

MOBILITY STUDIES AND EDUCATION

# College and the Working Class

What it Takes to make it

Allison L. Hurst



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## **MOBILITY STUDIES AND EDUCATION**

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# College and the Working Class

*What it Takes to make it*

**Edited by**

Allison L. Hurst

*Furman University, SC, USA*



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## INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

Janet was a smart kid who grew up in the projects.<sup>1</sup> She did well in school and was often taunted by her classmates for being a nerd. In fact, “book learning” was a favourite insult, “They believed that common sense exists in inverse proportion to academic instruction, a notion that found expression in cutting comments such as ‘The girl ain’t got nothin’ upstairs but book learning’ and ‘You got about as much common sense as a speck on a fly!’” (35–36). When Janet did in fact manage to find her way to college, however, she received a new unwanted identity – “project girl.” At home in Brooklyn she was different (“nerd”); at Vassar she was different in a new way – poor and Black. “College had given me a glimpse of a wider, whiter, wealthier world than my own. I wanted to assume its benefits, but not the identity. Did I have to be it, to share in it? That was the conflict that had wrestled me down and threatened to pin me there, in the projects” (76). Janet managed to survive college although the “brutal” contrast between her home life and college almost stopped her from achieving her goals. Hearing of troubles at home (mostly financial) made her feel guilty that she was safely away at college, surrounded by privilege and comfort, playing tennis and taking philosophy courses (66). Unlike her peers who were striving to become “stockbrokers like their mothers, lawyers like their aunts, or professors like their fathers,” she was in college in order to *not* be her mother, her aunt, her father (58–59). Eventually, Janet earned a law degree and moved to Paris, where she lived and wrote books until her early death of cancer in 2007. Her story can thus be seen as a “success,” a testament to the ability for any child born in the US to achieve his or her dream by going to school and becoming somebody. Her story is, in a way, both rare and common. It is rare because fewer than three percent of children from working-class families like hers actually earn a four-year degree.<sup>2</sup> Working-class college students (low-income, first-generation) are a minority group on our college campuses. Janet’s story is also common, however. The position of being “the other,” being from the working class but on the way towards achieving a college degree, raises common issues - straddling home and college cultures, feeling guilt for having escaped, being marginalized both at home and at college, suffering an identity crisis. This may explain why so few like Janet who begin college actually earn a degree, or why high-achieving high-ability working-class students sometimes fail to enter college at all. But Janet’s story also tells us that it is possible to succeed. Discovering the stumbling blocks so that they can be removed can help us ease the way for the Janets of the world to achieve their dreams.

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This book then is about college and the working class, particularly the three percent of working-class kids who earn four-year college degrees. It is a book about the American Dream of upward mobility through education and hard work. It is also a book about the economic, moral, and psychological dilemmas facing working-class people who choose to go to college. To illustrate these issues, you will hear the stories of five very different students - Maria, Sam, Lucas, Serena, and Michael - as they make their way to and through college. Through them, you will gain an understanding of both the common issues facing working-class college students and the various ways in which these issues may be confronted.

I have drawn these five stories in composite form from the very best research in this area. The stories are woven from a rich tapestry of research,<sup>3</sup> surveys of college students,<sup>4</sup> autobiographies of working-class academics,<sup>5</sup> novels and essays based on true-life experiences,<sup>6</sup> and my own previous research in this area.<sup>7</sup> I have also drawn on my personal experience as a former working-class college student.

Each chapter will highlight different aspects of the students' struggles to achieve the American Dream. Each chapter will conclude with questions for discussion and recommendations for further reading. The information presented in each chapter will draw on a large and growing body of research on working-class college students. However, to keep the work as fresh and readable as possible, references will be reserved when absolutely necessary for footnotes. Readers interested in finding out more about particular studies and findings should consult the recommendations for further reading at the end of each chapter.

I use Maria, Lucas, Michael, Serena and Sam to show the common experiences and obstacles faced by working-class college students today and to show the diverse ways students confront and overcome these obstacles. Although there are scores of studies, accounts, reflections, and data that tell similar stories, none of them are as comprehensive as I would like. It is for this reason that I created the five composite characters. I wanted to tell the story of the working class' confrontation with higher education in all its fullness, and this means addressing the impact of gender and race as well. It is for this reason that I created five composites, rather than tell the story from a single working-class person's perspective.

The composites were created with three principles in mind. First, I wanted the characters to be as truthful as possible, meaning as close to empirical reality as possible. Their stories are typical stories, as much as an individual's life story can be. There is no event described that did not happen in real life to somebody somewhere, and perhaps to many people in many places. Second, I wanted the characters to represent the wide range of experiences found within this population. This may seem opposed to the first principle, and in many ways it was and is difficult to balance the complexity of human relations with the need for "typical" accounts and generalizable experiences. But working-class college students are individuals, with different social locations and cultural expectations related to race, gender, ethnicity, immigration status, age, sexuality, and disability status, to name

the most obvious. Here I have tried to remain faithful to the diversity of the working-class college population by creating a sample of racially and ethnically diverse men and women, whose ages run from early to late 20's, who have different experiences related to family structure, poverty, school trajectories, and union activity. Third, I wanted the characters to typify the common experiences working-class students share while in college while allowing their reactions to be as unique and different as they are in reality. Some of these shared experiences include coming to college with different cultural expectations, values, and capabilities than middle-class college students, accruing high levels of debt while in college, and being the target of classist remarks and commentary. As you will see in later chapters, students react to these experiences very differently. For example, while Serena may be intimidated by middle-class peers and expectations, and ashamed of her different cultural background and lack of approved cultural capital, others, like Michael and Sam, find new sources of pride in their working-class roots. And while Michael may articulate his differences in terms of class, others like Lucas and Maria are more likely to articulate their differences in terms of race and gender.

Although the five students whose stories form the core of this book were created specifically to highlight the diversity of backgrounds and identity orientations found among working-class college students, they all share the broad similarity of being from families whose members do working-class jobs – jobs with little prestige, little pay, and little power and autonomy. Historically, these jobs have not required extensive formal education. Thus, these students are doing something different from the rest of their families and home communities when they venture into college. They also have different future expectations than their families. While in the past a good worker might have followed his or her own American Dream without college, today a college degree is considered essential to finding a decent job (let alone a career). This generation of working-class college students thus shares some things in common with past generations of “scholarship boys and girls”, but they are also unique in that they are being *pushed*, not just *pulled*, into college. Whether college responds by losing its middle-class character so as to better welcome these students, or whether working-class college students will continue to feel forced to assimilate to middle-class norms in order to succeed, is a question only future events can answer.

My choice of “Redwood State University,” a large public university of a fictitious US state, as the site was chosen for similar reasons of typicality and diversity. First, the majority of working-class college students attend either a public two-year or public four-year college. There are fewer students from the working class in private colleges, due to both of cost and information barriers. Because I wanted this sample to be typical, I chose not to use a private college setting. I chose a four-year college instead of a two-year college because “success” is often premised on a four-year degree and a four-year college would have a greater imbalance in the number of middle-class and working-class students.

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This allows me, of course, to spend some time discussing the earlier community college participation of some of the composite characters. Public universities are particularly attractive to working-class college students who may have very little information on colleges in general (as we will see in Chapter Three). I also gave the college a unique social setting, which so far as economic stagnation and town/gown relations go, is not atypical. Many college towns are situated in places where the local economy is now suffering, and this exacerbates tensions between what is perceived as the elite population (the “gown”) and the working population outside the campus (the “town”).

### MEETING THE FIVE REDWOOD STATE STUDENTS

Redwood State University (“RSU”) is a mid-sized moderately selective public university, the type of institution that grants the most baccalaureate degrees. Like other schools of its kind, classes are often large and overenrolled, and many students take more than four years to complete their coursework. It is also the flagship university of its state, producing the largest number of PhDs in the region, and proud to be distinguished as a “Research 1 University.” Because of this, many full-time faculty commit more time to research than teaching, and are often inaccessible to undergraduate students. Classes are often taught by graduate students and underpaid adjunct faculty.

RSU’s level of prestige depends on one’s position. While many middle-class and upper-middle-class students see the school as a “safety” school (and treat it accordingly) despite its flagship status, less economically privileged students (working-class and middle-class) perceive it as a very good school, distinguished from smaller regional public colleges and universities or two-year-community colleges. The five students described here had high expectations of the academic rigor and calibre of the school before attending.

RSU is located in an economically depressed state in a region of the country that has suffered a loss of well-paying working-class jobs in the lumber industry. Although unemployment rates are high in the area, you could not tell this from the area immediately surrounding RSU. Expensive cars and SUVs crowd the campus parking areas. University Avenue, directly south of the campus, is a tree-lined boulevard of expensive ostentatious homes that serve high-level administrators and local professionals. Several large mansions housing fraternities and sororities, complete with porticos and ornate Greek columns, dot the surrounding environs. Although many students dress comfortably in shorts, sweats, and flip-flops, an equal number wear trendy clothes with expensive price tags (besides, designer flip-flops can easily top \$100). While the school does not have a reputation among faculty as being full of “elite” students (like the Ivies or many more selective liberal arts colleges), working-class students are an almost invisible presence on campus. RSU can best be described as comfortably middle class.

In addition, a sizeable number of international students attend and pay the full costs of out-of-state tuition. Faculty and staff are encouraged to be as welcoming as possible to this population as a way for the university to raise revenue. Although RSU does provide financial and advisory support to students it identifies as contributing to the diversity of the campus, many students of color are dissatisfied with the level of this commitment. In addition, RSU can seem wilfully oblivious at times to the circumstances and experiences of economically disadvantaged and/or non-traditional White students. At one point, the student-run newspaper ran a “humorous” story belittling older returning students and implying they were too stupid for college. There was no official reaction (and little overall campus reaction) to this article, although many non-traditional students were deeply offended and/or embarrassed.

The metropolitan enclave surrounding the campus is full of upscale restaurants as well as the typical college fare of pizza places and coffee shops. There are a few clothing boutiques and stores selling “exotic” mercantile from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Only a few blocks from campus is the “business downtown area” with expensive shops, athletic clubs, and apartment complexes, as well as a nationally renowned Performing Arts Center. RSU also has very strong ties to a local businessman who heads a multi-billion dollar global industry. His recent donations have renovated the campus, creating a state-of-the-art Business Center that attracts visitors not only from the region but throughout the country. In keeping with the times, the renovated football stadium includes skyboxes for the wealthy.

And yet, to the immediate east of the campus lies another town entirely, one that has been nastily referred to as “Springtucky” in order to connote its “hillbilly” character. Incoming students are warned to stay away from this area (of course, no one expects that anyone *from* there might be one of these incoming students). Although the area has a good mixture of White and Latino/a working-class people, the image of White poverty remains strange and exotic and perhaps what is most perplexing to the people giving this caution. Residents of this town often dismiss its neighbors as “snobbish” and “not real people.” Both Serena and Michael live in this town, as the rents are much more affordable. Thus, the class divide they traverse every day is marked geographically in their daily commutes.

For now, these are our five students – Maria, Sam, Lucas, Serena, and Michael. For only five, they are a fairly representative sample. Sam, Serena, and Michael are a little older than the “traditional” student, a commonality of working-class students. One, Sam, has children. Two are in college primarily because they are attracted to reading and scholarly activity, two are in college because they want to get ahead, and one is in college because the job market is so bad on the outside that he feels compelled to get a degree. Three (Michael, Sam, and Lucas) are what I will call *Loyalists* – their first priority is to their home communities and are sometimes willing to forego success if this is predicated on assimilation. Two (Maria and Serena) are what I will call *Renegades* – they have learned to value

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what the greater society values, academic success, social prestige, and high class position. They believe that moving away from families and assimilating into the mainstream are necessary for achievement. More on this later.

### *Maria's Story*

Maria was born two years after President Reagan's amnesty for Mexican migrants who were living in the US as *braceros*. She is the oldest of three children, and considers herself the moral and intellectual backbone of her family. She is the only one of the five students who entered a four-year college directly from high school. Beginning at the age of seven, Maria has been the family's translator, financial advisor, and guide through bureaucracies. Her father died in a freak farming accident when she was ten, after which her mother and younger siblings became even more dependent on the capable Maria. She has worked alongside her mother in the fields during the strawberry season as well as holding down several full-time jobs herself, beginning at the age of fourteen. When in high school, she grabbed the attention of teachers and administrators. She was a force to be reckoned with, starting and leading student clubs, running for class president, striving to be valedictorian (and just missing), and incessantly asking questions, "What is a good college? How do I get in? What classes should I take? Why won't you let me into AP English? What do I write in my application letters? What is an SAT and how can I afford to take it?" Maria has a very clear idea of what she wants to achieve in her life – after college, a political internship, then law school, then a position as a Civil Rights attorney or immigration attorney, maybe political office.

Despite her external appearance as the capable, feisty, strong-willed Latina, Maria harbors deep fears and low self-esteem. She wanted very much to go to Georgetown University and be close to the heart of the US political system, but was dissuaded by one of her high school teachers who told her she would never get in. She struggled through high school with students calling her a *vendida*, or sell-out. Others taunted her by saying she was "acting White." Nor is everything going well at home. Her mother is often exasperated by her daughter's ambitions. She wants her to take it a little easier and find a nice young man to marry. She cannot understand why Maria has so little interest in starting a family of her own. Her younger brother and sister often make fun of her. Neither of them has any interest in college. Maria finds it increasingly difficult to visit home, and prefers to spend her breaks working on extra projects or planning her future career path. She remains socially isolated at college.

### *Sam's Story*

Sam identifies as American Indian, from the *Miwok* tribe of the Northwest, although he is quick to point out that he doesn't "do powwows" or engage in other

overtly cultural indicia of being Indian. What he does have is a strong sense of solidarity with other American Indians, regardless of tribe, and people of color in general. His family is large and multicultural, with many uncles, aunts, and cousins of Mexican descent. When he was a small boy, his grandfather sat him down and explained cultural genocide to him. He has never looked at American patriotism, imperialism, or war in quite the same way.

Sam's early teachers did not identify him as a good student. He would often sit quietly in the back of the classroom, seemingly ignoring what his teachers had to say, staring out the window, drawing cartoons. But Sam was not ignoring them – he was just careful about accepting what they had to say without criticism. You could say that Sam has a very loose attachment to school. Even though a few teachers recognized his hidden potential and encouraged him, Sam at first chose not to go to college. The only thing that kept him tied to high school was sports (he played basketball). After working several dead-end jobs after high school (at one point he worked in Alaska, canning fish), he decided to try community college. To his surprise, he liked it. He took a course on Native American literature and was hooked. He married his high-school sweetheart and became a father, working full-time and going to class whenever he could find the time.

When the factory where both he and his wife shut down, they decided to move to another town where many of his relatives had previously relocated. After three more years of doing low-skill, low-pay work and never seeming to get ahead, Sam and his wife divorced, although the parents took equal custody of their daughter, Brianna. With more reluctance than desire, Sam applied to the four-year university located in his new hometown, which turned out to be RSU. He had little interest in its relative prestige or stature in the area. He understood that going to college full-time would allow him to take out student loans, and that these loans could help him make ends meet while taking care of his daughter. Of course, he is worried about his growing debt, and is unsure what use a college degree is for someone who is uninterested in business, management, or being “the boss.” To say that Sam is conflicted about being a college student would be a gross understatement.

Sam continues to have very close relationships with his large family. Several cousins and siblings live near RSU, where jobs are a little easier to find than in the rural hinterland. To save on rent, Sam lives with three of his cousins and two of their friends, in a rather run-down previous frat house near the campus. He walks everywhere, and his ex-wife drops off and picks up Brianna for the weekends. He frequently skips meals to save on expenses, and once in awhile an uncle will come visit with some freshly procured deer meat. Although Sam and Maria attend the same college, they have never met, as they are both too busy with studies and responsibilities to do much socializing.

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### *Lucas' Story*

Lucas, who is African American, is the only one of the five students to have come to the University from out of state. Most working-class college students go to colleges near their families, for both financial and informational reasons. Lucas was recruited, however. A University representative from the football team flew all the way across the country to ask Lucas to apply to his college. Lucas had never heard of the college. He certainly did not want to move 3000 miles away from his family, but saw this as his only chance at a college degree.

Lucas had been trying to go to college for several years when the football assistant coach paid his visit. The oldest son of a single mother, Lucas had long been playing the father figure to his younger brother and sister. His mother, a strong and brave woman whom Lucas adores, had struggled after her husband was murdered. She did clerical work, but was never able to find a permanent job with benefits. There were two instances in his childhood when the family had been homeless. Lucas began working as a clerk at the local grocer's as soon as he could, when he was fifteen, kicking in his paychecks to help the family make it through tough times.

In high school, Lucas had begun running track to fulfill his physical education requirements. The irony is that Lucas doesn't like sports at all. He is much more of an intellectual than an athlete. But at a primarily White school, which he attended on a desegregation order, Lucas was identified as an exceptional athlete. He doesn't think he really was exceptional, only that his blackness made others identify him as so. When he graduated from high school he had a strong desire to go to college but no money. He had scored very high on the SATs, but his relatively low grades precluded academic scholarships. After a year, he was offered a track scholarship by a former coach who was now teaching at a community college. Even with the scholarship, it was hard on Lucas and his family. He still had to work full-time to pay for "incidentals," like transportation, food, clothing, books, and other living expenses. Plus, his family still depended on his financial contributions. Working full-time, attending school full-time, commuting hours a day, and then literally running himself ragged took its toll. His grades were atrocious and he was about to give up on his dreams when the assistant football coach showed up.

Lucas moved across the country to pursue his dreams of a college education. He still calls his mother every day. He guides his younger brother and sister through school and the social miasma of adolescence. At RSU, he is just another Black athlete, from whom many students and teachers do not expect much academically. This bothers Lucas tremendously as he is passionate about learning and despises football, which he is quite good at because of all the running he did to get to college. He has a strong sense of humor, because, as he says with a chuckle, he "needs it." He is completely dedicated to making it through college and becoming a teacher.

He wants to teach in a working-class neighborhood (Black, White, he doesn't care) and help kids who want to learn but whom teachers and administrators who don't expect much out of them all too often ignore.

### *Serena's Story*

Serena is a White woman in her late 20's. Her father has been intermittently employed throughout her life, sometimes working as a mechanic and sometimes as a store clerk. Her mother is the elementary school "lunch lady." Serena has a younger brother and sister. Serena grew up embarrassed of her poverty and stung by "White Trash" insults she heard from the other kids at school. She blames her parents for not finding better jobs. From a very early age, Serena decided she would have to do things very differently from the way her parents did things. First, she rejected what she calls their "extreme religiosity." Second, she learned to mimic the speech and behavior patterns of the better-off kids with whom she went to school. Third, she celebrated ambition and her will to succeed. This, she believed, was what would set her apart from the rest of her impoverished family.

When Serena was sixteen she left home and moved in with the parents of one of her best friends. Her "new Dad" was a professor at a small liberal arts college and her "new Mom" worked at a non-profit organization dedicated to saving the environment. Serena was amazed at the types of conversations they had around the dinner table. She realized why her friend always seemed so aware and sure of herself. Upon graduation, her "sister" entered the same liberal arts college where her father worked and Serena started at the local community college. Always emotionally supportive, her new parents did not have the funds to finance Serena's education. She moved out of their house and supported herself by working several part-time jobs while attending college. Sometimes, she would have to take a term or two off because she was behind on her studies. Two times she could not afford to pay rent and lived out of her car for a month or so. At the age of 27 she applied to and was accepted at RSU.

Serena has very mixed feelings about college. She knows that having a college degree is necessary for her to be successful, but sometimes she questions whether or not she is learning anything of value at college. She sees the degree as a credential – one that people like her adoptive sister more easily attained than people like her. On the other hand, like Maria, she is exasperated that her younger brother and sister are not interested in furthering their education beyond high school. She is upset that they have resigned themselves to being "serfs" in the modern economy. Serena believes she has already made it to the middle class because she has acquired so much cultural capital from her adoptive family and her time in college. She is especially proud that she was not willing to settle for the lesser things in life. This has cost her financially. She has accrued a great deal of

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debt while in college, even though she works full-time. Serena has almost no contact with her biological parents, although she does visit her brother and sister on occasion and always sends them a gift on their birthdays.

### *Michael's Story*

Michael, who is White, is the only one of the five students who has experience with labor unions. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather worked at the local mill. His grandfather was instrumental in unionizing the workforce. Today, though, it is nearly impossible to get a job there because operations have all but been shut down. When Michael was 10, he witnessed a heartbreaking eight-month strike in which the workers eventually lost. His father was blacklisted for his role in the strike and lost his job. This period really solidified a sense of “us vs. them” in young Michael. His mother explained to him the importance of striking and picketing, and standing up together. Michael retains a strong working-class consciousness and class solidarity to this day.

The family scrambled for awhile, with Michael's mother taking a job at a dry cleaners/laundry. Eventually, Michael's father got a job as a general handyman. Michael's older brother joined the business. Michael was a bookworm as a kid and was never very good at working with his hands. His older brother often teased him for being a “momma's boy.” Early attempts to fix things were disastrous. Still, Michael never really considered college. After high school graduation he got a job in a warehouse. There were several things he disliked about this job. First, he was uncomfortable with his fellow workers when they made racist and misogynist jokes. He would like to have talked to them about politics or the books he was reading but they didn't seem interested in anything more than sports and women. Second, he was angered at the way management sat in air-conditioned offices while he and the other warehouse workers sat on lunch pails in the heat to eat their home-packed lunches. It all seemed very unjust to him.

When his girlfriend starting going to community college, he decided to try one class for himself. The class he took was an introductory sociology course, and it was here that he learned about Marx's theories of capitalism. This was eye-opening to him. Finally, he felt that all of his distrust, anger, and bitterness had a purpose. For a class assignment he asked his father questions about the old union and revisited his childhood memories of the strike. He was eager to learn more. He decided to go to college full-time. After two years as an exemplary student at the community college, he transferred to RSU. At first he was shocked by the difference. He was dismayed to find that so few courses confronted issues of class or inequality. He was bitter at the privilege he saw all around him. Eventually, he learned to take things in stride, but always remained cautiously suspicious of his peers and professors.

Michael would love to stay in school forever, but only if he can learn about the things he thinks are important. He has dreams of being a college professor, but only if he can teach at a community college. His older brother still teases him about being so smart, and both his parents wonder if all the expense of a college education is worth it. Michael is not so sure either, but this is what he does best.

These five students are individually interesting, having taken quite different pathways to and through college. The obstacles they have faced – low-paying jobs, low expectations, pressure to help out family, lack of information, shocking contrasts between poverty and privilege – differ in the particularities but have an overall resemblance. These obstacles result from living at the bottom of a class society. The structure of class inequality is the frame in which these students move. They are all actively engaged in overcoming handicaps of class and race. Going to college is one way the express their agency. Throughout this book we will revisit the interplay of agency and structure as we watch the story of how Maria, Sam, Lucas, Serena, and Michael become college graduates unfold. Before we do this, however, we must be clear about what is meant by the term “working class.”

#### DEFINING THE WORKING CLASS

Although there are various and competing definitions of class, the definition embraced here focuses on the type of work one does and the social relationships that this work creates. Classes are formed over time through common experiences. Because our work takes such a large part of our daily lives, our experiences at work are key to defining ourselves and our relationships with others. “[Class] is about the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result” (Zweig 2000: 11). This power derives from the workplace. Classes are “groups of people connected to one another, and made different from one another, by the ways they interact when producing goods and services” (*ibid*).

Although income and education level may be related to the type of work we do, the type of work we do is what matters. For example, whereas working-class jobs are directed by others, middle-class jobs are often self-directed or directing. This means that people in working-class jobs have fundamentally different social relationships than people in middle-class jobs. In contrast to the middle class or upper class, “to be in the working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability” (Zweig 2000: 13). Following orders may be a requisite for those in the working class, whereas creative self-expression may be optimal for the middle class. Another point about class is that classes relate to each other, sometimes in oppositional or antagonistic ways. It makes no sense to talk of a “working class” without also talking about a “managing class.” Classes feel their commonness in relationship to, and in distinction of, other classes. That is what makes a class a class.

Americans supposedly do not like talking about class. We rail against political candidates who bring up issues of progressive taxation as engaging in “class warfare.” We are publicly committed to the idea that anyone can make it in America, so long as they work hard enough to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. So how can we define classes as shared experiences and common feelings when our national ideology ignores class distinctions? I believe that the notion of classlessness is overstated in the literature and that our public stance has more to do with our historical distaste for aristocratic privileges than it does for a belief that class no longer matters. And against the idea that we all perceive ourselves to be “middle class”, consider this: When surveys are conducted asking people if they are upper, middle, or lower class, the vast majority respond “middle.” However, when people are given the choice of upper, middle and working, an equal number of respondents choose working as middle.<sup>8</sup>

Self-identifications are notoriously tricky, of course, which is one reason we cannot rely solely on self-identification if we wish to understand the working class. Many researchers use income or parental education level to get at class differences in education. This makes sense given that the US government often keeps records based on income quartiles or quintiles. Looking at “low-income” students or students with high financial need is often the easiest way to examine class differences in college. But it is not optimal for several reasons. Income may be related to class position but it is not a perfect equivalent. Income can tell us only how much money a person earns, not how much wealth a family has, how their money is spent, what types of activities family members participate in, what kind of work and social relationships members engage in. In other words, income tells us almost nothing about what people *do* and *how they live their lives*. For similar reasons, looking solely at parental educational level is also problematic, although it is possible that the difference between having parents with a college degree and having parents without is a fairly profound cultural difference in today’s society. Although income and parental education levels may indicate relative *status* in society, they do not tell us much about *class*.

To see how misleading the use of income and education can be, let us imagine two very different students. We can imagine, first, a student whose parents selflessly work at a Non-Governmental Organization as directors, with incomes in the lowest quartile, who live in a large house in a very nice neighborhood that was a gift from *their* parents, who have extensive business interests. The child of these parents may have high financial aid, and she may be classified as low-income, but it would be a mistake to see her as working class. Second, we can imagine a student whose parents went no further than high school but who successfully started a small business that is now a multi-million dollar business. Although rare, such stories do happen in America, and when they do, the children of such parents often go on to college, where they are considered “first-generation” students. Here, too, it would be misleading to call such a student working class.

Working class is therefore a much more comprehensive term than low-income or first-generation, although most working-class students are both of those as well. To be as careful as possible, I use income, education, *and* occupation to define working class, although the most important by far, for the reasons stated above, is occupation. I follow in the line of many other class researchers to define working-class jobs as those that are non-supervisory, primarily manual (all jobs require mental work, although this is not often recognized), non-salaried, directed by others (as opposed to self-directed), and not considered prestigious by most accounts. This latter is necessarily subjective, but such prestige rankings of jobs do exist. There are two instances where income and parental education level do *not* correlate clearly with jobs, and these are the cases where, first, parents have well-paying highly skilled unionized jobs and, second, where a parent may have been the first in *their* family to attend college, but was unable to translate that college degree into a middle-class job. I do not place such people outside of the working class.

I also do not divide the working class into racialized and gendered subcomponents. “Working class” for many middle-class Americans invokes a stereotypical image of a blue-collar White man, with decent pay but a lot of economic insecurity about his job, perhaps ignorant and racist as well. This is *not* what working class means to me. Using the definition of working-class job describe above, approximately two-thirds of Americans are currently holding down working-class jobs (Zweig 2000). These jobs range from skilled manual labor to service work, from predominantly masculinized jobs like linesman to almost exclusively feminized jobs such as childcare provider and home nursing aides. Enlisted men and women in the armed forces, grocery clerks, the cable guy, the UPS driver, hospital orderlies, food servers, adult workers at McDonalds – all of these are part of the working class. So, too, are the unemployed and underemployed who would prefer to have stable jobs. Or, as the novelist Paul Lauter once said, the working class include all those who, “to advance their conditions of life, must move in *solidarity* with their class or must leave it.” Although there may be important distinctions within the working class, this book is not about those distinctions. It is instead about what happens when kids from the working class get to college, a place that is designed for and dominated by the middle class. A middle class that is everything the working class is not – highly educated, well-paid, salaried, and in control of their own work.

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter Two provides an historical overview of the relationship between the working class and higher education. Here I demonstrate that the notion of career success and social mobility through formal educational advancements is relatively new, particularly for the working class. Although there is a history of alternative educational systems, labor colleges for example, the working class has historically

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eschewed college. College remains even today strongly linked with the middle class and middle-class professions and occupations. The chapter also highlights some of the social forces at work that are breaking down these strong connections between the middle class and college, as well as forces such as globalization and deindustrialization that are pushing more working-class people to consider college as the only viable economic option. Readers interested only in the current stories of the five highlighted students may want to skip this chapter and move directly to Chapter Three.

Chapter Three turns to a discussion of one of the most important bundle of issues confronting working-class students – deciding to go to college (and where), applying, and paying for college. Unlike middle-class students, working-class students often have very little counseling or assistance in these important decisions. They haven't been groomed for college. For many, the decision to go to college is a last-minute one, borne out of necessity, or the result of encouragement by a mentor. Many do not go to college right away. Many struggle through the requirements of applying for financial aid, or are daunted and intimidated by the cost of tuition, unaware that aid is available. But working-class students who do make it to college show great enterprise and persistence. This chapter follows Maria as she makes the decision to go to a four-year college directly from high school, and Sam, as he transfers in and out of school and cycles back and forth between work and college. Those interested in attracting working-class students to college programs and easing their matriculation paths may find important sites of intervention in this chapter.

Chapter Four takes a closer look at the first-year college experience for working-class students. It describes the culture shock most working-class students experience when they first arrive on campus, and how students learn to successfully cope with differences. The chapter follows Lucas directly to a very White place and Serena to a land of privilege. Through their stories the reader is encouraged to consider the ways in which class bias and stereotypes, assumptions about privilege and economic position, and normal teacher expectations may harm working-class students. This chapter may particularly help those who are interested in developing retention programs for working-class and minority students.

Chapter Five follows the students as they navigate their way through college, particularly the built environment of the campus space itself and the social cues and messages transmitted through this space. We will follow Maria as she seeks improvement in her writing skills in the campus writing center, Sam and Michael as they make use of the student union, Serena as she accesses the student athletic center, Lucas as he trains at the football complex, and all five as they mingle and work in social spaces both on and off campus. In many ways, college campuses are idyllic retreats from real world concerns and inequalities. On the other hand, their very idyllic layout and resources may highlight the greater society's inequalities. Furthermore, the way spaces are used and arranged may in fact reinforce class and race hierarchies. A careful examination of a typical campus may help both planners

and those who inhabit particular spaces within the campus integrate working-class students more effectively into the life and mission of the college.

Chapter Six moves away from the campus to reexamine the changing nature of students' relationship with family and home community. This, too, is part of the college learning process, and those working with working-class college students should be aware of the particular strains and tensions that college can place on students' families. It is important for those counseling working-class college students to understand the emotions attendant on moving between and among classes. This is one area where students react quite distinctly to the pressures of academic expectations and potential social mobility. For this reason, all five students are highlighted in this chapter. The important lesson here is that there is no "one-size-fits-all" counselling policy for working-class college students.

Chapter Seven examines the future plans of the students, demonstrating the ways in which social capital, cultural capital, and informational barriers continue to play a role in student expectations and opportunities. Also examined in this chapter is the impact of high student debt loads, an increasing social problem for many college graduates. Those interested in easing students' transition from school to work will find this chapter particularly helpful.

Chapter Eight provides a useful summary of lessons learned, clearly listing the many points at which working-class college students need assistance (from deciding to apply to college to finding a job that will help them repay their debt) and offering suggestions and examples of successful intervention programs. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers will all find something of use here to ease the pathway of our future working-class college graduates. Campus residents, by they students, faculty, staff, or administration, can evaluate their own school's commitment to creating a working-class friendly environment against a series of checklists.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This account was taken from Janet McDonald's literary autobiography, *Project Girl* (McDonald 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> Heller 2002:14-15. This may surprise the reader who is used to hearing about our increasing college attendance rates. Much of the rise in college attendance has been the result of greater numbers of middle-class students and female students. In fact, even as more students attend college, *the relative proportion* of low-income students attending college has decreased (Fossey & Bateman 1998:92).
- <sup>3</sup> Allesandria & Nelson 2005; Aries 2008; Attewell & Lavin 2007; Bowker 1993; Bowl 2003; Carter 2007; Clydesdale 2007; Cushman 2006; Evans 2009; Gandara 1995; Goldman 1968; Goodwin 2002, 2006; Granfield 1991; Grigsby 2009; Howard & Levine 2004; Howard 2008; Johnson-Bailey 2001; Kahl 1953; Kahlenberg 2004; Kastberg 2007; LaPaglia 1994; Lawler 1999; Lehmann 2009; LePage-Lees 1997; Levine & Nidiffer 1996; Lindquist 2002; Lubrano 2004; Loeb 1994; London 1989; Mangione 1998; Seiber 2001; Orwell 1958; Ostrove 2003; Padilla 1997; Plummer 2000; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009; Sacks 2007; Weis 1985; Walpole 2007; Willie 2003; Young 1999.

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- <sup>4</sup> Abbott 1971; Bank & Yelon 2003; Bowen et al. 2005; Goldsen et al. 1960; Jackson & Marsden 1962; Komarovsky 1985; Levine 1980, 1998; Massey et al. 2003; Reynolds 1927.
- <sup>5</sup> Adair & Dahlberg 2003; Aisenberg & Harrington 1988; Allison 2004; Dews & Law 1995; Grimes & Morris 1997; Hoggart 1957; hooks 2000; Hurst 2008; Kadi 1996; Linkon 1998; Mahony & Zmroczek 1997; Muzzatti & Samarco 2006; Ngugi wa-Thiong'o 1986; Oldfield & Johnson 2008; R. Rodriguez 1983; S. Rodriguez 2001; Ryan & Sackrey 1984; Shepard & Tate 1998; Tokarczyk & Fay 1993; Valverde 2002; Welsch 2005; Zandy 1995.
- <sup>6</sup> Anson 1987; McDonald 1999; Podhoretz 1967; Sittenfeld 2005; Suskind 1998; Villanueva 1993; Walkerdine 1990.
- <sup>7</sup> Hurst 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> See Vanneman and Cannon, *The American Perception of Class*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press (1988).

## CHAPTER 2

# COLLEGE AND THE WORKING CLASS: AN OVERVIEW

In 2007, Peter Sacks published *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*. The book tells the story of “several young people born into different sides of America’s class divide and how their educational opportunities are being shaped by their class status more than ever.” More than ever? How can this be? Every year we are bombarded with statistics about the increasing number of young people entering college. If you are born into the type of middle-class family that prepares you for college from primary school on, where college is an expected destination, you may even think that most young adults are going to college these days. You would be wrong. The college enrollment rate of high school graduates in 2008 (ages 15 to 24) was 44%. More than half of all high school *graduates* were not enrolled in college (US Census Bureau). Even this statistic is misleading, however. Of those enrolled in college, about one-third attend two-year colleges (US Census Bureau). Who goes to college and where, and whether those who go actually earn a degree, are largely dependent on factors of class, race, and gender. For example only three percent of students at our top colleges and universities come from low-income families, compared to seventy-four percent from high-income families. Sacks’ book demonstrates some of the difficulties facing low-income high school students as they attempt to “move up” in the world through education. These difficulties include attending schools with few resources, being placed in remedial tracks, competing with students whose parents hire private tutors and extracurricular enrichment activities, and reduced expectations (although not always reduced aspirations (Hanson 1994)).

Sacks’ book is a great wake-up call to those who believe we have achieved or are close to achieving a meritocracy, where the talented emerge at the top and the less able take their positions at the bottom. In this chapter I supplement Sacks’ account by examining the historical connection between class and education in the US, exploring the ways in which higher education has been “classed” from its inception. I then briefly provide an overview of the current landscape of who goes to college, filling out our understanding of “the other three percent.” Those interested in jumping into the stories of our students are welcome to pass over this chapter and go directly to Chapter 3.

How much access to higher education has there been for the working class? How has this access changed, if at all, over time? What role has higher education played in the pursuit of the American Dream? In this chapter we will explore the

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impact of the GI Bill after World War II, the rising cost of college during the 1980s and beyond, and the effects of deindustrialization and loss of well-paying factory jobs on young adults' decisions to give college a try. We will see that, despite many changes and attempts at broadening educational opportunities, colleges and universities continue to serve a relatively privileged portion of the American population. The chapter will conclude with a critical review of programs in existence today designed to expand access to higher education for low-income, first-generation, and working-class students. This chapter sets the frame for the closer examination of what going to college is like for working-class students that will be followed in later chapters. Before we can understand the experiences of working-class college students, however, we will have to take a quick detour into the history of higher education in the US and the relationship between colleges and the working class.

### *A Short History of Education and Social Mobility in the US*

We've all seen the movie where the bright kid from the farm (or the 'hood) surprises all of his (or her) teachers and classmates by getting a scholarship to Harvard (or Princeton, or Yale) and becomes rich and famous, perhaps graciously returning home once or twice to bestow favors and wisdom. Often there is tension as to whether or not the bright kid will be kept down by a needy community and jealous classmates, or perhaps struggle with self-esteem issues, or maybe the whole plot centers on the availability of that scholarship. Perhaps the best of this genre is Peter Yates' 1979 film, *Breaking Away*, complete with class conflict between the sons of "cutters" (local stonecutters) and college boys. Here you have a young "cutter" who falls in love with a rich college girl and dreams of Italy and bicycling. Not the usual dreams of a cutter. Will he manage to break away? Similar movies include the 2002 *Real Women Have Curves*, about a young Latina who works in her sister's LA sweatshop and dreams of leaving it all behind to attend Columbia University, the 1997 hit *Good Will Hunting*, about a young janitor/math prodigy who learns how to overcome self-doubts and trust issues, *Homeless to Harvard*, the 2003 "true-life" story of Liz Murray, a smart young girl who moves away from her drug-addicted parents, ends up on the streets, and manages to win a spot at America's most prestigious university, and the 1983 film *Educating Rita*, about a married British hairdresser who is successfully tutored by an alcoholic University professor, leaves her husband, and grows a taste for high culture.

But how common is this experience? First, it must be acknowledged that this story comes into being only in the latter half of the twentieth century. Before World War II, colleges and universities were reserved for the wealthy. Ivy League Universities were largely open admissions – if you could afford the tuition, you could go. Changes in the job structure, a growing need for managerial workers,

supervisors, and conceptual analysts, combined with an influx of soldiers returning stateside at the end of the Great War, pushed colleges and universities to redefine their mission. We will return to that a little later in the chapter. Before this redefined mission, the way to “get ahead” in the land of opportunity was by moving up the company ladder, or starting your own business. Despite American myths to the contrary, this was never highly possible or probable. Before the Civil War, most people remained in the same types of jobs as their parents. As Pessen demonstrates in his 1973 study *Riches, Class, and Power: The United States before the Civil War*, the most successful men were typically those with the greatest opportunities -of birth, social connections, and wealth. In point of fact, the richest families of the mid-nineteenth century were the same families as the richest families of the late eighteenth century.

Opportunities for advancement did not seriously increase in the later nineteenth century, *Horatio Alger* stories notwithstanding. In 1964, Stephen Thernstrom published *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City*. In this book, Thernstrom uses several different measures of social mobility to assess whether or not working families of the town of Newburyport, Massachusetts, improved their condition over several generations. Although he found that more than half of the workers of the town were able to buy their own homes after a decade of work, and that home ownership came with improved social status, children of property-owners tended to be *less* successful, in terms of income and jobs, than children of non-property owners. Thernstrom suggests this is because buying a house is expensive, mortgages weigh heavily on families, and children are asked to contribute to their maintenance. In other words, families used a larger part of their income on paying the mortgage off and a lesser part on subsistence, clothing, and training that might assist future generations:

To become a property owner out of earnings from unskilled manual labor required immense sacrifices – sacrifices so great as almost to blur the dichotomy between ‘property’ and ‘poverty’.” Money in the bank and a place to live without paying rent did provide security against extreme want, and did give a man a certain respectability. Entry into the propertied sector of the working class was thus an important form of social mobility. But it was mobility within narrow limits, mobility which tended to close off future opportunities rather than open them. Whatever the “magic influence” of property, possession of small amounts of it allowed the laborer neither to improve the material circumstances of his family very much nor to give his children the education which would have enabled them to climb into the white collar world (pg.137).

In the nineteenth century, this education would have more likely been paid apprenticeships, or on the job training as a clerk. The white-collar world was small,

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not very well paid, but relatively prestigious compared to unskilled or even skilled manual labor. And there was always the chance, if started on this track, that a good clerk could move up the company ladder, perhaps becoming president one day. Lockwood's (1998) study of clerks in 19<sup>th</sup> century England found little actual social mobility but great expectations:

The clerk, less a master but more than a hand, was poised precariously between the middle and working classes proper. Yet everything in his environment contrived to strengthen his attachment to the sentiments and way of life of the classes above him. His economic position made him forward-looking, striving and individualistic. His working life brought him into close contact with members of the middle class and from them he borrowed the prestige that surrounds authority (pg. 99).

When mobility did occur, it was typically "one step," from semiskilled to skilled work, for example. Fewer than one in twenty laborers in the nineteenth century saw their children make it into the middle class (Thernstrom, 103). The middle class was a different world entirely. Thernstrom says, "boys did not begin their careers as laborers or operatives and later edge their way up into white collar positions. The white collar and laboring worlds were clearly separated. One entered the white collar group only after having received considerable schooling, and one entered it directly" (page 144–45).

During the nineteenth century, advanced schooling was not considered a route of social mobility. College was reserved for the independently wealthy. As more "middle-class" positions of the kind studied by Lockwood emerged (clerks, bookkeepers, salesmen) graduation from *high school* became important. High school served as the gateway to middle-class positions, which did not in fact pay significantly more than working-class jobs, but did carry some prestige, borrowed from their surrounding authority, as Lockwood eloquently puts it, and were, on the whole, "safer" jobs than many working-class jobs of the nineteenth century.

From its origins, education in this country has been a *classing* process, allocating some members of society to well-paid or prestigious occupational positions while excluding others. In the nineteenth century, the wealthy sent their children to private preparatory schools and then college, while workers sent their children to elementary school and then on to work. As late as 1860, the number of youth attending high school was minimal, and those that did attend were the children of the middle class or skilled laborers (Ueda 1987). The high school of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century provided a service both to the emerging industrial capitalist system and to the middle class, for it provided trained managers to run industry and stabilized the middle class by "facilitating the intergenerational maintenance" of middle-class families, thereby becoming "the new link of the reproduction of middle class status" (pg.221).

By the early twentieth century public officials and school boards made some successful attempts at broadening public support for the high schools. By doing so, school supporters saw the tax base for these schools expand. Working-class people were now expected to shoulder part of the costs of these schools, even though it was a rare thing that their children earned a high school diploma. Here are some striking figures from the Ueda study. At the turn of the century, more than two-thirds of the children attending high school in the community he studied were children of parents in white-collar positions, even though less than one-third of the community's jobs were white-collar jobs. The children of workers who attended high school tended to come from the skilled trades. While 23% of the children in high school had parents who were skilled laborers, only 1% of the children attending high school had parents who were semiskilled or unskilled laborers (even though they represented one-third of the entire labor force of the community) (pg 46). Eventually, broadening public support for high school translated into greater participation across classes, although graduation rates for working-class kids have always trailed significantly behind those of middle-class kids. Ueda reports that even when participation by working-class kids reached 78%, less than one-quarter actually graduated, compared to more than two-thirds of the children of professionals. Furthermore, *none* of the high school graduates during this period had parents who were semiskilled or unskilled – the only children of laborers who actually graduated were those with skilled laborer parents (pg. 163).

It is important to recognize that what we are talking about here is, for the most part, intergenerational mobility – the ability of children to “move up” in class relative to their parents’ position. Intragenerational mobility, moving up in class within one’s own lifetime, is more rare. A locksmith who returns to college after twenty years of work and becomes a college professor would be an example of intragenerational mobility. She would also be an example of intergenerational mobility, however, if her parents were also locksmiths. We tend to believe that a college education can make a positive difference in people’s class position – that education can change what otherwise would be a caste position (your birth class defines your class throughout your life) into a variable class position. Sometimes, when we say “America is the land of opportunity” we mean exactly this. But “America is the land of opportunity” could mean something else entirely. It could mean, for example, that US citizens have the ability to develop their talents and interests, without worrying about whether or not they would be able to sustain themselves by that activity. Jane the locksmith (or Joe the Plumber) could remain a locksmith if that is what she wanted to be, without fearing that (a) she couldn’t pay her bills; or (b) she would be derided for not “making something of herself” by choosing not to attend college. In other words, “America is the land of opportunity” does not have to mean that people can (and should) “move up” in class.

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Education, particularly high school and college, has always been about helping students either move up in class, or maintain a position in the middle class. Obviously, we want students to be well-educated and informed citizens and functioning adults. But we tell our children to stay in school and go to college because we expect them to be more than that.

The shift in college from being an exclusive province of the very wealthy to being a rite of passage for the middle class began in the first half of the twentieth century, and reached its peak shortly after World War II. Once high school attendance was expected of all classes (even though, as we have seen, graduation was not), another level of education was required for making finer distinctions between workers. Growing capitalist businesses required a growing managerial class. Great capitalists began donating and creating colleges to train these managers. In 1924, James B. Duke donated millions to a small college in North Carolina that would become known as Duke University. Earlier, gifts over two decades from John D. Rockefeller would be used to create the University of Chicago. Andrew Carnegie's funds created Carnegie Mellon University. The Ball brothers took over a struggling normal college in Indiana and renamed it Ball State University. We still use the Carnegie-funded classification system of colleges and universities.

These were new schools, whose creation and mission was closely tied to the needs of the expanding capitalist system. Many, like the University of Chicago, were partially based on the German research university. They offered specialized areas of study in engineering, business science, economics, and hard sciences, in addition to the more typical humanities, arts and language courses offered by older liberal arts colleges and private universities. It is instructive to compare these new colleges and universities with what had reigned before. Up until this time, higher education operated more as social finishing schools for the very wealthy than as places to prepare for work. In 1870, fewer than two percent of the male population (and almost no women) attended college (Bowles & Gintis 1976). These colleges, hallowed names notwithstanding, were rather poor deals academically. Most of these schools provided no grades, provided no specializations, and had no permanent teaching staffs but rather relied on poorly-paid tutors and traveling lecturers (Bledstein 1976: 34).

The history of colleges in the first half of the twentieth century is largely, once again, a history of the involvement and boosterism of the middle class and related business interests. Bledstein (1976) argues that the new colleges and universities pushed a "culture of professionalism" that would be helpful for those trained as managers and coordinators of new capitalist enterprises. Aspects of this professionalist culture included an emphasis on competitiveness and an embrace of meritocracy. The best were thought to rise to the top, and were slotted accordingly for higher paying professional occupations. As Bledstein notes, universities "legitimized the growing authority of the middle class through the idea of meritocracy" (pg. 124).

But who was attending these early twentieth century colleges and universities? Who was available for this vast sorting machine? Most Americans were excluded. White men from both upper class and professional families, men who had either graduated from private preparatory schools or new public high schools, were the only ones on this meritocratic track. Mid-century, fewer than *twenty percent of American men* were college graduates. Not much had changed since 1871 when the President of Princeton University described America's educational landscape as "a two-story structure without a staircase."

The demands of a growing capitalist system following World War II made great changes to this structure. On the Fourth of July in 2000, the Lehrer News Hour on PBS ran a special on the importance of the GI Bill, a "bill that made America." According to historian Stephen Ambrose, the GI Bill "was the best piece of legislation ever passed by the U.S. Congress, and it made modern America." Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin argued that few laws "have had so much effect on so many people" as the GI Bill, under whose provisions "a whole generation of blue collar workers were enabled to go to college, become doctors, lawyers, and engineers, and that their children would grow up in a middle class family." Unfortunately, the truth is considerably more complicated. Although certainly college participation expanded after World War II, there were important caveats to this expansion. In many ways, what happened after World War II paralleled the earlier democratization and subsequent stratification of high school.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (popularly known as the G. I. Bill of Rights, or "GI Bill") provided tuition, subsistence, books and supplies, equipment, and counseling services for returning World War II veterans. This was extended by the 1962 Manpower Development and Training Act. These two pieces of legislation are largely cited as historical turning points for opening up access to college. For the first time, millions of people who otherwise could not afford college were able to do so. In the first seven years alone, eight million veterans received educational benefits, approximately one-third of whom attended college.

The GI Bill thus offered substantial opportunities to parts of the population who had never had a real chance to attend college before, although its effects were limited almost exclusively to White working-class men. People of color and women were generally ineligible for the educational funds. A cynic would also point out that the GI Bill was enacted in large part to curtail otherwise inevitable unemployment, as thousands of men returned home from overseas expecting to find their old jobs waiting for them, if not something better. Nevertheless, the GI Bill of Rights has been *the most substantial and effective* program for expanding college access to the working class in the history of the US.<sup>1</sup> The expanded number of working-class students on campus however did not mean there were less children of the more privileged in attendance. In fact, there were *proportionally more* middle-class students in college at this time, as college became even more important to maintain one's social position (Fossey & Bateman 1998:92). Even in

two-year colleges, working-class students were in the minority. In the postwar period, two-year colleges primarily served middle-class students with relatively poor academic records (Jencks & Riesman 1968:146).

The rise of the junior (or community) college is an interesting history in itself. As more people attended college, social expectations were raised. By creating stratification within higher education, some of these social expectations could be deflected, thus preventing social unrest. In the US, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, chaired by Clark Kerr, met between 1968 and 1973 to study the role of the higher education system in the US. The Kerr Commission, fearful of student radicalism, attempted to defuse the situation by stratifying and vocationalizing higher education, placing heavy restrictions on access to four-year colleges. Brint and Karabel tell this story well in their 1989 book, *The Diverted Dream*. They argue that “junior colleges have historically been supported by the major universities less to supply them with students than to insulate them from the masses clamoring at their gates” (pg. 229). This stratification severely constrained the promise of expanded access for the poor made just years before. “To be sure, the growth of community colleges has brought some individuals into higher education who would otherwise never have attended college; at the same time, however, this growth has also meant a diversion to the two-year sector of large numbers of students – disproportionately of modest social backgrounds – who would otherwise have attended four-year institutions” (pg. 226). Furthermore, the availability of these two-year colleges made it possible for four-year colleges to become more exclusive (pg. 90).

Before World War II, less than five percent of Americans went to college. In 1950, the numbers had doubled; about ten percent of all twenty-year olds were enrolled in college that year. By 1960, the numbers again doubled; now close to 20% of all young adults were enrolled in college. This is almost a quadrupling from before the war, but it still leaves more than 80% of the population outside the college gates. College was now open to those in the middle class (particularly the more affluent professional echelons of the middle class), but was still relatively underused by the working class. It was not until the mid-1970s that more than 20% of the population was going to college, and even then we begin to see substantial stratification within higher education. Upper-class and upper-middle-class students went to more selective four-year colleges and universities, many of them private. Academically strong middle-class students went to four-year colleges and universities, many of them public. Weaker middle-class students went to two-year colleges. Despite what Doris Kearns Goodwin stated and what we tend to believe as a national myth, very few children of blue-collar parents were going to college. It is safe to say that the number of working-class kids in college has always been more of the exception than the rule. Even the very highest ability, highest achieving students from low-income families attend college less than the lowest achievers among the upper middle class, as numerous studies show (more on this in the next section).

Even the limited gains of the Post-World War II era appear to be drying up, however. Along with rising tuition we are seeing less need-based financial aid, and a subsequent rise in indebtedness. Not only can rising costs of college keep out working-class students (who are more debt-averse than middle-class students in general) but they can also mean more of the working-class students who are going to college are doing so at two-year rather than four-year colleges. A 1999 study found choice of school to be more sharply constrained for lower-income students (McPherson & Schapiro 1999:42). Practically speaking, this means that low-income students, regardless of ability, go to two-year colleges while everyone else goes to four-year colleges and universities (*ibid*:46). In the immediate post-war years, there was a larger congregation of less affluent students at public colleges and universities than private colleges and universities, but this seems to be changing.

Duffy and Goldberg (1997) demonstrate the many creative ways colleges and universities have attempted to retain wealthy tuition-paying students in the face of greater overall access. Ironically, the “tidal wave” of incoming students in the post-war years allowed many small colleges to become selective for the first time in their histories. Instead of taking those who could pay, they were now taking those who could pay who also scored the highest on college entrance examinations. In the “zero growth” period of the 1970s, these colleges worked competitively to maintain their standing in the burgeoning college ranking game, leading to a period of increasing quality and merit, as defined by high scores on tests, rigorous high schools, and all those things on a college application that signify being a “bright, well-rounded” candidate, including extracurricular activities and public service work (Toor 2001). In such an atmosphere, top colleges and universities increasingly compete for the “best” students, who also tend to be from affluent college-educated families. These colleges use “enrollment management” strategies to maximize their revenue and maintain their competitive ranking, making it even more difficult for low-income first-generation students to find a place in their ranks (Duffy & Goldberg 1997). Public colleges and universities are seeing larger influxes of more affluent students as well, further diluting the possibility for low-income students to find a place. In 2002, unmet need was *thirty-two times* greater for low-income college students than for high-income students (Heller 2002:16), largely as a result of the need for colleges to use “merit aid” to attract the most competitive students.

Today we are witnessing some of the highest enrollment rates ever, with approximately three-quarters of all high school graduates enrolling in college within ten years of graduation.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to take these statistics at face value, without exploring the many ways they tell a misleading story about college access. How many of our students never make it to high school graduation, and are therefore left out of these statistics? What kinds of colleges are students attending? Are working class students isolated on our college campuses, especially at four-year and selective colleges and universities? Although we have a larger percentage

of our population having some involvement with postsecondary education than we ever have before, there remain persistent and intractable issues of class and stratification. For the upper-middle class student, college is desirable, expected, and probable. For the working-class student, college may be desirable (and may be not), but it is often beyond one's expectations and highly improbable. The next section will take a closer look at the figures today for working-class college students.

### *Three Percent: Working-Class College Students by the Numbers*

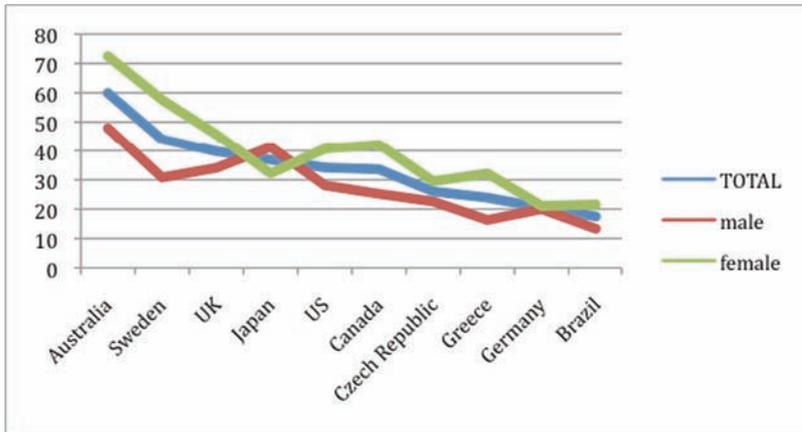
Ideally, I would be able to tell you exactly how many working-class students earn college degrees today, from what types of institutions, and how their participation rates compare to participation rates of middle-class and upper-class students. I cannot do this. We are hampered by a lack of precise data in this area for several reasons. Most basically, no federal agency or educational association keeps records of college attendance and attainment based on class. The US Census Bureau reports some educational statistics by income level – sometimes dividing the populace into quintiles, quartiles, and sometimes thirds (low, middle, and upper income). Information based on financial aid is similarly flawed in that more middle-class than working-class college students receive aid. Conversely, there is a great deal of information on college attainment levels differentiated by gender and race. It is unfortunate that sometimes race is coded as class in the analysis of these data. I want to keep a very clear distinction between the two in the following description. I have included some information on race and gender only where I think it is appropriate to get a more nuanced picture of what is happening to working-class students (although this information is surely interesting and important in its own right).

Anecdotally, “three percent” has become a figure used widely to describe college attainment for the working class. In 2004, Lawrence Summers, then President of Harvard University, used the figure in several speeches in an attempt to prod elite colleges and universities into providing more financial aid for low-income students. He was citing a national study by the Century Foundation demonstrating that three percent of students at the nation's 146 most selective colleges and universities come from families with incomes in the lowest 25 percent while approximately 75 percent come from families in the top 25 percent (Carnevale and Rose 2004). There are two big issues for our use of the three percent figure for our purposes. First, the study used household income rather than class status and there are several reasons why this is problematic, although alternatives are not readily available. Second, the three percent figure was for the 146 colleges and universities marked as “selective or highly selective.” Our fictional university here, “Redwood State” would fall just below the cutoff point. So we must use other data as well before we can approve this number. Upon doing so, I believe we can see that the three percent figure as a measurement of working-class college graduates (that is, to be clear, three percent of all children

of the working class earn a college degree) is quite possible. First, I will present general information on college attainment and income levels in the US from official data sources (US Bureau of Labor Statistics and US Census Bureau) and then present an overview of studies that have examined SES markers and college attainment.

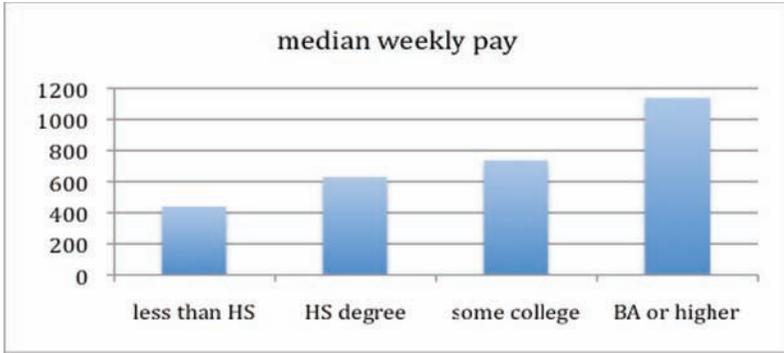
First, though, let us remember that the majority of Americans today are not college graduates. Less than one-third of the adult US population holds a college degree (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009), placing the US near the middle for industrialized countries (FIGURE 1). Interestingly, female college graduates now outnumber male college graduates in every country listed but Japan.

Figure 1. Percent of bachelor's degree recipients by country, 2005  
SOURCE: Digest of Education Statistics



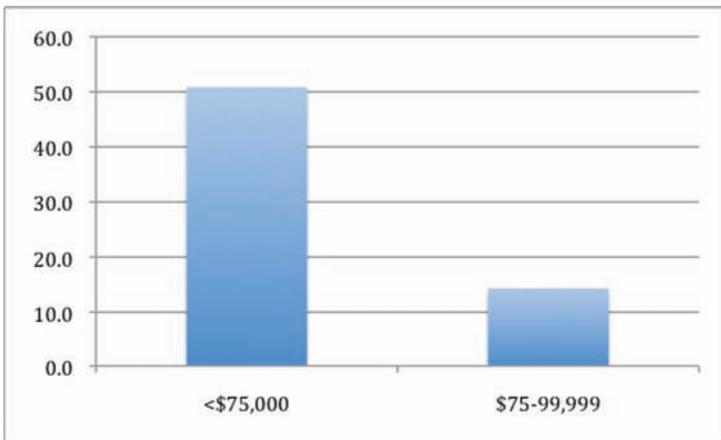
Individuals with college degrees on average earn more than those without (FIGURE 2). They earn more because colleges prepare their graduates for the types of jobs that pay more. These jobs are managerial, supervisory, relying on “mental labor,” and generally self-directive. In other words, they match the definition of middle-class jobs adopted in this study. Between 25% and 30% of American jobs fall into this category, nicely matching up with the overall college attainment figures (Zweig). Whereas *income* alone is insufficient for determining class positions (simply remind yourself of low-paid social workers and many non-profit managers, or, conversely, unionized longshoremen whose earnings can be in the six figures), we can see a general correlation between average earnings and educational attainment and class. Using income quartiles is not perfect, but it may be closer empirically to reality at this point in US history than any other alternative.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 2. Median Weekly Earnings in Dollars by Educational Attainment Level, 2010.  
SOURCE: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010.



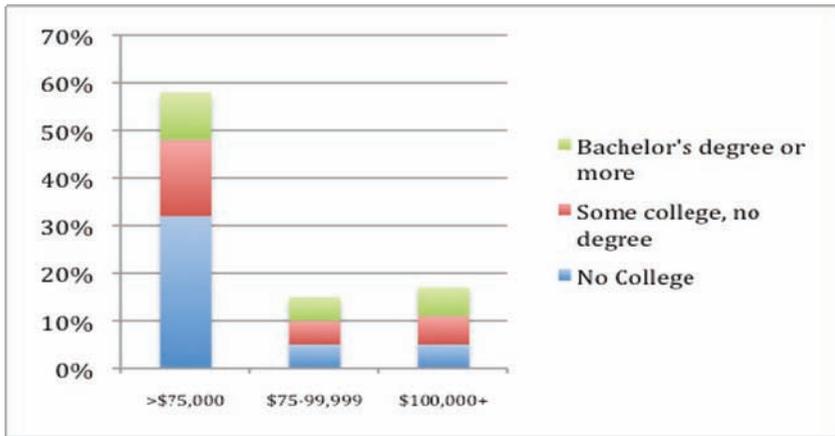
If we had a perfect meritocracy, where class position of one’s parents made no difference on where one ended up, we couldn’t make much of this other than to say that not all working-class kids (or not all middle-class kids) go to college. What is the proportion of working-class families to middle-class families? Based on type of job, the figure is around 65% (Zweig). We can compare this also to income level. In 2007, the median household income was \$61,355, meaning that exactly half of US families earned less than that amount. Approximately 60% of all Americans earned less than \$75,000, 14% earned between \$75,000 and \$100,000, and 26% earned more than \$100,000 (FIGURE 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of population by income, 2007.  
SOURCE: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table 682,



We can attempt to merge the two figures and see how income and educational attainment overlap. Doing so, we can see that the sixty-percent of the population earning less than \$75,000 in 2007 comprised mostly those without a college degree (FIGURE 4). Interestingly, however, half of all households headed by college graduates also earn less than \$75,000. It is thus easier to make the statement that failing to earn a degree significantly impairs one's chance at getting ahead economically than it is to make the statement that having a college degree ensures economic security. This will become important later in the story.

*Figure 4. Total 2007 population in terms of education and household income*  
*SOURCE: US Census Bureau, 2010*



Sadly, this is about the extent of information on class participation in college we can discern from official government data. Roughly, we know that college degrees are associated with higher incomes (but that college incomes do not guarantee high income), that the majority of Americans do not have a college degree, and consequently that the majority of US households do not have very high incomes. If nothing else, this data does seem to defy popular images of college as a regular and expected stage of life as portrayed in American media.

Fortunately, we do have a few independent studies to fill out our understanding of the relationship between classes, income groups, and higher education in the US today. From these studies we learn four things:

- Children from low-income families are substantially less likely to earn a college degree than those from high-income families; this is true even for highly exceptional academically able low-income students. Although the number of young adults participating in higher education has increased over

time, the participation rates of low-income students have either remained static or declined relative to other income groups.

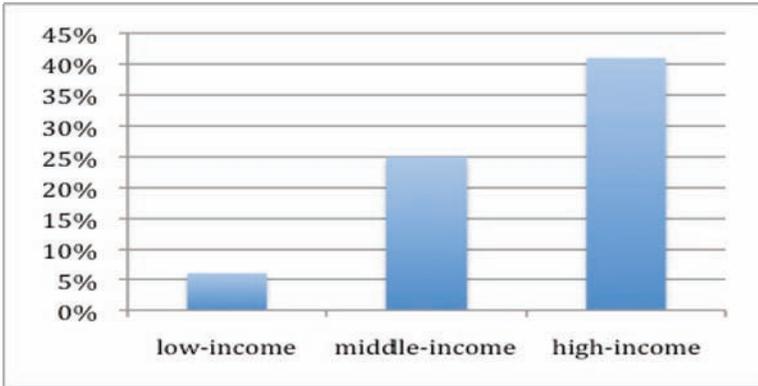
- Low-income students who go to college are more likely to attend two-year colleges and for-profit colleges than middle-income or high-income students, and much less likely to earn a bachelor's degree.
- Working-class students (those with parents in working-class jobs) who go to college are more likely to attend two-year colleges than middle-class or upper-class students.
- Children whose parents do not hold a college degree are substantially less likely to go to college than those with college-degreed parents. First-generation students who go to college are more likely to attend two-year colleges and for-profit colleges than middle-income or high-income students, and are less likely to persist to degree.

A few points of clarification are necessary before exploring the studies on which these observations are based. By our definition, all working-class college students are also first-generation college students; however, not all first-generation college students are working-class. One-half of first-generation college students in 1989–1990 came from families earning more than the household median (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). Also by our definition of working class, income and class status are an imperfect but close match. For the most part, low-income students are also working class. Low-income and first-generation students are almost always working class as well. The studies that have looked at parental occupation tend to be small case studies so we cannot generalize them to national trends, although they do clearly show stratification within colleges by class. Finally, we must take note that most studies are looking specifically at “college-ready” high school graduates, thereby dismissing a significant portion of children of the working class. Low-income students are much less likely to be college-ready than other students; fewer graduate from high school, fewer take college entrance examinations, and fewer have the courses necessary for admission to college. While more than 90 percent of students from families earning above the median income graduate from high school, only sixty-five percent of those from low-income families do so (Association of American Universities, News, *Facts and Figures*, March 2004). It is for this reason that, even though the “3%” figure is only for students at top colleges, I believe this figure is eerily accurate for the working class as a whole. Let us now take a closer look at the four findings listed above.

*First, low-income students are significantly less likely to earn a higher degree than their higher-income peers.* Nearly half of the lowest-income quartile high school graduates do not enroll in college the fall after their high school graduation; this is a non-enrollment rate *five times* as high as that of high-income students (Terenzini et al. 2001). A 2002 study by Donald Heller reported that approximately six

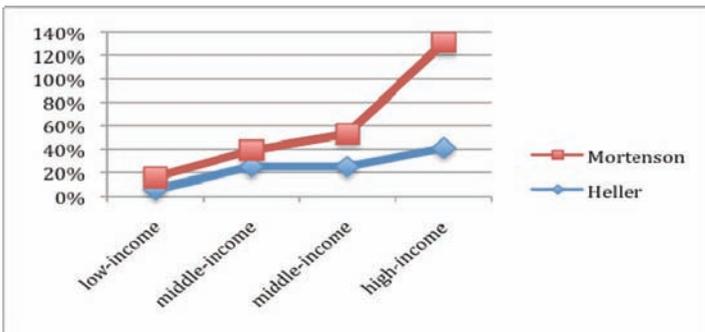
percent of all high school graduates from low-income families graduate from college, compared to 41% of high-income students and 25% of middle-income students (FIGURE 5).<sup>4</sup> If we factor in the high school drop out rate, we actually have a three or four percent overall college completion rate for low-income students. While forty-eight percent of college-qualified high school graduates from the low-income families attend college and six percent actually graduate from college, there are many more, as mentioned above, who never make it that far. This would mean a proportional decrease in the 6% cited by Heller to 3 or 4%.

Figure 5. Percentage of students earning four-year degrees, by family income  
 SOURCE: Heller, Condition of Access (2002)



An earlier study by Mortenson (1998), also looking at high school graduates, found even more disparity in achievement by income-level (FIGURE 6).

Figure 6. Percentage of students earning four-year degrees, by family income,  
 SOURCE: Mortenson (1998) and Heller (2002)



Kingston and Lewis' 1990 study of undergraduates at highly selective colleges, *The High-Status Track*, discloses huge class discrepancies and stratification within high education. Astoundingly, four times as many exceptional-ability (SAT scores sufficient for entry into *any* elite college) low-income students attend non-selective colleges as highly-selective colleges. The same is not true among students from high-income families. High-income students of exceptional ability attend highly selective colleges (Kingston & Lewis 1990: 131). According to Kingston and Lewis, in 1986 there were approximately 800,000 new college graduates. Of those, approximately 115,000 (15%) came from families with incomes higher than \$100,000 whereas roughly 10,000 (1.25%) come from families earning less than \$20,000 annually (*ibid*: 114).

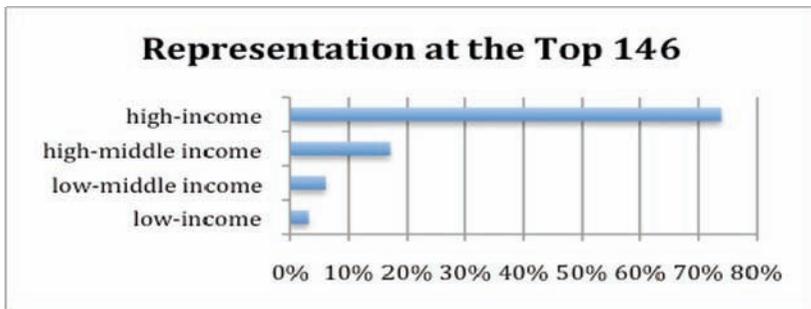
Data collected over time shows us that the relative proportion of low-income students in college is actually *decreasing*, even though more and more students are going on to college. Between 1979 and 1993, while the numbers of high-income students going to college increased 21% (and middle income categories by 13% and 16%), the lowest-income students increased their participation by only 4% (Fossey & Bateman 1998: 92). Turner found that, on average, the percentage of the US population earning a college degree has remained static over several decades (in Hoxby 2004). This seems to indicate that increase in the college participation rate of middle-class or upper-middle-class students (for example, the great increase in numbers of women earning college degrees) is coming at a cost to others (numerically speaking, White working class students). The high concentration of high-income students at top colleges and universities may even be crowding out middle-income students as well as low-income students (Astin & Oseguera 2004).

*Second, low-income students who go to college are more likely to attend two-year colleges and for-profit colleges than middle-income or high-income students, and much less likely to earn a bachelor's degree.* Of those who graduated from high school in 2008, fifty-four percent went on to college (US Census Bureau, CPS, October 2008). But which college and what kind are important distinctions. Studies show that low-income students are more likely to attend less prestigious colleges and universities and to follow pathways characterized by interruption (Goldrick-Rab 2006). Eighty percent of US college students attend colleges who accept all qualified applicants or are open enrollment (Dickert-Conlin and Rubenstein 2007). Currently, the school with the second highest overall enrollment (at half a million) is the University of Phoenix on-line.

Overall, nineteen percent of high-school graduates attended a two-year college whereas thirty-five percent attended a four-year college or university, but this figure conceals much. Two-thirds of low-income first-year students in 1999 attended a two-year college, compared to less than ten percent of high-income

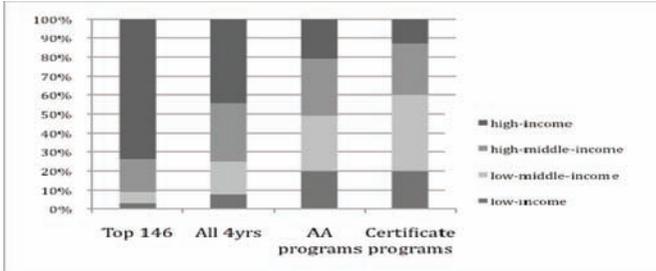
students (Gladieux 2004). Economic stratification and class polarization tends to increase as we move up the ladder (a) between two-year and four-year colleges; and (b) within selectivity bands of four-year colleges and universities. Furthermore, the college one attends significantly affects one's chances of completing a degree; the proportion of students who persist to graduation varies widely across institutions, even controlling for academic ability (Velez 1985: 191–200). The widely used “three percent” figure, as mentioned earlier, describes the percentage of low-income students at the nation's top 146 colleges and universities. Middle-income students are also underrepresented at these colleges and universities, however (FIGURE 7).

Figure 7. Percentage of students attending selective colleges in 2004, by income.  
SOURCE: Carnevale and Rose (2004), Table 3.1, p. 106



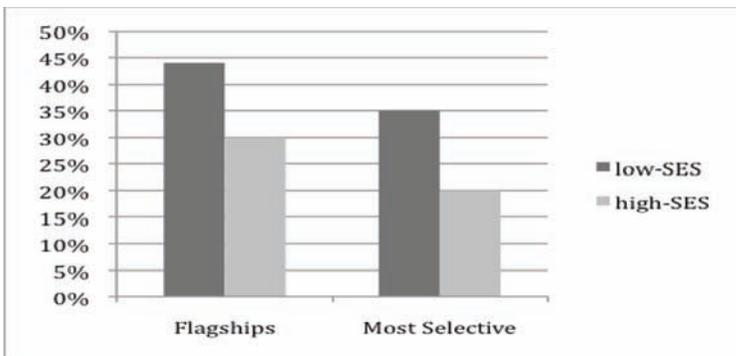
If we disaggregate the “middle” here we actually find that only 10% of students in these categories come from the *bottom half* in terms of income (Pennington 2004; Dickert-Conlin and Rubenstein 2007). Two-thirds of the students in top colleges and universities are from families who earn in the *top ten percent* of household income (Soares 2009: 167). The majority of highly-qualified low-income students are not enrolling in selective colleges; one in ten of the highly qualified do not enroll in any form of college at all (Bowen et al. 2009). In a study of North Carolina graduating high school seniors, more than half of the students in families earning below the median household income attended colleges which “undermatched” their abilities, compared to less than one-third of top quartile students (*ibid*: 103). If we compare the top colleges to four-year colleges and universities generally, and associate and certificate programs at two-year colleges, we see a distinct shift away from stark polarization at the ends towards greater over-representation of the middle; at none of the institutions are low-income students fairly represented (FIGURE 8).

Figure 8. Percentage of students attending college by type of institution and income.  
 SOURCE: Bailey et al (2005) and Carnevale and Rose (2004)



More disturbing perhaps, half as many low-income students at four-year colleges and universities persist to a degree as middle-income students (Bowen et al. 2005: 91). Those who do take longer on average to earn a degree than those of middle- and high-income. For example, at flagship universities, forty-four percent of the 1999 entering cohort who were of low SES-backgrounds took more than four years to graduate, compared to thirty-nine percent of middle-income and thirty percent of high income students (Bowen et al. 2009: 37). At the most selective colleges and universities, where resources tend to be greater and assistance for students more intense, thirty-five percent of low SES students failed to graduate in four years compared to twenty percent of high SES students (*ibid*: 218) (FIGURE 9).

Figure 9. Graduation rate within 4 years by SES status  
 SOURCE: Bowen et al (2009)

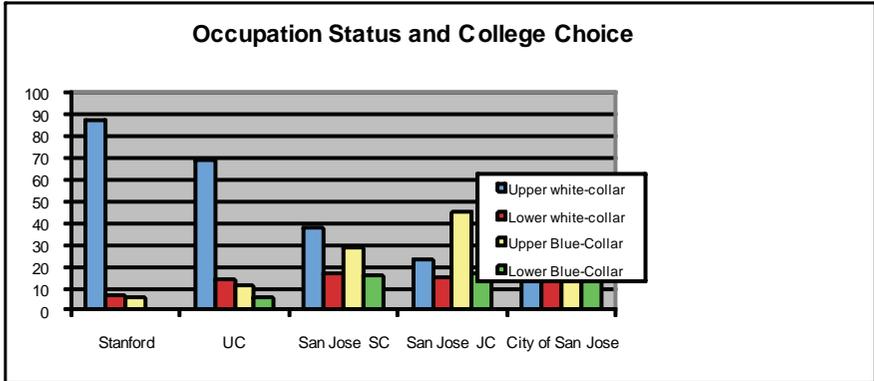


Thus, the information on income is fairly clear. High-income students attend high-status colleges and universities, high-middle-income students attend less-prestigious public colleges and universities, low-middle-income students attend two-year colleges and universities, and low-income students are underrepresented across the board. We are still left making inferences about class, however. Which brings us to our third finding.

*Third, working-class students (those with parents in working-class jobs) who go to college are more likely to attend two-year colleges than middle-class or upper-class students.* Soares reports that Oxford University, that bastion of elite privilege in England, has four times as many students from blue-collar backgrounds as does Harvard (Soares 2007). McDonough's study of the decision-making process among high school girls, *Choosing Colleges*, confirms that class plays a very large role in determining where students apply to college. McDonough conducted extensive interviews with twenty-four high school students of varied class backgrounds. All working-class girls chose to attend two-year colleges; middle-class girls tended to go to local public universities, and upper-class girls went to more prestigious four-year private colleges and universities (McDonough 1997: 16).

Brint and Karabel (1989) compared students' parents' occupations across the California college system. The California college system is very stratified, ranging from open admissions two-year colleges through the moderately selective public California State schools to the highly selective University of California schools. Using a representative from each of these bands of selectivity in one geographic area, plus the elite private Stanford University and a private two-year college in the City of San Jose, Brint and Karabel found heavy correlation between class and type of institution attended (FIGURE 10). For example, while eighty-seven percent of Stanford's students had upper fathers in white-collar professions, no Stanford student had a father who did unskilled blue-collar work. As Brint & Karabel worked their way down the levels of prestige among California schools they found more blue-collar children and fewer white-collar children.<sup>5</sup> What is important to remember when looking at these charts is that, while they show the concentration of the student body by institution they do NOT provide an indication of how representative this is of the greater population. Thus, while 87% of Stanford's population was comprised of students with upper white-collar backgrounds, less than 20% of the population actually falls into this category, which means that students with these backgrounds were quite over-represented.

Figure 10. Type of college attended by occupation of father  
 SOURCE: Brint & Karabel (1989)



*Fourth and finally, first-generation students who go to college are more likely to attend two-year colleges and for-profit colleges than middle-income or high-income students, and are less likely to persist to degree.* As with income and parental occupation, so with parental educational level. Twenty-seven percent of 1992 high school graduates were the first in their families to graduate (Choy 2001). While 71% of students whose parents are college graduates enroll in college, only one quarter of students whose parents have high-school degrees do so. The numbers are even lower for students whose parents have not completed high school (Perna and Swail 2002: 82). Of those who go on to college, twenty-eight percent of first-generation college students attended four-year colleges and universities compared to more than half (55%) of students whose parents had college degrees (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (BPS:90/94). Given that half of all first-generation college students are from families earning more than the household median, the percentage of working-class first-generation students at these institutions is probably significantly lower. On the other hand, more than half of all students at two-year colleges and for-profit colleges were the first in their family to attend college (ibid). In the study of North Carolina graduating high school seniors mentioned previously, two-thirds of first-generation students attended colleges which “undermatched” their abilities, compared to forty percent of those whose parents attended college (ibid: 103).

First-generation college students are also more likely to drop out of college than students whose parents hold college degrees. Twenty-three percent of first-generation students at four-year colleges and universities drop out before completing their degree (compared to 10% of other students) (Choy 2001). More generally, almost half (45%) of first-generation students who began college in 1989 were not enrolled or degreed five years later in 1994, and only 13% had

actually earned the degree by that time (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). The recent massive study by Bowen and colleagues (2009) found that nine percent of low-income first-generation college students had earned a degree by the age of 26 compared to sixty-eight percent of students whose parents graduated from college (pg. 8).

#### PROGRAMS TO EXPAND ACCESS AND ATTAINMENT

Interestingly, studies have shown that low-income students in selective four year colleges and universities do just as well as their colleagues (Bowen et al. 2005). There are no major differences between these students in terms of major, grades, plans for further education, career plans, and anticipated satisfaction with careers (Goldstein 1974). Remember that the number of low-income high ability students is equal to the number of high-income low ability students. In fact, a 2005 study by Winston and Hill entitled “Access to the Most Selective Private Colleges by High-Ability, Low-Income Students: Are They Out There?” (2005) answer with an emphatic “Yes!”<sup>6</sup> The problem then is not one of insufficiently able working-class students. In the 1970s and 1980s we witnessed many specific programs designed to find high-achieving minority students and assist them in getting into and through college (e.g., Prep for Prep, Bridges, Prep 9, A Better Chance). The important point to take from the research is that good students are out there and they can benefit greatly from programs that help them get to a college that matches their ability. Attewell and Lavin (2007) found significant returns on education for low-income female graduates of the CUNY system in the 1970s and 1980s, not only increasing incomes for these women but also increasing the likelihood that their children and grandchildren would themselves earn a college degree.

McPherson and Shapiro (2006) argue that selective colleges and universities have the capacity to enroll more low-income students and should do so. Some colleges and universities have recently instituted programs that specifically help first-generation and low-income students (in addition to many historic programs targeting minority youth and women). There are also national programs and local government initiatives to expand access to “economically and educationally challenged” students (Walpole 2007). Although most policy analysts and social researchers active in this area acknowledge the continuing need for expanding access to historically-disadvantaged students of color, most also recognize that class inequality in itself is a growing problem that should be targeted by racially neutral programs for first-generation and working-class students (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein 2007; Kahlenberg 1997; 2004; McPherson & Shapiro 2006).

Programs to expand access can be divided into three categories: (1) interventions for “at-risk” youth; (2) academic outreach programs operated by educational institutions; and (3) high school-college collaborations (Fenske 1997). One program that targets the working class generally has been the institution of Educational Opportunity Centers (as part of the federal TRIO package of programs

to expand college to underserved populations). These centers provide information about college choice and financial aid to prospective college students, many of whom are displaced workers. Engle (2006) argues that all of the following are necessary and essential for expanding working class access to college: improving pre-college preparation, encouraging early aspirations, increasing access to financial aid, easing the transition (culturally, financially) to college, and increasing exposure to and engagement with the college environment.

Many colleges and universities are engaged in multiple programs to do just those things. Arizona State University, for example, has the following programs: (1) Financial Aid and Academic Planning (FAAP): assists students in 75 local schools fill out financial aid forms and plan for college; (2) Testskills: a fifteen-week course preparing “at-risk” high school sophomores for college entrance examinations; (3) Success Express: a series of on-campus visit to local high schools, including motivational speakers, academic presentations and campus tours; (4) Upward Bound (a federally funded TRIO program): providing “college simulation” through a six-week residential program for high-achieving low-income and minority high school students; and (5) The Summer Bridge Minority Engineering Program (providing residential classes in engineering for minority high school students). This is a win-win situation for colleges and students, as they expand their pool of talented applicants (thus keeping up their competitive rankings) and many students who might not otherwise go to college do so.

Other colleges and universities have attacked the problem more directly, by increasing financial assistance. Most notably, Harvard announced in 2010 that admitted students from families earning less than \$40,000 a year would be able to attend Harvard tuition-free.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Harvard has greatly reduced the contributions it expects from families with incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000. Other elite and well-endowed colleges and universities were quick to follow suit. Princeton meets 100% of recognized need for all students through grants and work-study, not loans. Yale covers the entire cost of attendance for students with family incomes below \$45,000 through grants and work-study, not loans. In addition, Yale has approximately halved contributions it expects from families with incomes between \$45,000 and \$60,000. Brown does the same for students whose families earn below \$30,000 (less than one-half of 1% of its student body).

Elite well-endowed colleges and universities are not the only institutions of higher education that are trying to remedy the class imbalance, however. An increasing number of state universities are providing assistance to state residents. The University of North Carolina covers the entire cost of attendance for students with family incomes within 200% of the poverty line through grants and work-study through the Carolina Covenant program. The program also provides free laptop computers and mentoring (“etiquette dinners”) opportunities. Likewise, the University of Virginia covers the entire cost of attendance for students with family incomes within 200% of the poverty line through the AccessUVa program. It also caps the amount of need-based debt *any student* is forced to take out at 25% of the

four-year in-state cost of attendance, providing grants to cover the rest of the student's cost, and provides financial aid counseling to admitted students and their families. The University of Maryland caps the amount of need-based debt Maryland resident seniors can accumulate at \$15,900 in four years, providing grants to cover the rest of the student's costs. The University of Michigan has replaced some loans in the financial packages of low and middle-income in-state students with grants through its M-Pact program. Ohio State has attempted to reward the highest-achieving low-income student in each of Ohio's 88 counties by covering the entire cost of attendance for these 88 students.

These programs work particularly well for high-achieving working-class students who have made it all the way through high school. As we saw, however, there are many working-class students who never make it that far. There are also working-class students who do well in high school but who fail to take the next crucial step, applying to college. For these students, programs like the Boston COACH program, where high school students are helped through the entire process of applying to college, from entrance examination to financial aid forms to the college application itself, have proven very successful (Avery & Kane 2004). Before the COACH program, Avery and Kane found that a fifth of low-income academically strong high school students failed to take any college entrance examinations and that a quarter of low-income students of those who did (and who scored very high on the SAT) never even applied to college (pp. 372–73). The COACH program has proved very effective in getting high-achieving low-income students into college and other states and cities have created similar programs.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The programs discussed above are beginning to make a difference but we still have a very long way to go if education is to be truly an equal opportunity venture for our young people. The rest of this book will follow five working-class students into and through college. Their journey will highlight the many obstacles that still confront “the other three percent” in higher education. Perhaps this will explain why so few working-class students persist to degree. But the stories are meant to show more than the obstacles these students face. The stories also highlight the extraordinary resilience of our young people today, and hold out promise for a better future, not just for these students but for all. At the end is a different vision of what is possible – a world where all of our young are valued, not just the lucky few.

For the historical connection between the middle class and the educational system described above has resulted, whether intentionally or not, in a particularly *classed* educational system. We have seen how first secondary schools and then post-secondary schools were created for the purpose of training and certifying graduates for middle-class jobs and professions. Despite rhetoric of education for all, our school system has always been primarily about sorting people into

occupational (and hence class) slots. A true meritocracy would, of course, award these slots solely by merit – intelligence (however that is measured), ability, and hard work. The fact that so often class position corresponds to educational position is thus troubling to the very notion of meritocracy and the American Dream. There is a bigger issue, too, than just whether our meritocracy is living up to its name.

Michael Young, British sociologist and activist, coined the term “meritocracy” in a utopic satire of 1958 entitled *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In the novel, the ablest and most intelligent became the new rulers of society. One’s place in society was a result of IQ plus effort. He meant this as a critique of the shift away from egalitarian values, but very few seemed to get the point. His was a reminder that hierarchy, no matter how arranged, was a threat to democracy and equality. At the end of *The Rise of Meritocracy*, the masses revolt against the new elite, who are as snobbish and cliquish as any feudal aristocracy ever was. Far from seeing the dangers in this new form of rule, meritocracy became hailed as a great concept, viewed as a fair way of distributing resources and power. Young became particularly distressed to see the British Labour Party (to which he belonged) adopt the term as its motto of educational reform. At the time, Britain was engaged in a similar project as the US, expanding access to postsecondary education for all.

I leave this review of the historical relationship between the working class and higher education with Michael Young’s book as a reminder that the very things we say we want – expanded access to college, equal opportunity for all – may be at odds with other socially desirable qualities – namely, democracy, equality and social justice. As we explore the difficulties working-class students confront getting in to college, being in college, navigating between the cultures of home and new peers, and finding a job for which their education has prepared them, we should remember Young’s lesson. Academically successful working-class college students are moving away from their home communities into a brave new world of opportunities and experiences. These opportunities and experiences are linked to an unequal class structure. Their successes are premised on the failure of others. Pursuing the American Dream now means, inevitably, that others will stumble by the wayside. This is a knowledge that many working-class college carry with them, whether they can articulate it clearly or not. It can deeply affect the texture of their educational experiences.

#### FOR FURTHER READING<sup>9</sup>

For further reading on the lack of a true meritocracy, see Attewell’s article in the journal *American Prospect* entitled “The Mirage of Meritocracy” (2000) and McNamee and Miller’s *The Meritocracy Myth* (2004). For a somewhat dated perspective, but one that still makes excellent points about the connection between education and jobs and the inequalities that ensue, see Collins’ *Credential Society* (1979) and Berg & Gorelick’s *Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery* (1971). See also Young’s provocative satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*

([1958]1994). For an excellent and undervalued discussion of the impact of the “college for all” model on American youth generally, see Rosenbaum’s *Beyond College for All* (2001). For a critique of education as a form of indoctrination into the dominant culture, see Spring’s very readable *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States* (2004).

For discussion, comparison, and analysis of the post-World War II attempts at expanding educational opportunities, the following books are well worth reading. For the US, see Soares’ *The Power of Privilege: Yale and America’s Elite Colleges* (2007) and Lehmann’s *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999). For Britain, see Soares’ *The Decline of Privilege: The Modernization of Oxford University* (2002) and Floud’s *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (1956). On France, see Bourdieu & Passeron’s *Reproduction in Education* (1977). For a description of the role of education in creating a *comprador* class in soon to be decolonized Third World, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s excellent *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). Finally, for a sociological view of college attendees *prior* to the post-War era, see the 1927 study conducted by Reynolds, *The Social and Economic Status of College Students*.

For more on the historical connection between business and higher education, see Newfield’s *Ivy and Industry* (2003).

To learn more about specific programs that encourage access to college for the working class and minority youth, see Fenske’s excellent overview *Early Intervention Programs* (1997). For more on the wildly successful Prep for Prep program see the stories of graduates collected by Gary Simons in *Be the Dream* (2003). To see how one federal program assisted a cohort of low-income students at an elite college, see Latty Lee Goodwin’s companion pieces *Resilient Spirits: Disadvantaged Students Making It at an Elite University* (2002) and *Graduating Class: Disadvantaged Students Crossing the Bridge of Higher Education* (2006). For more on the increasing costs of going to college, see Chapter 3.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It is worth pointing out that expanded access to higher education was *not* limited to the US. The expansion of access after WWII also occurred in England (Soares 2002) and the Soviet Union (Derlugian 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> As there are many ways to display and read the numbers in this area, it is not possible to say with complete accuracy how large our overall college enrollment rate is. According to the most recent census reports, 52% of high school graduates between the ages of 15 and 24 were not enrolled in college in 2008 (*US Census Bureau*, 2008). Of those enrolled, 70% were in four-year colleges and universities and 30% were in two-year colleges and universities. This is a snapshot image and does not actually tell us about college *attainment*. For that we need to turn to the US Bureau of Labor

## CHAPTER 2

Statistics. According to the Current Population Survey (CPS) for 2009, only 30% of all adults age 25 or older had a bachelor's or higher degree. However, another 26% had attempted some college, perhaps earning an associate's degree. Thirty-one percent of the population had graduated from high school but had not further schooling while another 13% had not even graduated from high school (*US Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 2009).

- <sup>3</sup> Since three percent is such a low number, however, it would be very useful to know how many of these low-income students come from college-educated families with low earnings; or how many middle-income students are actually part of the blue-collar working class. Alas, we await finer survey data!
- <sup>4</sup> A 2007 study by Dickert-Colin and Rubenstein report that students from the top economic quartile are four times as likely to graduate from college than those from the lowest, once other factors have been controlled (pg.1).
- <sup>5</sup> It is worthwhile noting, however, that in their analysis class (as measured by occupation) shows a different trend than the overlay of income demonstrated in Figure 7. Here, students from "upper blue-collar" backgrounds were much more likely to attend college overall, and especially so at the less prestigious ends, than students from "lower white-collar" families. We could surmise that the cost of tuition played a role here (assuming that "upper blue collar" held relatively high incomes) but the UC system was well funded at the time of this study and cost should not have played a significant role in choice of school. This is further evidence of the need for more finely-measured *class* analyses of educational choice and attainment.
- <sup>6</sup> Winston and Hill report, "At ability levels that look quite reasonable in light of current COFHE scores—say 1220 to 1420—there appear to be plenty of low-income students out there."
- <sup>7</sup> Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers, has publicly maintained that the relative absence of low-income students in elite colleges and universities is a serious social problem: "When only ten percent of the students in elite higher education come from families in the lower half of the income distribution, we are not doing enough. We are not doing enough in bringing elite higher education to the lower half of the income distribution."
- <sup>8</sup> For example, South Carolina is currently extending its SC CAN GO program throughout the state; this program sets up "college application days" on high school campuses where local volunteers (in some cases, local college students) help high schoolers complete the on-line application form for South Carolina colleges and universities. *Personal correspondence*.
- <sup>9</sup> Full citations for each of these recommended readings can be found in the bibliography.