to centering working-class students in higher education is the range of ways that social class is discussed across research and practice. Common classifications include first-generation, low-income, and working-class and are based on criteria such as parental education, occupation, income, Pell Grant receipt, and expected family contribution. It is a dizzying array that creates multiple divisions about what "counts" in any given program or organization.

In an article for *About Campus*, Shonda L. Goward described the limitations related to categorizing social class as rooted in her own experiences. While first-generation status provided "a comfortable label that gets at one's temporary collegiate status" (p. 19), it did not capture the impact that being poor had on Goward's experiences and self-perception. In my research, I found additional complications in choosing the best categorization to encapsulate social class. For example, any given measurement can fluctuate, such as income or occupation for individuals navigating employment transitions or layoffs. Children may not know the exact details of their parents' income or job as talking about social class is still taboo for many families. For college students, the myth of the universal poor college student and the fact that higher education is often seen as a tool for upward mobility further mask social class distinctions.

My research focuses largely on working-class students rather than first-generation or low-income designations. Like Goward, I believe that single variables do not capture the full picture of social class. As a child, my social class did not derive merely from the fact that my dad

did not have a college degree. Instead, by not having a college degree he was effectively barred from accessing jobs the provided greater autonomy and financial stability. As he worked night shifts on a dairy farm to financially support our family, I grew up in a culture that centered work ethic, resourcefulness, and frugality. In my research, I draw upon work of Allison Hurst to define working-class background through parental education and occupation. Specifically, one's parent(s)/guardian(s) obtained less than a bachelor's degree and worked blue collar jobs (defined through criteria such manual labor, unsalaried work, and relationship to other workers). This definition positions social class within as a system of labor that distributes power to individuals and contains unique elements of culture.

Working-Class Students on Campus

Literature confirms what I witnessed in my own experiences and research: working-class students have different pathways to and through college than their peers. In her book, *Inside the college gates: How class and culture matter in higher education*, Jenny M. Stuber compared working-class and upper-middle-class students at a large state and private college in the Midwest. She found that attending college was not a given for working-class students and was often predicated on receiving financial assistance. For working-class students that attended college, they were less likely to be involved in co-curricular opportunities such as internships or leadership roles due to employment obligations, limited finances, and competing priorities. Despite these barriers, Stuber noted the strengths working-class students described bringing to campus, ranging from life skills to strong home relationships.

Challenges in and out of the classroom are amplified by the fact that for most working-class students, arrival at college presents a contrast between the middle-class culture of the institution and their families and home communities. Allison L. Hurst, in *The Burden of*

Academic Success: Managing Working-Class Identities in College, found that working-class students fell into three paths while pursuing higher education. Loyalists resisted assimilation with middle-class norms and values (think competition, individualism) and prioritized their families and home communities. Renegades viewed themselves as part of the middle-class, distancing themselves from the working-class communities that they associated with shame and embarrassment. Finally, double agents maintained cultural aspects of both working- and middle-class groups, moving across social groups and different settings as needed.

These studies demonstrate that working-class students are often expected to negotiate and reconcile different aspects of themselves upon arrival within higher education. Most institutions place the onus of this navigation on students to adapt to the institutional culture, overlooking the values that they already possess and pushing assimilation with campus norms. To become student-ready, higher education institutions must challenge the expectation that students cannot integrate their working-class backgrounds into campus life and work to build institutional cultures that are celebratory of diverse social class backgrounds.

Re-Centering Working-Class Stories

In 2018, I recruited working-class students at two public research institutions in the northeast to participate in my dissertation research. As there were no hubs of social class on either campus, I shared recruitment materials with different resources on campus that provided social class-related support (e.g., TRIO programs, financial aid, food pantries) and instructors of courses that focused on identity (e.g., Sociology, Education, Anthropology). I also posted fliers on both campuses. Twenty-four students met the study criteria and agreed to participate. Participants ranged between sophomores and fifth year seniors and pursued a breadth of majors

and career goals. The final sample included 16 women, two non-binary participants, and six men with eight participants identifying as students of color and 16 as white.

I spoke with all but four students twice, totaling over 46 hours total. In the first interview, participants and I discussed their social class backgrounds and how they came to higher education. In the second, we focused on their college experiences. During our conversations, I often shared my experiences of coming from a working-class family, confessing that writing a dissertation on social class often made me feel conflicted as I moved farther away from my background even as it was often present in my mind.

Across participants, institutions, and research questions, I found three themes that spanned the ways that participants consistently described their social class. First, working-class students viewed their backgrounds in asset-filled ways. Second, working-class students used the values and assets that they associated with their social class backgrounds as the foundation for building connections on campus. Third, working-class students came from many different pathways that they often felt campuses failed to acknowledge. The stories of Jamie, Blake, and Lydia, though each a unique contribution, exemplified themes demonstrated by all participants. Their stories challenge how we think of students' experiences and how we shape institutions to be ready to support working-class students' success.

Asset-Based Perspectives: Jamie's Story

Jamie is an Asian-American Public Health major who was a junior when we spoke. Though she was born in New England, she and her sister were sent to live in China for five years during their early childhood as "it is a norm for Asian parents to send their kids back to live with the grandparents. At that time, my parents were trying to create a stable lifestyle." While she was gone, her parents opened their own restaurant. Jamie spent most of her childhood at the

restaurant with her family, and once she was old enough she "help[ed] in the kitchen, in the back…especially during the busy season." The business required work from the whole family, causing Jamie to identify as working-class:

> [My parents] did own a business, but it was still them working. They didn't really hire people to work for them…they were there every single day actually taking orders and cooking and stuff. I guess for some people they could be middle-class, but for me, because they were always working constantly, I consider us working-class.

Eventually, other restaurants opened nearby and the competition caused Jamie's parents to close their business. At the time of our interview, they were working at other restaurants in the area.

During our conversation, Jamie continually referred to her social class background in asset-filled ways. She had a deep connection with her family and saw their support as rooted in their immigrant status, in which "parents try to help the kids as much as they can." In college, Jamie found ways to reconcile her parents' goals with her own aspirations. Although her parents wanted her to be doctor, Jamie helped them to understand that her passion lay in the field of public health. She shared her goals strategically, noting "I basically already had a job in mind with the CDC." Jamie saw public health as a hybrid of the medical field and her passions for social change, noting that "the whole point [of the field] is to help close that inequality gap, whether that's social or health."

In addition to finding ways to integrate her familial and individual aspirations, Jamie described her resourcefulness and work ethic as key determinants of her college experience. As a high school student, she built social networks that provided her with support and resources. She shared examples of connecting with a nursing teacher that introduced her to public health, a financial aid advisor that informed her of affordable college options, and a youth leader that

provided emotional support related to her career goals. Her networking paid off as she navigated college:

> I don't think people realize the amount of work I put in or other people put in to get the amount of social capital that we might have gotten or cultural capital. It isn't because of our parents' background or their connections to other people. I've been working since I was 16, but through that, I managed to meet a lot of people.

Jamie's regularly drew upon the work ethic she had developed in high school, differentiating her from many of her peers because "I work a lot" and "I like work a lot." Jamie felt that student work was an important contribution on campus, sharing that "people are surprised when they come to campus and they see students [working]… they just don't realize how much students play a role in keeping the university functioning." Jamie herself had three jobs and used the money to pay for her own expenses.

Rather than seeing her social class as an obstacle, Jamie described her background as providing her with a strong work ethic, resourcefulness, passion for social change, and connection to her family. Jamie's narrative exemplified the ways in which working-class students described the assets they derived from their social class backgrounds. In addition to the values Jamie described, other students mentioned responsibility, thriftiness, maturity, and empathy as key values tied to their working-class background. These assets fueled their success within higher education across curricular, co-curricular, personal, and career goals.

Using Values to Connect: Blake's Story

A white woman within a couple of months of graduation when we met, Blake's family consisted of her parents and her younger brother. Growing up, Blake experienced instability at home as her parents got into verbal and physical altercations that were amplified by alcohol and financial stress. After navigating their conflict in her life, Blake felt a responsibility to watch out for her brother. After graduation, she was moving back home and taking a local job in finance.

When asked about her social class, Blake identified as working-class immediately, sharing that "my dad is a mailman [and] my mom currently is unemployed." She described the impact of witnessing the work of her father:

> Every day, my father goes to work, and that day is to get him through the next day. To have that kind of mindset, you have to be so strong…there is a very high level of grit and you have to be able to push through. I think that strengthened me, physical and mental strength.

The importance of a strong work ethic was central to Blake and something she described as deriving directly from her social class background.

On campus, Blake's work ethic drove her to seek out two spaces where she could connect with peers with similar values. The first was her hospitality major, which she viewed as different from the larger college of business. The college focused on making money, drawing in privileged students that "appear[ed] to be middle/upper class to me." In contrast, hospitality appealed to students with a diligent work ethic and interest in helping others:

> I have noticed many people with similar backgrounds as me are [hospitality] majors. Which is interesting because we're embarking on a career of service and work for other people. I think that definitely has something to do with our social class backgrounds and our work ethic in the ability to serve and help others.

Similarly, Blake found a strong community through her work-study position with the student-run business community at her university. Blake noted that each student involved was equally invested in making the business a success. The investment was amplified by the fact that everyone did every job and held the same title, so there was no hierarchy of labor. Work ethic became a hallmark of the community, which managed to continually employ "hard-working, genuine people." The student business was also one that promoted ethical approaches to business and social justice. By working for a student-run business, Blake was able "to learn more about advocacy here on campus…How you can work about creating a better world and better stability

for your own self." Thus, the community not only shared her work ethic but her values related to the type of work she wanted to do.

Blake's story emphasizes how working-class students were drawn to communities related to their social class background. However, rather than seeking out relationships with working-class peers explicitly, they found spaces that centered the values that they associated with their social class backgrounds. For Blake, work ethic was central to her family and she found both an academic major and on-campus involvement that celebrated and engaged in work. Other students found shared commitment to work ethic within leadership positions such as Resident Advisor roles or off-campus jobs. Across participants, the same values that working-class students centered in their lives (e.g., financial responsibility, passion for social change, thriftiness) led them to connections with others.

Varied Pathways: Lydia's Story

A multi-racial Asian American and Latina woman, nutrition major Lydia was a junior at the time of our interview. Lydia grew up primarily in California, moving around frequently as her mother navigated different romantic relationships and left largely on her own to navigate her educational pursuits. She shared an example of a time when she switched to a school and "[my mom] told me like 'oh, go and enroll yourself.'" Lydia later explained the reason for the disconnect, noting:

> My mom and her family moved from Cambodia when she was very young. It was around the Cambodian genocide, so they were escaping that. And her mother died at a young age because of penicillin, they gave her penicillin and she was allergic to it. I think her losing her mom at a young age, and then having me later on, she didn't have a mother in her life. So that's maybe why she was not a great mother.

Lydia met her boyfriend in high school, and the two stayed together after his family moved to New England. When Lydia was 18, her mother asked her to move out. Lydia's boyfriend was her

closest relationship, and she moved to New England to live with him and his family. Hesitant to move without concrete plans, Lydia applied to and was accepted at a private college nearby.

While taking classes, Lydia struggled with the long commute to campus and the expectations of the college. She ended up leaving to work at a local chain store before eventually realizing that “I don't want to work for minimum wage and work full time." She then enrolled at the same community college that her boyfriend attended. Eventually, she and her boyfriend “wanted to move out of his parent's house” and enrolled at a regional state university where they could live in the residence halls. Once enrolled, the pair realized that the campus felt too small and wanted to transfer to a large public institution where “there are so many majors to choose from. And there's a lot of resources.” While her boyfriend’s application was accepted, Lydia’s was rejected. Throughout her education, Lydia had to work to support herself. The work took a toll on her academics as “it was very difficult for me…to balance my GPA and work at the same time.” While her boyfriend transferred, Lydia “went back to [community college].” Through her persistence, Lydia improved her grades and successfully transferred the next year.

Lydia’s experience at her public research institution was largely positive. However, she felt disconnected from her classmates, who focused on partying rather than classes. She shared, “I think their priorities are just different than mine.” Lydia also felt a disconnect in campus policies and conversations that assumed that all students came straight from high school and were supported by their parents. She described an example of “a recent lecture that we were learning about insurance and the professor that was presenting said, ‘oh, most of you are probably on your parents' insurance.’ And I'm on [state insurance].” Financial aid was another barrier as Lydia had to demonstrate each year that she was independent of her family, an emotional and cumbersome process as she had no official documentation.

Lydia's journey illuminates the variance in working-class pathways to and through higher education. Several participants took time off prior to or during college to work. One joined the military and deployed. Other students transferred between postsecondary options as they navigated financial uncertainty and changing life circumstances. Three participants were born in another country. For many, navigating residential instability, illness and addiction amongst loved ones, and financial insecurity provided them with perspective and maturity by the time they reached higher education. These experiences distanced working-class students from peers who could rely upon resources and support from their families. At the same time, navigating different life circumstances drew upon and strengthened many skills that participants used to succeed.

Becoming Student-Ready for the Working-Class

Jamie, Blake, and Lydia represent success stories of working-class students. Despite obstacles, the women attended college and persisted through challenges to pursue their education. Their stories show that working-class students navigate societal expectations to be college-ready by using the assets they draw from their social class backgrounds. However, for each success story, there are many working-class students who do not persist. If expectations to be college-ready effectively serve to penalize working-class students for not possessing the resources and knowledge of their peers, then challenging institutions to be student-ready can promote equity by shifting the onus of action back on the systems in place. Rooted in these participants' stories, I suggest three recommendations for higher education institutions to become working-class student ready.

Celebrating Values

A first step might be to find ways to celebrate the values and strengths that working-class students bring to campus. My participants described work ethic, responsibility, maturity, and

drive for social change as central to their success on campus. They drew upon these skills to access and navigate higher education and continued to finesse them throughout their education. Indeed, while newspapers and journals regularly proclaim that contemporary college students are "less resilient," these stories show that an important demographic is incredibly resilient. Finding ways to center the assets working-class participants bring might help those students feel affirmed and welcomed on campus.

By celebrating the values of working-class students, institutions can also confront problematic dynamics deeply embedded within public research institutions. In *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton followed a group of women living in a residence hall at a large public university to map out the different pathways available to students. They found that universities are organized to support the needs and wants of the party-going upper-class students through mechanisms such as low-intensity academic majors and Greek life, what they deem as party pathways. The impact is to penalize working-class students who cannot enjoy these pursuits and lack the parental connections and financial support to fall back upon. Here, the values that participants described were largely antithetical to the party pathway. Thus, efforts to celebrate work, responsibility, and perspective may not only better serve working-class students, but also re-center the goals and functions of higher education away from reinforcing social class inequality.

One approach might be to develop opportunities to bring students together regarding shared values. For example, an advisory board of student workers on campus could give students a chance to connect over a shared value of work and work ethic. Their organization could provide recommendations for supporting student workers on campus, demonstrating an institutional commitment to recognizing the value of student labor and providing appropriate

resources. Another way to create a celebratory culture of shared values could be for individual campus offices to host student employee recognition programs to celebrate the contributions of working students to institutional success.

Centering Anti-Classism

A second approach to creating a more affirming culture is to create spaces that challenge classism rather than provide support to only specific identity subgroups. By focusing on classism, I use the definition by Betsy Leondar-Wright and Felice Yeskel in the second edition of *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* of "the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class" (p. 314). Too often, campus resources divide students across first-generation, low-income, or working-class and end up missing the bigger picture of social class inequality. The result is that institutions may try to support students impacted by classism, but rarely actually address classism as an issue.

In a similar context, Z. Nicolazzo and Crystal Harris (2014) discussed the need to re-conceptualize gender identity spaces by moving away from women's centers to feminist spaces in their *About Campus* article, "This is what a feminist (space) looks like: (Re) conceptualizing women's centers as feminist spaces in higher education." They problematized the ways that women's spaces have historically been used to center the experiences of White women and erase Women of Color and Trans* women to instead advocate for inclusive spaces that challenge hegemony, privilege, and oppression. In thinking about social class, a focus on addressing classism would encompass first-generation, low-income, working-class, and other demographics of students while also maintaining a critical emphasis on the systems of power that create

disparate experiences and how social class is shaped by other marginalized identities students hold (e.g., race, gender, ability).

Under the umbrella of something like a Social Class Coalition, a resource center could serve students in ways that transcend the range of categorizations through which students identify themselves or are identified through various programs and systems. In a coalition space, resources could target shared issues. For example, workshops on financial aid, finding scholarships, and building social networks for career and future planning would serve a wide range of students. Moreover, such spaces could provide students with an opportunity to build networks across different experiences that could lead to organizing or action (e.g., appealing to states for higher education funding). These types of spaces would inevitably benefit working-class students, but might also provide possibilities for solidarity with middle-class students who may grapple with these issues.

Rethinking Resources

Third, while working-class students may be drawn to spaces to connect based on their social class, it is important to provide resources across multiple axes of support and to strive for cultural competency across campuses. Participants described utilizing resources on campus that were salient with other aspects of their identity, particularly for students of color or student veterans. While many campuses already institute cross-office diversity training, this study reinforces the importance of training student leaders and staff to support students across multiple facets of their identities and the need for cross-campus collaboration and shared learning objectives to promote student-readiness.

Moreover, such efforts should extend beyond traditional resource hubs. For many working-class students, faculty or academic advisors provide necessary points of contact. They

must receive training on supporting diverse students, including working-class students specifically. Does your staff know what resources are available for students facing food insecurity? How about those that need to find employment to maintain their student status? Is there an embedded assumption within policies and programs that every student is between 18-22 years of age, coming directly from high school, and relying on parental support? For institutions to truly be student-ready, cultural competency must be a core requirement for campus stakeholders with accountability embedded into traditional reward structures of tenure, promotion, and performance review.

Conclusion

Across practice and research, I have continued to witness working-class students experience the same barriers, largely unchanged since I first packed a few boxes into the trunk of my dad's pick-up truck and moved into my residence hall room in Northern California. These barriers reflect a legacy of expecting students to be college-ready, a coded term that ultimately implies assimilation. For many students, being college-ready means having the financial resources and knowledge on par with middle- and upper-class students. In contrast, being student-ready means that institutions are prepared to celebrate the skills and backgrounds that working-class students bring to campus. Student-ready campuses not only affirm working-class students' unique backgrounds and contributions but reinforce the goal of higher education as providing students across diverse social class backgrounds with the opportunity for postsecondary success.

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