

# Working-Class College Students: Engagement, Belonging, & Social Capital

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# Overview

- Working-class students: what do we know?
- Theoretical framework
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Recommendations

# Working-Class Students

- Lower grade point averages and rates of degree attainment
- Less likely to have access to higher education “norms” and role models within their families
- Less likely to receive support from family and hometown friends

# Working-class Students

- Less likely to participate in co-curricular or extracurricular activities
- More likely to work longer hours and live with families
- Have difficulty fitting in with the middle/upper-class culture of higher education

# Working-Class Students

- General themes for working-class students' experiences:
  - Alienation
  - Estrangement
  - Marginalization
  - Class jumping
  - Border crossing
  - Imposter syndrome

# Social Class in Higher Education

- A challenging concept in society: many myths related to social class
  - We are all middle-class
  - Everyone has the same chance to succeed
- Difficult to “identify” in colleges due to its “invisibility” (from the students’ perspectives too!)
- Lack of discourse, programming, and support for working-class students in particular

# Theoretical Framework

- Bourdieu (1986): social class reproduced through
  - Economic capital
  - Cultural capital
  - **Social capital**
- Habitus: subjective perceptions held by class members that shapes expectations, attitudes, and aspirations

# Social Capital

- Resources developed by virtue of networks of acquaintances
  - Benefits extended from college to career
- Institutional agents: staff, faculty, students
  - Especially useful as working-class students are more likely to benefit from college knowledge passed from institutional agents



# Social Class in Higher Education

- Because higher education is the property of the middle/upper-classes...
  - Middle/upper-class students are more likely to succeed in their habitus
  - Social class is reproduced
  - Higher education is *stratified* and *stratifying*—potentially reproducing inequalities

# Research Questions

- Do working class students experience a lesser degree of belonging, lower social capital, and less academic engagement compared to their middle/upper-class peers?
- Among working-class students, how does social capital relate to students' academic engagement and sense of belonging?

# Methods: Instrument

- Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) undergraduate survey
- 28,237 census sample of a large, public research university
- 34% responded = 9,601 students
- 30% of students randomly assigned to complete a module containing social capital items

# Methods: Measures

- Demographic
  - Gender
  - Race
  - First-generation status
  - Social class (self-identified; working-class compared with middle/upper-class)
- Academic achievement
  - GPA (working-class students had lower GPA)
- Number of credits completed

# Methods: Measures

- Outcome variables
  - Academic engagement (5 items,  $\alpha = .89$ )
    - Frequency contributing to class discussions, interacting with faculty in class, asking insightful questions in class, etc.
  - Sense of belonging (4 items,  $\alpha = .85$ )
    - I feel that I belong on this campus, satisfaction with academic/social experiences, etc.
  - Social capital (6 items,  $\alpha = .82$ )
    - Ease or difficulty in finding students in classes to study with, finding faculty/staff to help navigate their way through the university, finding people on campus who share background and experiences, etc.

# Results

- Question One: ANOVA
  - Working-class students had a statistically significant and lower
    - Sense of belonging
    - Social capital
      - Going out with companions or friends
      - Finding people on campus who share your background and experiences
      - Deal with the size and complexity of the university
  - No differences in academic engagement

# Results

- Question Two: Multiple linear regressions
  - Among working-class students, social capital is positively associated with sense of belonging ( $B = .58$ ) and academic engagement ( $B = .29$ )
  - Other significant factors include
    - GPA (positive with both)
    - Race: URM working-class students had a lower sense of belonging and higher academic engagement
    - Female working-class students had a higher sense of belonging than males
    - Every one credit earned was associated with a .01 decrease in sense of belonging

# Recommendations

- Staff and faculty can help to connect working-class students to high-impact educational practices
  - Build into the classroom
- Connect students to institutional agents
- Make class visible
- Examine structures that may prohibit full engagement of all students



# Recommendations

- Start and support a working-class identity group
- For those who identify as first-generation or working-class, serve as mentors
- Be open about your social class background; explore the meaning behind your class experiences
- Conduct a campus-wide “class audit”

# Thank you!

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