Supporting Working-Class Students in Higher Education

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Utilizing data from the multi-institutional Student Experience in the Research University *survey, we examined self-identified working-class students' experiences in higher education. The results suggest that working-class students experience a lower sense of belonging, perceive a less welcoming campus climate, and pursue fewer social engagements than their peers who self-identify as middle/upper-class. Specific suggestions direct academic advisors to promote working-class students' success.*

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Students from working-class backgrounds are significantly less likely to attend college (particularly 4-year institutions) and persist to degree completion than their peers from middle- and upper-social classes (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006; Walpole, 2007). Social class, as determined by economic status, is an important indicator of college access and attendance: In 2004, no more than 43% of high school graduates from families with incomes under $30,000 immediately matriculated to higher education institutions while 75% of students from families with incomes over $50,000 enrolled in colleges and universities (Long, 2008). The rates at which lower- and upper-income students graduate from college reflect even greater disparities: By 24 years of age, 12% of students from low-income families earn a baccalaureate degree compared with 73% of their higher income peers (Mortenson, 2007).

The inequality in degree completion rates has created longstanding barriers to social mobility over generations by systematically perpetuating economic inequalities for students from working-class backgrounds. As colleges and universities become more diverse, academic advisors must increasingly appreciate and understand the ways in which students' social class background shapes collegiate experiences and, in turn, the ways in which postsecondary institutions reinforce systems of existing class privilege.

Although scholars have documented differences between social classes in terms of higher education attendance and attainment, very few have addressed working-class students' experiences in higher education (Walpole, 2003). Furthermore, in academic advising literature on marginalized and underrepresented students issues of social class remain noticeably absent, a situation concomitant with the scarcity of social class scholarship in higher education and limited inclusion of social class issues in diversity conversations on college campuses. In overlooking the influence of social class background in shaping students' collegiate experiences, academic advisors may fail to attend specifically to the social class–based concerns of their students and thus unknowingly perpetuate social class inequalities and classism.

To remedy this dearth of information in the literature, we investigated working-class students' experiences in traditional 4-year public institutions to provide academic advisors with insights into ways social class may mark a point of division for working-class college students among the larger population. We specifically examined whether students' social class is associated with their sense of belonging, social involvement, and perceptions of campus climate for those in specific social classes. In learning more about the collegiate experiences of working-class college students, academic advisors can be better prepared to advise this group of students and better positioned to create institutional conditions to promote students' educational success.

Defining Working-Class Students

The lack of consensus on social class definitions coupled with differing contextual meanings of them complicates proper class-based cohort identification for educational researchers. Therefore, throughout the paper, we reference scholarship in which the term *social class* has been operationalized and social class variables (e.g., parental education, income, or occupation) are utilized in multiple ways.

Scholars have suggested that subjective identification of social class can be valid under specific conditions: for example, if meaningful response categories are provided and if social class is

conceptualized as membership in specific socially defined groups (Rubin et al., 2014; Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013-2014). Furthermore, subjective assessments of social class may provide reliable and predictive measures in the field of higher education (Rubin et al., 2014); consequently, in the analysis, we relied upon students' self-reported affinity with one of five social classes as listed on the survey provided to them: low-income or poor, working-class, middle-class, upper-middle or professional middle-class, and wealthy. We collapsed the three middle- and upper-class categories into one group for comparison with low-income and working-class students, a group hereafter identified as *working class*.

Many factors influence self-identification or -categorization of social groups, including the status of the group, perceived clarity and permeability of group boundaries, legitimacy and stability of intergroup relations, and similarity to a prototypical group member (Brown, 2000; Huddy, 2001). Class-based terminology for self-definition may create problems in research because of the rhetoric used to describe classes; for example, *lower class* tends to carry the most negative stereotypes, and individuals may therefore avoid external affinity with lower social classes to dodge social stigmatization (Lott, 2002). Class differences may appear more salient for working-class students who attend universities mostly attended by those from middle- and upper-class families (Granfield, 1991; Ostrove & Stewart, 1998). Therefore, the sample for this research, derived from several large, public, research universities where the majority of students self-identified as middle/upper-class, may reflect some bias. In prior research utilizing the same data, researchers found that self-identified social class strongly correlates with students' self-reported and institutionally reported family income and parental education, lending validity to students' self-identification in a social class in this particular sample (Soria & Barratt, 2012). While social class intersects with other dimensions of students' identities in unique ways, in this study, we highlight class-based differences to advance awareness of social class influences on students' experiences.

Working-Class Students in Higher Education

Working-class students often struggle in areas related to social engagement and integration in higher education (Soria, 2012); for example, Soria and Stebleton (2013) discovered that working-class college students struggle to find peers who share their own background and life histories. Their circumstances can influence students' academic experiences as well; for example, working-class students spend significantly less time collaborating with classmates on academic assignments than middle- and upper-class students (Soria et al., 2013-2014). Working-class students also engage in student clubs and groups less than students from other socioeconomic backgrounds, and nearly one half of them participate less than one hour a week in student organizations (Walpole, 2003). These findings comport with those from other researchers who have found that students from lower social classes work longer hours and participate less frequently in organized student groups or informal and formal social activities than their peers from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Rubin, 2012; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003).

Students from working-class backgrounds clearly see disparities based on class differences, express sensitivity to social class issues, and believe that social class matters in their collegiate experience (Aries, 2008; Stuber, 2006). Working-class students clearly articulate their astute awareness of social class by identifying cultural rules and symbols associated with various levels of social class (Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009). Aries and Seider (2005) discovered that low-income students attending a private college reported greater feelings of inadequacy, intimidation, exclusion, and inferiority than their peers. Working-class students have previously identified several critical incidents that spurred them to realize the economic, social, and cultural capital differences between social classes on their campuses: For example, students noted that they felt invisible in the eyes of peers and university personnel; believed that their fellow students and the university staff lack awareness of the issues and realities facing working-class students; and believed prevalent stereotypical views of the working-class persisted on campus (Hess, 2007). Undoubtedly, such awareness of social class differences can contribute to working-class students' alienation, marginalization, and isolation in higher education.

The extent to which students feel integrated on their campuses matters: Students' experiences and levels of involvement in college influence their educational aspirations and persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2003). Additionally, social networks on campus can cultivate working-class students' acquisition of valuable social and cultural capital that they can

utilize to bolster their success in higher education (Stuber, 2011). Working-class students may benefit more than middle- and upper-class students from social engagement efforts of college; for example, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found first-generation students derived greater outcomes from social activities than their peers whose parents had a college education. Working-class students may be at a greater disadvantage with regard to their sense of belonging because of the overriding middle-class culture of traditional 4-year institutions (Hurst, 2010). According to Ostrove and Long (2007), social class background strongly relates to students' sense of belonging at college, which in turn mediates students' academic and social adjustment. These findings suggest that working-class students' experiences in college can affect their retention, graduation, and other long-term outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

Past researchers have used Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) social reproduction theory to explain inequities in educational attainment by social classes and describe the ways in which social class is reproduced in institutions, societies, and individuals (Hurst, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003). According to Bourdieu (1986), social class combines three types of capital: economic (accumulated money or wealth), social (network of acquaintances), and cultural (knowledge or familiarity with the dominant culture). Environment or habitus also contributes to the theory, which asserts that the dominant culture represented in the habitus of higher education (i.e., middle- and upper-class culture) reproduces the dispositions of those who already possess that culture, most often to the detriment of working-class students who do not integrate into the dominant culture (Grenfell, 2004). Those with power in society—typically the upper classes—design systems, structures, and processes to reinforce and reproduce their power. College admission criteria at prestigious institutions, for example, confer greater status on students involved in extracurricular activities, complete advanced college preparatory curricula, and have parents who also attended the same institutions—all of which are disproportionately within reach of students from more privilege backgrounds who, from very young ages, are guided by their parents (many with college degrees) to actively engage in extracurricular activities and enjoy access to college preparatory courses through schools with such resources (Kahlenberg, 2010; Stevens, 2007).

Working-class students encounter several challenges negotiating in the middle-class habitus of higher education (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011); for example, many working-class students feel a strong sense of marginalization and alienation from their wealthier peers (Aries, 2008; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). As a result, they feel isolated at college as though they are "marred by a painful sense of never quite measuring up" (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 119). Working-class students often feel like imposters, passing as qualified students, in higher education (Hurst, 2010; Long, Jenkins, & Bracken, 2000), and Hurst (2012) documented that some go to great lengths to alter their physical appearances and manner of dress to fit in with their middle-class peers. These negative sentiments can compromise lower- and working-class students' authentic sense of belonging and integration, thus contributing to their comparatively low persistence and graduation rates (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991).

Some suggest that the challenges experienced by working-class students in higher education stem from the ways they are socialized in childhood. For instance, working-class children have fewer structured interactions with peers and professionals compared with middle- and upper-class children, who undergo a process of concerted cultivation in which they are purposefully placed in environments and designated activities that increase their social and cultural capital (Lareau, 2003), which is associated with students' academic success (Berger, 2000). Educational systems reproduce social classes by granting continued advantages to students of middle- and upper-class backgrounds who can successfully navigate educational systems (Crossley, 2008). Middle-class students embody dispositions recognized and valued by teachers operating in middle-class educational systems, who perceive these students to be "brighter and more articulate" because they "speak the same language'' and possess cultural knowledge and abilities similar to those of the teachers (Crossley, 2008, p. 95). Higher education institutions confer a great deal of value and prestige upon the culture of the middle class, which maintains power by virtue of attenuated legitimacy and reinforces outcomes that strengthen members of the social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Working-class students often report encountering lower expectations from faculty members, some of whom may assume working-class students

lack intelligence or intellectual ability (Aries, 2008; Christopher, 2003; Espinoza, 2011; Jensen, 2012; Plummer, 2000). These beliefs feed working-class students' perception that they do not belong in higher education (Hurst, 2010). Academic advisors should be cognizant of the ways in which existing social class hierarchies perpetuate class divisions in higher education.

The extant scholarship describing working-class students' collegiate experiences has primarily utilized qualitative methods, which often feature small sample sizes in single-institutional contexts (Aries & Seider, 2005; Hurst, 2010; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; Muzzatti & Samarco, 2006; Ostrove, 2003; Schwartz el al., 2009; Stuber, 2011). Informed by Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) social reproduction theory, we utilized a multi-institutional data set to examine the potential relationships between college students' social class background and their sense of belonging, perceptions of campus climate for those in their social class, and social involvement in higher education. A quantitative approach contributes to the literature by adding new insights not captured in previous qualitative work, enhances understanding of how social class shapes college students' experiences across a broad expanse of situations, and triangulates evidence from prior research related to social class (as per Creswell, 2009).

Methods

Instrument

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey is conducted by the Center for Studies of Higher Education at the University of California–Berkeley. The survey provides a means for a census scan of the undergraduate experience. All undergraduates in the eight-university consortium enrolled in Spring 2011 and at the end of the prior term were asked to complete this web-based questionnaire, with the majority of communication undertaken by e-mail. All institutions that participated in SERU survey administration underwent internal review board reviews and received approval to administer the instrument. For the SERU survey, each student answers a set of core questions and is randomly assigned one of four modules containing items focused on a research theme.

Participants

The SERU survey was administered to 213,160 undergraduates from eight large, public universities in the Midwest and classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) as having very high research activity. The institutional-level completion response rate among nontransfer, non-international students was 28.46% (n = 60,665). From this larger sample, institutions assign approximately 20% of respondents to one of the four themed modules. After accounting for missing data, we analyzed a final subsample of 17.92% who completed a module related to student life and development (n = 10,869). The sample was comprised of primarily female and White students (Table 1).

Measures

Dependent variables. We measured campus climate for members of a social class through three questions assessing the frequency with which students had heard peers express negative or stereotypical views about social classes, perceptions of other students on campus as respected regardless of their social class, and whether students of the respondent's own social class receive respect on campus. To measure the internal consistency of these items, we used SPSS 21.0 to derive Cronbach's alpha values. The results of the analysis suggested that these items had good reliability (α = .70).

We measured students' sense of belonging through two items assessing students' agreement that they belonged on campus and that they would re-enroll with the knowledge gained to date. We also utilized two additional items measuring students' satisfaction with their overall academic and social experiences. These items also showed good reliability (α = .85).

Finally, we measured students' social involvement through three items assessing the frequency with which students socialized with friends, pursued recreation or creative interests, or participated in physical exercise or physically active hobbies. The results of the analysis to derive Cronbach's alpha suggested that these items had lower-than-acceptable reliability (α = .60), which is not surprising as more time spent participating in one activity necessitates less time pursuing an alternate social opportunity. Because of the low internal consistency of these items, readers should interpret the results of analyses predicting students' social involvement with caution.

Control variables. We used several demographic control variables in our models, including

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and coding for variables, $N = 10,869$

Variables Used in Analysis	*M*	*SD*	Coding/Scale
Demographic and Personal Characteristics			
Gender	.59	.49	0 = male; 1 = female
African American	.06	.24	0 = no; 1 = yes
Asian Pacific American	.20	.40	
American Indian or Native American	.00	.06	
Hispanic or Latino	.12	.32	
Other/unknown race	.04	.20	
First-generation	.23	.42	
College Experiences			
Cumulative grade point average	3.30	.53	0.0 to 4.0
Credits earned	62.91	39.94	0.0 to 263.0
On-campus residence	.35	.48	
Lives with family	.04	.20	
Lives in a fraternity or sorority	.04	.20	0 = no; 1 = yes
Employed off campus	.16	.37	
Employed on campus	.31	.46	

gender, race and ethnicity, and first-generation status. All variables were dummy coded. Students identified their social class through the question, "Which of the following best describes your social class when you were growing up?" Students could select one of the following categories: wealthy; upper-middle or professional-middle, middle-, or working-class; and low-income or poor. In this sample, 4.5% of students identified as low-income or poor ($n = 489$), 17.2% as working-class ($n = 1,869$), 43.0% as middle class ($n = 4,674$), 32.7% as upper-middle or professional-middle class ($n = 3,554$), and 2.6% as wealthy ($n = 282$). The dummy coding allowed for comparisons of low-income and working-class students to the three upper-class categories combined.

Students' cumulative grade-point averages (GPAs) were derived from the fall semester because the survey was administered in the middle of the spring semester. We used all academic levels of undergraduates in this analysis, so we controlled for the number of credits students had earned (Table 1). Additional variables related to students' college experiences were included as control variables; for example, we controlled for students' residence on campus or off campus and the number of hours they reported being employed per week. Winkle-Wagner (2009) identified student housing as one way in which some institutions, perhaps unintentionally, create social stratification based on students' social class as students from wealthier backgrounds may be more likely to live on campus. Students' residence was dummy coded, with indicator variables that included living situations: university housing, fraternity or sorority, or family off campus. We also dummy coded students' employment as either off or on campus with unemployed students serving as the common referent group.

In addition, students rated the overall campus climate in four areas: from friendly to hostile, caring to impersonal, safe to dangerous, and tolerant of diversity to intolerant of diversity. These four items showed good reliability ($\alpha = .77$). Students rated the level of pride and respect that they and their peers showed for their institutions through four items (e.g., "most students are proud to attend this school"). These four items also showed good reliability ($\alpha = .79$). Students assessed the frequency with which they interacted with faculty members in and outside of classes through three items of good reliability ($\alpha = .79$). They also indicated their level of participation in on-campus activities, including the amount of time they spent per week performing community service, attending student clubs, or participating in spiritual or religious activities. These campus involvement items showed poor reliability ($\alpha = .65$) which, like social involvement, perhaps reflects finite time for multiple commitments.

Data Analysis

We developed factors from several survey items, including students' sense of belonging, perceptions

of campus climate for social class, and social involvement. We used SPSS 21.0 for all analyses. We conducted multiple linear regressions predicting students' responses to items on these factors while controlling for demographic, academic, and additional variables. We also conducted a factor analysis on 24 items with oblique rotation (promax). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis (KMO = .87). Bartlett's test of sphericity, χ^2 (276) = 92,686.96 (p < .001), indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for principal components analysis. Seven components had an eigenvalue over Kaiser's criterion of one and explained 63.03% of the variance. Because of the large sample size, Kaiser's criteria for components, and the convergence of a scree plot that showed inflections that justify retaining seven components, the final analysis retained the following factors: sense of belonging, general campus climate, pride and respect for diversity on campus, faculty interactions, campus participation, campus climate for social class, and social involvement. The factor scores were computed using the regression method and saved as standardized scores with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The full factor analysis table, including all of the items used in the analysis, is available by request (see Authors' Notes).

Across the three regressions, we examined assumptions of multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, linearity, and independent and normal errors. Tests of the multiple regression assumptions indicated no multicollinearity among the independent variables, with tolerance levels above zero and variance inflation factor statistics below 10 (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). In testing homoscedasticity, we found random scatter and variability in scatterplots of standardized residuals against the standardized predicted values. In producing histograms comparing the distribution of standardized residuals to a normal distribution, we found evidence of a slight negative skew in the data. Examinations of matrix scatterplots suggested the relationships between the predictor and outcome variables were rela-tively linear. We found consistently that the residual errors were independent across our models and the Durbin-Watson values were below 2.0 for all three models.

Results

We conducted ordinary least squares regressions predicting students' sense of belonging, perceptions of campus climate for social class, and social involvement. We primarily wanted to examine whether data, controlling for gender, race, employment, academic achievement, residence, and college experience variables, showed that working-class students had different college experiences than middle- and upper-class students. The overall regression for the first model predicting students' sense of belonging was statistically significant, $F(19, 10849) = 374.98$, $p < .001$, and the model explains 39.4% of the variance in sense of belonging (Table 2). The first model suggests working-class students reported a lower sense of belonging on campus than did middle- and upper- class students when demographic, college experience, and academic variables were controlled. The model also suggests that female, African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Asian students reported a lower sense of belonging on campus compared to their peers. Students who reported other/unknown race or ethnicity also reported a low sense of belonging. Additionally, students who lived on campus and in fraternities or sororities had a higher sense of belonging than did those who lived with family. GPA and number of credits earned were positively associated with students' sense of belonging on campus. Students' pride and the respect for the campus based on diversity, faculty interactions, and participation in campus activities were all positively associated with students' sense of belonging. The general campus climate was positively associated with students' sense of belonging.

The second model predicting campus climate based on social class is also statistically significant, $F(19, 10849) = 187.03$, $p < .001$, explaining 24.5% of the variance in the outcome. Working-class students reported a less welcoming campus climate for social class than did middle- and upper-class students. African American and Hispanic students also reported a less welcoming climate for members of their social classes. Students who lived on campus and with family experienced a more welcoming climate whereas students who lived in fraternities and sororities reported a less welcoming campus climate for people in their social class. Students employed on campus reported a less welcoming campus climate while GPA and credits earned were positively associated with campus climate. Finally, students' pride and the respect toward the campus as determined by diversity was positively associated with campus climate, but faculty interactions and participation in campus activities were both negatively associated with

Table 2. Regression analyses predicting sense of belonging, campus climate for social class, and social involvement

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Sense of Belonging			Campus Climate for Social Class			Social Involvement		
Predictor	**B**	**SE**	**β**	**B**	**SE**	**β**	**B**	**SE**	**β**
Constant	–.622***	.053	—	–.040	.060	—	.968***	.063	—
Working Class	–.100***	.020	–.041	–.254***	.023	–.105	–.155***	.024	–.064
First-Generation	.001	.020	.000	–.027	.022	–.011	–.104***	.023	–.044
Female	–.065***	.015	–.032	.030	.017	.015	–.255***	.018	–.126
African American	–.080*	.035	–.018	–.270***	.039	–.060	–.307***	.041	–.069
American Indian or Alaskan Native	–.244*	.121	–.015	–.041	.136	–.002	–.091	.142	–.006
Asian	–.171***	.020	–.067	.038	.023	.015	–.227***	.024	–.089
Hispanic	.024	.025	.008	–.197***	.028	–.063	–.161***	.029	–.051
Other/Unknown Race/Ethnicity	–.148***	.036	–.031	–.032	.041	–.007	–.099*	.043	–.020
Lived with Family	–.225***	.037	–.046	.293***	.042	.060	–.187***	.044	–.038
On Campus Residence	.064***	.018	.031	.113***	.020	.055	–.017	.021	–.008
Fraternity or Sorority	.343***	.035	.075	–.279***	.039	–.061	.102*	.041	.022
Employed Off Campus	–.016	.022	–.006	–.024	.025	–.009	–.020	.026	–.007
Employed On Campus	.020	.017	.009	–.109***	.019	–.051	–.088***	.020	–.041
Cumulative GPA	.185***	.015	.098	.041*	.016	.022	–.171***	.017	–.091
Credits Earned	.001***	.000	.052	.000***	.000	–.014	–.001***	.000	–.043
General Campus Climate	.272***	.009	.273	.276***	.010	.276	.036***	.010	.036
Pride and Respect	.381***	.009	.379	.228***	.010	.226	.021*	.010	.021
Faculty Interactions	.083***	.008	.083	–.029**	.009	–.029	.085***	.009	.085
Campus Participation	.045***	.008	.045	–.078***	.008	–.078	.342***	.009	.342
R^2			.394			.245			.173

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

campus climate for social class. The general campus climate was positively associated with campus climate for social class.

The third model predicting social involvement was also statistically significant, $F(19, 10849) = 120.64$, $p < .001$. The model explains 17.3% of the variance in students' social involvement. Working-class students reported less social involvement on campus compared with middle- and upper-class students. First-generation, female, African American, Asian, and Hispanic students also reported less social involvement compared with their referent groups. Students self-identified as other/unknown race and ethnicity also reported low social involvement. Students who lived with family expressed lower social involvement whereas students who lived in fraternities and sororities experienced higher social involvement. Students employed off campus reported relatively low social involvement. Both the number of credits earned and GPA were negatively associated with students' social involvement. Students' pride and the respect toward the campus based upon diversity, faculty interactions, and campus involvement were positively associated with students' involvement. The general campus climate was positively associated with students' involvement.

In reviewing the standardized coefficients for the first model, one sees that social class identification is not as strong a predictor of students' sense of belonging than other variables. In the second model, social class proved a relatively weak predictor compared to general campus climate and the pride and the respect students felt the campus placed on its diversity; however, in that model, social class was a stronger predictor than faculty interactions and campus participation. Finally, in the third model, social class was a stronger predictor of social involvement than the general campus climate, the pride and the respect students felt the campus placed upon diversity, and faculty interactions; however, campus participation was a stronger predictor of social involvement than social class.

Discussion and Recommendations

The results of this study suggest working-class students experience a lower sense of belonging in higher education, perceive a less welcoming campus climate for social class, and report less social involvement on campus than peers self-identified as middle or upper class. Our results suggest that social class acts as a significant predictor of students' sense of belonging and involvement on college campus even when race, gender, and parental education are considered. Social class as an element of diversity may therefore be meaningfully associated with students' feelings of acceptance and social experiences at the institution. Campus leaders who strive to make institutions more inclusive to students from diverse backgrounds must recognize the need to create respectful and welcoming environments for working-class students (Oldfield, 2007, 2012); working-class students may feel disrespected because of their social class identity, especially if they have heard their peers express negative stereotypical messages about those in the working class. Despite difficulties in initiating long-term institutional change, academic advisors can help students understand how their pre-college backgrounds and social identities influence their college experiences, connect with opportunities that can support their academic success and social integration, and gain knowledge of college procedures and resources. In fact, advisors are among the most important on-campus individuals who can directly influence working-class students' success in higher education.

Working-class students' feelings of alienation, isolation, and lack of belonging may be attributed to the difficulties of navigating a new culture that differs from that of their family or communities of origin. Compared to their middle- and upper-class peers, few working-class students possess the tools to navigate higher education systems because most of them have parents who had not attended college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Coupled together, ongoing challenges with a new culture and academic environment may translate into lower academic performance, higher disengagement, less social integration, and higher rates of early attrition for working-class students. The results from our research support others who suggest that social class as a factor in students' social identity plays a featured role in shaping collegiate experiences; consequently, advisors must become more attuned to students' social class of origin, understand the ways in which higher education institutions may unintentionally erect barriers to opportunities for upward mobility, and actively seek to understand the ways in which classism may manifest on their campuses.

As institutional agents who can transmit valuable social and cultural capital, academic advisors can help working-class students become better integrated in higher education (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Specifically, culturally aware advisors can talk openly about class struggles, class privilege, and working-class identity concerns (Clawson & Leiblum, 2008; Granfield, 1991). Academic advisors also serve as instrumental sources of support for working-class students, especially those not socially involved on their campuses who will not benefit from the potential social and cultural capital otherwise gained from peers. Well-informed and sensitive advisors assist with acculturation to the new social and cultural norms of campus while still helping students maintain and value their social class identities. Granfield (1991), Hurst (2010), and Stuber (2011) found many students spoke with pride about the values they learned growing up in working-class families, including a strong work ethic and discipline for task completion. These values and competencies benefit students in higher education, and with support and encouragement from academic advisors, working-class students can integrate these cultural norms and values as well as avoid some of the pressures to completely assimilate in the middle-class culture of higher education.

As a first step in integrating students, advisors may need to help identify the challenges creating acculturative stresses as advisees adapt to a new social class culture. Acculturative stress often manifests as depression or anxiety (Joiner & Walker, 2002) and the challenges of assuming a bicultural identity or learning to code-switch between cultures may lead to feelings of inauthenticity—of not belonging to either culture. These emotions may be mitigated if academic advisors help students identify that the origin of their alienation does not reflect their individual capacity to be successful in academia but instead results from internalized social class conflict. In other words, advisors should remind working-class students of their ability to handle the academic rigor of higher education while acknowledging their struggles with the transition into a new class culture. Nelson, Engar-Carlson, Tierney, and Hau (2006) stressed that professionals in advising fields should not remain mute about the subject of social

class and the internalized experience of social class for individuals who leave their working-class culture and enter into the middle- and upper-class culture of academia. We encourage academic advisors to clearly vocalize concerns about social class in their conversations with students, in professional dialogues with advising colleagues, and in professional development venues.

Academic advisors can take several steps when in partnership with personnel from other campus offices to develop programmatic opportunities to integrate working-class students into academia. Barratt (2011) encouraged institutions to build bridge programs for incoming working-class students that balance their acquisition of social and academic capital. Bridge programs also help first-year or transfer students to experience a welcoming campus climate before traditional classes begin, potentially further enhancing their sense of belonging through the early development of faculty and classmate interactions. Within larger institutions (as in the context of our study), bridge programs may help working-class students connect with academic advisors who subsequent support and mentor them during their first year of study—a factor especially important at larger institutions, where students may have difficulty connecting with faculty members.

In addition, academic advisors need to better understand class-based cultural influences on academic major decisions or career goals. According to Lindquist (2002), working-class students are often socialized within communities that value street smarts over book smarts, which also indicates resistance to an educational system that has left working-class individuals behind. Those established in the working class may perceive those pursuing higher education as actively distancing themselves from—and thereby implicitly devaluing—the working class from which they came (Lindquist, 2002). Matthys (2013) suggested the messages of anti-intellectualism conveyed within working-class communities leads to limited toleration for social mobility and working-class students who eventually choose the life of intellectuals are nearly excommunicated from full working-class cultural membership. Academic advisors may need to assist working-class students in negotiating some of the tensions between their cultural understanding of work-related values and the white-collar employment opportunities typically offered with 4-year or liberal arts degrees. These conversations may enhance working-class students' sense of belonging on campus as well as reinforce the fact that their working class values harmonize perfectly with the employment opportunities conferred by the college education that has traditionally been most familiar to those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

Limitations

One limitation of this study lies in a potential for bias due to nonresponses. Additionally, we had access only to students with experiences at large, public, research universities. Therefore, results may not be generalizable to community colleges or other institutional types. Finally, students' self-reported social class can lead to bias. Our study was also limited with regards to our dependent variables, which only capture limited aspects of college students' experiences. We encourage future researchers to seek additional evidence of students' social class identification—and the ways in which social class influences students' experiences—through continued qualitative and quantitative inquiry.

Summary

In conclusion, our study provides evidence about the importance of social class affinity in college students' experiences on campus. As important mentors and institutional agents, academic advisors can take the initiative of welcoming working-class students into higher education. By improving the social environment for working-class students, advisors help alleviate their students' sense of marginalization as their identities are affirmed and validated in higher education.

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