

Blue Collar Scholars: Engagement and Integration among Working-Class First-Year Students

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Introduction

Students from working-class backgrounds are historically underrepresented in higher education, especially at four-year institutions. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, including working-class students, are less likely to enroll in college, choose a four-year college, persist, and graduate—regardless of their academic abilities—than their peers from middle/upper-class backgrounds.

While much is known about the effects of social class on students' entrance and departure from higher education, little is known about the effects of social class on students' actual experiences in higher education; subsequently, the present research seeks to examine whether working-class students experience greater challenges with regard to their academic engagement, mental health, and sense of belonging as compared to their middle/upper-class peers.

Research Questions

- Are there differences between working-class and middle/upper-class first-year students with regards to their academic engagement, mental health, and sense of belonging on campus?
- Controlling for additional factors, do these differences persist?

Conceptual Framework

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction describes the ways in which social class is reproduced in institutions, societies, and individuals; according to Bourdieu, education reinforces privileged forms of capital that maintain power distinctions and reproduces the acquisition of capital among social classes.

Social class is a combination of

- economic capital—accumulated money or wealth
- social capital—network of acquaintances
- cultural capital—knowledge or familiarity with the dominant culture

Because higher education is ultimately the property of the dominant middle/upper-classes, middle/upper-classes are more likely to persist and attain their degrees, thus maintaining/reproducing their cultural and social capital. Research focusing on the role of social class in higher education is also interested in Bourdieu's notion of "habitus," a common set of perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual's expectations, attitudes, and aspirations. The middle-class habitus of higher education can increase the marginalization of working-class students.

Methods

To answer the research questions, this study employed independent samples t-tests to examine differences between working-class and middle/upper-class students in the three dependent measures and multiple linear regressions to determine whether differences held controlling for additional measures.

Instrument

In spring 2010, the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey was administered to 244,795 undergraduate students at 10 large, public universities classified by the Carnegie Foundation as having very high research activity. The institutional level response rate for the SERU survey was 39.9% (n = 97,601).

Of the total respondents, 20,484 (21%) were first-year, non-transfer students who had been admitted fall 2009. In the SERU survey, students were asked to identify 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-class, working-class, and low-income or poor. Working-class students were compared to the three middle/upper-class categories.

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents.

Variables	Middle/Upper-Class		Working-Class	
	n	%	n	%
Male	7649	41.4%	1284	38.6%
Female	10835	58.6%	2040	61.4%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	92	.5%	19	.6%
African American	443	2.6%	132	4.2%
Hispanic	1559	9.3%	809	25.7%
Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander	5439	32.3%	1318	41.8%
White	8006	47.6%	735	23.3%
Other/Unknown	808	4.2%	84	2.7%
International	587	3.5%	54	1.7%
Non-First-Generation	11056	86.2%	1463	44.6%
First-Generation	1766	13.8%	1818	55.4%

Measures

Dependent:

- Sense of belonging factor (four items, $\alpha = .85$)
- Academic engagement factor (eight items, $\alpha = .86$)
- Mental health (single item from a module): During this academic year, how often has feeling depressed, stressed, or upset been an obstacle to your school work or academic success? ("never" to "very often")

Independent:

- Campus climate factor (six items, $\alpha = .92$)
- Gender (females = 1, males = 0)
- Race (students of color = 1, all others = 0; international students = 1, all others = 0)
- First-generation status (defined as neither parent having earned a baccalaureate degree) (first-generation = 1, non-first-generation = 0)
- Cumulative grade point average (fall 2009)

Results

Working-class students reported statistically significant and lower academic engagement and sense of belonging compared to their middle/upper-class peers (Table 2). Additionally, working-class students reported significantly higher frequency in feeling stressed, depressed, and upset to the extent that these feelings became obstacles to academic success.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-tests of Differences Between Students.

Variables	Middle/Upper-Class			Working-Class			t
	m	sd	n	m	sd	n	
Academic Engagement	.05	.99	12353	-.14	.99	3043	9.78***
Sense of Belonging	.08	.98	12353	-.18	1.02	3043	12.67***
Mental Health	3.13	1.28	3638	3.38	1.34	952	-5.3***

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Additionally, when controlling for additional variables, working-class students are only associated with a lower sense of belonging and higher frequency in feeling stressed, depressed, and upset. Working-class students were not significantly associated with academic engagement in the model below (Table 3).

Table 3. Regressions Predicting Academic Engagement, Sense of Belonging, and Mental Health.

Variables	Academic Engagement		Sense of Belonging		Mental Health	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	-.25***	.05	-.32***	.05	3.95***	.13
Working-Class	.00	.02	-.10***	.02	.13*	.06
Female	-.02	.02	.02	.02	.39***	.04
Students of Color	-.30***	.02	-.23***	.02	-.05	.05
International	-.05	.06	-.31***	.06	-.12	.14
First-Generation	-.10***	.02	.03	.02	.02	.06
GPA	.13***	.02	.14***	.01	-.32***	.04
Campus Climate	.08***	.01	.34***	.01	-.17***	.02
R ²		.05		.15		.07

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

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that working-class first-year students have difficult transitions to academia—especially in regards to their social integration and mental health. Practitioners should seek ways to validate the experiences of working-class students as they enter colleges and universities. Additionally, first-year program directors should consider social class as a dimension not to be overlooked when examining the campus climate for underrepresented students.

Working-class students may internalize their struggles because social class is relatively invisible on college campuses. Student affairs practitioners can make social class visible by talking openly about privilege and class power. Among other themes of diversity in new student programming, themes related to social class issues should be predominant and working-class students' identities should be acknowledged and affirmed.

